

Balancing Hip-Hop and Rap Imagery

Written by Robert ID1145
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Tamika Guishard said "I love hip-hop. Sometimes I feel like hip-hop doesn't love me back," in her film "Hip Hop Gurlz." Hip-Hop Gurlz was one of several movies screened Thursday at the start of the three-day Feminism and Hip Hop Conference in Chicago.

The conference, sponsored by the Center for the Study of Race, Politics & Culture at the University of Chicago, saw renowned scholars, authors, artists and community activists discuss and share strategies to combat problematic images of women within the culture of hip-hop, including the exploitation of women's bodies showcased in mainstream rap and hip-hop lyrics and videos.

Participants, many of whom came from the hip-hop culture and who often admiringly quoted each other, expressed dismay with the standard mainstream hip-hop formula of bling, vulgarity and commodification of women's bodies. Coincidentally, this weekend in Chicago also saw a parade of artists who have set the standard for such depictions, including rap artists Fat Joe, Ludacris, Ying Yang Twins and Nelly perform in concert.

"Hip-hop as I knew it is pretty much dead to me. And I've mourned it a million times," said Joan Morgan, author of *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* and former executive editor of *Essence* magazine and writer for *Vibe* magazine. "I am willing to let hip-hop go because I know there will be something else."

Portrayals of males in the culture, too, are limited, but to thugs and pimps, said filmmaker Byron Hurt.

Corporations demand male artists stick to such roles to ensure profits, panelists said. But artists also are reluctant to stray from the formula of bling, whips and scores of booty-shaking, thong-clad women that has been commercially successful, said panelist Jessy Terrero, video director and director of the movie "Soul Plane."

Conference participants, men and women from their teens to their 40s, some dressed in suits and others in overalls, received updates of the Hip-Hop Archive at the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University, and heard about the

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establishment of the Progressive Women's Caucus of the National Hip Hop Political Convention. The caucus was created last year when the convention refused to acknowledge issues of rape, domestic violence, incest and the sexual abuse of young girls as urgent as those of police brutality, racial profiling, black male incarceration and black male unemployment.

Hip-hop, the dominant youth culture, is diverse, but its front men, the rap artists; are primarily black males.

Still, "the most vocal and hostile opponents to a critical view of hip-hop were women themselves, not the prototypical male leadership," noted Zenzele Isoke, a researcher and a founder of the hip-hop political convention. She is a fellow at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. Those women didn't want the culture singled out for misogyny and considered the feminist critics as race and culture traitors, she said.

Panelist Kim Osorio showed some contrition in describing roles she played in objectifying women while editor in chief at the Source -- hip-hop's most highly regarded magazine.

Suggestions provided to balance the images of women in mainstream hip-hop culture include teaching young girls to create music and art themselves, establishing rites of passage programs for them, drafting a 10-point plan for the community, and refusing to buy products by artists who demean or exploit women.

"The underground is not going to save us because it's underground. It's not where most hip-hop fans are listening," said Tricia Rose, chairwoman of the American Students Department at the University of California-Santa Cruz and author of *Living to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality and Intimacy*.

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