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"Ladies First": Queen Latifah's Afrocentric Feminist Music Video

Although they have been featured in a number of newspaper articles, feminist rappers have not received sufficient critical attention. Three recent books on rap (Costello and Wallace; Spencer; and Toop) ignore female rappers, and as recently as March 1990, Terry Teachout could proclaim that, "not surprisingly, women in the world of rap are largely, if not exclusively, objects of transient sexual gratification" (60). Feminist rappers like Queen Latifah, Yo Yo, Ms. Melodie, Salt 'n Pepa, M. C. Lyte, and Roxanne, among others, not only belie his pronouncement but deserve close attention because they are a group of African American women who are "allowed to speak their own words," a situation that Michele Wallace identifies as unusual in popular culture (3). The one exception to the critical neglect of feminist rappers is the work of Tricia Rose who, in "Never Trust a Big Butt and a Smile," calls for "broadening the scope of investigations in our search for black women's voices" (128) to include rap. Rose asserts that "women rappers are vocal and respected members of the Hip Hop community, and they have quite a handle on what they are doing" (109). Queen Latifah's music video "Ladies First" (which Rose discusses briefly in her article and in her recent book *Black Noise* [163-66]¹) provides ample evidence to support Rose's claims.

By examining "Ladies First" closely, this article explores issues raised by feminist rap; that is, rap that focuses on promoting women's importance, that demands equal treatment for women, and that demonstrates the need for women to support each other. While a feminist politics of entertainment is troubling and ambivalent, there are feminist entertainments such as "Ladies First" that present the viewer with moments of resistance to dominant exploitative images of women. In its serious exploration and glorification of African American women's history, "Ladies First" seizes a televisual moment and breaks the continuity of sexism and racism that dominates the music video flow. While "Ladies First" is neither ideologically pure nor completely consistent, there is a coherence to the images and lyrics that contrasts strikingly not only with music videos by male performers, but also with music videos like "Sisters Are Doin' It For Themselves," performed by Aretha Franklin and Annie Lennox. In Franklin and Lennox's video, for example, arbitrary, unconnected, and traditional portraits of women undercut rather than strengthen the overtly feminist message of the lyrics. By contrast, the complexity of the lyrics and images of "Ladies First" refutes the notion that popular culture texts will inevitably and exclusively exploit gender and Afrocentricity (if these concepts even appear at all).

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Queen Latifah's feminism draws on the patterns of rap to assert the importance of women promoting themselves and other women. Rap, like all other forms of popular music, is not inherently feminist, but in this genre, as in other popular genres, female performers use specific generic qualities to promote a feminist message. Rap is noted for its emphasis on lyrics, and through the lyrics, female rappers make explicit assertions of female strength and autonomy. Since rap revolves around self-promotion, female rappers are able to use the form without appearing to be unduly narcissistic.² In "Ladies First," for example, Queen Latifah touts herself as a "perfect specimen," and Monie Love (*aka* Simone Johnson) spells out her professional name, which evokes the paradox of the conjunction of love and money in a capitalistic society. Love's name draws attention to the nature of the music business, which so frequently draws upon the notion of love to make money. These feminist rappers' names make their wry understanding of capitalism clear and should allay any doubts about their awareness of the complexities and ambiguities of their position.

Through her name and emphases Queen Latifah draws upon a tradition of African music and culture to make her criticism of sexism and racism. Latifah—whose name means 'delicate and sensitive' in Arabic—was born Dana Owens in East Orange, N.J. (She added to *Latifah*, a name conferred upon her by a friend, the word *Queen* when she became a professional rapper.) Her name suggests the Afrocentric nature of her performances, for, as Angela Davis explains, "according to African tradition, one's name is supposed to capture the essence of one's being" (100). Because of this tradition, Dick Hebdige asserts that names have particular power in Afrocentric music:

Naming can be in and of itself an act of invocation, conferring power and grace upon the namer: the names can carry power in themselves. The titles bestowed on Haile Selassie in a Rastafarian chant or reggae toast or on James Brown or Aretha Franklin in a soul toast or MC rap testify to this power. . . . the namer pays tribute in the "name check" to the community from which (s)he has sprung and without which (s)he would be unable to survive. (8)

Queen Latifah promotes herself as a rapper, a toast to herself that is part of the rap tradition.³

Significantly, Queen Latifah's Afrocentricity occurs in the music as well as in her use of names and images. The rhythms of rap are those of Africa. As Hebdige describes it, there is a substantial difference between European and African music:

African, Afro-American and Caribbean music is based on quite different principles from the European classical tradition. . . . Rhythm and percussion play a much more central role. In the end there is a link in these non-European musics with public life, with speech, with textures and grains of the living human voice. (12)

Drawing on African and African American traditions of music as resistance,⁴ Queen Latifah transforms these qualities into rap to criticize racism. Like many male rappers, Latifah subscribes to the belief that black North Americans must look to Africa in order to create their identities and culture. As Latifah herself says, "To me Afrocentricity is a way of living. . . . It's about being into yourself and into your people and being proud of your origins." She attributes her interest and her knowledge to her "very cultured family," who were "very aware" of African culture (qtd. in Dafoe D8). (Latifah's mother is a high school history teacher.) Through her use of beat and language, Queen Latifah promotes women and attacks apartheid.

Significantly, she does so by using the very forms that are used (by many male rappers) to denigrate women, thus reclaiming those forms for women. At the same time, by using rap and Afrocentricity, she asserts the centrality of women to an Afrocentric outlook. Being feminist does not mean abandoning her African heritage; instead, it becomes an additional source of strength and power. Her attire, in particular, reveals the way in which an African-based clothing style can assert an eroticism that resists the nakedness and exposure of Western styles for women (such as the dresses and high heels worn by Tina Turner).

Queen Latifah's Afrocentricity is most prominent in "Ladies First" when she uses footage from South Africa and attacks apartheid.⁵ Furthermore, Queen Latifah's style and dress and rap itself are Afrocentric; through them she looks to Africa for inspiration. Queen Latifah's Afrocentricity operates both culturally and politically. Her regal bearing, her name, and her self-promotion associate her with a tradition of African royalty. Through her attire, she draws attention to styles and colors that are African in their ethos. Her military dress and the colors that she wears (red, black, and green) evoke the African National Congress. Scenes in the video depict armed struggle in South Africa, emphasizing that, in her case, style is used to underscore a political message. In the video, Queen Latifah's Afrocentricity is also apparent in her neo-nationalistic positioning of herself as a leader of African American male and female rappers. Through her appropriation of rap, Queen Latifah politicizes it and uses the genre to promote herself and other African American women.

By employing the strategies of postmodernism inherent in the music video form, Queen Latifah forces viewers to question the assignation of complexity and linguistic play to high-

art productions by white men. Her video exemplifies Houston Baker's description of rap as "the form of audition in our present era that utterly refuses to sing anthems of, say, whitemale hegemony" (182). By using Afrocentric images and style in a postmodern art form, "Ladies First" requires its viewers to accept the overlap between two apparently distinct cultural phenomena. While Afrocentricity emphasizes Africa as a source of unity and historical continuity, postmodernism emphasizes fragmentation and contradiction. In "Ladies First," however, the two are linked together in the service of Queen Latifah's trenchant critique of racism and sexism. Both Afrocentricity and postmodernism are implicated in sexism, her text implies, but both can be redeemed if used carefully. Through the video images and the words of her rap, Queen Latifah creates a unified, but far from seamless, sense of the intersection of the perspectives of Afrocentricity, postmodernism, and feminism. Examining her music video in detail allows us to see magnified the relationships between South Africa and the United States, between performance and resistance, and between history and contemporary politics.

Latifah's use of Afrocentricity draws her work into debates about postmodernism and its relation to African American culture. African American culture creates and draws upon postmodernism, just as modernism involved an appropriation of earlier African American culture—jazz and sculpture, to name just two examples. I agree with Cornel West that, "for too long, the postmodernism debate has remained inscribed within narrow disciplinary boundaries, insulated artistic practices, and vague formulations of men and women of letters" (90). Rap music videos provide a

site to explore the postmodernism of African American culture. Rap itself draws on qualities of non-Western music that overlap with postmodernism. For example, scratching demonstrates one of the postmodern qualities of rap because it involves the appropriation of another record. While appropriation is postmodern when it appears in conjunction with music video's other postmodern qualities—such as fragmentation, pastiche, and self-reflexivity—it is also African American, Afro-Caribbean, or “versioning.” As described by Hebdige, *versioning* is “an invocation of someone else’s voice to help you say what you want to say.” Hebdige positions this characteristic as explicitly African American and Afro-Caribbean, and complains that the quality “is often cited by critics in a spirit of censure” (14). This method of producing music, and the frequent use of snatches of melody from other songs as part of a rap record or “dub” or sampling, emphasizes pastiche and fragmentation, two fundamental aspects of postmodernism. Like Angela Davis and David Toop, Hebdige connects adaptation and emphasis on rhythm to the use of music by African slaves to “express their resentment, anger and frustration” (26).

A poststructuralist approach to popular culture licenses the interpretation of Queen Latifah as an author. Music videos are postmodern texts, and as such they are properly approached through a poststructuralist understanding of a text. To appreciate Queen Latifah’s video, the viewer must first redefine the idea of a “text,”

expanding it to include a multitude of nonverbal signs and freeing it from monologic and auteurist assumptions. In a music video the performer’s dress, gestures, enunciation, and style all become signs liable to interpretation.

“Ladies First” is worth studying (and teaching) because it raises (without resolving) issues of gender and race, and it refutes the prevailing notions of certain popular culture forms as inherently misogynistic and racist.

Redefining *text* also means redefining *author*. The author of a multi-voiced and polyphonic video is no longer what he (or, less likely, she) would be in auteur theory—the director only, supposedly controlling all meanings—but also the female performer, who interweaves and juxtaposes meanings through her delivery, her look, her gestures, and in many cases the music and lyrics. Performers like Queen Latifah design their own videos and work with their producers and colleagues to create an image. In this type of interpretation, the female performer is legitimated as an agent, and her role fuses with that of the traditional director.⁶

The star-centered institution of music videos further empowers the performer. Information on

music video directors is difficult to obtain, while every video carries the name of its star, and Music Television’s programming, for example, emphasizes the primacy of the star. “Rock Blocks” on Music Television consist of three or more videos by a particular performer, rather than by a particular director. The director as well as the performer’s agent undoubtedly have hands in the final product, but poststructuralist theory encourages the discussion of the performer as an equal participant, another voice, rather than as a puppet of a director. While all music videos,

then, have the potential to be liberating for women,⁷ there are significant differences among music videos by women, even those which can be described as feminist. Most radical of all, perhaps, are feminist rap music videos, because rap is perceived as more explicitly and even endemically misogynistic.

Unlike other political videos, feminist rap videos point to the ways that systems of oppression are interdependent. They do so by drawing on the possibilities of the music video form, which allows one message be communicated through the lyrics while a complementary message is carried through images. While performers like (The Real) Roxanne, Salt 'n Pepa, and M. C. Lyte have explicitly feminist music videos, these videos do not draw explicitly on Afrocentricity or the feminist solidarity that Queen Latifah uses.⁸ More importantly, none of these videos is as explicitly political, and they do not challenge the structure of commercial music (although they are still worth analyzing).

Queen Latifah links sexism with racism in her video "Ladies First," in which the lyrics speak of sexism and the visual images depict racism in South Africa. Her feminist message is particularly powerful in the context of the other videos that air on MTV and BET. In this frame, the feminist rap videos are always already radical. These feminist videos stand in marked contrast to the sexist videos that frame them; their message, which might seem moderate in other contexts, is, in this place, a compelling challenge to the dominant patriarchal social order.

Queen Latifah's success, however, is framed by the limitations that she accepts—her music video, like almost all music videos, accepts the premises of compulsory heterosexuality. While she examines sexism and racism, she does not question the code of

heterosexual relationships that underlies most of the products that are advertised on MTV and BET. Since I know of no music video that does, the limitation may be one of the commercially embedded music video form. Perhaps even radical commercials remain constrained by the advertising need that generated the form.⁹

At the same time that popular culture limits the radicalism of a music video, however, it is a popular culture form that provides a unique opportunity for an Afrocentric feminist rapper. For example, it was Latifah's demo video "Princess of the Posse," shown on MTV, which led to her contract with Tommy Boy Records (Kennedy). This history reverses the old pattern, in which a performer got a contract and then produced a music video. Rap music videos can be seen daily on a special MTV program, *Yo MTV Raps* (which, according to Pareles, "consistently draws the cable channel's largest audiences, proving that rap appeals to fans a long way from its early strongholds in black urban neighborhoods" [28]), and on *Rap City*, an hour-long show on BET. Both shows frequently air music videos by female performers, and Queen Latifah, Sweet Tee, and Antoinette have been guests on *Rap City*. As Antoinette points out about music videos, "That's how you get into the groove of it and also it helps the song because when a person sees your video they get a picture of what's going on, so a video definitely helps" (*Rap City*). A music video "helps" rap artists, in particular, because many radio stations refuse to play rap songs. Music videos have enabled dozens of women rap artists to get attention and promote their records. More importantly, for feminist rappers, music videos offer the opportunity to underscore their feminist message by offering alternative, positive images of women that contradict stereotypical images of African American women

identified by the Combahee River Collective: "mammy, matriarch, Sapphire, whore, bulldagger" (13-14).

Furthermore, rap is uniquely accessible to feminist appropriation. Because rap is still a relatively undercapitalized venture, rap artists have far more control over their videos, their product, than do new artists starting out with major record labels. For example, Antoinette's video "Shake, Rattle and Roll" was filmed in fourteen hours, and Queen Latifah's video was finished in twenty-two hours. While "Ladies First" is polished and professional, it was devised by Queen Latifah, Monie Love, and Shakim, her manager, in a London hotel room. In her words, there "we sat, revised and rewrote the whole thing." Through a music video, a feminist rapper can extend and solidify the message of the lyrics—which, in the case of "Ladies First," were written to "lift females up." Latifah adds, "We wrote the concept for the video and I wanted female rappers in to show a unified thing" (*Much Music*). The "unified thing"—a group of female rappers singing in unison "ladies first"—is far more compelling visually. In the video the viewer can actually identify the various artists who are working with Latifah. On the track, their number and their personalities are indistinct. This is just one example of the way that a music video can augment and intensify a feminist message and emphasize its importance for African American women. Here, too, Latifah shares with other African American women writers what Michael Awkward has described as "the figure of a common (female) tongue, of a shared Afro-American woman's authorial voice" (13). While Queen Latifah's vision is not the only possible Afrocentric feminist agenda, her music video is part of a continuum of Afrocentric feminism promulgated by Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston,

and other African American women artists.

The range of African and African American feminism is stressed by the first frames of the music video. "Ladies First" opens with slides of four African American political activists—Madame C. J. Walker, Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis, and a young Winnie Mandela. To emphasize Queen Latifah's connection to these women, the pictures are repeated later in the video, with Latifah proudly singing in front of them. Later images include Harriet Tubman and a still of Cicely Tyson playing Tubman in the film *A Woman Called Moses*. Queen Latifah and Monie Love begin singing "Ladies First" against the backdrop of a bombed-out housing project, a river looming in the background. Their singing is accompanied by the frenetic dancing of the Safari Sisters, attired in bright yellow-and-black jackets and wearing black boots. Interspersed between these frames is news footage from South Africa, depicting the armed struggle against apartheid, and counterpointing these scenes are depictions of Queen Latifah as a military strategist, using a pointer to remove giant white chess pieces and replacing them with black power fists. Twice, as the chorus "ladies first" is sung, we see a line of prominent feminist rappers in close-up. The video ends with a darkened skyline and Queen Latifah proclaiming "ladies first."

"Ladies First" exemplifies the possibilities of the music video form for feminist artists and the sophistication of Queen Latifah's work. The play on the chivalric phrase *ladies first* is clever, sophisticated, and multi-layered. In the nineteenth century, the phrase would not, of course, have been applied to African American women. Its reclamation here positions Latifah as a lady—a rank underscored

by her assumption of the title of *Queen*, which in turn links her to a heritage of African queens. Similarly, the irony of the phrase is that while “ladies” were supposed to be “first,” their status was completely titular. Ladies had no legal rights or powers.

At the same time, as Latifah, Monie Love, and the other female rappers intone “ladies first,” their chorus can be heard straightforwardly. They are putting themselves first and promoting themselves as performers. Here they draw on rap’s focus on self-promotion to make a feminist statement. Furthermore, they are doing so collaboratively. The conjunction of the scenes of South Africa, including scenes of women fighting and of Latifah knocking figures off the war map and replacing them with the clenched fist that symbolizes the struggle against racism, suggests yet another reading of the phrase *ladies first*. The lyric also implies that women can and should be first in revolution, a claim underscored by the slides of notable African American freedom fighters like Harriet Tubman and Angela Davis.

Most compellingly, the juxtaposition of the phrase *ladies first* with the scenes from South Africa points to the hypocrisy of arguments for separate spheres for men and ladies, or whites and blacks—a parallel which shows how the same rationales are used to justify the oppression of blacks and women, and identifies the similarity between sexism and racism and the importance of resisting both oppressions. Through the parallel structure of lyrics and images, unique to music videos, Latifah can draw on her dual heritage of Afrocentricity and African American feminism to depict sexism and racism as related. As she does with her interest in Afrocentricity, Latifah attributes her interest in feminism to her parents, from whom she “got that message” (*Much Music*) Her heritage extends beyond her

biological family, however, as the series of slides that begin the video at-tests.

The photographs and pictures provide a history of Latifah’s African American lineage. By offering the viewer images of African American women who fought for freedom for women and blacks, she suggests that, in a number of different ways, women have been and should be at the forefront of struggles against both forms of oppression.¹⁰ The images also point to the ways in which this history is underappreciated and omitted from curricula. When I first saw the video, I was only able to recognize Truth, Davis, and Tubman—and, significantly, Rose does not mention Walker in her discussions of the video. Staring at the pictures over and over again helped me realize how ignorant I am of African American women’s history. Thus, by beginning with these unidentified slides, Latifah makes each viewer aware of her knowledge or lack of knowledge about African American “ladies.” As Latifah herself says,

I wanted to show the strength of black women in history—strong black women. Those were good examples. I wanted to show what we’ve done. We’ve done a lot, it’s just that people don’t know it. Sisters have been in the midst of these things for a long time, but we just don’t get to see it that much. (qtd. in Rose, “One” 19)

The opening works as a hook to pull the viewer into the video, and it also makes the viewer think about what each woman stands for and how Latifah herself fits into this lineage.

Although Madame C. J. Walker, a millionaire cosmetic manufacturer, might seem like an unusual choice for the first image in a feminist music video, Walker nicely encapsulates Latifah’s dual message about art and rebellion. With a formula that she created, Walker built an empire based on cosmetic products for black women, used her wealth to endow a

school for girls in West Africa, and donated large sums of money to African American institutions and charities (Robinson 138). Paula Giddings observes that Walker's "will stipulated that two-thirds of her fortune go to various charities, and that her company always be controlled by a woman" (188). Giddings praises Walker for employing thousands of black women and for improving their lives. By putting "ladies first," Walker made a fortune, lived lavishly, and was widely admired for her success and flamboyant social life. She can thus be viewed as an early African American celebrity. The appellation *Madame* itself suggests that the esteem with which she was viewed makes her a queen of sorts, and hence a precursor for Queen Latifah. Like Latifah, Walker was a mistress of self-promotion, and her marketing of her image places her as a performer in popular culture.

The second slide shows Sojourner Truth, a former slave and eloquent and famous speaker. Given the name Isabella, Truth renamed herself in the African tradition of naming identified by Davis. Truth's name reflects the essence of her inner being, as Latifah's does over a century later. Truth attended the Second National Women's Suffrage Convention and riveted those in attendance when she alone challenged the male ministers who were praising the male intellect and dominating the conference. She met with Lincoln and is perhaps best known for her speech "Ain't I a Woman," which links the oppressions of racism and sexism and depicts the double oppressions faced by black women (Bennett; Loewenberg and Bogin). Truth is important to many contemporary African American feminists like bell hooks, whose first book on feminism is entitled *Ain't I A Woman*. Truth's verbal capabilities also make her a precursor for a feminist rapper like Latifah, for Truth

proved through her speech that words have the power to challenge sexism and racism and to alter people's visions of reality. Like Truth, Latifah challenges male authorities, and by associating herself with Truth, Latifah emphasizes her own Afrocentric feminist position.

The third slide shows Angela Davis, and through her image Latifah raises a number of issues, including that of class. The move from a millionaire capitalist to a former slave to a woman who writes about gender, race, and class reminds viewers of the importance of class and of rap's positioning in capitalism. Like Madame Walker's cosmetics, rap has created and supported a number of African American record companies and made fortunes for some of its practitioners. Like Walker herself, Latifah has the prospect of making a great deal of money from her work. By depicting Davis third in this series, Latifah seems both to be endorsing entrepreneurship and to be warning about how class divides and oppresses, too. By depicting Davis, a critic of capitalism, and a writer and agitator for Civil Rights and women's rights, Latifah points to the interdependence of oppressions and the necessity of fighting on all fronts. Like Truth, Davis writes about herself—her autobiography is a powerful exposé of racism and sexism in the United States. Associating herself with Davis points to Latifah's desire to be associated with radicalism and, like the appearance of Truth, emphasizes that Latifah is a writer; rap is after all, a writerly text. Davis is also a professor, so Latifah makes explicit the didactic function of her art by including a picture of Davis in the series that opens the video.¹¹

Moving from an image of a nineteenth-century woman to the twentieth century with Davis emphasizes that, well over a century later, there are still battles to be waged

against racism and sexism. The trajectory is optimistic, because moving from Walker to Truth and then to Davis reveals that African American women are attacking oppression in increasingly powerful and direct ways. While Davis was acquitted of charges of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy when her gun was used to kill a judge, her image evokes violence used in self-defense, an issue directly raised in South Africa, where the African National Congress is pledged to using whatever means necessary to end apartheid. The violence is present in the video, too, in the compelling image of a woman lying dead after a demonstration in South Africa. The cost of fighting for freedom is high, as Winnie Mandela, who appears in the fourth slide, well knows.

Moving from Davis to Mandela highlights contemporary connections, as African and African American women struggle against sexism and racism. Both Davis and Mandela have written autobiographies that reveal the systems of oppression in their countries, and Davis has a chapter on Mandela in her book of critical essays *Women, Culture, and Politics*. The picture of a young Winnie Mandela reminds us of the long history of struggle against apartheid and how Winnie Mandela managed to keep the African National Congress alive and visible despite her husband's lengthy imprisonment and her own banning and house arrest. Mandela's jeweled and elegant portrait reinforces descriptions of her as "a woman of regal presence" (Lelyvald 211) and as possessing "spiritual beauty and political eloquence" (Davis 98). Again by juxtaposing Davis and Mandela, Latifah suggests that struggles against racism and sexism are international. The juxtaposition reminds us of America's involvement in South Africa and of our responsibility to resist racism throughout the world.

It remains for Latifah to take the combination of art and politics the next logical step. In doing so, she realizes Angela Davis's description of music's radical potential: "Black people were able to create with their music an aesthetic community of resistance, which in turn encouraged and nurtured a political community of active struggle for freedom" (201). Using rap, Latifah draws on a heritage of African American womanhood to evoke struggles against sexism and racism, and positions herself and her music video as logical successors to this tradition. This combination of art and politics appears again in the video when Latifah stands proudly in front of a slide of Harriet Tubman, the legendary escaped slave who helped hundreds of other slaves to escape. Moments later, the slide changes to a depiction of Cicely Tyson playing Tubman in *A Woman Called Moses*. Through this series, Latifah asserts the centrality and power and responsibility of art to refresh our memories about African American women's history and the need to continue the struggle—in this video, that against apartheid in South Africa, especially. The slides of African American women explicate the South African footage without a word about South Africa or apartheid being used in the rap lyrics.

The use of historical photographs and news footage from South Africa enhances Latifah's message. In these scenes, which provide one of the two glimpses of men in the video, women fight alongside men. Through these images, which range from black-and-white pictures to color film, she points to the length of the struggle against racism and provides encouragement through the allusions to successful women leaders like Harriet Tubman. The grim newsreels reveal how much there is yet to combat. The

video makes the movement from life to art and back again, stressing the interconnectedness of history (through slides of African American women) to the events of the more recent newsreels (armed struggle in South Africa) to the symbolic enactment of resistance to art itself, the rap music video. Through her actions and her attire, Latifah clearly identifies herself as a participant in the struggle. Sporting a sash with African National Congress colors, Latifah destroys figures on the board map of South Africa, and she leads a group of men to clench their fists and vow to continue to struggle. This moment shows that men and women must work together to fight apartheid.

The message of cooperation is strengthened by the way the video is shot to emphasize the lyrics. The images of women singing in chorus vividly conveys the idea of cooperation rather than rap's traditional emphasis on the individual rapper competing with and denigrating other rappers. Throughout the music video, Latifah and Monie Love engage in conversation. Like another feminist rap group, Salt 'n Pepa, Latifah and Monie rap in dialogue. In this regard they differ from many male rappers, who engage the mike solitarily. Monie and Latifah ask each other before one of them takes over the mike. For example, Monie asks Queen, "Hey, yo let me take it from here, Queen," as the camera pans from her face to Latifah's face and back again. She concludes by saying, "Let me take a position—Ladies First, yes?" Her feminine ending—women use more tag questions (Sapiro)—is answered by Latifah's resounding "Yes," then Latifah continues the rap. They exchange again when Monie once more asks permission to take the mike: "My sister, can I get some?" Latifah responds, "Yeah, Monie Love, grab the mike and get dumb." Their cooperation and artistic collaboration

can also be seen in the way the camera moves from one to the other throughout the video, and it is emphasized by their standing next to each other, faces in profile, chins a tilt with Latifah's hand on Monie's shoulder.

Latifah also resists the traditional subordination of background singers and dancers through the autonomy of the Safari Sisters, the dancers in the video. Such performers are frequently women, and they are customarily depicted in music videos as sex objects. The Safari Sisters, on the other hand, have their own identity; they choose their own outfits, which are vivid and engaging but not revealing—jackets, shorts, and boots—and design their own dances. Through their coordinated gyrations, they underscore the message of sisterhood. They appear to dance primarily with each other. As Latifah describes it, "They do their own thing" (*Rap City*). Their stage names, 007 and 99, accentuate the play with militarism that characterizes Latifah's stance. By referring to James Bond and to *Get Smart*, they evoke both filmic and television traditions and playfully appropriate the signifiers from white men for their struggles. At the end of the video, they clasp their hands to make an arch for Latifah. In this concluding gesture, they visually support her call for "ladies first."

The inclusion of a number of other female rappers in the music video also stresses sisterhood. As a group of other feminist rappers—including Antoinette, Ms. Melodie, Ice Cream Tee, and Shelly Thunder—sings the chorus, the camera slowly pans across their faces. Smiling and laughing they present a visual representation of the words they sing: "ladies first." This scene in particular undercuts rap's competitive nature, in which rappers are obliged to be combative and to speak combatively about other rappers. As Tricia Rose explains, "Her

decision to collaborate on her debut album is as surprising as it is ambitious; it suggests that being a solo rap artist does mean isolating yourself from your peers" ("One" 16), especially your female peers. Latifah specifically refutes masculine rap's heightened sense of individualism, both by the appearance of other female rappers, and also through the positioning of pictures of historical women like Tubman and Davis. Latifah knows that women have to work together, and the images and lyrics of her rap work together to stress this message. It is through the chorus of female rappers and through her dialogue with Monie Love that Queen Latifah's feminism, her commitment toward improving the position of women and to working with other women, is most obvious. Her feminism also consists of the promotion of a strong female image, her emphasis on cooperation with other women, and her clever linguistic play with the phrase *ladies first*. However, while the music video criticizes male sexism, "Ladies First" does celebrate African American women as heterosexuals, and in this regard, Queen Latifah's music video fails to present an alternative to compulsory heterosexuality and neglects another obvious interpretation of *ladies first*.

The words of the song are quite explicitly feminist. In "Ladies First," Latifah and Monie stress women's power as mothers and as artists. Women are "stepping, rhyming, cutting" and "not forgetting we're the ones who give birth." "Like mother, like daughter," Monie states, stressing lineage and the strength of the mother-daughter tie. "I'm the daughter of a sister who is the mother of a brother," she explains, reeling out her connections in familial, matrilineal terms. She calls for "respect due to the mother who's the root of it," a framing expounded upon by Latifah, who con-

cludes the video with a rap about "queens of civilization," an Afrocentric claiming of her heritage and an expansion of mothering to cultures. Through the phrase, she reminds her viewers of the pivotal role Africa has played in the development of human civilization. The strength of women also enhances their artistry. As Latifah proclaims, "The ladies will kick at a rhyme that is wicked," and Monie praises "all the beats and rhymes my sisters have applied." Latifah depicts her work "laying down track after track waiting for the climax; when I get there that's when I attacks." This spirited phrasing reminds us of her military attire and position against sexism and racism. Just listening to the CD might make the meaning appear to refer only to music, but the augmentation of images make the "attack" multilayered. Her power to do so is stressed when she attributes to herself not only the qualities of a lady and a queen, but also those of a goddess. "I'm divine and my mind expands throughout the universe." While this statement might sound grandiose to those unfamiliar with rap, in the context of rap, in which self-aggrandizement is expected, it is a modest claim and one that promotes other women at the same time. Latifah promotes herself as a representative of womanhood and shares her power and screen time with other women, who are a part of her universe. She connects her feminist power to the pleasure of the audience. "Grab the mike, look at the crowd, and see smiles, because they see a woman standing on her own two." Or as Monie puts it, "Believe me when I say being a woman is great. All the fellows out there agree with me." Like her, the viewer can be "merrily, merrily . . . overjoyed, pleased with all the beats and rhymes my sisters have applied."

The job of these sisters involves promoting an Afrocentric image of

strong womanhood. They assert feminine strength and power. "A woman can bear you, break you, take you," Latifah warns. She and Monie take upon themselves the responsibility of explicating gender relations for their listeners—"So listen very carefully as I break it down for you," Love insists. "Believe me when I say being a woman's great." Monie's positivism is counterpointed by Latifah's bluntness, "Who said the ladies couldn't make it must be blind. If you don't believe, well, here, listen to my rhyme." They speak together, disparage sexists, and demand, "Stereotypes, they got to go." Their rhymes are accentuated by their attire, which evokes power through the military and regal appurtenances. Monie is dressed in black, wears a beret and boots. Latifah is attired like a general. In one scene, she wears a white jacket with military fringe. In one extreme close-up, her turban is prominent, connecting her to Africa and also to the historical African American women in the slides that open the video. Latifah's and Monie's powerful screen presences persuasively underscore the rap's message. As the video concludes, viewers are convinced, "You get the drift, it's ladies first."

This dramatic and powerful rendering of an African

American feminist message through a rap music video shows that even so unpropitious a setting as music videos or rap can be turned to feminist ends. Through her unique combination of an Afrocentric image, music, and feminism, Latifah emphasizes the importance of women in African American culture, and to liberation movements, such as that taking place in South Africa. By stressing the strengths of women as mothers and as artists, Latifah connects the two as mutually empowering. Through her rap dialogue with Monie Love and through the backup chorus of a group of female rappers, Latifah produces a new interpretation of *ladies first*.

As brief as a music video is, it only allows Latifah to hint at the significance among some of the African American women she lists as forerunners. What would she have her viewers do? That remains unclear, and even the connection between South Africa and Afrocentricity leaves racism here in America unconnected to apartheid in South Africa. Nevertheless, "Ladies First" is still worth studying (and teaching) because it raises (without resolving) issues of gender and race, and it refutes the prevailing notions of certain popular culture forms as inherently misogynistic and racist.

Notes

1. Tricia Rose's important book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* was released by Wesleyan UP late in the spring of 1994, about a year after this article was submitted for publication; Rose's extensive study helps to right the gender imbalance and explore some of the gender politics that prompted me to write this essay.

2. A particularly vivid example of this phenomenon is cited by Toop: "The competitive spirit still flares among b boys (though seemingly less among the b girls). For Bobby Robinson the contradiction is clear: 'Damn it, every group I meet is number one!' " (19).

3. Rap's connection to Afrocentricity is underscored by one of its early major figures, Afrika Bambaata, who like Queen Latifah, renamed himself; his name is that of a nineteenth-century Zulu chief.

4. Angela Davis describes music's resistance: "Of all the art forms associated with Afro-American culture, music has played the greatest catalytic role in awakening social consciousness in the community. During the era of slavery, Black people were victims of a conscious strategy of cultural genocide, which proscribed the practice of virtually all African customs with the exception of music" (200-01).

5. This music video aired in 1989, well before the recent changes in South Africa's government.
6. Kim Carnes's description of creating a music video is supported by similar descriptions by Queen Latifah, Pat Benatar, and Aimee Mann. Carnes explains, "It was great. We would all get together and sit around a table all night and throw a million concepts around until one felt right" (Kim Carnes, *Women in Rock* [1986], written and directed by Stephanie Bennett).
7. Lisa A. Lewis analyzes other music videos extensively and perceptively in *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990).
8. See, for example, Keyes; Roberts.
9. Including the long and venerable tradition of the toast (see Saloy).
10. In her sense of African American women's history, Latifah repeats and reinforces the writings of Angela Davis, bell hooks, and the Combahee River Collective. The last, for example, states that "contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters" (14).
11. Davis stresses the political dimension of art in *Women, Culture, and Politics*: "Art can function as a sensitizer and catalyst, propelling people toward involvement in organized movements seeking to effect radical social change" (200). While she does mention rap briefly, she does not mention feminist rappers and in an earlier essay speaks disparagingly of MTV.

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