Never Trust a Big Butt 
and a Smile 

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If you were to construct an image of rap music via accounts of rap in the established press, you would (besides betraying limited critical instincts about popular culture) probably perceive rap to reflect the violent, brutally sexist reality of a pack of wilding "little Willie Hortons." Consequently, you would wonder what a group of young black women rappers were doing internalizing with these male rappers and why they seemed to be having such a good time. If I were to suggest that their participation in rap music produced some of the most important contemporary black feminist cultural criticism, you would surely bewail the death of sexual equality. As Public Enemy's Chuck D has warned regarding the mainstream press, "Don't believe the hype!" Sexism in rap has been gravely exaggerated by the mainstream press. Rap is a rich, complex multifaceted African-American popular form whose male practitioners' style and subject matter includes the obsessive sexism of a 2 Live Crew, the wacky parody of Biz Markie, the "entertainment" of Boogie Down Productions, the gangster-style storytelling of Ice Cube, the gritty and intelligent speed rapping of Kool Moe Dee, and the explicit black nationalism of Kool-Artists. Women rappers are vocal and respected members of the Hip Hop community, and they have quite a handle on what they are doing.

Fortunately or unfortunately (I'm not sure which), most academics concerned with contemporary popular culture and music have avoided sustained critical analyses of rap. A few literary scholars and theorists have explored the historical and cultural heritage of rap as an African-American form, while others have made passing reference to it as an important site of postmodernist impulses or as the prophetic voice of an angry disenfranchised group of young African-Americans. The work on women rappers (while making claims that women rappers are pro-women artists) has been published in popular monthly periodicals and consequently has been limited to short but provocative inquiries.

While any positive, critical attention to rap comes as a welcome relief almost all of these accounts observe rap music outside of its socio-historical framework, as texts suspended in time. Such distanced readings, especially of a musical form to which it is difficult to gain direct and sustained access, leave open the possibility of grave misreadings regarding meanings and context. Women rappers are especially vulnerable to such misreadings precisely because their presence in rap has been consistently ignored or marginalized, even by those social critics who have published some of the most insightful analyses of rap. This essay, which is part of an extended project on rap music, will try to correct some of these misunderstandings, or as Chuck D states, "give you something that I knew you lacked. So consider me a new jack." Better yet, here's Queen Latifah:
Some think that we can't flow (can't flow)
Stereotypes they got to go (got to go)
I'm gonna mess around and flip the scene into reverse
With what?
With a little touch of ladies first.

The summer of 1989 marked the tenth anniversary of rap music's explosive debut in the recording industry. In honor of its unexpected longevity, Nelson George, a pro-Hip Hop music critic and Village Voice columnist, published a sentimental rap retrospective in which he mourned rap's movement from a street subculture into the cold, sterile world of commercial record production. George points out that, while recently, music industry powers have maintained a studied indifference to rap music, but now that rap's "commercial viability has been proven" many major recording companies are signing any halfway decent act they can find. What worries George, and rightly so, is that corporate influence on black music has led, in the past, to the dissolution of vibrant black cultural forms and that rap may become the latest victim. This problem is complex, real and requires analysis. However, Nelson George, like media critics generally, imbeds his descriptions of "authentic rap" and fears of recent corporate influence on it in gender-coded language that mischaracterizes rap and silences women rappers and consumers. In his tenth anniversary piece, George traces major shifts in rap, naming titles, artists and producers. He weaves over twenty rap groups into his piece and names not a single female rapper. His retrospective is chock-full of prudish, urban black youth (read men), whose contributions to rap reflect "the thoughts of city kids more deeply than the likes of Michael Jackson, Oprah Winfrey et al." His concluding remarks make apparent his underlying perception of rap:

To proclaim the death of rap is to be sure, premature. But the farther the control of rap gets from its street corner constituency and the more corporations grasp it—record conglomerates, Burger King, Minute Maid, Vh1 MTV Raps, etc.—the more vulnerable it becomes to cultural emasculation.

For George, corporate meddling not only dilutes cultural forms, it also reduces strapping testosterone-packed men into women! Could we imagine anything worse? Nelson George's analysis is not unusual; his is merely the latest example of media critics' consistent coding of rap music as male in the face of a significant and sustained female presence.

Many social critics who have neglected to make separate mention of women rappers would probably claim that these women are in many ways just "one of the boys." Since they are as tough as male rappers, women rappers fit into George's mind-bogglingly emblematic definition of rap as an "ultra-urban, unromantic, hyperrealistic, neo-nationalist, anti-assimilationist, aggressive Afrocentric impulse." For George, and for media critics generally, it is far easier to re-gender women rappers than to revise their own gender-coded analysis of rap music.

Since the summer of 1989, there has been a marked increase in media attention to women rappers. Most of the articles have been written by women and have tried to shed some light on female rappers and offer a feminist analysis of their contributions. I would like to extend some of the themes presented in these pieces by showing how women rappers participate in a dialogue with male rappers and by revising some of the commonly held assumptions about what constitutes "feminist" expression.

As Nancy Guevara notes, the "exclusion and/or trivialization of women's role in Hip Hop" is no mere oversight. The marginalization, deletion, and mischaracterization of women's role in black cultural production is routine practice. Angela Davis extends this criticism by stating
that this is "an omission that must be attributed to the influence of sexism." In her article, "Black Women and Music: An Historical Legacy of Struggle," Davis makes three related arguments that are of particular importance here. First, she contests the marginal representation of black women in the documentation of African-American cultural developments and suggests that these representations do not adequately reflect women's participation. Second, she suggests that music (song and dance) are especially productive sites for examining the collective consciousness of black Americans. And third, she calls for a close reexamination of black women's musical legacy as a way to understand black women's consciousness. She writes:

Music has long permeated the daily life of most African-Americans; it has played a central role in the normal socialization process; and during moments characterized by intense movements for social change, it has helped to shape the necessary political consciousness. Any attempt, therefore, to understand in depth the evolution of women's consciousness within the Black community requires a serious examination of the music which has influenced them—particularly that which they themselves have created.8

She continues by offering a close reading of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's music as a step toward redressing such absences. Dealing with similar issues, Hazel Carby charges that white dominated feminist discourse has marginalized (and I would add often ignored) non-white women and questions of black sexuality. She further argues that representations of black women's sexuality in African-American literature differs significantly from representations of sexuality in black women's blues.9

Carby and Davis, while concerning themselves specifically with women's blues, are calling for a multi-faceted analysis of black women's identity and sexuality as represented by their musical production. Stating that "different cultural forms negotiate and resolve different sets of social contradictions," Carby suggests that black women writers have been encouraged to speak on behalf of a large group of black women whose daily lives and material conditions may not be adequately reflected in black women's fiction. For example, the consumption patterns and social context of popular music differ significantly from those of fiction. The dialogic capacity of popular music, especially that of rap music, engages many of the social contradictions and ambiguities that pertain specifically to contemporary urban, working-class black life.

George Lipsitz, applying Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "dialogic" criticism to popular music, argues that:

Popular music is nothing if not dialogic, the product of an ongoing historical conversation in which no one has the first or last word. The traces of the past that pervade the popular music of the present amount to more than mere chance: they are not simply juxtapositions of incompatible realities. They reflect a dialogic process, one embedded in collective history and nurtured by the ingenuity of artists interested in fashioning icons of opposition.

Lipsitz's interpretation of popular music as a social and historical dialogue is an extremely important break from traditional, formalist interpretations of music. By grounding cultural production historically and avoiding the application of a fixed inventory of core structures, dialogic criticism as employed by Lipsitz is concerned with how popular music "arbitrates tensions between opposition and co-optation at any given historical moment."10

This notion of dialogism is especially productive in the context of African-American music. The history of African-American music and culture has been defined in large measure by a history of the art of signifying, recontextualization, collective memory and resistance. "Fashioning icons of opposition" that speak to diverse communities is part of a rich black American
musical tradition to which rappers make a significant contribution. Negotiating multiple
boundaries, black women rappers are in dialogue with each other, male rappers, other popular
musicians (through sampling and other revisionary practices), and with Hip Hop fans.

Black women rappers are integral and resistant voices in Hip Hop and in popular music
generally. They sustain an ongoing dialogue with their audiences and male rappers about
sexual promiscuity, emotional commitment, infidelity, the drug trade, racial politics and black
cultural history. Rappers interpret and articulate the fears, pleasures and promises of young
black women and men whose voices have been relegated to the silent margins of public
discourse. By paying close attention to rap music, we can gain some insight into how young
African-Americans provide for themselves a relatively safe free-play zone where they creatively
address questions of sexual power, the reality of truncated economic opportunity, the pain of
racism and sexism and, through physical expressions of freedom, relieve the anxieties of day-
to-day oppression.

If you have been following the commercial success of rap music, it is difficult to ignore the
massive increase in record deals for women rappers following Salt-N-Pepa’s double platinum
(two million) 1986 debut album Hot, Cool and Vicious. Such album sales, even for a rap album
by a female artist, were virtually unprecedented in 1986. Since then, several female rappers,
many of whom have been rapping for years (some since the mid-1970s), have finally been
recorded and promoted. Says female rapper Ms. Melodie:

It wasn’t that the male started rap, the male was just the first to be put on wax. Females were
always into rap, and females always had their little crews and were always known for rockin’
house parties and streets or whatever, school yards, the corner, the park, whatever it was. 

In the early stages, women’s participation in rap was hindered by gender considerations.
M.C. Lady “D” notes that because she didn’t put a female crew together for regular perfor-
mancess, she “didn’t have to worry about getting [her] equipment ripped off, coming up with
the cash to get it in the first place, or hauling it around on the subways to gigs—problems
that kept a lot of other women out of rap in the early days.” For a number of reasons
(including increased institutional support and more demand for both male and female
rappers), such stumbling blocks have been reduced.

MC Lyte’s 1988 release, “Paper Thin,” sold over 125,000 copies in the first six months with
virtually no radio play. Lady B, who became the first recorded female rapper in 1978, was
Philadelphia’s top rated DJ on WUSL and is founder and Editor-in-Chief of Word Up!, a
tabloid devoted to Hip Hop. Salt-N-Pepa’s first single, “Expressions,” from their latest album
release Black’s Magic, went gold in the first week and stayed in the number one position on
Billboard’s Rap Chart for over two months.

But these industry success-markers are not the primary focus here. I intend to show that
the subject matter and perspectives presented in many women’s rap lyrics challenge domi-
nant notions of sexuality, heterosexual courtship, and aesthetic constructions of the body. In
addition, music videos and live performances display exuberant communities of women occu-
pying public space while exhibiting sexual freedom, independence and, occasionally, explicit
domination over men. Women’s raps grow more and more complex each year and, with audi-
ence support, many rappers have taken risks (regarding imagery and subject matter) that a
few years ago would have been unthinkable. Through their lyrics and video images, black
women rappers—especially Queen Latifah, MC Lyte and Salt-N-Pepa—form a dialogue with
working-class black women and men, offering young black women a small but potent culturally-reflexive public space.

In order to understand the oppositional nature of these women rappers, it is important to
have at least a sketch of some of the politics behind rap’s battle of the sexes. Popular raps by
Both men and women have covered many issues and social situations that pertain to the lives of young, black working-class teens in urban America. Racism, drugs, police brutality, sex, crime, poverty, education and prison have been popular themes in rap for a number of years. But raps about celebration, dance, styling, boasting and just "gittin' funky" (in Kid-N-Play's words) have been equally popular. Raps about style and prestige sometimes involve the possession of women as evidence of male power. Predictably, these raps define women as commodities, objects and ornaments. Others are defensive and aggressive raps that describe women solely as objects of male pleasure. In rap music, as in other popular genres, women are divided into at least two categories—the "kind to take home to mother" and the "kind you meet at three o'clock in the morning." In Hip Hop discourse, the former is honest and loyal—but extremely rare (decidedly not the girl next door). The latter is not simply an unpaid prostitute, but a woman who only wants you for your money, cars and cash, will trap you (via pregnancy or other forms of manipulation), and move on to another man (probably your best friend). It would be an understatement to suggest that there is little in the way of traditional notions of romance in rap. Sexist raps articulate the profound fear of female sexuality felt by these young rappers and by many young men.

In a recent Village Voice interview with ex-NWA member Ice Cube, notorious not only for harsh sexist raps but for brilliant chilling stories of ghetto life, Greg Tate (one of the best Hip Hop social critics) tries to get "some understanding" about the hostility toward women expressed in Ice Cube's raps:

Tate: Do you think rap is hostile toward women?
Ice Cube: The whole damn world is hostile toward women.
Tate: What do you mean by that?
Ice Cube: I mean the power of sex is more powerful than the motherfuckers in Saudi Arabia.

A girl that you want to get with can make you do damn near anything. If she knows how to do her shit right, she can make you buy cigarettes you never wanted to buy in life…. Look at all my boys out here on this video shoot, all these motherfuckers sitting out here trying to look fly, hot as a motherfucker, ready to go home. But there's too many women here for them to just get up and leave. They out here since eight o'clock in the morning and ain't getting paid. They came for the girls.15

Ice Cube's answer may appear to be a non sequitur, but his remarks address what I believe is the subtext in rap's symbolic male domination over women. Ice Cube suggests that many men are hostile toward women because the fulfillment of male heterosexual desire is significantly checked by women's capacity for sexual rejection and/or manipulation of men. Ice Cube acknowledges the reckless boundaries of his desire as well as the power women can exercise in this sexual struggle. In "The Bomb," Ice Cube warns men to "especially watch the ones with the big derriers" because the greater your desire, the more likely you are to be blinded by it, and consequently the more vulnerable you are likely to be to female domination. From the perspective of a young man, such female power is probably more palpable than any woman realizes. Obviously, Ice Cube is not addressing the institutional manifestations of patriarchy and its effects on the social construction of desire. However, he and many black male rappers speak to men's fears and the realities of the struggle for power in teenage heterosexual courtship in a sexist society.

During the summer of 1990, Bell Biv Devoe, a popular R&B/Rap crossover group, raced up the charts with "Poison," a song about women whose chorus warns men not to "trust a big butt and a smile." The song cautions men about giving in to their sexual weaknesses and then being taken advantage of by a sexy woman whose motives might be equally insincere. The degree of anxiety expressed is striking. "Poison" explains both their intense desire for and
profound distrust of women. The capacity of a woman to use her sexuality to manipulate his desire for her purposes is an important facet of the sexual politics of male raps about women. Bell Biv DeVoe are telling men: “You may not know what a big butt and a smile really means. It might not mean pleasure; it might mean danger—poison.”

All of this probably seems gravely sexist—so much so that any good feminist would reject it out of hand. However, I would like to suggest that women rappers effectively engage with male rappers on this level. By expressing their sexuality openly and in their own language, yet distinguishing themselves from poisonous and insincere women, black women rappers challenge men to take women more seriously. Black women rappers might respond by saying: “That’s right, don’t automatically trust a big butt and a smile. We’ve got plenty of sexual power and integrity, but don’t mess with us.” I am not suggesting that women have untapped power that once accessed will lead the way to the dismantling of patriarchy. Ice Cube and Bell Biv DeVoe’s expressions of fear must be understood in the context of their status as men and the inherent social power such a gender assignment affords. But, understanding the fear of female sexuality helps explain the consistent sexual domination men attempt to sustain over women. Without such fears, their efforts would be unnecessary.

Women’s raps and my interviews with female rappers display similar fears of manipulation, loss of control, and betrayal at the hands of men. What is especially interesting about women rappers is the way in which they shift the focus of the debate. Male rappers focus on sexually promiscuous women who “want their money” (in rap lingo they are called skeezers) and almost never offer a depiction of a sincere woman. Female rappers focus on dishonest men who seek sex from women (much like the women who seek money from men), and they represent themselves as seasoned women with sexual confidence and financial independence.

During my interview with Salt (one half of the female rap duo Salt-N-Pepa), I pressed her about how she could envision a committed relationship without some degree of emotional dependence. She replied:

I just want to depend on myself. I feel like a relationship shouldn’t be emotional dependence. I, myself, am more comfortable when I do not depend on hugs and kisses from somebody that I possibly won’t get. If I don’t get them then I’ll be disappointed. So if I get them, I’ll appreciate them.16

Salt’s lyrics reflect much of how she feels personally: “You know I don’t want to for your money”; “I’m independent, I make my own money, so don’t tell me how to spend it”; “You can’t disguise the lies in your eyes, you’re not a heartbreaker”; “You need me and I don’t need you.”17

Women rappers employ many of the aesthetic and culturally specific elements present in male rap lyrics while offering an alternative vision of similar social conditions. Raps written by women which specifically concern male/female relationships almost always confront the tension between trust and savvy, between vulnerability and control. Women rappers celebrate their sisters for “getting over” on men. Some raps by women such as Icey Jaye’s “It’s a Girl Thang” mock the men who fall for their tricks. But for the most part, women rappers promote self-reliance and challenge the depictions of women in male raps, addressing the fears about male dishonesty and infidelity that most women share.

Raps written and performed by women regarding male/female relationships can be divided into at least three categories: (1) raps that challenge male dominance over women within the sexual arena, (2) raps that by virtue of their authoritative stance, challenge men as representatives of Hip Hop, and (3) raps that explicitly discuss women’s identity and celebrate women’s physical and sexual power. Across these three categories, several popular female rappers and their music videos can serve as illuminating examples.18
MC Lyte and Salt-N-Pepa have reputations for biting raps that criticize men who manipulate and abuse women. Their lyrics tell the story of men taking advantage of women, cheating on them, abusing them, taking their money and then leaving them for other unsuspecting female victims. These raps are not mournful ballads about the trials and tribulations of being a woman. Similar to women’s blues, they are caustic, witty and aggressive warnings directed at men and at other women who might be seduced by men in the future. By offering a woman’s interpretation of the terms of heterosexual courtship, these raps cast a new light on male/female sexual power relations and depict women as resistant, aggressive participants.

Salt-N-Pepa’s 1986 single, “Tramp,” speaks specifically to black women, warning us that “Tramp” is not a “simple rhyme,” but a parable about relationships between men and women:

Homegirl’s attention you must pay to what I say
Don’t take this as a simple rhyme
’Cause this type of thing happens all the time
Now what would you do if a stranger said “Hi”
Would you dis him or would you reply?
If you’d answer, there is a chance
That you’d become a victim of circumstance
Am I right fellas? Tell the truth
Or else I’ll have to show and prove
You are what you are I am what I am
It just so happens that most men are TRAMPS.

In the absence of any response to “Am I right fellas?” Salt-N-Pepa “show and prove” the trampings of several men who “undress you with their eyeballs,” “think you’re a dummy,” and “on the first date, had the nerve to tell me he loves me.” Salt-N-Pepa’s parable, by defining promiscuous men as tramps, inverts the social construction of male sexual promiscuity as a status symbol. This reversal undermines the degrading “woman as tramp” image by stigmatizing male promiscuity. Salt-N-Pepa suggest that women who respond to sexual advances are victims of circumstance. It is the predatory, disingenuous men who are the tramps.

The music video for “Tramp” is a comic rendering of a series of social club scenes that highlight tramps on the make, mouth freshener in hand, testing their lines on the nearest woman. Dressed in Hip Hop street gear, Salt-N-Pepa perform the song on television, on a monitor perched above the bar. Since they appear on the television screen, they seem to be surveying and critiquing the club action, but the club members cannot see them. There are people dancing and talking together (including likeable men who are coded as “non-tramps”), who seem unaware of the television monitor. Salt-N-Pepa are also shown in the club, dressed in very stylish, sexy outfits. They act as decoys, talking and flirting with the tramps to flesh out the dramatization of tramps on the prowl, and they make several knowing gestures at the camera to reassure the viewer that they are unswayed by the tramps’ efforts.

The club scenes have no dialogue. The tramps and their victims interact only with body language. Along with the music for “Tramp,” we hear Salt-N-Pepa’s lyrics, which serve respectively as the club’s dance music and the video’s voice-over narration. Viewing much of the club action from Salt-N-Pepa’s authoritative position through the television monitor, we can safely observe the playful but cautionary dramatization of heterosexual courtship. Rapping to a woman, one tramp postures and struts, appearing to ask the stock pick-up line, “What is your zodiac sign, baby?” When she shows disgust and leaves her seat, he repeats the same body motions on the next woman who happens to sit down. Near the end of the video a frustrated “wife” enters the club and drag one of the tramps home, smacking him in the head with her pocketbook. Salt-N-Pepa stand next to the wife’s tramp in the club, shaking their heads as if
to say "what a shame." Simultaneously, they point and laugh at him from the television monitor. At the end of the video, a still frame of each man is stamped "tramp," while Salt-N-Pepa reveal in having identified and exposed them. They leave the club together without men, seemingly enjoying their skill at exposing the real intentions of these tramps.

Salt-N-Pepa are clearly "schooling" women about the sexual politics of the club scene. They are engaged in and critiquing the drama of heterosexual courtship. The privileged viewer is a woman who is directly addressed in the lyrics and can fully empathize with the visual depiction and interpretation of the scenes. The video's resolution is a warning to both men and women. Men: Don't fall for these men either by talking to them in the clubs or believing the lies they'll tell you when they come home. Men: You will get caught eventually and you'll be embarrassed. The "Tramp" video also tells women that they can go to these clubs and successfully play along with the game as long as the power of female sexuality and the terms of male desire are understood.

In her video, MC Lyte has a far less playful response to her boyfriend Sam, whom she catches in the act of flirting with another woman. MC Lyte's underground hit, "Paper Thin," is one of the most scathing raps about male dishonesty/infidelity and the tensions between trust and vulnerability. Lyte has been burned by Sam, but she has turned her experience into a black woman's anthem that sustains an uncomfortable balance between brutal cynicism and honest vulnerability:

When you say you love me it doesn't matter
It goes into my head as just chit chatter
You may think it's egotistical or just very free
But what you say, I take none of it seriously.

I'm not the kind of girl to try to play a man out
They take the money and then they break the hell out
No that's not my strategy, not the game I play
I admit I play a game, but it's not done that way
Truly when I get involved I give it my heart
I mean my mind, my soul, my body I mean every part
But if it doesn't work out—yo, it just doesn't
It wasn't meant to be, you know it just wasn't
So, I treat all of you like I treat all of them
What you say to me is just paper thin.

Lyte's public acknowledgment that Sam's expressions of love were paper thin is not a source of embarrassment for her, but a means of empowerment. She plays a brutal game of the dozens on Sam while wearing her past commitment to him as a badge of honor and sign of character. Lyte presents commitment, vulnerability and sensitivity as assets, not indicators of female weakness. In "Paper Thin," emotional and sexual commitment are not romantic Victorian concepts tied to honorable but dependent women; they are a part of her strategy, part of the game she plays in heterosexual courtship.

The high energy video for "Paper Thin" contains many elements present in Hip Hop. The video opens with Lyte (dressed in a sweatsuit and sneakers) abandoning her new Jeetta because she wants to take the subway. A few members of her male posse follow along behind her, down the steps to the subway tracks. Once in the subway car, her D.J. K-Rock, doubling as the conductor, announces that the train will be held in the station due to crossed signals. While they wait, Milk Boy (her bodyguard) spots Sam at the other end of the car, rapping heavily to two stylish women. Lyte, momentarily surprised, begins her rhyme as she stalks toward
Sam. Sam's attempts to escape fail; he is left to face MC Lyte's wrath. Eventually, she throws him off the train to the tune of Ray Charles's R&B classic, "Hit the Road Jack," and locks Sam out of the subway station, symbolically jailing him. The subway car is filled with young black teenagers, typical working New Yorkers and street people, many of whom join Lyte in signifying on Sam while they groove on K-Rock's music. MC Lyte's powerful voice and no-nonsense image dominate Sam. The tense, driving music—which is punctuated by sampled guitar and drum sections as well as an Earth Wind and Fire horn section—complements Lyte's hard, expressive rapping style.

It is important that "Paper Thin" is set in public and on the subway, the quintessential mode of urban transportation. Lyte is drawn to the subway and obviously feels comfortable there. She is also comfortable with the subway riders in her video; they are her community. By setting her confrontation with Sam in the subway, in front of their peers, Lyte moves a private problem between lovers into the public arena and effectively dominates both spaces.

When her D.J., the musical and mechanical conductor, announces that crossed signals are holding the train in the station, he frames the video in a moment of communication crisis. The notion of crossed signals represents the inability of Sam and Lyte to communicate with one another, an inability that is primarily the function of the fact that they communicate on different frequencies. Sam thinks he can read Lyte's mind to see what she is thinking and then feed her all the right lines. But what he says carries no weight, no meaning. His words are light, they're paper thin. Lyte, who understands courtship as a game, confesses to being a player yet expresses how she feels honestly and in simple language. What she says has integrity, weight, and substance.

After throwing Sam from the train, she nods her head toward a young man standing against the subway door, and he follows her off the train. She will not allow her experiences with Sam to paralyze her, but she does have a new perspective on dating. As she and her new male friend walk down the street, she raps the final stanza for "Paper Thin," which sets down the ground rules:

    So, now I take precautions when choosing my mate
    I do not touch until the third or fourth date
    Then maybe we'll kiss on the fifth or sixth time that we meet
    'Cause a date without a kiss is so incomplete
    And then maybe, I'll let you play with my feet
    You can suck the big toe and play with the middle
    It's so simple unlike a riddle. ...

MC Lyte and Salt-N-Pepa are not alone in their critique of men's treatment of women. Neneh Cherry's "Buffalo Stance" tells men: "You better watch, don't mess with me / No money man can buy my love / It's sweetness that I'm thinkin' of"; Oaktown's "'95-7"; "Say That Then" lashes out at "Finger poppin', hip hoppin', wanna be bed rockin'" men; Ice Cream Tee's "All Wrong" chastises women who allow men to abuse them; and MC Lyte's "I Cram to Understand U," "Please Understand" and "I'm Not Havin' It" are companion pieces to "Paper Thin."

Women rappers also challenge the popular conception that male rappers are the only M.C.'s who can "move the crowd," a skill that ultimately determines your status as a successful rapper. Black women rappers compete head-to-head with male rappers for status as the preeminent M.C. Consequently, rhymes that boast, signify and toast are an important part of women's repertoire. Antoinette's "Who's the Boss," Ice Cream Tee's "Let's Work," MC Lyte's "Lyte as a Rock," Salt-N-Pepa's "Everybody Get Up," and Queen Latifah's "Dance for Me" and "Come Into My House" establish black women rappers as Hip Hop M.C.'s who can move the crowd, a talent that is as important as writing "dope" rhymes. Latifah's "Come into My House" features Latifah as the dance master, the hostess of physical release and pleasure:
Welcome into my Queendom
Come one, come all
'Cause when it comes to lyrics I bring them
In Spring I sing, in Fall I call
Out to those who had a hard day
I've prepared a place on my dance floor
The time is now for you to party... I'm on fire
The flames too high to douse
The pool is open
Come Into My House.10

As rap's territory expands, so does the material of female rappers. Subjects ranging from racism, black politics, Afrocentrism and nationalism to homelessness, physical abuse of women and children, drug addiction, AIDS and teen pregnancy can all be found in female rappers' repertoire. "Ladies First," Queen Latifah's second release from her debut album, All Hail the Queen, is a landmark example of such expansions. Taken together, the video and lyrics for "Ladies First" is a statement for black female unity, independence and power, as well as an anti-colonial statement concerning Africa's southern region. The rap recognizes the importance of black female political activists, offering hope for the development of a pro-female, pro-black, diasporic political consciousness. A rapid-fire and powerful rap duet between Queen Latifah and her "European sister" Monie Love, "Ladies First" is thus a recital on the significance and diversity of black women. Latifah's assertive, measured voice in the opening rhyme sets the tone:

The ladies will kick it, the rhyme it is wicked
Those who don't know how to be pros get evicted
A woman can bear you, break you, take you
Now it's time to rhyme, can you relate to
A sister dope enough to make you holler and scream?

In her almost double-time verse, Monie Love responds:

Eh, Yo! Let me take it from here Queen
Excuse me but I think I am about due
To get into precisely what I am about to do
I'm conversatin' to the folks who have no whatsoever clue
So, listen very carefully as I break it down to you
Merrily merrily, hyper happy overjoyed
Pleased with all the beats and rhymes my sisters have employed
Slick and smooth—throwing down the sound totally, a yes
Let me state the position: Ladies First, Yes?

Latifah responds, "YES!"

Without attacking black men. "Ladies First" is a wonderful rewriting of the contributions of black women into the history of black struggles. Opening with slides of black female political activists Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis and Winnie Mandela, the video's predominant theme features Latifah as Third World military strategist. She stalks an illuminated, conference table-size map of Southern Africa and, with a long pointer, shoves large chess-like pieces of a brief case carrying white men off white dominated countries, replacing them with large black power style fists. In between these scenes, Latifah and Monie Love rap in front of and between more
photos of politically prominent black women and footage of black struggles that shows protests and acts of military violence against protestors. Latifah positions herself as part of a rich legacy of black women's activism, racial commitment, and cultural pride.

Given the fact that protest footage rap videos (which have become quite popular over the last few years) have all but excluded scenes of black women leaders or foot soldiers, the centrality of black women's political protest in “Ladies First” is refreshing. Scenes of dozens of rural African women running with sticks raised above their heads toward armed oppressors, holding their ground alongside men in equal numbers and dying in struggle, are rare media images. As Latifah explains:

I wanted to show the strength of black women in history. Strong black women. Those were good examples. I wanted to show what we’ve done. We’ve done a lot; it’s just that people don’t know it. Sisters have been in the midst of these things for a long time, but we just don’t get to see it that much.20

After placing a black power fist on each country in Southern Africa, Latifah surveys the map, nodding contentedly. The video ends with a still frame of the region’s new political order.

Latifah’s self-possession and independence is an important facet of the new cultural nationalism in rap. The powerful, level-headed and black feminist character of her lyrics calls into question the historically cozy relationship between nationalism and patriarchy. The legendary Malcolm X phrase, “There are going to be some changes made here,” is strategically sampled throughout “Ladies First.” When Malcolm’s voice is introduced, the camera pans the faces of some of the more prominent female rappers and D.I.s including Ms. Melodie, Ice Cream Tee and Shelley Thunder. The next sample of Malcolm’s memorable line is dubbed over South African protest footage. Latifah evokes Malcolm as part of a collective African-American historical memory and recontextualizes him not only as a leader who supports contemporary struggles in South Africa, but also as someone who encourages the imminent changes regarding the degraded status of black women and specifically black women rappers. Latifah’s use of the dialogic processes of naming, claiming and recontextualizing is not random; nor is it simply a “juxtaposition of incompatible realities.” “Ladies First” is a cumulative product that, as Lipsitz would say, “enters a dialogue already in progress.” It affirms and revises African-American traditions at the same time that it stakes out new territory.

Black women rappers’ public displays of physical and sexual freedom challenge male notions of female sexuality and pleasure. Salt-N-Pepa’s rap duet, “Shake Your Thang,” which they perform with the prominent go-go band E.U., is a wonderful verbal and visual display of black women’s sexual resistance. The rap lyrics and video are about Salt-N-Pepa’s sexual dancing and others’ responses to them. The first stanza sets them in a club “shakin’ [their] thang to a funky beat with a go-go swing” and captures the shock on the faces of other patrons. With attitude to spare, Salt-N-Pepa chant: “It’s my thang and I’ll swing it the way that I feel, with a little seduction and some sex appeal.” The chorus, sung by the male lead in E.U., chants: “Shake your thang, do what you want to do, I can’t tell you how to catch a groove. It’s your thang, do what you wanna do, I won’t tell you how to catch a groove.”21

The video is framed by Salt-N-Pepa’s interrogation after they have been arrested for lewd dancing. New York police cars pull up in front of the studio where their music video is being shot, and mock policemen (played by Kid-N-Play and their producer Herbie Luv Bug) cart the women away in handcuffs. When their mug shots are being taken, Salt-N-Pepa blow kisses to the cameraman as each holds up her arrest placard. Once in the interrogation room, Kid-N-Play and Herbie ask authoritatively, “What we gonna do about this dirty dancing?” Pepa reaches across the table, grabs Herbie by the tie and growls, “We gonna do what we wanna do,” Outdone by her confidence, Herbie looks into the camera with an expression of shock.
The mildly slapstick interrogation scenes bind a number of other subplots. Scenes in which Salt N Pepa are part of groups of women dancing and playing are interspersed with separate scenes of male dancers, coded dance segments with Kid N Play, E.U.'s lead singer acting as a spokesman for a "free Salt N Pepa" movement, and picketers in front of the police station calling for Salt N Pepa's release. When he is not gathering signatures for his petition, E.U. chants the chorus from a press conference podium. The camera angles for the dance segments give the effect of a series of pop or rock videos. Salt N Pepa shake their butts for the cameras and for each other while rapping, "My hands in nice, they show off my butt" and "I Like Hip Hop mixed with a go-go baby, it's my thang and I'll shake it crazy. Don't tell me how to party, it's my dance, vep, and it's my body."

A primary source of the video's power is Salt N Pepa's irreverence toward the morally-based sexual constrictions placed on them as women. They mock moral claims about the proper modes of women's expression and enjoy every minute of it. Their defiance of the moral, sexual restrictions on women is to be distinguished from challenges to the seemingly gender neutral laws against public nudity. Salt N Pepa are eventually released because their dancing isn't against the law (as they say, "We could get loose, but we can't get naked"). But their "dirty dancing" also teases the male viewer who would misinterpret their sexual freedom as an open sexual invitation. The rappers make it clear that their expression is no such thing: "A guy touch my body? I just put him in check." Salt N Pepa thus force a wedge between overt female sexual expression and the presumption that such expressions are intended to attract men. "Shaking your thang" can create a stir, but that should not prevent women from doing it when and how they choose.

At the video's close, we return to the interrogation scene a final time. Herbie receives a call, after which he announces that they have to release the women. The charges will not stick. Prancing out of the police station, Salt N Pepa laughingly say, "I told you so." The police raid and arrests make explicit the real, informal yet institutionally-based policing of female sexual expression. The video speaks to black women, calls for open, public displays of female expression, assumes a community-based support for their freedom, and focuses directly on the sexual desirability and beauty of black women's bodies. Salt N Pepa's recent video for "Expression" covers similar ground but focuses more on fostering individuality in young women.

Salt N Pepa's physical freedom, exemplified by focusing on their butts, is no coincidence. The distinctly black, physical and sexual pride that these women (and other black female rappers) exude serves as a rejection of the aesthetic hierarchy in American culture that marginalizes black women. There is a long black folk history of dances and songs that celebrate big behinds for men and women (e.g., the Bump, the Dookey Butt, and most recently E.U. and Spike Lee's black chart topper, "Da Butt"). Such explicit focus on the behind counters mainstream definitions of what constitutes a sexually attractive female body. American culture, in defining its female sex symbols, places a high premium on long thin legs, narrow hips and relatively small behinds. The vast majority of white female television and film actresses, musicians and even the occasional black model fits this description. The aesthetic hierarchy of the female body in mainstream American culture, with particular reference to the behind and hips, positions many black women somewhere near the bottom. When viewed in this context, Salt N Pepa's rap and video become an inversion of the aesthetic hierarchy that renders black women's bodies sexually unattractive.

Obviously, the common practice of objectifying all women's bodies complicates the way some might interpret Salt N Pepa shaking their collective thangs. For some, Salt N Pepa's sexual freedom could be considered dangerously close to self-inflicted exploitation. Such misunderstanding of the racial and sexual significance of black women's sexual expression may explain the surprisingly cautious responses I have received from some white feminists regarding the importance of female
rappers. However, as Hortense Spillers and other prominent black feminists have argued, a history of silence has surrounded African-American women's sexuality. Spillers argues that this silence has at least two faces: either black women are creatures of male sexual possession, or else they are revealed into the status of non-being. Room for self-defined sexual identity exists in neither alternative. The resistant nature of black women's participation in rap is better understood when we take into consideration the historical silence, sexual and otherwise, of black women. Salt-N-Pepa are carving out a female-dominated space in which black women's sexuality is openly expressed. Black women rappers sport Hip Hop clothing and jewelry as well as distinctively black hairstyles. They affirm a black, female, working-class cultural aesthetic that is rarely depicted in American popular culture. Black women rappers resist patterns of sexual objectification and cultural invisibility, and they also resist academic reification and mainstream, hegemonic, white feminist discourse.

Given the identities these women rappers have fashioned for themselves, it is not surprising that they want to avoid being labeled feminists. During my conversations with Salt, MC Lyte and Queen Latifah, it became clear that these women saw feminism as a signifier for a movement that related specifically to white women. They also thought feminism involved adopting an anti-male position, and they did not want to be considered or want their work to be interpreted as anti-black male.

In MC Lyte's case, she remarked that she was often labeled a feminist even though she did not think of herself as one. Yet, after she asked for my working definition of feminist, she wholeheartedly agreed with my description, which was as follows:

I would say that a feminist believed that there was sexism in society, wanted to change and worked toward change. She either wrote, spoke or behaved in a way that was pro-woman, in that she supported situations or organizations that were trying to better the lives of women. A feminist feels that women are more disadvantaged than men in many situations and would want to stop that kind of inequality.

MC Lyte responded, "Under your definition, I would say I am." We talked further about what she imagined a feminist to be, and it became clear that once feminism was understood as a mode of analysis rather than as a label for a group of women associated with a particular social movement, MC Lyte was much more comfortable discussing the importance of black women's independence: "Yes, I am very independent and I feel that women should be independent, but so should men. Both of us need each other and we're just coming to a realization that we do." For MC Lyte, feminists were equivalent to devoutly anti-male, white middle-class members of the National Organization of Women.

Queen Latifah was sympathetic to the issues associated with feminism, but preferred to be considered pro-woman. She was unable to articulate why she was uncomfortable with the term "feminist" and preferred instead to talk about her admiration for Faye Wattleton, the black president of Planned Parenthood, and the need to support the pro-choice movement. As she told me:

Faye Wattleton, I like her. I look up to her. I'm pro-choice, but I love God. But I think [abortion] is a woman's decision. In a world like we live in today you can't use [God] as an excuse all the time. They want to make abortion illegal, but they don't want to educate you in school. 24

Salt was the least resistant to the term feminism yet made explicit her limits:

I guess you could say that [I'm a feminist] in a way. Not in a strong sense where I'd want to go to war or anything like that [laughter]. . . . But I preach a lot about women depending
on men for everything, for their mental stability, for their financial status, for their happiness. Women have brains, and I hate to see them wallowing in the shadow of a man.5

For these women rappers, and many other black women, feminism is the label for members of a white woman's social movement, which has no concrete link to black women or the black community. Feminism signifies allegiance to historically specific movements whose histories have long been the source of frustration for women of color. Similar criticisms of women's social movements have been made vociferously by many black feminists who have argued that race and gender are inextricably linked for black women—and I would add, this is the case for both black and white women.6 However, in the case of black women, the realities of racism link black women to black men in a way that challenges cross-racial sisterhood. If a cross-racial sisterhood is to be forged, serious attention must be paid to issues of racial difference, racism within the movement, and the racial blind spots that inform coalition building. In the meantime, the desire for sisterhood among and between black and white women cannot be achieved at the expense of black women's racial identity.

If feminist scholars want to contribute to the development of a women's movement that has relevance to the lives of women of color (which also means working-class and poor women), then we must be concerned with young women's reluctance to be associated with feminism. We should be less concerned with producing theoretically referential feminist theories and more concerned with linking these theories to practices, thereby creating new concrete ways to interpret feminist activity. This will involve broadening the scope of investigations in our search for black women's voices. This will involve attending to the day-to-day conflicts and pressures that young, black working-class women face and focusing more of our attention on the cultural practices that are most important to their lives. Academic work that links feminist theory to feminist practice should be wholeheartedly encouraged, and an emphasis on making such findings widely available should be made. For feminist theorists, this will not simply entail "letting the other speak," but will also involve a systematic reevaluation of how feminism is conceptualized and how ethnicity, class and race seriously fracture gender as a conceptual category. Until this kind of analysis takes place a great deal more often than it does, what any of us say to MC Lyte will remain paper thin.

One of the remarkable talents black women rappers have is their capacity to attract a large male following and consistently perform their explicitly pro-woman material. They are able to sustain dialogue with and consequently encourage dialogue between young men and women that supports black women and challenges some sexist male behavior. For these women rappers, feminism is a movement that does not speak to men; while on the other hand, they are engaged in constant communication with black male audiences and rappers, and they simultaneously support and offer advice to their young, black female audiences. As MC Lyte explains, "When I do a show, the women are like, 'Go ahead Lyte, tell'em!' And the guys are like, 'Oh, shit. She's right.'" Obviously, such instances may not lead directly to a widespread black feminist male/female alliance. However, the dialogues facilitated by these female rappers may well contribute to its groundwork.

In a world of worst possibilities, where no such movements can be imagined, these black female rappers provide young black women with a small, culturally-reflexive public space. Rap can no longer be imagined without women rappers' contributions. They have expanded rap's territory and have effectively changed the interpretive framework regarding the work of male rappers. As women who challenge the sexist discourse expressed by male rappers yet sustain dialogue with them, who reject the racially-coded aesthetic hierarchies in American popular culture, who support black women and black culture, black female rappers constitute an important voice in Hip Hop and contemporary black women's cultural production generally. As Salt says:
The women look up to us. They take us dead seriously. It's not a fan type of thing; it's more like a movement. When we shout, "The year 1989 is for the ladies," they go crazy. It's the highlight of the show. It makes you realize that you have a voice as far as women go.28

Notes

1. I would especially like to thank MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, and Salt for their generosity and for their incredible talents. I would also like to thank Stuart Clarke for his thoughtful comments and criticism on earlier versions of this article and in

1. For a particularly malicious misreading of rap music, see David Gates, "The Rap Attitude," *Newweek Magazine* (March 1989): 62–63. While "The Rap Attitude" is an outrageous example, the assumptions made about the use and intent of rap are not uncommon. Exceptions to misreadings of this nature include Michael Dyson, "The Culture of Hip Hop," *Zora Magazine* (June 1989): 43–50, and the works of Greg Tate, a Village Voice staff writer, who has been covering rap music for almost a decade.


11. Roxanne Shante was the first commercial breakthrough female artist. Her basement-produced single was "Roxanne's Revenge" (1985).

12. Pearlman 34.


14. Pearlman 34.


18. Salt-N-Pepa, "Tramp," *Cool, Hot and Victorious: Next Plateau Records*, 1988; Salt-N-Pepa, "Shake Your Thang," *A Salt with a Deadly Pepa*, Next Plateau Records, 1988; Queen Latifah, "Ladies First," *All Hell the Queen*, Tommy Boy Records, 1989. As you will see, none of my analyses will involve the music itself. The music is a very important aspect of rap's power and aesthetics. Indeed, my purpose has been to focus on the impact of my argument, I have decided to leave it out rather than throw in "samples" of my own. For an extended cultural analysis of rap's music see Tricia Rose, *Orality and Technology: Rap Music and Afro-American Cultural Theory and Practice,* *Popular Music and Society* 15:4 (1986): 35–44.


20. Queen Latifah (Dana Owens), personal interview, 6 Feb. 1990.

21. The melody and rhythm section for "Shake Your Thang" is taken from the Ike and Tina Turner single "It's Your Thing," which was on *Billboard's Top Forty Charts* in the Winter of 1969.


24. Queen Latifah, personal interview.
25. Salt, personal interview.
27. MC Lyte, personal interview.
28. Salt, personal interview.