From Queen Latifah to Lil' Kim: The Evolution of the Feminist MC

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"Every time I hear a brotha call a girl a bitch or a hoe/trying to make a sista feel low/you know all of that's gots to go."

-*U.N.I.T.Y*, Queen Latifah

"I am diamond cluster hustler/Queen bitch, supreme bitch/kill a nigga for my nigga by any means bitch/murder scene bitch/clean bitch, disease free bitch."

-*Queen Bitch*, Lil' Kim

The feminist lyricism of early female hip-hop artists conveyed a message of empowerment, and an awareness of the power of one's own femininity. Artists like Salt-N-Pepa, MC Lyte, Monie Love and Queen Latifah reigned as the queens of hip-hop in the late 80's and early 90's, cementing their legacy as hip-hop royalty. But it was during the late 90's and into the millennium, that this feminist message within hip-hop music began to change. A new kind of feminism was developing within the music and culture, with lyrics focused on sexual liberation, control, and sexual domination. In this paper, I will argue that while the style in which these concepts were presented, there no distinct difference between the feminist philosophy of a socially-conscious artist like Queen Latifah or a more sexually liberated artist like Lil' Kim. Both encouraged women to be liberated, empowered and to resist sexist oppression through the genre of hip-hop.

The major problem with feminism is that it is difficult to define. Depending on one's socio-economic status, cultural experience, age, demographic and political affiliation, feminism and how an individual defines it can be different. This issue has been a point of contention among feminists, as many women of color have been ignored by the white feminist agenda. Bell hooks defines feminism this way; "Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression."[1] Hip-hop music and culture has also faced some of these same issues. Hip-hop as a music genre has been difficult to define and has a different meaning depending on whom you are speaking to, what gender they are, what generation they are from, and what ethnicity or socio-economic background they come from. Even more difficult to place is the female emcee's role in the hip-hop community and what her feminism means in a widely male-dominated industry.

In the late 80's and early 90's, female hip-hop artists were known for their vicious flow, citing lyrics that promoted female empowerment, respect (specifically the rejection of the "bitch-persona") and embracing the original nature of the black woman as royalty. Groups like Public Enemy and artists like KRS-One helped to usher in a social consciousness in hip-hop music, but it was Queen Latifah that took this African-centered consciousness to another level by "promoting [a] women's importance, that demands equal treatment for women, and that demonstrates the need for women to support each other."[2] Latifah was beautiful, confident, powerful, intimidating and so brutal with her flow that she could take down any male artist that thought he had a chance at taking her place on the throne.

In the video for her 1989 song "Ladies First" off her album *All Hail the Queen*, Latifah blends a mixture of feminine strength, with a warrior like power and dominance. It is truly a song celebrating womanhood, breaking the rules of traditional "sexism and racism that dominate the

music video flow."[3] The video opens with images of Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Angela Davis, women who have been central figures in the struggle for both black and female liberation. Dressed in clothing fit for a male general, Latifah stands in front of a map, maneuvering oversized chess pieces, smashing and knocking them over as if she is strategizing for a hostile takeover of the rap game and the world. The song also featured up and coming artist Monie Love, whose lyrical flow stands up with Latifah's. While the track is featured on Latifah's first studio album, at this point in 1989, the Queen had already established herself as a highly sought-after artist. Adding Love to the song provides the parallel of seeing the "Queen" passing the mic to the up and coming "Princess". Clearly, Latifah was placing herself in position to not only take on the male-dominated hip-hop industry but also counter any notion of sexism that was beginning to creep onto the music landscape.

In the song "Ladies First" Latifah also presents an entirely new concept to her audience. She seamlessly links her Afrocentricity (pride in her African heritage), *with* her feminism, thus creating a movement where the two ideologies can co-exist. This is something that female hip-hop artists today are either unable or unwilling to do. Robin Roberts in her article "Ladies First: Queen Latifah's Afrocentric Feminist Music Video", states that "being a feminist does not mean abandoning her [Latifah's] African heritage; instead it becomes an additional source of strength and power."[4] During the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s and the Black Power Movement of the 70s, a power struggle developed between men and women within various organizations and institutions. While many men within these organizations were committed to the fight for black liberation and empowerment, they were not as equally committed to the liberation of black women. This is true within both the hip-hop and conscious communities even today. The impression that traditional gender role must remain the same in order to stay true to Afrocentricity, support African people across the diaspora, reconnect black families and heal black communities, is a complete farce. In their eyes, Afrocentricity and feminism cannot coexist. Artists like Queen Latifah refused to accept and normalize this. Latifah used her strength and power "as a way of asserting her power as a black woman, not as a marketing ploy."[5]

It was not only men that refused to accept that feminism and Afrocentricity could coexist, but many female hip-hop artists also refused to associate themselves with feminism, but for very different reasons. Men were afraid of losing their patriarchal power but women who denounced feminism did so because it is often "considered too white, too middle class, and too hostile towards black men."[6] Despite this, Queen and others, chose to offer their voices to the feminist cause positioning themselves in the category of Third-wave feminists. Unlike First-wave feminist's (focused primarily on voting rights) and Second-wave feminist's (focused primarily on reproductive rights and workplace inequalities) Third-wave feminists, specifically those in the hip-hop generation, are concerned with the liberation of women of color, the eradication of homophobia, and "white feminist elitism and black sexism."[7] While Latifah has never referred to herself as a feminist, her music is rich and full of Third-wave feminist ideology and theory.

The message and lyrics of "second generation female rappers"[8] changed in the early 90's. Unlike their predecessors, female hip-hop artists were no longer primarily concerned with promoting a feminist agenda through socially conscious lyrics. Because of pressure from the music industry and the rise of hardcore rap, many female artists began to adopt the "trademarks of rap-exaggerated braggadocio, consumption of drugs and alcohol, and 'dissin' of fellow female and male rap artists."[9] Matthew Oware conducted research about this trend among female hip-hop artists. He chose 44 songs from the Billboard charts from the years 1992-2000 performed by female hip-hop artists. The

songs were coded line-by-line and common themes were reported and analyzed. The songs had to be on the charts for at least 12 weeks and just as popular as songs performed by their male counterparts. In other words, the songs had to have been heard by listeners and the artists had to have been known by consumers.[10] Artists in the study included Eve, Foxxy Brown, Da Brat, Yo-Yo, Trina, Rah Digga, Missy, Queen Latifah, Salt-N-Pepa and Lil' Kim, women who were at the top of the hip-hop genre at the time. Oware found that while female rappers were still writing, producing and performing songs that empowered women, many of those same artists were writing and performing songs that were exploitative, derogatory and demeaning towards women just as much as their male counterparts were thus "upholding hegemonic, sexist notions of femininity, and serving to undermine and disempower women"[11] by becoming just like one of the guys. Of the 44 songs that were surveyed, all had 7 or more references to the craving for material possessions.[12] Like male artists, Oware claims,

> Female artists depict themselves as physically appealing to potential suitors and mates, as well as in possession of items that common people do not and cannot possess. This type and degree of arrogance reverberates throughout rap music and is not unique to men or women; rather it illustrates the artists' ability, in their narratives, to overcome obstacles and eventually achieve success, albeit, material success.[13]

I agree somewhat with Oware's assessment but I do think that this notion of "bravado" should be examined more closely. Many female hip-hop artists, as well as their male counterparts, come from either lower-middle class or an impoverished socio-economic status. Now able to lavish in the limelight of being a successful, well-known hip-hop artist, they do what the average person would do; spend and show-off. In a society that is built on capitalism, materialism and consumption, Americans are fascinated with the "come-up". This is not only societal but also cultural and not just specific to hip-hop. Oware's analysis does not take this into account and I while I believe that this does not necessarily need to be central to Oware's argument it should have at least been included in his examination.

Most female rappers in Oware's study, performed songs where they referred to themselves or other females as "bitch". Outside of hip-hop, "bitch" is a derogatory term used primarily by males to insult females. In hip-hop culture and in music "bitch" can have a variety of meanings, especially if used by a female rapper in a song. Female rappers have taken this term and changed its context to allow it to serve a purpose that is more positive. "Bitch", in a wide variety of songs, has been used to describe a "woman with lyrical skills who can motivate and excite an audience"[14], and who is the "perfect female specimen."[15] Oware believes that while this is admirable, it is not enough to combat the damage done to the feminist movement by female artists, who by conforming to industry standards of their male counterparts are contributing to the sexism and misogyny saturating hip-hop music.

Oware concludes his research by stating:

> Although female rap artists articulate a feminist approach to in their narratives by employing empowering, autonomous, and independent lyrics, many of them also re-appropriate the sexist and misogynist tropes that present women as hypersexual beings who are contained and controlled by, in this case, other women. Indeed, in this new paradigm, it is other Black women who hyper objectify themselves and degrade other black women. They employ the

> tools of the master that only strengthens the structure of their own oppression and domination.[16]

Dream Hampton also agrees with Oware. In a piece that she wrote for *Vibe Books* in 2001 entitled "Free the Girls", Hampton states:

> I want to tell her [speaking about her daughter] all the ways hip-hop has made me feel powerful. How it gave my generation a voice, a context. How we shifted the pop culture paradigm. How it sometimes it's a good thing to appear brave and fearless, even if it's just posturing. I want to suggest that these rhymes about licking each other's asses is liberating. But I can't.[17]

While I do think that Oware and Hampton make some valid points, I believe that they are missing several key factors. Female hip-hop artists are not just industry pawns. Some are controlling their own narratives and images that they present in front of the camera and behind the mic. They have chosen to sexualize themselves as a focal point of empowerment, not oppression. In addition, just as the word "nigga" can have multiple meanings in hip-hop culture, "bitch" can as well. By countering misogyny in this way these Third-wave feminist's rappers are creating a counter-culture within hip-hop that focuses on "flipping" the meaning of historically negative terms, phrases, and cultural stereotypes, into something more positive and empowering. I believe that Oware is guilty of what a lot of men in hip-hop and the conscious community are guilty of; strategically placing women in a box. For scholars like this black women can *only* be "this" or "that". They can be Afrocentric or feminist, a "bitch", a "hoe" or a "queen". Labeling makes it convenient to accuse female hip-hop artists and women like them to ascribing to Eurocentric oppression.

A third change occurred in the hip-hop feminist movement. During the late 1990's and into the millennium, both "Golden Era Hip-Hop" artists and newer artists begin to shed their baggy, oversized clothing that dominated hip-hop culture for most of the early 90's for a more feminine, sexy look. With the style change also came a lyrical change. Gone were the days of the social-conscious feminist rap lyrics of the late 80's. Lyrics were replaced bolder themes of sexual freedom and liberation and within it, a new brand of feminism began to surface. This brand of feminism was "anti-sexist, gender-defiant, ultra-erotic"[18] and in my opinion unapologetically black. Leading the charge in this feminist hip-hop revolution was Lil' Kim. At barely 5 feet tall, Kim was lyrical powerhouse whose connection to Notorious B.I.G, considered one of the greatest storytellers of all time, and Bad Boy records (whose music dominated the hip-hop and R&B charts for most of the 90's) only enhanced and her solidified her role. She created what Greg Thomas in his book *Hip-hop Revolution in the Flesh: Power, Knowledge, and Pleasure in Lil' Kim's Lyricism* calls a "revolution within a revolution."[19] Not everyone was pleased with this shift. Popular music critics complained that hip-hop was becoming a genre driven by sex, and profits, straying away from its origins of being a genre of social-conscious music or as Chuck D put it "CNN of the ghetto". I find it interesting that these same critics were all but silent when some of their favorite male hip-hop artists like Jay-Z, Biggie, and Nas bragged about various sexual exploits in their songs but as Kim and others began to explore their own sexuality on wax, suddenly it became an issue. As most of us are aware, the black female body and black female sexuality have always been issue for black men, white men, and white women.

Many social and popular music critics (some of whom were black women) believed that Lil' Kim sold her own black body for industry profits, pimping her lyrical gift for money, but in fact, the opposite is true. I would argue that Lil' Kim as a persona and as an artist was is complete control of her sexuality and how she was represented. Calling herself the "Queen Bee" is evidence of that. The Queen Bee in nature is in control of the hive. Worker bees (male bees) work for her. As Greg Thomas states:

> The 'nature' of the Queen Bee is not subject to male domination or strict gender confinement, let alone sexual-erotic oppression or repression. She is a matriarch. She doesn't serve, she's served. Her mating is a phenomenon (joyful or lethal). She castrates her willing drones and takes charge of their genital equipment within herself, to fertilize herself, by herself, when she pleases.[20]

This encompasses the persona, the artistry and the lyricism of Lil' Kim. Like the matriarchy from an African village, or the cool 20 something sista' on a block somewhere in Brooklyn, Kim's songs are about "pussy really: the power, pleasure, and politics of it….she makes songs that defy it, demand we respect it, revere and glorify it."[21] This is hip-hop feminism at its best and if we dismiss Lil' Kim as an artist and are to believe that her only interest was rapping about sex, we do Kim's contribution to the genre an injustice and diminish her as an artist, a woman, and feminist.

In a 1997 interview with Lil' Kim, author, feminist and scholar bell hooks says this about Kim:

> More dangerous than any words that come out of Lil' Kim's mouth are the forces of repressive puritanical morality that seek to silence her. Before talking to Kim, I spoke with lots of so called cool folks who were putting her down, calling her a 'ho…nothing but a prostitute'.[22]

Hooks is correct in her assessment and critique. I too have expressed these same sentiments about Lil' Kim while, praising artists like Queen Latifah, Bahamdia, and Lauren Hill for their more "classy" approach to their sexuality. While most people do not understand hooks' stance as a black feminist defending Kim and her freedom to express her sexuality, Kim herself understands her role. She states:

> Sometimes they say that I set back women's liberation. We have people like Too Short, Luke Skywalker, Biggie, Elvis, Prince who are very, very, very sexual, and they don't get trashed because they like to do it. But suddenly, we have a female who happens to be a rapper, like me, and my doin' it is wrong. And 'cause I like doin' it's even more wrong because we've fought for years as women to do the same thing that men are doing.[23]

Lil' Kim has a sense of political awareness around her sexuality that even today black feminists have a difficult time understanding. She also recognizes that sex is more than just about desire and pleasure. It is about power. She is essentially a "female king", dominating the genre of hip-hop on her own terms, questioning the misogynistic status quo. Like Latifah, Kim refuses to be defined by traditional gender roles. In her world, a woman can say the words "hymen", "uterus" and

"pap smear" outside of the gynecologist's office without feeling ashamed or embarrassed.[24] While Kim uses these words metaphorically, like "gunfire bursting like hymen" in her song "Funny How Time Flies", it still strangely gives women the courage to no longer consider these words dirty and in turn, no longer consider their bodies dirty. Society has made women uncomfortable with their own bodies, but Lil' Kim made those in the hip-hop community, specifically black women, feel liberated enough to love themselves, their bodies and to not hide or be ashamed of their sexual desires. She showed a new generation of women that sex is more than just "okay". Sex is for pleasure and can be pleasurable, not just for a woman's partner but for her as well; and if the "brothas" skills in the bedroom are "wack" he can and should be called out on it.

When I first began research on this topic, I thought that as artists, rappers, women of color and feminists Lil' Kim and Queen Latifah could not be more different. Latifah, the Queen. Kim, the Queen Bee. But as I began to search deeper, I realized that the brand of feminism that these emcees developed, refined and included in their music, while stylistically different, are very similar. Latifah empowered women to be their best by encouraging them to embrace their Afrocentricity *and* their feminism, noting that the two do not have to live independently of one another. Lil' Kim did the same, only taking a more radical approach. She boldly proclaimed what black women have wanted to say but have been too afraid to. Latifah encouraged a message of self-love and refused to subscribe to the notion that she was in any way "less than" because she is a woman whether as a lyricist, general or homemaker. Kim, in her own way, did the exact same thing. By being free enough to expose her love of sex for pleasure, Lil' Kim empowered a new generation of women to embrace and not be embarrassed by their own sexual desires. She also combated sexism by turning the tables on men in her lyrics by refusing to be defined by gender specific roles. Kim could be an assassin, a Mafia don Princess, an African warrior sitting upon a royal throne, or a bad bitch who takes the money and runs. Scholars like Matthew Oware, who in my opinion want to uphold the old order of consciousness, Afrocentric-women, unconcerned with their own sexual exploration and liberation, interested only in clearly defined gender roles, disappoint me. Like Oware there are many in the hip-hop and conscious community that believes that:

> The positive and liberatory songs and lyrics of several female artists become effaced by the lyrics and songs that are demeaning and degrading to women especially Black women. The feminist approach is lost and in its place, arises a "man's woman"-a woman who imitates and reinscribes a White supremacist, misogynist structure.[25]

But where is the room for women, specifically black women to explore, and define themselves? How is it possible for a black, female hip-hop artist to move beyond the "boring straight male porn fantasy"[26] if they cannot move beyond the gender roles that hip-hop has clearly defined for them? There is something dangerous about a woman who is fearless, sexually free, and chooses not to be what the world defines her. This is truly what the female hip-hop artist is meant to be and has always been. As Queen Latifah so appropriately rhymes in the song "Ladies First": "The ladies will kick it/the rhyme that is wicked/those that 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."

Notes

[1] bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 240.
[2] Robin Roberts, "Ladies First: Queen Latifah's Afrocentric Feminist Music Video," *African American Review* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 245, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041997.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid., 247.
[5] Leola A. Johnson, "The Spirit is Willing and So is the Flesh: The Queen in Hip-Hop Culture," in Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (New York: NYU Press, 2003), 163.
[6] Ibid., 165.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Matthew Oware, "A Man's Woman? Contradictory Messages in the Songs of Female Rappers," *Journal of Black Studies* 39, no. 5 (May 2009): 787, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40282596.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 791.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 796.
[15] Robin Roberts, "Ladies First: Queen Latifah's Afrocentric Feminist Music Video," *African American Review* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 246.
[16] Ibid,. 797.
[17] Dream Hampton, "Free the Girls." Weblog posting to dreamhampton.com, 2001, http://dreamhampton.com/free-the-girls/ (accessed March 30, 2016).
[18] Greg Thomas, Hip-hop Revolution in the Flesh: Power, Knowledge, and Pleasure in Lil Kim's Lyricism (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2009) 5.
[19] Ibid., 2.
[20] Ibid., 4-5.
[21] Robert Marriott, "Blowin' Up." Vibe Magazine, June/July 2000, p.126.
[22] bell hooks, "Hardcore Honey: Bell Hooks Goes on the Down Low with Lil' Kim." Paper Magazine, July 11th, 2014. http://www.papermag.com/hardcore-honey-bell-hooks-goes-on-the-down-low-with-lil-kim-1427357106.html.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Greg Thomas, Hip-hop Revolution in the Flesh: Power, Knowledge, and Pleasure in Lil Kim's Lyricism (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2009) 115.
[25] Matthew Oware, "A Man's Woman? Contradictory Messages in the Songs of Female Rappers," *Journal of Black Studies* 39, no. 5 (May 2009): 787, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40282596. 798.
[26] bell hooks, "Hardcore Honey: Bell Hooks Goes on the Down Low with Lil' Kim." Paper Magazine, July 11th, 2014. http://www.papermag.com/hardcore-honey-bell-hooks-goes-on-the-down-low-with-lil-kim-1427357106.html.

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