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# U.N.I.T.Y. Addressing Misogyny and Transcending the Sista-Ho Dichotomy in Hip Hop Culture

Michael H. Easterling  
*Brigham Young University - Provo*

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U.N.I.T.Y.—Addressing Misogyny and Transcending the  
Sista’-Ho Dichotomy in Hip Hop Culture

Michael H. Easterling

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Francesca Sborgi Lawson, Chair  
Carl Sederholm  
Marc Yamada

Department of Comparative Arts and Letters  
Brigham Young University

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## ABSTRACT

### U.N.I.T.Y.—Addressing Misogyny and Transcending the Sista'-Ho Dichotomy in Hip Hop Culture

Michael H. Easterling  
Department of Comparative Arts and Letters, BYU  
Master of Arts

In this thesis I investigate the portrayal of women in Hip Hop as either a sista' or a ho, a dichotomy that mirrors the Freudian Madonna-whore complex prevalent in Western Society. Belittled and disparaged by the sexism implied by this dichotomy, women have become victims of various forms of misogynistic abuse. Queen Latifah stands up against this misogyny, using Hip Hop in the very way it was designed to be used—as a voice for the disenfranchised—speaking out against the sexism in Hip Hop in the same way African American males use Hip Hop against White mainstream society. She thus challenges the sista'-ho dichotomy and becomes empowered to decry gender discrimination in the same way African American males become empowered to denounce racism through the performance of Hip Hop.

Keywords: Hip Hop, misogyny, Queen Latifah, Black feminism, Hip Hop feminism

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## Introduction

Hip Hop as a music and a culture emerged in the 1970s as block parties became increasingly popular in New York City among African American youth from the Bronx who could not afford to go to Disco clubs and live the Disco life style. In its early stages, Hip Hop music was an outlet and a "voice" for the disenfranchised youth from low socio-economic areas since it depicted the social, economic and political realities of their lives (Aldridge 190). Hip Hop was forged out of resistance towards a system that had deprived African Americans of basic civil rights and decency in the 1970s and 80s. Therefore, Hip Hop became a corrective to a system that has made African Americans social subordinates to White America. Ironically, African American males have sought to use Hip Hop to speak out against the injustices inflicted upon them and to elevate their status as social subordinates while simultaneously creating a dangerous and misogynistic environment for women, thereby relegating women as Hip Hop's subordinates.

The discourse surrounding women in Hip Hop is focused on what is widely known as the genre's "woman problem." In the edited collection *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology*, co-editor Rachel Raimist writes that the majority of Hip Hop's women problems is related to the ongoing depiction of Hip Hop as simply a male genre, with sexist male rappers surrounded by a harem (used in Hip Hop slang to denote "a stable full o' bitches"<sup>1</sup>) of nameless and faceless gyrating bodies in video after video. This objectifying practice has reduced women in Hip Hop to degraded commodities whose only value is their sexuality.

Issues surrounding the treatment of women in the genre of Hip Hop are at the heart of "U.N.I.T.Y." by female emcee Queen Latifah. "U.N.I.T.Y" is the Grammy Award-winning song

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<sup>1</sup>Definition from urbandictionary.com. Whereas Urban Dictionary is not normally considered an academic source, it is however a credible source for this project, as the definitions are based on Hip Hop culture, which is what I am dealing with in this thesis.

from the 1993 album *Black Reign*. The single, released on January 6, 1994, speaks out against the disrespectful treatment of women in Hip Hop society. Queen Latifah is ingenious in the way she uses Hip Hop in the very way it was designed to be used – to speak out against injustices. In this case, however, she speaks out against the injustices imposed on women in the same way that African American males use Hip Hop as a political tool to speak out about the hardships they endure because of racial intolerance. In order to appreciate Queen Latifah’s ingenuity in using Hip Hop to combat sexism, it is necessary to contextualize her work within certain components of male-female relationships within African American culture in the late 20th century. We can start to contextualize the meaning of Latifah’s work by providing a brief introduction to the sista'-ho dichotomy in Hip Hop and by explaining the relationship of the sista'-ho to the Madonna-whore complex prevalent in mainstream society. After examining how misogyny has shaped the way some African American men view and treat women as sistas or hoes in Hip Hop, I will explore how the two similar yet different schools of Black and Hip Hop feminism respond to misogyny in Hip Hop, and demonstrate Queen Latifah’s clever strategy to transcend the sista'-ho dichotomy through her performance of Hip Hop.<sup>2</sup> By using her commanding presence and undeniable lyrical abilities to appropriate the position of power from male Hip Hop artists,

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<sup>2</sup> Disclaimer: It needs to be said, that as a lifelong fan and practitioner (as a B-boy), I love Hip Hop. The genre is of incredible importance to me, and has influenced my life, informing who I am in countless ways. The beats, the rhythm, the music, the lyrical delivery, the breakin', the graffiti, the originality, all of it speaks to my soul. I love that Hip Hop can tell a story and connect with people from all classes, races or genders and make them laugh or think deeply. I love the raw emotion that is expressed through Hip Hop, not only in the music, but the emotion that can be seen in the musicality of break dancers using their body to express the music, or the emotion present in the message of graffiti art. However, as a fan and member of the Hip Hop community, I am aware of the issue of misogyny prevalent in the genre. As a researcher I choose to examine this issue by analyzing some of the reasons behind the misogynistic tendencies in this art form, while as a White male, I approach the topic of Queen Latifah's contributions to Hip Hop with some trepidation as I attempt to give this study the respect it deserves while offering high praise to this female emcee for cleverly using Hip Hop to challenge the “sista'-ho” dichotomy inherent in the genre.

Queen Latifah blazes the path for addressing misogyny both within Hip Hop performance and American culture.

### The “Madonna-whore,” The “Sista’-Ho”

In Hip Hop, as in mainstream society, women have been treated unfairly. As James Brown sang, “this is a man’s world,” and it has been structured to favor men while viewing women as second-class citizens. The engagement of Madonna-whore or the sista’-ho dichotomies serve as tools to define women and neatly put each one in their place. These dangerous dichotomies are the creation of a patriarchal order, at the expense of women and their abilities to create their own identities. Freud identified the “Madonna-whore complex” as a very specific way in which some men view women—a complex rooted in the man’s view of love being divided between the “sacred and profane (or animal) love” (Freud, 397). The Madonna-whore labels signal the apparent incapacity for males to sustain sexual arousal within a dedicated, loving relationship but have no trouble doing so when fantasizing about other women. As a result, we see a mutually exclusive way of thinking about women as either virtuous Madonnas or degraded whores (Kaplan 3-9). Freud wrote that “[w]here such men love they have no desire and where they desire they cannot love” (Freud, 397). In order to reduce sexual anxiety, men who suffer from this complex categorize women into two groups: females they can respect and appreciate and females they consider sexually attractive. In spite of the issue of sexual attraction, men who suffer from this complex tend to love and esteem women in the first group, whereas they ultimately loathe and debase the women in the latter group (Tuch 143-144). Psychoanalyst Richard Tuch proposes that Freud tendered an alternative reasoning for the Madonna–whore dichotomy as the basis of “man’s primary hatred of women” and the



subsequent sadistic measures in which the son (man) would then rectify the mother's (women's) mistreatment upon future partners by explaining:

This earlier theory is based not on oedipal-based castration anxiety but on man's primary hatred of women, stimulated by the child's sense that he had been made to experience intolerable frustration and/or narcissistic injury at the hands of his mother. According to this theory, in adulthood the boy-turned-man seeks to avenge these mistreatments through sadistic attacks on women who are stand-ins for mother (154).

Therefore, the notion of women as either saints or sinners offers only two mutually exclusive ways to construct and express femininity. Clinical psychologist Uwe Hartmann explains that this complex leads men to objectify a sexual mate who has been corrupted (the whore), while esteeming the morally virtuous mate (the Madonna) as a potential lover to be conquered (2332-2335). Of course these binaries are not simply false, but also incredibly harmful since they lend themselves to the perpetuation and justification of violence against women, encouraging people to debase those who don't fit into an ideal mold. In an article published in 2009, Hartmann believes that the complex "is still highly prevalent in today's patients" (2338).

Given its prevalence, it is not surprising that vestiges of the Madonna-whore complex may be found within the arts. For example, Laura Mulvey's exploration of "the male gaze" describes the propensity within film to depict the world, and especially the women in that world, from a masculine view point, all the while giving added value to men's opinions (Eaton 878-881). This androcentric view of the world intensifies the Madonna-whore binaries. Furthermore, the female body is constantly sexualized, objectified, and commodified by the male gaze. This is one reason why female performers on public stages have been and continue to be associated with

prostitution (Dudden 2). However, for women to participate in the performing arts, or even just to take part in society, they must enter into a public arena.

Building on the idea that the public nature of performance is problematic for women, Faye Dudden proposes the idea that women in public present a “body problem” (3, 4). The female body is viewed through the male gaze as being sexual and seductive, representing the enticing, innately sexual female that the male should not love but is nonetheless drawn to. This enticement stands in stark contrast to the unconquered virgin, whom the male should love but whose purity intimidates him. Although these stark binaries do not properly represent actual women, they are nonetheless established female archetypes, not only in the arts but in society as well.

The Madonna-whore dichotomy pervades Western cultural performance, with female identities falling into one of two archetypes. Eve represents the original “bad girl,” whose actions were understood to be so treacherous that they caused the fall of all mankind. Numerous other unfaithful and tainted women like Jezebel, Salomé, Rahab, Mary Magdalene, and a host of other women depicted as femme fatales, fill the pages of the New and Old Testaments. In stark contrast with these femme fatales is the virginal mother of Jesus and other saintly women.

Given the widespread presence and influence of both female archetypes—the virgin and the whore—it should not be surprising that Hip Hop has also engaged in this dichotomy in a similar yet unique way. When examining the way women are represented in Hip Hop, we are presented with a variation of the Madonna-whore complex known as the “sista’-ho” or “good girl-bad girl” dichotomy. Within Hip Hop culture, women tend to be represented as either a sista,’ a socially aware and morally conscience woman who is submissive to her man, or a ho, an erotic, easily exploited bad girl who wants a man to be rough with her and treat her with no

respect. In a segment titled “Sista’s and Bitches” in Byron Hurt’s documentary *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes*, he discusses the idea of the “sista’-ho.”<sup>3</sup> He interviewed concert goers at the BET Spring Fling in Daytona, FL to expose the effects of commodifying women in Hip Hop. Hurt was disgusted by the actions of Black youth at the event, who he caught on camera openly groping women and indiscreetly shooting videos up women’s skirts. One young man who was interviewed stated that the way the women were dressed justified such actions. Byron claims that the objectification of women in Hip Hop lyrics and music videos has negatively influenced young Black men to view women as sexual objects for their own personal pleasure.

The sista'-ho dichotomy found in Hip Hop culture mirrors the Madonna-whore complex in that it creates mutually exclusive categorizes that shape the way man view and define women. Although these two dichotomies are similar, the major difference between them is in the way men react to the sista'. With the ho and the whore defined as bad girls, sexual deviants, or femme fatales, they are both considered fallen women. The Madonna, however, is viewed as being morally virtuous and unconquered, the type of girl a man should love, but whose purity keeps him from desiring/lusting after her. In contrast to this view of the Madonna, the sista' is clearly a sexual being who nonetheless stands on a higher moral and social ground than the ho. In other words, there seems to be a lack of a sexually pure or virtuous female archetype in Hip Hop culture, only a less tainted but still sexually subservient female.

With male Hip Hop artists measuring the good girl against the bad girl, we see a backhanded glorification of the good girl, which comes at the expense of the bad, and while the sista' is to be respected as a self-aware woman in the Hip Hop community, she is nonetheless

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<sup>3</sup> Whereas he used the term “sista’-bitch” in his documentary, in this paper I use the term “sista’-ho” to express the same mutually exclusive definitions for women in Hip Hop. For the purpose of this paper I view them as being interchangeable as there’s certainly enough evidence to suggest that ho and bitch are used synonymously throughout the genre and the culture.

considered the property of her male lover. Rapper Drake expresses the attitude that only these model good, submissive girls should be treated with respect in Beyonce's song "Mine" when he says:

This is a song for the good girl.

And I still keep it hood,  
still treat you like I should.

Or consider these lyrics from Kanye West, which imply that only good girls, who are properly subservient, are of any value, while "bitches" are disposable, in "Bound 2":

Close your eyes and let the word paint a thousand pictures.

One good girl is worth a thousand bitches.

So who are these good girls in Hip Hop? They appear to be the self-aware, sexually active but subservient female emcees like Salt N Pepper or TLC who can commonly be referred to as sistas in the Hip Hop Community, while at other times they appear to be the girls that Eminem raps about – submissive and willing to be subordinated in Hip Hop culture. In essence sistas seem to be women who would never dream of challenging male domination.

On the other hand, the bad girls in Hip Hop, who allow themselves to be constructed as hypersexual beings, are more clearly identified and recognized than the sista.' Tiara Thomas expresses the expectations of a bad girl's sexuality in Wale's song "Bad" by singing:

I never made love,

No I never did it...

I'll be your bad girl.

I'll prove it to you.

I can't promise that I'll be good to you.

Though rejecting the subjugated and repressive good girl identity and deciding to be sexually assertive on her own terms can be liberating, the problem lies in equating this feminine stance with badness and allowing it to define femininity in Hip Hop. Why do listeners have to choose between the “good” sexual submission or the “bad” sexual assertiveness as the only two choices? Both archetypes are clearly created according to a male perspective and fail to represent all possible female identities in Hip Hop.

Investigating the paradoxical discourse around female emcees Lil’ Kim and Nicki Minaj is helpful in understanding the bad girl archetype in Hip Hop. Lil’ Kim reveals how women in Hip Hop are fashioned and seen as hypersexual, using their bodies and sexuality for album sales. Although Nicki Minaj can be viewed in a similar manner, contextualizing her lyrics and career reveals her as a woman who, similar to Queen Latifah, destabilizes the male dominant Hip Hop discourse by subverting male bravado, albeit by utilizing her bold sexuality on her terms.

Although speaking about the creation of a patriarchal order in Shakespearean England – a vastly different culture from 20th century Hip Hop—Stephen Orgel’s discussion about Elizabethan patriarchy is surprisingly appropriate for the present analysis. Orgel clarifies that patriarchy depends upon having a subordinate, but that subordinate does not have to be a woman. Younger or lower ranked males, as well as women, could be considered subordinate enough to sustain patriarchal power (14). Similarly today, in mainstream society we find this to be true as White males have made social subordinates not only of women, but also of gays, lesbians, transgender people, members of lower socio-economic classes, and different minority groups such as the African American community.

## Misogyny before Hip Hop

Sigmund Freud provided an interesting framework for understanding some of the reasons behind this misogyny and sexism in the Black community, but to truly understand the origin of the intense anger, mistrust and violence promoted in Hip Hop, we must examine representations of misogyny in music like the Blues before Hip Hop. Understanding Orgel's argument about how anyone from social class can be deemed a social subordinate, some Black men have directed their frustration and anger at Black women, making women their social subordinates.

The legacy of misogyny in the African American community has commonly been represented through music. Among the Blues, for example, there are many examples of misogynist lyrics. In 1927 Texas Alexander represents women as unfaithful whores in his song "Corn-Bread Blues" singing:

She was a broad back middy,  
and a gambling stomping whore...  
She cooks cornbread for her husband,  
biscuits for her back door man.

In 1936 the famous Blues guitar man and singer Robert Johnson declares in his song "30-20 Blues," "Little girl, little girl, I got mean things on my mind" – perhaps the sort of mean things that surface the next year in his song "Me and the Devil Blues," where Johnson sings "I'm gonna beat my woman' til I get satisfied." These lyrics represent a kind of male superiority that thrives on the depictions of violence against women by Black men, which did not start nor end with Robert Johnson, however.

Along with viewing women as whores, and treating them violently, the misogynistic messages of commodification and control can also be found in the Blues. In 1945 Big Joe

Turner, ironically celebrating fidelity in his song “My Gal’s a Jockey,” commodifies his woman as a sexual object singing:

Hey baby, everything's all right,  
 Long as you in at yo door, you'll suit your daddy tonight  
 My baby’s my jockey, she’s teaching me how to ride...  
 Well she's little and she's low and she's built tough from the ground  
 When my baby shimmies she makes my love come down.

In 1954 Ray Charles wrote and sang the song “I Got a Woman,” which was his first hit song and quickly climbed to #1 on billboards R&B. The lyrics centered on the message of keeping women in their place, using them for money and sex while keeping them at a distance.

I got a woman way over town that's good to me oh yeah  
 Say I got a woman way over town good to me oh yeah  
 She give me money when I’m in need  
 Yeah she's a kind of friend indeed  
 I got a woman way over town that's good to me oh yeah...  
 She's there to love me both day and night  
 Never grumbles or fusses always treats me right  
 Never runnin in the streets and leavin me alone  
 She knows a womans place is right there now in her home.

This song became so popular that several other musical artists made covers of it, including Elvis Presley, The Beatles, The Monkees, Stevie Wonder, Johnny Cash, etc. Eventually samples of this song would be used by Hip Hop superstar Kanye West in his song “Gold Digger,” which portrayed similar misogynistic messages.

A few years later in 1960 Lightnin' Hopkins states that he is going to "shoot my woman, 'cause she's foolin' around with too many men" in "Bring Me My Shotgun"; this song clearly communicates that a whore deserves violence because of her infidelity or promiscuity. A decade later in 1970 The Isley Brothers sang a song titled "Take Inventory" in which they promote the idea of controlling your woman by not being too kind or sweet since those are the actions of a boy, not a man. A real man pushes his woman away and is mean to her with the intent making her subservient. They sang:

She'll go by your rules...

She'll do what you tell her

And do what you wanna do

The message of infidelity, dishonesty, and domination is designed to keep a woman submissive:

Listen to my story,

Be sure to lie

And be sure to cheat

Listen to my story

Always keep that woman beggin'

At your feet

Don't be so loyal and

Don't be so true...

Show who's the Boss and

Show who's the King

Show you can be cold now

And you can be mean



This type of misogyny assumes control and domination of one's female partner. While he does not promote physical abuse in the song, he systematically wears her down through psychological battering, using his words as weapons to manipulate her.<sup>4</sup>

The previous examples demonstrate that misogynist messages have been prevalent in the lyrics of music written by African American male musicians. The performance of abuse, hatred and violence towards Black women created a social system in the Black community that taught and embraced misogyny over generations. This misogyny only intensifies in rap music.

### Misogyny in Hop Hop

Various explanations for why misogyny exists in Hip Hop culture have been proposed. Edward Armstrong argues that rap artists use misogynistic lyrics and portrayals as a way to assert their masculinity and authenticity as rappers (336). In an industry where an artist's "street cred"<sup>5</sup> can make or break an emcee, misogyny has become a sign of authenticity for some

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<sup>4</sup> A full analysis of misogyny in Black music leading to Hip Hop is beyond the scope of this study. The reader should note that the examples provided focus on Black males perpetuating misogyny although some Black female artists not only perpetuated but enabled the misogyny to continue. One example can be found in a 1962 song called "He Hit Me (And It Felt Like a Kiss)." The Black female group known as The Crystals sang this song written by Gerry Goffin and Carole King under the guidance of Phil Spector. This song not only justifies but glamorizes domestic violence and perpetuated the commodification of Black women. They sang:

He hit me and it felt like a kiss  
 He hit me but it didn't hurt me  
 He couldn't stand to hear me say  
 That I'd been with someone new  
 And when I told him I had been untrue...  
 He hit me and it felt like a kiss  
 He hit me and I knew he loved me  
 If he didn't care for me  
 I could have never made him mad  
 But he hit me and I was glad...  
 Yes, he hit me and it felt like a kiss  
 He hit me and I knew I loved him  
 And then he took me in his arms  
 With all the tenderness there is  
 And when he kissed me, he made me his...

Spector's arrangement only served to augment the cruelty implied by this song. The lead vocal is highlighted by strings and funereal drums, while the benign back-ground vocals seem to support the idea that her boyfriend has done nothing wrong.

<sup>5</sup> Definition from Urban Dictionary: Commanding a level of respect in an urban environment due to experience in or knowledge of issues affecting those environments. Your "coolness" factor.

rappers because it is assumed that misogynistic lyrics and depictions of violence against women prove that they are masculine and authentic gangsters. On the other hand, as William Oliver points out, rappers that distance themselves from the hyper-masculine self-portrayals and hostile representations of women are often considered "soft" and "fake" (383). Others have suggested that rap music is a product of its environment, reflecting mainstream attitudes toward women, and that Hip Hop artists have internalized negative stereotypes about women (Dyson 22). Still other theories have stressed economic considerations as the reasoning behind misogyny in Hip Hop, arguing that rappers use misogyny to achieve commercial success – the old “sex sells” business technique.

In Hip Hop, misogyny tends to be even more explicit in both the lyrics and in performance than in previous musical genres. As social subordinates to White mainstream society, African American males have ironically sought to elevate their subordinate status by inflicting terrible abuse on the women of their community, thereby relegating women as Hip Hop’s social subordinates. Perhaps the intense misogyny expressed by African American male Hip Hop artists is because they are venting their anger and frustration on the only population they perceive to be subordinate to them — women.

Misogyny can be found in Hip Hop Culture to support, glorify, justify, or normalize the objectification, exploitation, or victimization of women (Adams 939). Seemingly reminiscent of the type of misogyny found in the Blues, these negative portrayals of women in Hip Hop can range from insinuations to clichéd characterizations and outright defamations. The sista-ho dichotomy is just a new example of an old standard. Emcees rap about the “good girl” who sticks by them even when they cheat on her or beat her up, followed by a song about the strip club and how much they judge and despise the women who work in them, calling them bitches and hoes.

The ubiquitous Hip Hop mantra “you can’t turn a ho into a housewife” encapsulates the sista-ho complex and has been widely accepted among Hip Hop artists for decades. Several artists have openly embraced this idea in their music, such as Tupac in his song “There U Go,” or Dr. Dre in his song “Housewife.”

Explicit misogyny in rap music emerged in the late 1980s as Hip Hop artists embraced the sista’-ho dichotomy to define women, and since that time lyrics and performance practices that degrade women have become a feature of many Hip Hop performances (Adams 942-943). In the 1990s audiences began to demand more violent and offensive lyrics, and record executives urged artists to write those lyrics (Watts 45, 50-51). When crowds demanded more violent and offensive lyrics, women were an easy target, so it shouldn’t be surprising that Black male rappers of the 1980s and 1990s were often unapologetically misogynistic. Slick Rick is one of the most entertaining emcees to ever grab a mic, but his music was consistently misogynistic and hateful towards women, as revealed in the song “Treat Her Like a Prostitute.” The woman who should be treated like a prostitute in Slick Rick’s song is his wife. He raps:

Treat 'em like a prostitute

Don't treat no girlie well ...

It's your wife...

Give her everything 'cause you swear she's worth it

All your friends tell you, "The bitch don't deserve it"...

There's the mailman, he was short yet stout

He went inside your house and didn't come back out...

Treat 'em like a prostitute

Don't treat no girlie well

Slick Rick elucidates his audience, namely Black males, not only to treat women like hoes, but to mistrust the woman a man should love the most, namely his wife. The song “A Love That’s True,” which opens with Slick Rick advising his son that, “You don’t trust no bitch,” illustrates how misogyny can often be perpetuated from father to son. This illustrates the manner in which some Black men have perpetuated the sexually exploitative nature of misogyny in music.

Gangsta rap, the most commercially successful subgenre of Hip Hop, has been particularly criticized and associated with misogyny (Rebollo-Gil 119-122). Armstrong reports that approximately 22% to 37% of rap lyrics contain some form of misogyny, including depictions of assault, murder, sexual conquest and rape (99-101). Moreover, 78% of the lyrics sung by rap super star Eminem were found to engage in violent misogyny. Of the eighteen songs on *The Marshall Mathers LP*, eleven contain violent and misogynistic lyrics and nine depict the killing of women (120). Similarly, in his song titled “Kill You,” where he advocates violence as an appropriate punishment for women who challenge male domination or who simply disrespect men, he says:

Slut, you think I won't choke no whore

'Til the vocal cords don't work in her throat no more?!

Analyses of rap lyrics indicate that rappers not only portray women as objects of violence, but also commonly as sex objects who are morally and intellectually inferior to men. Men are praised if they sexually exploit women, degrade them and keep them in their place (Weitzer 11–13). An example of portraying women as only being good for sex is illustrated in Dr. Dre’s iconic gangsta’ rap song titled “Bitches Ain’t Shit” where he definitively states that “Bitches ain't shit but hoes and tricks,” and are only good for sexual exploitation. He further elaborates this point by explaining that after a female has sexually pleased him he will kick her

out of his car so that he can find a new woman to exploit. This song communicates a very dehumanized portrayal of women, which becomes all the more disturbing when considering that Dr. Dre's album *The Chronic* peaked at number three on the *Billboard 200* and went triple platinum with over 5.7 million copies sold in the United States (Caulfield). And while rap music sexually degrades and advocates physically assaulting women, rap videos also feature women in positions of objectification and sexual submission to their male counterparts. For example, Kanye West's video for "Monster" presents dead women hanging from ceilings in sexually provocative outfits. It shows West holding a woman's decapitated head and repositioning the bodies of two dead girls in a bed. Although the video has been widely criticized as misogynistic, it is nonetheless emblematic of the kind of videos supported by the industry.

Ol' Dirty Bastard (a.k.a. ODB) from the Wu-Tang Clan echoed the message to use women not only for sex but for their money as well in his song "Got Your Money" – a similar idea communicated Ray Charles – as ODB raps about going to the clubs to fondle women and take advantage of them sexually. In the song's chorus female singer Kelis who is featured on the song sings:

Hey, Dirty, baby I got your money

Don't you worry

I said hey, baby I got your money.

While at the same time you can hear ODB screaming in the background "Sing it girl! Sing it right now! If Ol' Dirty wants his money you I think you should give it to him!" The chorus is then followed up by a male voice that sings "sexy, sexy, sexy," insinuating that women who give their money to men are sexy, while simultaneously insinuating that these women are prostitutes who should be proud of their identity. The disturbing manner in which this song glorifies the

pimp-like behavior of the male emcee, who needs to collect his money from his hoes, helps to explain why the pimp is so glorified in Hip Hop music at the expense, literally and figuratively, of his ho.

Critics like Johnnetta B. Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, have expressed dismay over the effects of misogyny in Hip Hop culture on children, stating, "We are concerned because we believe that Hip Hop is more misogynist and disrespectful of Black girls and women than other popular music genres. The casual references to rape and other forms of violence and the soft-porn visuals and messages of many rap music videos are seared into the consciousness of young Black boys and girls at an early age" (186).

Cole and Guy-Sheftall's concerns are well founded since rap music demeans and silences women, who are depicted as weak, submissive beings who are only good for sex. There are some emcees who try to defy the norm and rap lyrics that uplift women, however. Examples include socially conscious rappers like Tupac and Kendrick Lamar have written a few songs that offer support and understanding to women while also positioning them as equals to men. One example is Tupac's song "Keep Ya Head Up" where Tupac using his rap to elevate Black women:

Some say the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice

I say the darker the flesh then the deeper the roots...

And, I know they like to beat you down a lot

When you come around the block, brothers clown a lot...

You know what makes me unhappy

When brothers make babies, and leave a young mother to be a pappy

And since we all came from a woman

Got our name from a woman and our game from a woman

I wonder why we take from our women  
 Why we rape our women, do we hate our women?  
 I think it's time to kill for our women  
 Time to heal our women, be real to our women  
 And if we don't we'll have a race of babies  
 That will hate the ladies that make the babies  
 And since a man can't make one  
 He has no right to tell a woman when and where to create one  
 So will the real men get up  
 I know you're fed up ladies, but keep your head up.

However, both of these performers still use overtly misogynistic themes in their music. For instance in Tupac's song "Hit 'Em Up," he talks about having sex with another emcee's wife referring to her as a bitch, he tells Lil' Kim to get "yo' ugly ass off the streets," and even refers to the mothers of a rival crew in a derogatory manner.

With the release of the film *Straight Outta Compton*, the rap group NWA has come back under scrutiny for misogyny in their lyrics, videos, tours, performances and lifestyles. Reaction to the film has forced the surviving members to address their past conduct toward women. In August 2015, rapper Ice Cube vehemently defended their use of the words "bitches" and "hoes." He said in an interview with *Rolling Stone* "If you're a bitch, you're probably not going to like us. If you're a ho, you probably don't like us. If you're not a ho or a bitch, don't be jumping to the defense of these despicable females" (Seliger). Ironically he continues, "I never understood why an upstanding lady would even think we're talking about her."

Whether the explanation for the intense anger and misogyny in Hip Hop is rooted in the reflection of mainstream America's attitudes towards femininity or in the emcee's apparent need to present himself in a hyper-masculine way to build street cred, it has certainly created a distressed and dangerous environment for women, especially African American women. The reactions of African American women to the misogyny in Hip Hop have ultimately given birth to a new school of feminism.

### Black Feminism and Hip Hop Feminism

Throughout history, feminism has pushed back against misogyny and gender-related injustices, so it should come as no surprise that a Black female emcee and Hip Hop feminist would use her work to denounce the misogyny inherent in the genre of Hip Hop. To better appreciate Queen Latifah's influence, it is important that we examine two feminist discourses rooted in the Black community. An important part of second-wave feminism in mainstream society was broadening the feminist debate to a wider range of issues such as sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights, social biases, and legal inequalities. Second-wave feminism also drew attention to domestic violence, rape, and other misogynistic issues facing women. In the Black community, these issues became part of two distinct yet related discourses: Black feminism and Hip Hop feminism. Black feminism and Hip Hop feminism are often used interchangeably, and for good reason; they are very similar. However, to the discerning eye, each discourse embodies unique and substantially different approaches to feminism. Even though Black feminism and Hip Hop feminism are similar in their recognition of intersectionality<sup>6</sup>, they are very different in their response to young Black male Hip Hop artists who are trying to be

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<sup>6</sup> Intersectionality is an idea based on the interconnected nature of social categorizations applied to a given individual or group, which create overlapping systems of discrimination or disadvantage based off of lived experience. T. Hasan Johnson describes it as "a term that argues that race, gender, sexuality, and class are interlinked and used to shape hierarchical relationships in American society" (67).



successful and escape the hardships of ghetto culture. Black feminists attack Black male artists for their misogynistic tendencies while not fully appreciating their systematic positioning as social subordinates. By contrast, Hip Hop feminists seek to understand Hip Hop's overall message of resistance towards a system that has deprived African Americans of basic civil rights and decency while trying to negotiate the misogyny they encounter in the music they love.

Most people associate Black feminism with Hip Hop feminism because the former is feminism for Black women, and the latter is feminism coming from a Black counter-culture, namely Hip Hop. Both promote the need for equality for Black women, not only as women who have been oppressed because of their femininity but also as African Americans who have been oppressed because of their skin color. Historically, women were denied the right to vote and limited in their access to education, all the while being given a defined role as a social subordinate that placed them squarely in the home and out of the public sphere. Black women were also denied many additional basic civil rights enjoyed by their White counter parts. Together, both Black feminism and Hip Hop feminism advocate for gender and racial equality.

Black feminism, a school of thought that argues that sexism, class oppression, and racism are inextricably bound together (Hill, 19-24), emerged in the late 1960s in response to the perceived sexism of the civil rights movement and the racism of the radical feminist movement, whose priority was to defend the equality of White women from affluent families (The Combahee River Collective Statement). Proponents of Black feminism argue that Black women are positioned within structures of power in fundamentally different ways than White women, and therefore need to have their own movement that can champion the needs of African American women. From the 1970s to the 1980s, Black feminists formed various groups to address the role of Black women in Black-nationalist and second-wave feminist organizations

(Breines, 1099-1105). Black feminists assert that forms of feminism that ignore racial issues allow racial bias to exacerbate discriminatory practices against women. They argue that the liberation of Black women entails freedom for all people by requiring the end of racism, sexism, and class oppression. Finally in the 1990s, Black feminists received mainstream attention, in large part because of the stance they took against young Black male rap artists who portrayed violence and misogyny against minority women.

In 2010 Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey coined the term “misogynoir” to refer to misogyny in which race and gender both play roles in the bias directed at Black women (Bailey). She first used the term on the *Crunk Feminist Collective* blog, and has since used it to discuss misogyny toward Black women in Hip Hop music. Misogynoir is typified by the stereotypes projected onto Black women by society such as the "Strong Black Woman" or the "HyperSexual Jezebel," otherwise known as the sista'-ho dichotomy in Hip Hop. In "4 Tired Tropes That Perfectly Explain What Misogynoir Is – And How You Can Stop It," author Kisiena Boom illustrates some common stereotypes for Black women and explains why they are detrimental. For example, while the "Strong Black Woman" label seems to be a compliment, it disregards the racialized suffering that Black women have had to endure. The notion that Black women can handle anything ultimately perpetuates the stereotypes such as the "mammy" role for White families, the default head of household when Black men are absent or in prison, and the commodified partner who can be sexually abused (Boom). At the same time the “HyperSexual Jezebel” reinforces the idea that Black women are innately and permanently sexual, promiscuous beings. The notion that Black women are automatically “sluts and ho’s” reflects the Hypersexual Jezebel image and is widespread in Hip Hop music today. Black women are portrayed as the antithesis of “pure” White women, and many rap stars, such as Jay Z, Nelly or Kanye West, have

used Black women's bodies as props to "sex up" their music videos and live performances (Boom).

While Black feminism criticized the Black male emcee for objectifying and degrading the Black woman, a school of third-wave feminism known as Hip Hop feminism materialized in order to explore the dualistic nature of feminists that were also part of the Hip Hop generation and culture. Hip Hop feminism is a term that was coined by author Joan Morgan in her book *When the Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*. Hip Hop feminism has been loosely associated with Black women in the Hip Hop community who were born in the late 1960s or later. Hip Hop feminism comes from the same tradition of Black feminism, asserting that race, class, gender, and sexuality all play a role in determining how we are treated, and arguing that none of these issues should be decided and defined by men in a patriarchal system. Hip Hop feminism and Black feminism are therefore different from Anglo-American feminism because they are based on the different lived experiences of members of the Black community. However, Hip Hop feminism is a reaction to Black feminism from Black women who propose the question – does Black feminism have the right to criticize the females in Hip Hop for subscribing to a musical culture that degrades them? In examining the perceived hypocrisies in being a feminist who supports Black male-centric movements like Hip Hop, Joan Morgan stated:

Just once, I didn't want to have to talk about 'the brothers,' 'male domination,' or 'the patriarchy'. I wanted a feminism that would allow me to explore who we are as women – not victims. One that claimed the powerful richness and delicious complexities inherent in being a Black girl now – sistas of the post-Civil Rights, post-feminist, post soul, Hip Hop generation (56-57).

These feelings lead her, as a part of the Hip Hop generation, to ask some categorically politically incorrect questions like: "[c]an you be a good feminist and admit out loud that there are things that you kinda dig about patriarchy" (57)? Or "[w]ould I be forced to turn in my 'feminist membership card' if I confessed that suddenly waking up in a world free of gender inequalities or expectations just might bug me out a little" (57)? Or even "[a]m I no longer down for the cause if I admit that while total gender equality is an interesting intellectual concept, it doesn't do a damn thing for me erotically" (57-58)?

Hip Hop feminists are women who belong to a community and love a genre where misogyny is prevalent in the music. Yet while these feminists champion respect for women, they are not willing to degrade the young Black male Hip Hop artists who are struggling to express themselves in hopes of forming a better future for themselves and their families. Instead, they seek to operate from within the Hip Hop community to bring about change that will ultimately elevate both Black women and men.

Leola Johnson explains that some female rappers, such as Queen Latifah, personify and express feminism, yet for decades did not identify themselves as feminists because feminism was "considered too White, too middle class, and too hostile to Black men" (162). Nevertheless, she has long been considered one of Hip Hop's pioneer feminists who exemplifies third-wave feminism by representing a race and gender-conscious, sexually open feminism that challenges male authority from within the community and by establishing herself as the dominant character in her music (Roberts 245-248). In essence, she exemplifies Hip Hop feminism, using the Hip Hop music that she loves to establish herself as a dominant female figure.

Queen Latifah's contributions to Hip Hop are also surprisingly analogous to the influence of divas in Western opera, despite the obvious differences between the two genres. In speaking

about Italian Opera in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Carolyn Abbate argues that although the Prima Donna is often “undone”<sup>7</sup> by the libretti, her powerful authorial voice more than compensates for her undoing. Indeed, the locus of operatic triumph for women is in fact:

[T]he overwhelming sound of the female operatic voice and the musical gestures that fold those voices into a whole. This is a realm beyond narrative plot, in which women exist as sonority and sheer physical volume, asserting themselves outside spectacle and escaping murderous fates (254).

In a similar fashion, Queen Latifah’s locus of triumph as a female Hip Hop artist is her powerfully feminine voice, which, along with her considerable skill in creating lyrics (not written for her by a male librettist), empowers her to the point that she actually transcends the negative portrayal of women, thereby subverting male authority in Hip Hop.

Therefore, Hip Hop feminists are confronted with the paradox that Joan Morgan posed: Is it possible to be a feminist and still love parts of a musical culture created and defined by a patriarchy? I would argue in the affirmative, as does Morgan when she cites Hip Hop artists such as Tupac and Queen Latifah in making her point about the dual nature that is part of being a Hip Hop feminist, namely to be able to love your womanhood while also enjoying aspects of the Hip Hop culture that are also inherently misogynist (49, 58-61). She concludes that Hip Hop feminism is a verb, a movement actively trying to gain love, respect and compassion for women in the Hip Hop community (60-62). I would add that Hip Hop feminists are no less undone by their roles in Hip Hop music than the opera diva is in misogynist opera libretti. Similar to opera

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<sup>7</sup> The notion of the “undone” woman was an idea explored by French philosopher Catherine Clément in her book *Opera: The Undoing of Women*. In it, she studies the way in which established operatic plots often highlight the death of female characters – as she said, “the infinitely repetitive spectacle of a woman who dies, murdered” (47). In addition to the literal deaths of popular opera characters such as Carmen and Isolde, Clément also considered the figurative deaths – like the character of Marschallin who had to give way to the younger, more desirable female character Sophie, and yield to Sophie her lover Octavian (McClary, xii – xiii).

divas, women in Hip Hop cherish the music of their community, in spite of some of its inherent misogyny. And as we see in the music of Queen Latifah, feminism in Hip Hop has the power to unify the Black community while challenging the sista'-ho dichotomy engrained so deeply in Hip Hop.

### Queen Latifah and “U.N.I.T.Y.”

One of the most powerful responses to misogyny in Hip Hop can be traced to the pioneering efforts of one of the greatest female artists in the genre. In addition to the women who seemingly embrace the sista'-ho dichotomy, we also find a female emcee who transcends these stereotypes and establishes herself as a dominant character, rather than a social subordinate, through her commanding presence and lyrical abilities. I am of course referring to Queen Latifah. Through her song U.N.I.T.Y., she sets the standard for what a Hip Hop feminist can be. She calls out the blatant misogyny in Hip Hop and infuses feminism into rap music at a time when female emcees weren't afforded the opportunities to express themselves.

A few years before the release of U.N.I.T.Y., Queen Latifah began to blaze the path for feminists in Hip Hop with the song “Ladies First.” In examining “Ladies First,” one can see her vision of the strength and importance of women, as well as her rejection of misogynistic concepts in African American popular culture and her call for Black women to support one another. In the article “Ladies First’ Queen Latifah’s Afrocentric Feminist Music Video,” Robin Roberts writes about how this music video is not solely focused on feminism but also on Afrocentrism. Afrocentrism is a movement centered on the history of Black people and grew as a response to perceived global racism (247). Roberts argues that “Ladies First” stresses that feminism and Afrocentrism are mutually empowering since Hip Hop feminism empowers the Black community by elevating Black women. “Ladies First” raises issues of gender and race by

bringing Afrocentrism and feminism to the forefront of Hip Hop and opens a dialogue about the state of women in the Hip Hop community (248).

According to Roberts, “Ladies First” can be considered Black feminist because of Latifah’s focus on promoting Black women’s importance, her demand for equal treatment for Black women, and her portrayal of Black women supporting each other in her rap (Roberts, 245). “Ladies First” takes a positive direction in that it decries sexism, racism and apartheid. The song’s music video takes a “serious exploration and glorification of African American women’s history” while complimenting the message used in the song with images of Queen Latifah as a tactician in a military situation, a supporter of global Black opposition, and a fashion icon who “resists the nakedness and exposure of Western styles for women (such as the dresses and high heels worn by Tina Turner)” (247). The song itself gives “explicit assertions of female strength and autonomy” (245-246). The complementary lyrical and visual messages against sexism and racism in “Ladies First” provide the audience with the view of an African American female emcee as a community leader, contradicting stereotypical images of African American women in Hip Hop as either sistas or hoes – a message that Queen Latifah would clarify even more in “U.N.I.T.Y.”

In Gwendolyn Pough’s article “Do the Ladies Run This...?: Some Thoughts on Hip Hop Feminism,” she further discusses the impact of “Ladies First.” She argues that the music video openly expresses the third-wave Black feminists’ appreciation for the second-wave Black feminists and the Black Power movement (238-240). The support for Black feminism and Black Power can be seen in the video when Queen Latifah replaces the White male figurines with black power fists on the map and when Black feminist leaders from Sojourner Truth to Angela Davis flash on the screen. Pough goes on to say that while Queen Latifah is a strong female presence in

the Hip Hop community she does not necessarily identify herself as a Hip Hop feminist. However, with songs like “Ladies First” and “U.N.I.T.Y.”, which address the word “bitch”, sexual objectification and domestic violence, Pough argues that Queen Latifah presents Hip Hop feminism to the world (241-242).

Queen Latifah made history and blazed a new path for female emcees when she won a Grammy for her revolutionary hit, “U.N.I.T.Y.,” which speaks out against the way Black male artists construct female gender in Hip Hop. “U.N.I.T.Y.” began a dialogue in the African American community over cruelty and attacks against women. It also asserts that Black women rappers should have an authoritative and influential voice in a genre dominated by men. “U.N.I.T.Y.” issues a direct response to sexist male emcees who make the terms “bitch” and “ho” the go-to descriptors for women in Hip Hop. The song also addresses sexual harassment, domestic violence, the cycle of violence within the Black community, and the ways Black female sexuality have been objectified in life and art. In one verse she asks men, “Who you callin’ a bitch?” and in the next, she turns to women and demands, “You gotta let him know/You ain’t a bitch or a ho.” Queen Latifah challenges the “sista’-ho” dichotomy by placing the responsibility of change on the shoulders of the men who perpetuate sexist stereotypes in Hip Hop and the women who enable them. MC Lyte, another pro-female rapper who is also good friends with and a contemporary of Queen Latifah, told Billboard in 2014 that “U.N.I.T.Y.” is one of the most important songs in Hip Hop: “[It] was extremely impactful for the genre of Hip Hop to finally hear a strong voice of a positive Black woman speaking about uplifting young woman. To date it's still one of my favorite songs” (Ramirez).



In further examining “U.N.I.T.Y.”,<sup>8</sup> we discover how Queen Latifah demands respect for women from men. The chorus is dedicated to stopping the violence against women by communicating love and clear expectations for women. But we also find her expressing the same love for Black men. Queen Latifah raps in the chorus:

U.N.I.T.Y.

Love a Black man from infinity to infinity

U.N.I.T.Y.

You got to let him know

You ain't a bitch or a ho

U.N.I.T.Y.

Love a Black woman from infinity to infinity

Within the first four lines of “U.N.I.T.Y.” Queen Latifah demands love for both Black women and men from infinity to infinity! While the majority of the lyrics have strong feminist undertones, Queen Latifah distances herself from the Black feminist agenda that condemns young Black male emcees. “All that shit is bullshit! I know at the end of the day, I’m a Black woman in this world and I gotta get mine. [But still] I want to see the rise of the Black male in personal strength and power” (Pough 280). Pough explains Queen Latifah’s feelings as a Hip Hop feminist who uses Hip Hop to empower women, while simultaneously supporting Black men. Consequently, in the chorus Latifah establishes a foundation for unity between the genders in Hip Hop, communicating an urgency to stop viewing women as bitches or hoes. She continues with this theme at the beginning of the first verse:

Instinct leads me to another flow

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<sup>8</sup>This is my own transcription of the lyrics to U.N.I.T.Y. by Queen Latifah.

Every time I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a ho

Trying to make a sister feel low

You know all of that gots to go

These lyrics can be interpreted as the thesis of her rap, namely that she has to rap out about the misogyny that exists in Hip Hop culture, where it is seemingly okay to call women by names that demean and degrade them. She intends to accomplish her goal of denouncing misogyny through her skills as a rapper, thereby leveling the playing field through her undeniable vocal talent.

Queen Latifah continues in the first verse by clearly showing that gender unity is different from gender neutrality, often promoted in Second Wave feminism, (Korgen, 161) by acknowledging that there are differences between men and women that should be acknowledged and respected. Moreover, when there is mutual respect between a man and woman, there is a situation in which a woman may allow a man to refer to her as a bitch or ho. Under certain circumstances, when there exists a comradery between the man and the woman and when it is said in a playful way, a woman may allow a man to refer to her as a bitch or a ho. Latifah says:

Now everybody knows there's exceptions to this rule

Now don't be getting mad, when we playing, it's cool

However she wants to make it clear that she does not accept the dichotomous classifications of the good girl/bad girl. She will not allow herself to be defined as a social subordinate, no matter if the assault on her character is verbal or physical. Latifah states:

But don't you be calling out my name

I bring wrath to those who disrespect me like a dame

That's why I'm talking, one day I was walking down the block

I had my cutoff shorts on right cause it was crazy hot

I walked past these dudes when they passed me

One of 'em felt my booty, he was nasty

I turned around red, somebody was catching the wrath

Then the little one said “Yeah me bitch” and laughed

Since he was with his boys he tried to break fly

Huh, I punched him dead in his eye and said “Who you calling a bitch?”

In contrast to her song/video “Ladies First,” where Queen Latifah embraces Afrocentric fashion for women, both the song lyrics and video for “U.N.I.T.Y.” embrace Western fashion for women as she talks about and wears cutoff shorts, and can be seen doing so in the video. She explains that the purpose of wearing these shorts is not to allow passing men to objectify her, but simply to keep her cool because “it was crazy hot.” Queen Latifah promotes the feminist idea that a woman has the right to dress how she wants without having her body objectified.

In finishing the first verse Latifah also defiantly refuses to be degraded either verbally or physically. She has no interest in letting people talk about her and define her as anything but who she claims to be. Even more emphatically, she refuses to be sexually assaulted on the street and called a bitch because that act of violence denotes weakness and victimization. She turns this encounter on its head by denigrating the man who grabs her; she not only punches him in the face, but then asks “Who you calling a bitch?” Her actions should be interpreted as making the man her subordinate by virtue of two things: (1) her moral authority and (2) her commanding physical actions. In other words, he has been made Queen Latifah’s bitch. In this way she establishes herself as not a good or bad girl, not as a sista' or a Ho, but as a strong and powerful woman who should be admired and respected as someone who transcends both negative images.

Interestingly we find Queen Latifah using the term “bitch” to demean others, although her use of the term is far from perpetuating the patriarchal practice of degrading women. Instead, Latifah re-appropriates the term in a way that is reminiscent of Judith Butler’s concept of agency. Butler argues that “The terms by which we are hailed are rarely the ones we choose...but these terms we never really choose are the occasion for something we might still call agency, the repetition of an originary subordination for another purpose, one whose future is partially open” (38). When Butler talks about agency, she refers to the way we appropriate language—even negative language—for our own purposes, as evidenced by the use of the word nigga in the African American community (100). Likewise Queen Latifah takes the term “bitch” which has been used to describe and degrade women, and re-signifies it to describe a person who lacks respect and fails to demonstrate common decency to others which is applicable to both men and women. Butler further stated that “the name one is called both subordinates and enables, producing a scene of agency from ambivalence, a set of effects that exceeds the animated intentions of the call...The word that wounds becomes an instrument of resistance” through the resignification of that words meaning (163). Co-opting hate speech, as we see Queen Latifah do, through the repetitious insurrectionary use of the word bitch that was initially meant to degrade her, thus forces a new connotation for that word outside “the prior territory of its operation” (163).

It is also important to note that the lyrics “Yeah me bitch” from the line “Then the little one said ‘Yeah me bitch’ and laughed,” are delivered by emcee Vin Rock from Naughty by Nature,<sup>9</sup> a group known for its hit song O.P.P. which contained a message that glorifies infidelity

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<sup>9</sup> Naughty by Nature was found by Queen Latifah in the late 1980s, demonstrating that she indeed wanted to see the success of both men and women in Hip Hop. Not only did fellow New Jersey native Queen Latifah mentor the young emcees and help them find success in Hip Hop but she supported them throughout their career.

while objectifying the female body. Not only does this line demonstrate Queen Latifah's brilliant command of timing, rhythm and lyrical delivery as a female emcee equal to any male emcee, but the lyrics also metaphorically give a voice to the misogynistic messages portrayed in Hip Hop. The phrase "Yeah me bitch" is surrounded by the sound of a male voice laughing, and is stated in such a way as to portray the man's feelings of entitlement to be able to objectify and grab the female body. Ultimately the use of the male voice strengthens the message of her song because she maintains that she will not allow men to define her gender, nor will she subscribe to the "sista'-ho" dichotomy. Instead these lyrics demonstrate that she respects and is respected by male emcees and is willing to work with them to deliver an anti-misogynistic message of unity within the Black community.

In the second verse Latifah speaks out against domestic violence.

I hit the bottom, there ain't nowhere else to go but up\*<sup>10</sup>  
 Bad days at work, give you an attitude then you were rough\*  
 And take it out on me but that's about enough  
 You put your hands on me again I'll put you're ass in handcuffs  
 I guess I fell so deep in love I grew dependency  
 I was too blind to see just how it was affecting me  
 All I knew was you, you was all the man I had  
 And I was scared to let you go, even though you treated me bad  
 But I don't want my kids to see me getting beat down  
 By daddy smacking mommy all around  
 You say I'm nothing without ya, but I'm nothing with ya\*

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<sup>10</sup> The asterisks used in this verse indicate lines in which Queen Latifah uses a female background to add positive emphasis to her message. This idea will be addressed later.

A man don't really love you if he hits ya\*

This is my notice to the door, I'm not taking it no more

I'm not your personal whore, that's not what I'm here for

And nothing good gonna come to ya til you do right by me

Brother you wait and see Who you calling a bitch?

Her portrayal of a man coming home and getting physically violent with his woman, while the kids watch daddy beat up on mommy, represents all women in abusive relationships. She uses lyrics like “I guess I fell so deep in love I grew dependency,” “you was all the man I had,” and “I was scared to let you go, even though you treated me bad” to depict the all too common feeling of inadequacy, dependency on their abuser, and fear among victims of abuse. Coming from a powerful female emcee, this song demonstrates how women in these situations must find the strength to turn the abusive man over to the police and not believe the lie that a man who beats them loves them. She makes it clear that men in this situation (and throughout the culture of Hip Hop) will demean her to try and convince her not to leave, telling her that her only identity comes from her relationship with him. However, she proves this argument wrong by demonstrating how it dehumanizes and degrades women and gives notice that “[she’s] not taking it no more.”

In addition to asserting her strength as a woman, she also explains her sexual needs in the second verse. She proclaims that it is okay to be a woman and enjoy sex, but she will not stand to be treated like a whore, beaten by a pimp and abused sexually. If that is the way a man wants to treat a woman, then that relationship should end. And just in case he doesn’t believe her resolve, she invites him to test her, and then finishes the verse again asking, “Who you calling a bitch?”, again affirming that she will no longer allow herself to be treated as a social subordinate – to be

done with as the man sees fit – because she is not a bitch. She will not just sit around in an abusive relationship or accept victimization.

In this verse Latifah also makes use of a female voice in the background, offering affirmative support to the point that she is making at the end of the first, second, eleventh, and twelfth lines (marked with a \* above) in which she refers to the way her abusive partner takes out his frustration on her and wants her to believe that she is nothing without him. This is an idea she refutes by stating “a man don't really love you if he hits ya,” which the female voice in the background confirms with a “yeah.” In addition, these female background voices that are echoing the positive message of “U.N.I.T.Y.” stand in direct contrast to the typical female background voices found in Hip Hop. Female background vocals typically echo the misogynistic message of the song in a self-deprecating manner, such as in Dr Dre’s song “Keep Their Heads Ringin” in which female voices are used to call out other women as bitches. In the final verse of “U.N.I.T.Y.” Queen Latifah also uses female background voices, but puts them at different points in the song – sometimes at the end of phrases, other times in the middle of a phrase, but each time to add positive emphasis to the point she is trying to make.

In the third and final verse, Queen Latifah addresses younger girls who try to emulate gangsters as “wannabe”<sup>11</sup> gangsta’ bitches who try to imitate the gangsta’ bitches they hear about in rap songs and see in glamorized in rap videos. Not to be mistaken with the so-called video vixens, women who are sexually objectified in music videos broadly, these women embody the female gangsta’ who readily engages in gang activity. Latifah’s lyrics state:

What's going on in your mind is what I ask ya

But like Yo-Yo, you don't hear me though

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<sup>11</sup>Definition from urbandictionary.com: Someone trying too hard to fit in with a specific crowd of people. They usually change the way they act, dress and or talk. A faker, a poser.

You wear a rag around your head and you call yourself  
 a "gangsta' bitch" now that you saw Apache's video  
 I saw you wilding, acting like a fool  
 I peeped you out the window jumping girls after school  
 But where did all of this come from?  
 A minute ago, you was a nerd and nobody ever heard of ya  
 Now you a wannabe... hard  
 You barely know your ABC's, please  
 There's plenty of people out there with triggers ready to pull it  
 Why you trying to jump in front of the bullet (Young lady)  
 Uh, and real bad girls are the silent type  
 Ain't none of this work getting your face sliced  
 Cause that's what happened to your homegirl, right?  
 She got to wear that for life, Who you calling a bitch?

Queen Latifah refers to the underground rap song "Gansta Bitch" by male emcee Apache in the third and final verse of "U.N.I.T.Y." in order to condemn these women that were trying to be something they are not, while simultaneously enabling men to justify this poor treatment of women by figuratively turning them into gansta bitches. This video encourages women to behave in the same manner as the gangsta rappers. The term caught some traction as some girls in the Hip Hop community found it fashionable to act this way. However, Queen Latifah calls out both Apache, who raps in his song, "I want to gansta boogie, with my gangsta bitch," and the young female wannabe's that also want that and allow men to treat them this way because they think it would be cool. Queen Latifah feels that women should not be considered bitches nor wannabe



gangstas. Latifah references these wannabes who have no street cred but simply want to act out because of the way the image was glamorized in the late 80s and early 90s by rap songs and videos like “Gangsta Bitch.” Then she explains that these girls are actually clueless about what they are getting themselves into. She warns about the dog-eat-dog violence and hustling in which people are ready and willing to pull the trigger and kill someone, either to escape death themselves or take what they want from their victims. She also warns these girls about the violence that accompanies the bravado they admire. At the same time, she gives a voice to the actual bad girls that “put in work” – a term that means to engage in gang-related activities that are commonly dangerous and illegal<sup>12</sup>. These bad girls mirror the kind of gangsta that The Geto Boys talked about in their song “Damn It Feels Good to be A Gangsta” in which they explain what it means to be a real gangsta:

Damn it feels good to be a gangsta

A real gangsta-ass nigga plays his cards right

A real gangsta-ass nigga never runs his fuckin’ mouth

Cause real gangsta-ass niggas don't start fights

The Geto Boys articulate what is commonly known in Hip Hop and in gangs. You don’t run your mouth, and you don’t start fights for two reasons: (1) both of these actions will get a real gangsta caught by the police and (2) the real gangstas are busy “finishing” them, which could mean taking the life of their enemy. How these gangstas “finish fights” and “put in work” is how they build their rep on the street, and it is their rep or street cred that validates them. In the same way, unlike the wannabe female gangstas, these real gangsta bitches do not run their mouths off about putting in work, and they are not the cheap and expendable wannabe chicks that Apache talks

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<sup>12</sup>Definition from [urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com)

about in his song – the women who run around doing their man’s dirty work without thinking for or about themselves, only to get arrested by the police and subsequently be abandoned by the men whose work they were doing. In essence, Queen Latifah proclaims in the third verse of “U.N.I.T.Y.” that she is not the type of stooge gangsta bitch that Apache glorifies in his rap song. She ends this verse asking these wannabes “Who you calling a bitch?” as a warning that they had better be careful who they mouth off to because a real gangsta bitch will harm or even kill them.

### Conclusion

Queen Latifah directly addresses a longstanding problem of misogyny in the African American community. Her career as an emcee was filled with songs that challenged the misogynistic notions of Hip Hop and society at large. Through the song “U.N.I.T.Y.,” Queen Latifah expresses the need to challenge and end the systematically instituted sexual harassment, domestic violence, and insults against women in Hip Hop culture, all of which objectify, demean, and subordinate women. Ingeniously, she speaks out against gender discrimination in the same way Black male artists have spoken out against racism and other social ills in mainstream society. Moreover, Queen Latifah also transcends the misogyny inherent in the sista’-ho complex. She communicates that if women think of themselves as inherently valuable, they won’t be preoccupied with being good or bad, but rather will concern themselves with expressing their personal feminine identities. The simple act of loving and respecting oneself can be revolutionary. However, if young girls continue to be exposed to songs with misogynistic messages, they will not see their personal potential beyond being either a sista’ or a ho.

In conclusion, by appropriating the innate power of Hip Hop as a performance genre and by establishing herself as a commanding performer, rather than as a social subordinate, Queen Latifah defies the negative roles that have been relegated to women in Hip Hop. Her

transcendence of the sista'-ho dichotomy is an example of empowering disenfranchised groups of women and proclaiming more positive and self-affirming feminine identities for women in Hip Hop and throughout American culture. Queen Latifah started as an emcee and went on to be a TV star, a movie star, a fashion icon, a TV host, all the while blazing the path for Hip Hop feminism. She embodies through her song "U.N.I.T.Y." and her career the most powerful challenge to misogyny both in and outside of the African American community.

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