

Black Women Queering the Mic: Missy Elliott Disturbing the Boundaries of Racialized Sexuality and Gender

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Though there were and always have been djs, dancers, graffiti artists, and rappers who were Black women, they are placed on the periphery of hip-hop culture; their voices, along with “gay rappers” and “white rappers” devalued and their contribution to the global rise of hip-hop either forgotten or eschewed. This article is an attempt to articulate the existence of Black women who work outside of the paradigms of the “silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility” that Evelyn Hammonds describes. At the center of this article lies an attempt to locate a new configuration and expression of desire and sexuality, opening a door, wide open, to gain a different view of Black women, their sexuality, their expression of it, and the complexities that arise when they attempt to express it in hip hop nation language.

KEYWORDS *Black women, hip-hop, linguistic anthropology, queer, rap*

INTRODUCTION

Cecilia Cutler (2003) writes that “there is a powerful discourse within hip-hop that privileges the black body and the black urban street experience” (p. 212). What is important to understand, however, is that there is a particular *gendered* Black body that is privileged in hip hop. The body is of the urban Black heterosexual male, and his set of experiences shape not only the discourse, but also the language of hip hop itself. Simply put,

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in the hands of the Black heterosexual male, the mic is particularly potent. In hip-hop culture, the microphone represents duty—to speak, to act—on behalf of one’s self and community. It also represents power for the one who holds it, because it is their voice that is heard at the party, in the car, on the block, and on the radio far beyond the city limits.

The majority of hip-hop creation stories, or mythologies about the founding of hip-hop music and culture, name men as the original and primary producers, or suppliers, of hip hop to both “the street” and the world. Although there were and always have been djs, dancers, graffiti artists, and rappers who were Black and women, they are placed on the periphery of hip-hop culture; their voices, along with “gay rappers” and “White rappers,” devalued and their contribution to the global rise of hip hop either forgotten or eschewed.

In a conversation with Angela Y. Davis, rapper Ice Cube is challenged about the widely held belief that “the Black man’s” experience should be the primary concern in the struggle for racial equality in America; he responds, “if we look at each other Black men and Black women on an equal level there is going to be a divide” (Chang & Herc, 2006). As Gaunt (2006) writes, “the language of hip-hop is highly gendered, and structures male and female participation through heterosexual metaphors of power” (p. 114). This along with the privileging of Black male experience greatly shape the discursive landscape of what Alim (2006) calls Hip-Hop Nation Language (HHNL). The gendering that takes place within HHNL happens within very specific tropes of race. As P. Collins (2004) points out, “Western social thought associates Blackness with an imagined uncivilized wild sexuality and uses this association as one lynchpin of racial difference” (p. 27). This racial “difference” is then used as means of justifying the racial and sexual oppression. When Black men internalize this inherent “difference,” the result is a specific form of sexual and gendered oppression.

The terms “bitch” and “ho” are used nominally for Black women who act within and outside of the ever shifting boundaries of acceptable behavior within hip-hop culture. I suggest 2Pac’s “Wonder Why they Call You Bitch” (1996), Jay-Z “Big Pimpin” (2000), Lil’ Wayne’s “Hoes” (2004), and Rick Ro\$\$ “Money Make Me Come” (2008) are examples of the ways in “bitch” and “ho” are used interchangeably to refer to Black women who act “out of line” and those who act “in line.” These songs by male artists make it clear that transgressive linguistic work has to be done in order for Black females who utilize HHNL to assert a subjectivity that is independent of men’s pleasure and that articulates their control of their sexual pleasure. Further, Black women have to work outside the boundaries of propriety in order to exist outside of the racist-sexist narratives that define Black womanhood. According to Hammonds (1994), three themes emerge generally from the stories told of Black female sexuality:

First, the construction of the Black female as the embodiment of sex and the attendant invisibility of Black women as the unvoiced, unseen everything that is not white; second, the resistance women both to negative stereotypes of their sexuality and the material effects of those stereotypes on their lives; and finally, the evolution of a “culture of dissemblance” and a “politics of silence” by Black women on the issue of their sexuality. (p. 132)

This article is an attempt to articulate the existence of Black women who work outside of the paradigms of “silence, secrecy, and a partially self chosen invisibility” (Hammonds, 1994) to combat oppression. It is important, as P. Collins (2008) warns, that we do not consider Black women’s collusion in this system as anywhere near complete and that by examining possible configurations of sexual desire, that a door might be open to gain a different view of Black women, their sexuality, their expression of it, and the complexities that arise when they attempt to express it in HHNL.

Although his analysis does not address issues of gender and power in the use or construction of HHNL, Alim (2006) does articulate how HHNL has been formed through borrowing from, the twisting, and the stretching of the “limits of ‘standard’ American English” (p. 77). Although he purposefully utilizes the work of a few female rappers in his analysis, he does not address the particularities of women’s experience within hip-hop culture that might structure their particular relationship to the language. In fact, the majority of the rappers whom he quotes to talk about the way they use HHNL are men and those men are articulating the experiences as men. The Black heterosexual male experience in a racist American society has been the basis of the redefinitions of standard American English into a form of HHNL and, although Black women have been there from the beginning, our voices and contributions have gone unnoticed by most. This is the process by which HHNL has become and remained hetero-masculinized at the detriment of Black women who attempt to use it. As Crenshaw (2008) suggests of the gender and sexual paradigm of hip hop, “Black women are expected to be the vehicles for notions of ‘liberation’ that function to preserve their own subordination” (p. 127). This linguistic environment of hip hop offers little possibility of a Black female subject, but that doesn’t mean that Black women have remained silent. In fact, many have grabbed the mic by force, and find it essential to make a space for themselves and others in hip-hop culture.

“LADIES FIRST”: BLACK WOMEN GRABBING THE MIC

With the mainstreaming of hip hop and a burgeoning of scholarship surrounding it, scarce knowledge exists concerning women who rap and how they use this method of expression for pleasure, exploration, and agency.

Many scholars write off many of the stylistic choices Black women have made in hip hop including TLC, Queen Latifah, Da Brat, and MC Lyte's choices to wear more loose fitting clothes and men's sportswear, or Lil' Kim's sexually explicit rap lyrics as various ways in which they were simply trying to be "one of the boys" (see Chang & Herc, 2006; Morgan, 2000). Rarely are these choices read as "out of place," weird, or out of the norm of what women, let alone Black women, are supposed to do. Black women rappers who act outside of the scripts of proper femininity, saying and doing what women are not supposed to do and in a public space are rarely subject to an examination of the textual moments that these produce as evidence of the places in which the *queer* in hip hop manifests itself. I borrow my understanding of queer from John Erni. For Erni (1998), the "'queer' refers to non-normative, curious, and imaginatively ambiguous, objects and relations" where "queer sexuality can be defined as a practice of discursive excess that twists normal notions of gender and sexuality" p. 160).

Building on the work of Sellen (2005), this article begins with the concept that Missy Elliott has been involved in the disruption of and reconstruction of female identity inside and outside of hip hop. I argue that female rapper, Missy Elliott, constructs a particular queered HHNL language and style that allows her to work outside accepted gendered structures defined by contemporary hip-hop culture. She questions the very ground that contemporary hip-hop culture stands on by questioning gendered norms and by taking up a position of power. Missy causes instability in the systems that seek to confine her to the margins of hip-hop culture because she is a "female rapper." As Gaunt (2006) says,

if we question why it is normal that women "suck dick," or have to be subjected to a loss of power or a diminished position in hip hop, the entire system of masculinity and male domination comes into question, and the conscious—or at least complicit—exclusion of "lesser" sex becomes apparent. (p. 117)

I suggest that Missy consistently questions and, thus, threatens the heteronormative, patriarchal systems that maintains men's dominance in the rap industry and, as many other female rappers must do, she addresses concerns about her femininity through particular stylistic and linguistic choices. By existing on the margins and having to participate constantly in the reorganization and reconfiguration of a public identity, I believe Missy can be seen at the forefront of a progressive hip hop and Black sexual political movement. She makes bold statements about racialized gender and sexuality that fall outside the notions of propriety in both dominant culture and in hip-hop culture. Whether it's calling oneself a "queen" like Queen Latifah, or "the baddest bitch" like Trina, or "the boss bitch" like Lola Monroe, or "the illist pit bull in a skirt" like Eve, they all serve as linguistic gestures of

grabbing the mic. Not only do they grab the mic, but they also seek to get paid for reproducing themselves and these identities. This is the mark of the late modern society and “text-making . . . provides occasions for negotiating and contesting late modern gendered subjectivities” (Leap, 2003, p. 403). Missy and other female rappers not only seek to escape the narrow confines of urban and suburban poverty that many of them come from, but they also seek to express pleasure, they seek to advocate for exploration, and they do so with claims of agency.

What can be learned from the textual moments that Missy Elliott constructs and how might it point to a queering of HHNL? What else can this bending of language and style tell us about Black sexual politics in the late modern era? To answer these questions, I take a close look at Missy’s stylistic and linguistic choices in the video and lyrics of “Gossip Folks” from her 2002 album *Under Construction*. I highlight examples from other artists to show how Black female subjectivity has been created through alternate versions of HHNL use and I summarize with a discussion about the ways in which *distractions* often obscure Black feminist-inspired messages that Black female artists promote in their lyrics. Their purposeful use of alternative HHNL to make statements about self and body as well as Black female subjectivity and womanhood more broadly are statements that few women could ever do publically.

I examine various sets of lyrics reading each line for the distinct linguistic features that are of interest to this project, namely those lines which hold an evaluative function and which point to the project of identity making. I then read each line in the full context of the song and then in the context of Black sexual politics. Thus, I read from the inside of the lyrics outward, doing the same with the features of the music video. This allows for a reading that is based in the data, and also allows for an understanding of what this data means in a larger context.

MISSY ELLIOTT’S CONSTRUCTION OF QUEERED HIP-HOP LANGUAGE

In 2002, Missy Elliott and Adidas formed a partnership, which made Missy the face of an Adidas women’s lifestyle line of clothing, shoes, and accessories that were tailored to her taste under the moniker “Respect M.E.” emblemized by a crown. These are two important facts to retain as I begin this section with a reading of Missy’s lyrics and music video for her song “Gossip Folks,” the first single released from her album *Under Construction* (2002). I do so in order to discuss how Missy visually and linguistically constructs her identity and membership to an “authentic” hip-hop nation.

I listened to “Gossip Folks” song and watched the video multiple times, transcribing the lyrics. Each number represents what are referred to in

hip-hop nation language as half of a “bar.” A bar is a full eight count, and each may consist of multiple lines that are segmented based on where there were natural breaks. I will describe in as great of detail as possible, each scene from the music video that accompanies this analysis.

The music video for “Gossip Folks” is set in a high school where Missy and the dancers in the video play the role of the students. All of the students, male and female, are wearing a variation of the same burgundy Adidas tracksuit and Adidas sneakers—their uniforms. The video prominently features two elementary school aged girls, one Asian and one White. Both wear the same outfits as everyone else, except they are over sized. The women and girls wear ties with various forms of their Adidas tracksuits. Some wear Kangol fedora hats along with Missy, who also sports in this opening scene a pair of large hoop earrings with her signature “M” in the middle of it and a big gold chain around her neck. After arriving to school, Missy walks through a gauntlet of “haters,” or people talking ill about her. The song begins here with Missy providing a sort of prelude in the form of talk. Missy does not rhyme in this portion of the song, yet the voices are distinctly melodic and rhythmic to keep time with the flow of the music. She frames for the listener how they should be hearing her textual production to follow. As Missy walks through the gauntlet, the haters (their voices marked by indentations in the text) say within earshot, but always to her Missy’s back (see Example 1).

Example 1

- 1.1 Music begins
- 1.2 Yo yo, move out the way
We got Missy Elliott coming through.
- 1.3 Girl,
that is Missy Elliott.
Mmm hmm
She lost a lot of weight.
- 1.4 Girl, I heard
she eats one cracker a day.
What?
- 1.5 Girl, well I heard the bitch was married to Tim
- 1.6 And started fucking with Trina.
- 1.7 Well, I heard
the bitch got hit by three zebras and a monkey.
- 1.8 I can’t stand the bitch no way.

Looking coy and affected by the stares and words she receives from this group of haters, Missy walks in between them and as she begins to rhyme they become a part of her background dancing crew. When we listen to the song, without the visual aid, it is clear that it is Missy who lends her voice for

all three of the haters; her vocals are distorted using a basic music production method that creates the illusion of various voices. Without having to view the video, one can draw upon the linguistic features of African American English (AAE), particularly deictic markers specific to AAE, to conclude the speakers are depicted as being Black and female.

Benwell and Stokoe (2006) explain, “deixis refers to markers of reference . . . that signal the spatial, temporal, or identity location of a speaker . . . deixis generally occurs in contexts where there is a shared understanding or experience of events” (p. 255). In this particular portion of analysis, I will pay close attention to deictic markers and the evaluative function of those markers.

Evaluation for Thompson and Hunston (2000) has three main functions. First, it expresses the speaker’s opinion. It also maintains the relationship between speaker and listener, and lastly, it organizes discourse. In the following example, we will see that there are two levels of evaluation taking place. First, we will consider the fictional, satirized talking between the haters. Next, we understand that it is Missy making evaluative statements of the haters by writing and lending her voice in the construction of this fictionalized account.

The first word that Hater 1 says is “girl.” When used at the beginning of a speech act between Black women “girl” has a few functions. In this case it functions to hail a confidant into a discourse. For example, in 1.3 we can *bear* “girl” in its pragmatic function as a gesture to listen and look as Hater 1 says “girl” in an exaggerated manner beckoning Hater 2 to listen and witness what she does, “that is Missy Elliott.” The haters begin with a statement of fact in 1.3. Between the release of her first album and the release of her fourth album (which was a five year period), Missy lost significant weight. The moment where it disintegrates into hate is when they posit she did it by starving herself in 1.4. It is important to notice that in this imagined conversation between Elliott’s haters, she imagines their first act of “hate” to come as a comment about her body.

The fictionalizing of an encounter with people, hostile based on held beliefs about how Black women’s bodies are supposed to be, is not an uncommon theme among Black women writers. In fact we see this same fascination with a Black woman’s body in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2009) when the protagonist Florence meets a White family on her way to visit Smithy, the man she loves. They forced her to be the subject of examination—her dark body standing before them—naked, afraid, and humiliated. Sarah Baartman, known as the Venus Hottentot, was similarly subjected to the humiliation that comes with being a spectacle for “hateful” eyes as she was a common attraction at fairs and shows around Western Europe and subject to the scrutiny of those who did not imagine Africans as human (P. H. Collins, 2006; Gilliam, 2001). I draw the parallel between the racist problematic of Black women’s bodies in White imaginations and Missy’s haters because it

highlights the internalization of racist beliefs about self, which are at the heart of what Missy is dissecting in this satirical sketch of her haters.

There are a number of ways that Black male rappers use the Black female body as a theme, but its most recognizable configuration in commercial hip hop, is not in this complicated framework that Missy has set up. Most often we see Black female bodies serving as a means for Black male rappers to construct a masculinity that is based on the possession of multiple women. However, Missy's use of the Black female body serves a deeply evaluative function in a number of ways.

In the next two cases, in which an exaggerated "girl" is used, Missy's use of the exaggerated "girl" also functions to show familiarity between the speakers clueing the listener into a set of shared beliefs between those speaking. The discourse markers "mmm hmm" and "what?" are distinctive to AAE speech patterns as well and depending on intonation can either provide positive or negative feedback in the production of a dialogic moment of text-making (Schiffrin, 1987). In these examples, both are given positively. We know this because although "what" is asked with sense of surprise it is not disbelief as Hater 2 has even more to add—"I heard, the bitch got married to Tim, and started fuckin' with Trina." Here, Hater 2 makes reference to hip-hop personalities and their assumed intimate relationships with Missy: female rapper, Trina, and Tim, a shortened version of hip-hop producer and rapper, Timberland. Last, Hater 3 "heard" that Missy "got hit by three zebras and a monkey," which is nonsensical, but purposefully so. The listener now understands that "haters" in a more broad sense believe all what is being said about Missy, although it makes no sense and, ultimately, their evaluations of her come down to, "I can't stand the bitch no way." In other words, it doesn't matter what Missy does or does not do; they still won't like her.

In the music video, three different Black women play these haters. Their comments provide clues to what Elliott believes is reflective of the value system of the community that she fictionalizes, in this case, the Black female haters. Comments such as the one's in Example 1 are in some ways thought of as typical of groups of women in competition with one another, especially for social capital. Black women are often at the bottom of the social hierarchy with little means of climbing the ladder. Viewed more generally, the song and video show the Black woman's body being constructed as a site of spectacle and tension, even within the Black, hip-hop community. It very clearly functions as a critique of how some Black women treat each other as a means of gaining social capital, but in a way that ultimately fails.

There is little consensus in the Black community concerning Black women's bodies; when they should be shown, to whom, and for what end. As P. Collins (2008) describes, various Black women have demonstrated a shrewd, complex understanding about how they wish to use their bodies. Too often Black women rappers are not credited with having a conscious understanding of their oppression. However, just as P. Collins (2008)

describes of Josephine Baker's autobiography, if listened to more closely, there may be places where Black women are providing clues that they are not fools. Missy's ability to communicate an understanding as well as distance herself from this normalized mode of talking by White and Black America through this fictionalized account should be read as a very conscious understanding of the place of her body in society and the Black community; proving that while she sees that some Black women do violence to each other, there are plenty who don't. I draw specific attention to the distance she draws from this act in order to note how Missy deals with the gossip throughout the song concerning sexual matters.

The second hater speaks about the rumors that Missy and her friend and producer, Timberland, were married, which spread before and during the release of *Under Construction*. They were a dynamic duo in the hip-hop community with Missy writing many of the songs that Timberland produced for various artists, most notably the late R&B sensation, Aaliyah who died in a fatal airplane crash in 2001. Missy and Timberland's ascension to the top of the Billboard charts happened together and, because of their close working relationship, many assumed them to be in a relationship. Shortly after Trina was featured in a music video with Missy for her song "One Minute Man," a song from Missy's third (album) *Miss E . . . So Addictive* (2001), the blogosphere and celebrity gossip magazines posited that Missy's friend and fellow female rapper, Trina, were in a relationship. Missy addresses this in a rhyme (see Example 2).

Example 2

- 2.1 And stop talkin' 'bout
 Who I'm stickin' and lickin'
 2.2 Just mad it ain't yos yours

I find this verse particularly interesting because Missy neither confirms nor denies the rumors that she's had sex with, either Timberland or Trina. In fact, Trina makes an appearance in the video, along with fellow female rapper Eve, and friend and vocalist Tweet who she collaborated with on a song called "Oops" in which they talk about self-love and self-pleasure. Missy goes on to use the verbs "sticking" and "licking" to refer to the type of sex acts that are of interest to those talking about her. Both verbs are active and imply a sense of control in the bedroom. She finishes this line by saying "just mad it ain't yos," purposefully using the second person, talking to both the haters in the song, and to listeners who take part in discussions about her sexual behavior. She could be talking to either men or women, because she believes herself desirable to either men or women, a sentiment shared by rapper Da Brat in her song, "What Chu Like" (2000; see Example 3).

Example 3

3.1 She attractive

To them, him, her and you shit

I could cite a number of examples from various female artists who claim to be attractive to men and women including Nicki Minaj, Trina, and Lola Monroe. Rarely do heterosexual identified men in hip-hop talk about other men finding them sexually attractive, but when it does happen it is generally connected to a performance of hypermasculinity. The following example is from gangsta rapper DMX's "Up in Here." In the first 16 bars, DMX makes two references to other men (see Example 4).

Example 4

4.1 If I gotsta bring it to you cowards
then it's gonna be quick aight

4.2 All your mens up in the jail before,
suck my dick

4.3 Y'all niggaz remind me of a strip
club,

Cause every time you come around,

4.4 it's like what I just gotta get my dick sucked
woo

It appears Missy, in Example 2, is engaging in a similar homoerotic discourse as DMX (Example 4), a heterosexual-identified man, but because of the configurations of racialized gender and sexuality their use of this device doesn't have the same effect. George (2005) discusses the connection between the homoerotic in gangsta rap and the rape and psychological coercion that men who are incarcerated face while in prison. He argues that sex in that context is less about sexual orientation as it about "manifestations of control and domination . . . it suggests that there's a homoerotic quality to this culture's intense male bonding" (p. 44).

With her use of these particularly sexually potent verbs (Example 2, line 2.1), Missy complicates her sexual subjectivity, but not in a way that is about domination over others as is the case with DMX (Example 4, line 4.1), but is about a control of her sexuality. Sellen borrowing from Imani Perry (1995) says that when Black women reappropriate heterosexual male linguistic tools in rap, they are engaged in a claiming of their sexual subjectivity as well as an even more complicated project. They "enter the male body, generally as a metaphor for their strength and power, but also to expand self-definition" (Perry, 1995, p. 526, in Sellen, 2005, p. 53). DMX proves he his more masculine and more heterosexual, by putting down and evaluating

negatively other men who are constantly “on his dick,” a phrase in HHNL which means when a man constantly has some interest in another man. Missy however, metaphorically enters the role of the male where she can either “stick” or “lick” constructing a discourse about self that is outside of the norms of heteronormative female behavior. DMX uses HHNL to uphold the discourse of Black hip-hop male behavior.

Example 5 provides Missy’s first lines of the song “Gossip Folks.”

Example 5

- 5.1 When I walk up in the piece
- 5.2 I ain’t gotta even speak
- 5.3 Imma bad mama jama
Goddammit motherfucker
- 5.4 You ain’t got to like me

What Missy suggests (Example 5, line 5.2) is that before she speaks, she gets read. In other words, she’s silenced. At the same time, she doesn’t actually have to say anything for reasonable people to understand that she’s a “bad mama jama,” a term made popular by Carl Carlton on his 1979 song, “She’s a Bad Mama Jama She’s Bad, She’s Stacked.” Not speaking about her sexual and general desirability is of no consequence to the way that Missy navigates in the “piece,” or space. She makes it clear that “you ain’t got to like me.” In other words, Missy’s wording indicates that she’s extremely attractive, physically and stylistically, and those who do not like it are only “hating” and are the producers of the jumbled speech that happens in the chorus of the song, which is a sample from Frankie Smith’s 1975 classic, “Double Dutch Bus.” The words are nearly unrecognizable, unless you are familiar with a particular type of slang. (See Example 6 for a section of the text and a translation.)

Example 6

- | | | |
|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| 6.1 | Hilzi, gilzirls! Yilzall hilzave t’
milzove ilzout the wilzay | Hey girls! Y’all have to
move out the way |
| 6.2 | silzo the gilzuys can plilzay
bilzasket-bilzall | So the guys can play
basket-ball |
| 6.3 | I say wizzat? | Say what? |
| 6.4 | Nizzo-izzo wizzay! | No way! |

In “Double Dutch Bus,” girls who are playing double dutch, a jump rope game involving two ropes instead of one, are being told that they

have to get out of the way. Double dutch, as Gaunt (2006) points out, is an important game that Black girls play that shows the ingenuity and contribution to Black musicality that Black girls have made. Like hip hop, double dutch is a game of battles, innovation, and expressiveness (Gaunt, 2006). There is something deeply important about Missy's use of this clip from the "Double Dutch Bus": It not only sounds like nonsense to those unfamiliar with classic 1970s Black music, but it's also a clip about little girls standing up for themselves and saying "No way!" to little boys who would have them moved out to the margins so that they can play "a real game." The relevance of Missy borrowing from this song is that she is playing a game that usually only men get to play rap, and she does it better than most men. Thus, her boasting is well founded.

Missy doesn't have to speak, because her haters are going to talk nonsense regardless. She can say one thing, and they hear another. Other aspects of her appearance are actually speaking for her, particularly her assertion of a hip-hop sensibility demonstrated throughout the music video. Bucholtz's (2007) discussion of discernment helps me understand how Missy has used stylistic representation to construct this "hip-hop sensibility" in the music video. Discernment is a basic knowledge of what one is supposed to like based on their membership to a social group (Bucholtz, 2007). Missy not only knows how to dance, she also knows how to rap, and she knows that the Adidas brand represents a true and authentic hip-hop sensibility.

When conjured by contemporary hip-hop enthusiasts, Adidas symbolizes a certain era in hip-hop culture (George, 2005). It represents hip hop at its prime and to a more critical eye, it represents the moment when corporations noticed the profitability of Black male hip-hop artists and their ability to construct brand loyalty from the Black but mostly White kids who wished to emulate them. Run D.M.C. was the first rap group to sponsor a corporation. Adidas paid Run D.M.C. to promote their brand through a campaign tailored to their taste. Adidas "Superstar" sneakers, also referred to as "shell-toes," had already been co-opted by hip hop and formed into a symbol of citizenship in the hip-hop nation (Middlebrook, 2007), and it was this reason for Run D.M.C.'s classic anthem to shell-toes, called "My Adidas" (1986).

Hip hop is a call-and-response driven project, similar in effects to what is described by Athusser as the process of interpolation. The seductiveness of hip hop is that it manages to place the listener in an imagined space of hailing. Allison (1991) provides a wonderful framework for understanding how infusing a nostalgic value to an Adidas logo might enable the maintenance of dominant ideology in this fashion where she connects hip hop to Barthes' "second order myth." The imagined hip-hop era is a place where everyone, Black, White, and Asian can dance and battle over who was the best in a playful b-boy competition in the lunch room, and regardless of who wins, everyone comes back the next day as friends and do it all again.

This is the primary order of signification that Adidas calls for: Anyone can purchase Adidas and be part of the game. The primary meaning “stands as an alibi, the cover up under which the second, politicized meaning can hide” (Allison, 1991, p. 197). There are two such secondary meanings. The purchase of Adidas brand supports the capitalistic enterprise; the co-option of hip hop into the domain of the cultural and media ISA, and it supports the pocketbook of the Adidas cooperation. Second, men wear Adidas, not women, so the Adidas focus thinly veils the very real fact that women of color are often relegated to the margins in hip hop and that their citizenship is not granted based on the same credentials.

Working within the very framework that relegates women to the margins, she does something else. In addition to there being Adidas in every frame of the “Gossip Folks” video, it is not the Run D.M.C. version of Adidas, but the distinctive stylistic repertoire of Missy that makes this iteration of Adidas different. Traditionally, Adidas was one of many ways of claiming membership for men to an authentic, fun, and “funky-fresh” hip hop. But Missy not only professes her membership to a real hip hop, she makes space for a newly imagined era of hip hop literally where all types of people can be a part of the culture.

Missy provides an example of P. Collins’ (2008) point that Black women force a rethinking of hegemony. It is because from the outside, Black women are in a position to see the contradictions between the ideologies that seek to control them and their everyday experience. And when we are able to “see the contradictions in ideologies, they become open for demystification” (P. Collins, 2008). Missy, like all Black women are situated outside the norm, and understands that there is a serious sets of contradiction between what hip hop is touted as, and what actually happens within the industry. This allows for her engagement in a process of redefinition of its borders, with her at the helm.

REAL TALK: “SAY WHAT? NO WAY!”

Using these examples from Missy Elliot, I want to go back to my broader concerns of this article, and address two general themes: How Black women rappers are queering the language of hip hop as a way of proclaiming Black women’s voice through this medium, and, how issues of bodily representation complicate and at times work against those initiatives.

As discussed earlier, HHNL is masculinist in that it operates within the discourse of Black heterosexual male power and privilege to define hip-hop culture and Black sexual and gender relations. Operating in a heteronormative framework, many male rappers who deal in the homoerotic use it to feminize other men who they view as outsiders to their constructions of

masculinity. This operates to make more rigid the boundaries between men and women in hip-hop culture, normalizing the ideas around the lower status of femininity. Such that men who act like “bitches” are those who are passive, nonassertive, and do not take up the project of self-definition. As a group, Black women, underprivileged and privileged, do not represent a class with power, therefore where they shift, bend, and stretch the rules of this heteronormative framework, they are in effect, altering the rules so that they can play.

I cannot summarize this article without mentioning that there are artists that I believe who have made it possible for Missy and others, to bend the rules of heteronormativity in hip hop. Salt-N-Pepa come to mind when I think about their visual and musical bending of race and gender in their 1988 music video “Twist & Shout,” where they remake a 1960s classic made famous by The Beatles into a hip-hop song. In the video they perform on a stage in men’s attire at what looks to be a dance in a high-school gym. They also play partygoers in long skirts and harass their dates into dancing with them on the dance floor. The scene looks to be cut directly from an old Elvis movie, except all of the partiers are Black. I bring this up to suggest it as a reason why many female hip-hop artists have struggled to gain mass appeal. This video was released in 1988, the same year that N.W.A. (Niggas With Attitude), released their single “Straight Outta Compton,” which highlighted (to many people’s discomfort) the anger and reality of life in one of California’s suburban ghettos. Black men’s struggles came to the forefront and they gained a notorious position in American popular cultural consciousness especially with their single, “Fuck the Police.” So while Salt n’ Pepa is just an important reference in the historiographies of hip hop, N.W.A. is more likely to get mentioned. Not every hip-hop group in the late 1980s and early 1990s was participating in “gangsta rap” although it is often the only type of rap that many associate with the rise and fall of the crack era (George, 2005).

Suspicion of women, loyalty to the crew, adoption of stone face in confronting the world, hatred of authority—all major themes of gangsta rap—owe their presence in lyrics and impact on audiences to the large number of African American men incarcerated in the ‘90s. (p. 44)

Connecting the rates of incarceration and power with the proliferation of gangsta rap, George (2005) illustrates our point that at various points in the development and proliferation of the linguistic features of HHNL, it was the experience of Black men that made those themes and discourses possible, and women’s experience and contributions were swept aside. Although George is helpful in thinking through the homoeroticism in the linguistic practices of HHNL, he participates in this downplaying of women’s experience and contributions arguing that “there are no women who have

contributed profoundly to rap's artistic growth" and "if none of these female artists had ever made a record, hip hop's development would have been no different" (p. 184). He is even bold enough to name artists such as Missy, Salt n' Pepa, DJ Spinnderella, Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Erykah Badu, Foxy Brown, and Lil' Kim and then completely marginalizes them as if they are not a part of hip hop.

Black women are often forced into silence by being left out of conversations all together or erased from having made contributions. This article is an attempt to correct that tendency, but it also serves as a statement that these Black women are talking, loudly, and clearly, and they should be heard. The current state of popular discourse surrounding Black women who rap places a very narrow strict divide between those women who are viewed as having a very sexualized image or not (see Keyes, 2000; Morgan, 2000). These arguments typically do not engage the ideas that Black female rappers' bodies are always already sexualized. The degrees vary to which they are rewarded and punished by the cultural ideological state apparatus for engaging in the display of what some call hypersexuality. What are we talking about when we say hypersexuality and what are its implications?

I think the term "hypersexual" might be another way to call Black women hos,¹ and trying to classify them as "hypersexual" or not may serve as more a distraction than an analytical tool for understanding racist, sexist, homophobic ideology and their effects on Black women's ability to articulate their lives as full, complete human beings. I use distraction in the way that it was theorized by feminist scholars, Radner and Lanser (1993). They refer to distraction as "strategies that drown out or draw attention away from the subversive power of a feminist message" (p. 15). They go on to argue that "music, rhythmic accompaniment, and other modes of heightening and marking performance styles may be the most common means of distraction" (p. 16). This is certainly the case of hip hop where the means of the music production has become much more sophisticated and complex. Often people find it difficult to actually understand the lyrical content of the song. With the rise of the music video in hip hop, Black women's bodies have also served as another means of distraction. In most videos, Black women are silent. They don't talk and they don't contribute except where they are dancing or providing decoration to the male rapper. It is in this context that Black female rappers must deal with their body always already serving as a spectacle in rap music. Typical, commercial depictions of Black women's bodies in rap music, offer a body with no agency. We see Black women whose rear ends are either the theme of the song or the star of the music video, but rarely do these women get to express anything outside of a sexuality that is already shaped by the desire of the male artist. Trina's body is one of the reasons why she has had a chance to grab the microphone. Her first single, "Pull Over" was about her size and shape of her butt. She's been rapping for 10 years, and her butt is a part of HHNL. "Trina's ass"

is a common trope in the cultural milieu of hip-hop culture, yet, Trina's music has tackled issues from male infidelity to independent womanhood, something that most people don't know because they haven't been listening. Listening to Black women talk requires a more direct and intentional process of listening.

The "culture of dissemblance" produced the need for Black women to project "the image of a 'super-moral' Black woman, hoping to garner respect, justice, and opportunity for all Black Americans" (Hammonds, 1994, p. 133). The struggle for respect in this configuration is not based on actual racial/gender equality, but is based on the production of an image rooted in hetero-patriarchal notions of what a "good Black woman" should be. Thus, women like Queen Latifah, who despite her participation in similar discourses, but who have far fewer distractions than say Lil' Kim is elevated to the status of "super-moral," while Lil' Kim is relegated to the status of "ho" because she talks and expresses sexuality. So, I take issue with the term hypersexuality used by academics because they suggest that Black women choosing to portray any type of sexuality, to show "too much" skin, to dance "too provocatively" in public is doing something wrong.

Missy can be seen as an example of chewing on the "golden age" of hip hop and spitting out an image that includes her, and others. In 2005, Missy lent her name to a show that aired on MTV called, *The Road to Stardom with Missy Elliott*, which featured men and women, Black, mixed race, White, and Asian rappers from the suburbs to the projects seeking a record deal. Continuing the work she takes up in *Under Construction* (2002), Missy has been actively involved in a literary reconstruction of hip-hop identity.

Ultimately, respect, like Aretha Franklin bellowed, must still be demanded, but that demand is often obscured by the concessions that female rappers have had to make concerning the stylizing of their bodies in order to be deemed worthy of grabbing the microphone. For many female rappers, their bodies have served as distractions to their larger messages; distractions keeping people from wanting to know who they really were. For others, such as Missy, it has served as a tool of making a much broader statement concerning who can be authentically hip hop. Her politic around who can be hip hop includes more than just Black men.

Not only is George (2005) wrong about women's contributions to rap artistically, but I also believe that Missy has been responsible for altering rap artistically over the past decade, as Missy's opened a door for more fun, party, light-weight rhymers like T-Pain to come on the scene. Missy has also given artists like Ludacris and Timberland a boost in their careers. Her self-definition, her assertiveness, and her active engagement in the construction of a hip-hop identity that includes her and others who are not Black heterosexual men, is exactly what makes her an important figure in hip hop. Her dealing with sexual matters is more than a mere exercise in "doing what men do." As we've seen, many men use HHNL to define themselves for

the sake of normalizing a system of domination, however, Missy is involved in redefining masculinity and femininity in ways that questions, and thus destabilizes, the system of domination.

NOTE

1. I use this phrase inspired by McClaurin's (2001) introduction to *Black Feminist Anthropology*, where she quotes Othman Sullivan in John L. Gwanltney's *Drylongso*, who says, "I think this anthropology is just another way to call me a nigger" (p. 4).

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