

## Hip-Hop's Betrayal of Black Women

Written by Jennifer McLune ID2562  
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Indeed, like rock & roll, hip-hop sometimes makes you think we men don't like women much at all, except to objectify them as trophy pieces or, as contemporary vernacular mandates, as baby mommas, chickenheads, or bitches. But just as it was unfair to demonize men of color in the 60s solely as wild-eyed radicals when what they wanted, amidst their fury, was a little freedom and a little power, today it is wrong to categorically dismiss hip-hop without taking into serious consideration the socioeconomic conditions (and the many record labels that eagerly exploit and benefit from the ignorance of many of these young artists) that have led to the current state of affairs. Or, to paraphrase the late Tupac Shakur, we were given this world, we did not make it. – Kevin Powell, Notes of a HipHop Head. [emphasis added]

To hip-hop's apologists: You were given this world and you glorify it. You were given this world and you protect it. You were given this world and you benefit from it. You were given this world and even in your wildest dreams you refuse to imagine anything else but this world. And anyone who attacks your misogynistic fantasy and offers an alternative vision is a hater, or worse, an enemy who just doesn't get it. What is there to get? There is nothing deep or new about misogyny, materialism, violence and homophobia. The hardest part isn't recognizing it, but ending it. Calling it unacceptable and an enemy of us all. Refusing to be mesmerized, seduced or confused by what hip-hop has come to signify: a betrayal of our imagination as a people.

Kevin Powell's "socio-economic" explanation for the sexism in hip-hop is a way to silence feminist critiques of the culture: It is to make an understanding of the misogynistic objectification of black women in hip-hop so elusive that we can't grasp it long enough to wring the neck of its power over us. His argument completely ignores the fact that women, too, are raised in this environment of poverty and violence, but have yet to produce the same negative and hateful representation of black men that male rappers are capable of making against women.

Powell's understanding also lends itself to the elitist assumption that somehow poverty breeds sexism, or at least should excuse it. Yet we all know that wealthy white boys can create the same hateful and violent music as poor black boys. As long as the boys can agree that their common enemy is female and that their power resides in their penis, women must not hesitate to name the war they have declared on us.

Hip-hop owes its success to the ideology of woman-hating. It creates, perpetuates and reaps the rewards of objectification. Sexism and homophobia saturate hip-hop culture, and any deviation from these forms of bigotry is made marginal to its most dominant and lucrative expressions. Few artists dare to embody equality and respect between the sexes through their

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music; those who do have to fight to be heard above the dominant chorus of misogyny.

The most well known artists who represent an underground and conscious force in hip-hop – like Common, The Roots, Talib Kweli and others – remain inconsistent, apologetic and even eager to join the mainstream player's club. Even though fans like me support them because of their moments of decency toward women, they often want to remain on the fence by either playing down their consciousness, or by offering props to misogynistic rappers. Most so-called conscious artists appear to care more about their own acceptance by mainstream artists than wanting to make positive changes in the culture.

The Roots, for example, have backed Jay-Z on both his Unplugged release and Fade to Black tours. They've publicly declared their admiration for him and have signed on to his new "indie" hip-hop imprint Def Jam Left to produce their next album. Yet Jay-Z is one of the most notoriously sexist and materialistic rappers of his generation.

Hip-hop artists like Talib Kweli and Common market themselves as conscious alternatives, yet they remain passive in the face of unrelenting woman-hating bravado from mainstream artists. They are willing to lament in abstract terms the state of hip-hop, but refuse to name names – unless it's to reassure their mainstream brethren that they have nothing but love for their music.

Talib Kweli has been praised for his song "Black Girl Pain," but clearly he's clueless to how painful it is for a black girl to hear his boy Jay-Z rap, "I pimp hard on a trick, look @#%\$ if your leg broke bitch, hop up on your good foot."

The misogyny in hip-hop is also given a pass because some of its participants are women. But female hip-hop artists remain utterly marginalized within the industry and culture – except when they are trotted out to defend hip-hop against feminist criticism. The idea is that if women rap, then the industry and culture can't be all that sexist. If women find meaning and power within hip-hop culture, then it must be unfair to call hip-hop patriarchal. What about the ladies? they say. But the truth is, all kinds of patriarchal institutions, organizations and movements have women in their ranks in search of power and meaning. The token presence of individual women changes nothing if women as a group are still scapegoated and degraded.

Unlike men, women in hip-hop don't speak in a collective voice in defense of themselves. The

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pressure on women to be hyper-feminine and hyper-sexual for the pleasure of men, and the constant threat of being called a bitch, a ho – or worse a dyke – as a result of being strong, honest, and self-possessed, are real within hip-hop culture, and the black community at large. Unless women agree to compromise their truth, their self-respect, their unity with other women, and instead play dutiful daughter to the phallus that represents hip-hop culture, they will be either targetted and slandered, or ignored altogether. As a result, female rappers are often just as male-identified, violent, materialistic and ignorant as their male peers.

Hip-hop artist Eve, who describes herself as "a pit bull in a skirt," makes an appearance in the Sporty Thieves video for "Pigeons," one of the most hateful misogynistic anthems in hip-hop. Her appearance in this video displays her unity not with the women branded "pigeons," but with the men who label them. This is a heartbreaking example of how hip-hop encourages men to act collectively in the interest of male privilege, while dividing women into opposing camps of good and bad, or worthy and unworthy of respect.

Some women sing along to woman-hating lyrics because they've convinced themselves that Snoop, Jay-Z, Ludacris and others aren't talking about them. They are talking about women who act like bitches and hoes and thus deserve to be called bitches and hoes. When do women ask what men deserve? Too many of us sing along to woman-hating lyrics because we have allowed men to decide which women are worthy of respect and which women are asking to be called names. But as long as men define the terms upon which any woman is worthy of respect, we are all bitches and hoes. And as long as we allow men to divide and label us, they've conquered us all.

Lip-service protest against sexism in hip-hop culture is nothing more than a sly form of public relations to ensure that nobody's money, power or respect is ever really threatened. Real respect and equality might interfere with hip-hop's commercial appeal. We are asked to dialogue about and ultimately celebrate our "progress" – always predicated on a few rappers and moguls getting rich. Angry young black women like myself are expected to be satisfied with a mere mention that some hip-hop music is sexist and that this sexism of a few rappers is actually, as Powell calls it, "the ghetto blues, urban folk art, a cry out for help." My question then is: Whose blues? Whose art? Why won't anybody help the women who are raped in endless rotation by the gaze of the hip-hop camera?

They expect us to deal with hip-hop's pervasive woman-hating simply by alluding to it, essentially excusing and even celebrating its misogyny, its arrogance, its ignorance. What this angry black woman wants to hear from the apologists is that black women are black people too. That any attack on the women in our community is an attack on us all, and that we will no longer

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be duped by genocidal tendencies in black-face. I want to hear these apologists declare that any black man who makes music perpetuating the hatred of women will be named, shunned and destroyed, financially and socially, like the traitor of our community he is. That until hip-hop does right by black women, everything hip-hop ever does will fail.

If we accept Powell's explanation for why hip-hop is the way it is – which amounts to an argument for why we should continue to consume and celebrate it – then ultimately we are accepting ourselves as victims who know only how to imitate our victimization, while absolving the handful of black folk who benefit from its tragic results. I choose to challenge hip-hop by refusing to reward its commercial aspirations with my money or my attention.

I'm tired of the ridiculous excuses and justifications for the unjustifiable pillaring of black women and girls in hip-hop. Are black women the guilty parties behind black men's experience of racism and poverty? Are black women acceptable scapegoats when black men suffer oppression? If black women experience double the oppression as both blacks and women in a racist, patriarchal culture, it is our anger at men and white folks that needs to be heard.

The black men who make excuses for the ideology of woman-hating in hip-hop remind me of those who, a generation ago, supported the attacks on black female writers who went public about the reality of patriarchy in our community. The fact that these black female writers did not create incest, domestic violence, rape and other patriarchal conditions in the black community did not shield them from being skewered by black men who had their feelings hurt by the exposure of their male privilege and domination of black women. Black women's literature and activism that challenge sexism are often attacked by black men (and many male-identified women) who abhor domination when they are on the losing end, but want to protect it when they think it offers them a good deal.

Black women writers and activists were called traitors for refusing to be silent about the misogynistic order of things in our minds and homes, and yet women-hating rappers are made heroes by the so-called masses. To be sure, hip-hop is not about keeping it real. Hip-hop lies about the ugly reality that black women were condemned for revealing. Hip-hop is a manipulative narrative that sells because it gets men hard. It is a narrative in which, as a Wu Tang Clan video shows, black women are presented as dancing cave chicks in bikinis who get clubbed over the head. Or where gang rapes are put to a phat beat. Or where working class black women are compared to @#%\$-eating birds.

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As a black woman who views sexism as just as much the enemy of my people as racism, I can't buy the apologies and excuses for hip-hop. I will not accept the notion that my sisters deserve to be degraded and humiliated because of the frustrations of black men – all while we suppress our own frustrations, angers and fears in an effort to be sexy and accommodating. Although Kevin Powell blames the negatives in hip-hop on everything but hip-hop culture itself, he ultimately concludes, "What hip-hop has spawned is a way of winning on our own terms, of us making something out of nothing."

If the terms for winning are the objectification of black women and girls, I wonder if any females were at the table when the deal went down. Did we agree to be dehumanized, vilified, made invisible? Rather than pretending to explain away the sexism of hip-hop culture, why doesn't Powell just come clean: in the end it doesn't matter how women are treated. Sexism is the winning ticket to mainstream acceptability and Powell, like Russell Simmons and others, know this. It's obvious that if these are the winning terms for our creativity, black women are ultimately the losers. And that's exactly how these self-proclaimed players, thugs and hip-hop intellectuals want us: on our backs and pledging allegiance to the Hip-Hop Nation. If we were all to condemn woman-hating as an enemy of our community, hip-hop would be forced to look at itself and change radically and consistently. And then it would no longer be marketable in the way that these hip-hop intellectuals celebrate. As things stand, it's all about the Benjamins on every level of the culture. And black women are being thugged and rubbed all the way to the bank.

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