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TWO MINUTE BROTHER: CONTESTATION THROUGH GENDER 'RACE' AND SEXUALITY

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Is this all you got?
one minute and you go pop
yous a big disgrace
I don't mush you all in yer face
telling me lies like you a real good lover
yous a two-minute brother
I hate guys who talk a lot of shit
how they last long and got good dicks
talking shit and telling me lies . . . the best
lover?
they all two-minute brothers

Black girl kick it, Black girl just kick that shit
(repx6)
BWP in effect once again for all you females across
America.
(Bytches with Problems, 1991)

So much for supporting the male ego, doing the work of emotional management, being unable to express sexuality and being unable to challenge directly the male performance. This is not the reproduction of femininity but the music which refuses to be contained by it. These lyrics explore the fraudulent myths of male sexual performance. They come from women who have no economic and/or emotional investment in men. They don't pander to politeness; this is an all-out battle within sexual politics. They speak that which should not be spoken by women. They speak sexuality with power. They challenge both the silencing of Black women's cultural responses and the silencing of women's sexuality. They do what Audre Lorde (1984) defines as 'uses of the erotic: erotic as power'. Whilst other women are contained in the expression of power through the discourses of shame and honour, these

rappers refuse even to pander to such terms. Whilst other women try to overcome powerlessness by finding some self-worth and dignity in ascribed identities of femininity and motherhood, these rappers just take the difficult discourse of sexuality and assume their power within it. Ultimately, they refuse to be positioned and controlled through civilizing discourses.

Bytches with Problems (Bytches = Beautiful Young Thing College Honeys en' Shit, otherwise known as BWP), a New York rap group, also deal with feminist slogans such as 'No means No'.^[1] They are famous for the revenge fantasies that they put to music. Their name is a re-appropriation of the denigratory terminology used to oppress them. Just as both female and male Black slaves were able to re-appropriate the term 'nigga', BWP challenge the language that is used to define and confine them by investing it with new meanings. Hoes (American terminology for prostitute) is used to similar effect by 'Hoes wit Attitude' (HWA).

BWP draw from a long tradition in Black women's resistance, popularized in music. 'Two Minute Brother' has its legacy in blues music, which drew in part from slave songs and is described by Russell (1972) as a coded language of resistance. In the 1920s Ida Cox made a test recording of 'One Hour Mama' (it was never released) which uses humour in a similar way to BWP to mount an irreverent attack on male sexual prowess, whilst also claiming the right to a powerful, expressive, autonomous female heterosexuality:

I'm a one hour mama, so no one minute papa
Ain't the kind of man for me
Set your alarm clock papa, one hour that's proper,
Then love me like I like to be

I don't want no lame excuses,
Bout my loving been so good
That you couldn't wait no longer
Now I hope I'm understood

I can't stand no greenhorn lover
Like a rookie goin to war
With a load of big artillery
But don't know what it's for

I don't want no imitation
My requirements ain't no joke
Cause I got pure indignation
For a guy that's lost his stroke

I may want love for one hour
Then decide to make it two,
Takes an hour fore I get started
Maybe three fore I'm through

Ida Cox's lyrics are less confrontational and do not reference directly the collective experience of Black women as do BWP, yet they do refer to a similar debate within sexual

expression of a similar debate within another formation of Black power; one which uses the currently available cultural resources. Rap is now the major popular site for the expression of Black experience[2].

The central argument of this paper is that female rappers, in dialogue with male rappers, 'defiantly speak' (hooks, 1989) to the system of institutionalized and hegemonic masculinity that places all women as objects through the representational processing of masculine fear and fantasy. The female rappers also 'talk back, talk Black' (hooks, 1989) to the colonialist civilizing system that attempts to contain the expression of women's sexuality through the moralizing discourses of caring, duty and responsibility. And which also always defines Black women as 'other' and 'difference' against which distinctions can be measured. In refusing to succumb to the silencing and containment of their sexuality, the female rappers use masculine subject positions to undermine the objectification process.

Drawing from a long history of Black female musical resistance, the female rappers use masculine language, but invest it with different power relations. In so doing they create a public space in which women can express their sexuality powerfully as straightforward demand, need and desire. Rather than being coded through the safety of romance and marriage, sexuality is expressed as autonomy and independence. They move from object to subject. Rap thus provides competing moralities and feminist challenges. Just as the female rappers reworked their names from terms of abuse into terms of celebration, they are similarly re-investing the discourses that are used to control them. The political dialogue of rap music, I argue, has a value for all women.

The paper begins with an examination of rap as political dialogue, arguing that even the most extreme misogynists challenge racism. Just how anti-racist challenges are framed by gender is explored in the next section which shows how Black men construct dignity from the racist myths that were used to legitimate slavery. It demonstrates how women are defined as objects to be feared or loathed in this process. It is to this abuse and objectification that the female rappers, such as BWP, defiantly speak back. The third section explores the implications of this, arguing that in speaking back to a particular construction of Black masculinity, the female rappers address the wider regulative mechanisms of masculine power. But the female rappers don't just speak back to men, they also speak back to the civilizing system that defines Black women as the most uncivilized.

The next section illustrates that by refusing even to try to fit into this system which measures civilization against them, some of the female rappers expose the civilizing system as the means by which distinctions are maintained. Other female rappers choose to fight racism through an alternative civilizing system which parallels the dominant system in the placement of women as moral guardians. All this talking back has to be set against the contemporary economic conditions and cultural representations of Black women, which are briefly discussed in the penultimate section. The final section explores the responses of a group of young Black women whom these female rappers directly address. It suggests that the use of sexuality as an economic and cultural resource is one mechanism by which some young women are able to overcome the powerlessness they experience as part of their structural and cultural positioning.

Rap music as political dialogue

Ice Cube (infamous LA rapper, ex-member of 'Niggas with Attitude' and star of 'Boyz in the Hood') has claimed, along with Chuck D of Public Enemy (the most famous political rappers) that rap is the dialogue of Black people in America:

To white kids rap ain't nothing but a form of entertainment. For Blacks it's a strategy on how to manoeuvre through life. (Hip-Hop Connection, 36, Jan.22)

Eric B. and Rakim declare themselves committed to a ghetto constituency: people who as Rakim put it in an interview with Paul Gilroy, "turn to music because they got nothin' else".(Gilroy, 1990). Ice T argues that if it were not for rap, the voice of the 18-year old Black male would be silenced completely[3]. As one in four Black men under the age of 30 is in prison, on parole or probation, it is unlikely they would be heard at all[4]. MC Lyte became involved in rap because it was something positive for Black people. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King are regularly sampled in rap[5]. Many male rappers have become the spokespeople for Black people in general: interviews with KRS One, NWA, Public Enemy, Ice Cube and Ice T filled the style and news magazines after the LA riots. Rap is the contemporary expression of Black power as Ice T's 'Prepared to Die' demonstrates:

```
watch me flip and rip,  
on the freedom tip,  
open your mind,  
see the point of the ice pick,  
I stand tall,  
while my brothers,  
still choose to crawl,  
Black Power, it's in effect yall,  
but you don't understand,  
you're still a slave to the man,  
prepare for revolution.  
Some suckers say we're free,  
I gotta disagree,  
half my posse's in the penitentiary.  
so I'm a drop and kick the science,  
with defiance,  
because I have no alliance,  
with suckas who choose  
not to act Black,  
when they are Black.  
Get out my face with that,  
you better ease back.  
Cause Mandela did 27 hard ones,  
not in a windowed room  
but in a barred one,  
while his wife had tears in her eyes,  
the man is a hero,  
he needs a nobel prize.  
But that will never happen,  
so I'm gonna keep rappin.  
Freein my brothers' minds
```

from their entrapment.
To silence the Ice they'll probably
put a bullet in me.
But I'm prepared to die,
and Mandela's free!
(O.G. Original Gangster LP, 1991)

This rap comes not from the political rappers (KRS One) who maintain that rap is a form of 'edutainment', or from those associated with the Nation of Islam (Malcolm X's daughters form the Sisters of Shabazz rap group, and Farrakhan's speeches are incorporated into Public Enemy lyrics; Poor Righteous Teachers, Prince Akeem etc.), but from Ice T, a 'gangsta' rapper, who whilst being famous for misogyny, bragging, glamour and violence also directly addresses racism. Ice T argues that he uses the assertion of macho power to confront racism. He calls it 'threat' music which articulates the hatred generated by racism; it is used to tell the racists, especially the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) to watch out-revenge is possible[6]. This is not dissimilar to the images and practices evoked by the leaders of the Black power movement in the 1970s. Then the silencing of Black women was part of the process (Wallace, 1979); June Jordan documents how women in the Black power movement held discussion groups on how far behind their men they should walk[7]. The female rappers of the 1980s and 1990s are challenging the form of Black masculinity that wants to keep them in the same place as did Stokeley Carmichael-prone.

The form of challenge that anti-racism takes must inevitably be gendered because responses to racism are framed by the gender positions in which we are located. The next section explores how, in the construction of themselves as male, Black male rappers' use of cultural capital usually positions them against the interests of Black women.

Black masculinities and Black male sexuality

Black masculinities have never had the institutionalization of their gender in the same way as white masculinities[8]. The institutional positions that uphold and legitimate particular forms of white masculinities (such as the labour market, education and other areas of social policy) have not often been available to Black men in the same way. Moreover, whilst white masculinities are normalized, Black masculinities are pathologized. The same institutions (such as the education system and other government institutions) operate the normalization/pathologizing discourses in order to categorize and allocate Black and white masculinities. So when we receive the media image of pathologized Black men, it feeds into all the other discursive categorizations that we have already.

If, as Bob Connell (1989) argues, we have a hegemonic structure in which competing masculinities fight for the right to legitimate their power, Black men would already be disadvantaged by the structural inequalities in employment and education that blocked their access to the economic front. Michelle Wallace (1979) shows how the economic castration of Black men went hand-in-hand with their physical castration through lynching. As such, Black men have not been able to consolidate their gendered power through economic control (or the ideological myths that go with it) such as the notions of 'family wage' and 'breadwinner'.

Alongside economic castration (which meant that Black masculinities could never compete on the same territory as white masculinities) were the myths of colonialism and slavery that were produced to justify the abuse of slaves and to legitimate slavery as a system. Peter Fryer (1984) demonstrates how Black people were defined: through recourse to 'rational' theories of evolution; as atavistic; as belonging to a previous stage of evolution that was further away from 'civilization' than the white 'race'. Through pseudo-scientific mythology, Black people were labelled as more animalistic, more primitive and, accordingly, more sexual. Davybean (1991) defines colonialism as an erotic project in which the myths of animal and dangerous sexuality are commodities that are traded by whites. Slaves did not have the power to challenge these myths and so were silenced, both economically and culturally. Their resistance, however, as documented by Genovese (1972), demonstrates that they were able to develop coping strategies to create dignity out of oppression. Music was a crucial part of this process.

One by-product of the mythical legitimization of Black people as uncivilized and animalistic was the increasing fear of, and fascination with, the sexuality of Black men. Powerful white male colonialists created a fear for themselves within the framework of competitive masculinities. Animalistic sexuality may have been a means to justify the degradation of the Black man, but it also produced anxieties about white male physicality and sexual performance. If performance is one of the signifying features of all masculinities, then, although the economic performance of the white man was to some extent assured, his sexual performance was not. The colonialist had created a myth that assured his out-performance.

It is this legacy of competition between male sexual performances that continues today, making women the receivers of (and critics of) that competition. Michelle Wallace (1979) illustrates how Black men were able to use the myths that legitimate their oppression as a form of resistance against racism. If we look at the cultural capital that Black men have, it should not be surprising that they emphasize their sexuality. They use it to resist oppression, to construct dignity and self-esteem. And, as popular music has shown, through the fear and fascination of the white audience/consumers, racist myths could very easily be converted into displays of Black male power and control. Displays of glamour and macho-threat can be packaged and commodified, to be sold to a voyeuristic white market: NWA, Ice T and Public Enemy have majority white male audiences. This sexual objectification of Black men, interwoven with displays of aggression, however, produces an active and powerful object, the control of which is not always certain^[9].

Black men were, through their positioning within general discursive masculinity, able to use some of the gendered power relationships that had already been established by powerful white men as a cultural resource. This enabled control over both Black and white women. The objectification, use and abuse of women was a white male fantasy, established long before slavery. The category 'woman' has long existed as a symptom of male fantasy (Lacan, 1977), taking particular forms depending on the historical conditions and the technological means of representation. Lacan argues that, under patriarchy, men (obviously only those who have power and are able to put their ideas into distribution and circulation) create as their object not women as they really are, but fantasies of what men both desire and fear in the Other. Walkerdine (1989) argues that women, then, become the repositories of such fantasies. The

majority of rap videos that reference women often produce fantasy images of numerous beautiful women draping themselves around, and unconditionally desiring, the male rappers (Nemesis' 'I Want Your Sex' is a glaringly obvious example, widely distributed on the Rap City video.)

But women can see through these mythical displays: the history of female Black music charts a long course of disparagement of displays of male performance (not dissimilar to that of white working class women). Historically, because of the systems of slavery and colonialism which, enforced separation, Black women have not been able to rely on Black men for economic support. The Black Power movement, as Michelle Wallace (1979) points out, only served to increase the divisions between Black women and men:

Black macho allowed for only the most primitive notion of women-women as possessions, women as spoils of war, leaving black women with no resale value. As a possession the black woman was a symbol of defeat, and therefore of little use to the revolution except as the performer of drudgery. (Wallace, 1979, p. 158)

The high unemployment of Black men also makes them a less economically dependable prospect[10]. Wallace (1979) argues, however, that the number of fatherless Black households did not become significantly large until Black people began to be more successful economically in American society. She quotes Jacqueline Jackson, who shows that the number of fatherless families is directly related to the Black sex-ratio.

Women are placed in a difficult position. Whilst they are the site for the battleground of competing masculinities and the repositories of fantasy definitions of femininity and passivity, they are also the ultimate judges of male performance. This is one way in which women are able to have cultural power over men; they can make comparisons[11]. Women have the personal power to expose mythical masculine displays of power as fraudulent, although rarely do they have the representational space or the power to put their exposes into public circulation. They are thus to be feared. If women can be discredited, they need not be taken seriously; they will no longer constitute a threat.

Music is just one form in which discreditation occurs: the Geto Boys made lots of money by selling virulent hatred, expressed through slasher fantasies, to both white and Black men[12]; NWA's 'To kill a hooker' takes great delight in the destruction of dangerous women; Ice T's track 'Some of you Niggas is Bitches too' is very similar to Paul Willis's (1977) English working class 'Lads' comments about girls being the lowest form of life. The magazine Hip Hop Connection recognizes that misogyny is the easiest way to sell records to the largest audience[13]. Ice T has been able to capitalize on misogyny whilst also distancing himself from it through the use of parody[14]. He argues that the following lyrics are just for 'fun':

```
Evil E was out cooling with a freak (woman) one night  
Fucked the bitch with a flashlight  
Rolled her over to change the connection  
Bitch's ugly face could spoil his erection
```

Certain forms of Black and white masculinity have many similarities. However, unlike white male music, within rap there is a whole section publicly and directly opposed to rap misogyny (e.g., all the female rappers; Poor Righteous Teachers; Arrested Development).

It is not only fear of judgement and performance exposure by women that worries men. If men are heterosexual, their desire may mean that women have the power to make them lose control in a culture in which men are motivated to resist their own feelings of vulnerability (Hollway, 1984). This is demonstrated in an interview with Ice Cube (an LA rapper, now associated with the Nation of Islam, who articulates the street experiences of gangsta life as a response to institutional racism, but who is also notoriously misogynist). Tricia Rose (1990) points to the profound fear of female sexuality:

Interviewer: Do you think rap is hostile towards women?

Ice Cube: The whole damn world is hostile towards women.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that?

Ice Cube: I mean the power of sex is more powerful than the motherfuckers in Saudi Arabia. A girl that you want to get with can make you do damn near anything if she knows how to do her shit right.

The fulfilment of male heterosexual desire is significantly checked by women's capacity for sexual rejection and/ or manipulation of men. The fear of women's judgement and fear of exposing male vulnerabilities is articulated by many male rappers: EPMD warn other men about 'Goldiggers', i.e., women who are going to trap them into responsibility and commitment by becoming pregnant; Bell Biv Divo's 'Poison' warns men not to be taken in by sexy women who might exploit male sexual weaknesses. And the Fresh Prince of Bell-Air warns other men (in a style that confuses parody with fantasy) that 'Girls are Nothing But Trouble'. The pornographic images that accompany these warnings, Williams (1990) argues, are male confessions of insecurity which create the desire for knowledge and control. Segal (1992) argues that men are least sure of their power over women, and most fearful of women's self-sufficiency and autonomy. She quotes Soble (1986) who argues that: "Pornography is not a means for men to achieve power over women, but proof that men lack power over women." (Soble, 1986, p. 73).

Whilst challenging racism, Black male rap repeats the general masculine anxieties, fears and discomfort about women alongside the attempt to control them. This fear of women, Hope Scott (1992) notes, was also articulated through the literature of the Black power movement of the 1960s and 70s[15]. Misogynist representations may be one way in which Black men can make their displays of power seem real. Unfortunately, this continues to place Black women in positions of subordination to them. So, continuing in a long tradition, they fight back. This time rap is the form they use.

Female rappers talk Black, talk back

Female rappers do a double take on the defiant speech of 'talking back, talking Black'. If rap is the response to the racist 'call' of white society, then female rappers not only speak to this, but also to the sexist 'call' within the male response. Often this takes a direct form: Yo Yo talks back to Ice Cube, berating him for his sexism[16]; HWA's (Hoes Wit Attitude) 'Eat This' is their raunchy rebuttal to NWA's (Niggas Wit Attitude) 'Don't Bite', Easy E. (NWA) is frequently the target of their jokes; Dina X's 'Casting Couch' is a direct commentary on the sexist attitudes of the rap producers in LA; TCL produced a stunning riposte 'If you wanna sex me up' to Color Me Badd's popular 'I wanna sex you up'. In fact, one characteristic that pervades these records is the irony, parody and humour upon which they draw. Unlike most of the male rappers these women are less inclined to take themselves that seriously. It is in this struggle between male attempts to define women as objects and female attempts to resist or subvert these definitions that feminist challenges are articulated.

Davis (1990) and hooks (1989) argue that Black women's musical legacy is a way to understand history and contemporary Black women's consciousness. Queen Latifah's 'All Hail the Queen', rapped with Monie Love (her European sister), retells Black women's contribution to history. In an interview with Tricia Rose (1990) she maintains:

I wanted to show the strength of Black women in history. Strong Black women.... I wanted to show what we've done. We've done a lot; it's just that people don't know it. (Rose, 1990, p. 12)

The accompanying video to this track uses images of Angela Davis, Winnie Mandela and Sojourner Truth, with footage of African women running with sticks raised above their heads towards armed oppressors. She also includes other female rappers in the video.

Practically every female rapper has written and produced songs about autonomy and independence: Roxanne Shante's 15-year old debut 'Independent Woman' is a classic of its time. which she describes as "a call to home girls to find their own direction without male interference"[17]. Sandy Denton (Pepa of Salt 'n' Pepa) talks about their single 'Independence':

To me it's about independence for a women, not being dependent on a man for the financial stability. It's like 'go for your own, do your own'. It's just a strong song.[18]

Nikki D, Sweet Tee, Wee Papa Girl Rappers, Nefateri, Roxanne Shante, Shazzy, MC Lyte, TLC, Monie Love, Queen Latifah, BWP, HWA etc. all articulate disappointments and vulnerabilities with heterosexuality[19]. Many suggest they are better off by themselves. They also refer to the importance of relationships with other women; 'sisters' are a frequent point of reference. BWP directly address young Black women (through anthems dispersed in the music):

BWP in effect once again for all you females cross America, Black girl kick it, Black girls

just kick that shit (repetition x 6). (Two Minute Brother)

Or as Michelle of BWP says in an interview:

We learn to spend so much time-not to mention money-trying to please men.... And they just come by and are like, that's nice. Next. And then you spend days wondering, 'Was it my hair? Am I getting fat? But why? So they can walk all over you again? Fuck 'em. I don't need them.'[\[20\]](#)

Issues such as living on welfare as a single mother, homelessness, drugs and HIV are frequently addressed (as in MC Lyte's 'Eyes are the Soul' on the Like You Know album). Dee Dee Roper (Spinderella, of Salt 'n' Pepa) says of the massively popular single 'Let's Talk About Sex', 'it's like protect yourself against AIDS, use condoms'.

For many female rappers, their lyrics suggest that investments (both financial and emotional) in men have not paid off. Numerous female rappers refer to the fraudulent nature of masculinity; men are not to be taken seriously but to be laughed at. This also has quite a long history in blues music. For instance, Esther Phillips deals with what she considers to be the three worst addictions that capitalist social relations have encouraged in Black women: surrender to men, religion and hard drugs (Russell, 1982). In one group of songs, she announces that she, too, is fed up with men and the terms of heterosexual relationships as they exist in 1970s American society. In 'Black-Eyed Blues' Esther blends feminism with nationalism to make a strong statement of personal independence: 'I'm just gonna be me' and 'I can do bad by myself' are recurring themes. Irma Thomas recorded a world-weary, man-weary rap in 1973 'Coming from Behind' which articulated men's incapacity to love and charted men's sexual inferiority (Toop, 1984, p. 87). Ma Rainey was able to celebrate the power of lesbian sexuality in the blues song 'Prove it on me Blues'. There is a very long Black female tradition of autonomy (Mirza, 1992) which involves criticism of male behaviour and male performance (not dissimilar to that of white working class women). No wonder Ice Cube etc. are worried.

They are also probably worried by the fact that for some female rappers, such as HWA and BWP, 'dissing' other women has now been superseded by collective Black sisterhood. As Kim from HWA states in response to Salt 'n' Pepa's 'I'll take your man': "We'd never take your man. When one woman has a tough time, we all do."[\[21\]](#)

Thankfully, there appears to be a movement towards female collectivity from the original competitive form of boasting and toasting, a form developed from the early competitive masculine rap[\[22\]](#). Statements of collectivity do also stretch to men: LA Star, Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Cookie Crew, Harmony, Yo-Yo etc. all have close connections with male rappers; all see the struggle against racism uniting them. As Gaines (1988) notes, Afro-American women have historically formulated identity and political allegiance, in terms of 'race' rather than gender or class. This should not be surprising as Stack (1990) found all the African-Americans that she interviewed acutely aware of racism and economic injustice. By the age of 13 women were that racist and sexual harassment were part of the work experience.

Many female rappers have also been involved in direct political action: Michelle out of BWP has been involved in pro-choice demonstrations; Sister Souljah, MC Lyte, Queen Latifah and Monie Love have been involved in anti-racist campaigns; MC Lyte was recently co-commentator at the Democratic convention in New York (1992) and the Rap singer-writer Yo-Yo has formed the Intelligent Black Women's Coalition, referring to her ideal state as the 'Sisterland'.

Most express a specific commitment towards challenging oppression, but use different musical forms (such as the political lecturing rap of Sister Souljah against the fun-pop stance of Salt 'n' Pepa). Sandy Denton (Pepa) maintains: "Give 'em a little bit of knowledge, lessons on Black awareness, the cultural things and also give 'em a good time. [23]

BWP bought the television rights to the Rodney King beating (before the unbelievable verdicts that sparked the LA riots were passed). They wanted to use them in a pop video to give a global airing to what was actually happening to Black people in the USA. As it happened, the jury did this job for them.

In this sense the female rappers' responses are a product, not only of the economic conditions that engender racism, but also of the wider system of heterosexuality and the social discourses that position all women in relation to men. The Black female rappers don't just talk back to Black misogynist rappers, they talk back to the colonialist male history by which the Black man was positioned[24]. They speak against the power of white men who try to fit femininity to its fantasies. They speak against the objectification of women's bodies. They speak against the silencing of women's sexuality. They speak against the misogyny that is a ubiquitous part of everyday life for most women. In this way they can be seen to be speaking for all women. Talking back actually produces a social reality, rather than reproducing the given power relationships; it is part of the dialogic process of naming, claiming and recontextualizing that provides us with different meanings for the subject positions that we occupy.[25]

Therefore, the defiant speech of the female rappers, their talking back, needs to be seen not just as a response to a particular Black masculinity, but also as a response to the conditions of racism that enable Black men to speak in misogynist ways to Black women. The female rappers are filling a social void identified by numerous Black writers who identify the silencing of Black cultural responses (Fanon, 1971; hooks, 1989; Spillers, 1984), in particular those of Black women. Wallace (1992) notes the structural silencing of women of colour within the sphere of production of knowledge worldwide; Angela Davis (1990) maintains that the marginal representation of Black women in the documentation of African-American cultural developments does not reflect women's participation adequately. Female rappers are filling this silence with music.

Talking back to civilization

Some female rappers also talk back to the 'civilizing system' with its moralizing discourses of femininity, caring, reproduction and hygiene, that locates them doubly as polluting and dangerous whilst also allocating to them duties, obligations and responsibilities for the moral

training of Black people in general[26]. The term civilization has always been loaded with racist connotations. Bourdieu (1986) argues that civilization is an ideological category that operates to maintain and legitimate social distinctions and the allocation of power in the name of 'taste'. In this process issues of access to knowledge and cultural capital are obfuscated:

The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile-in a word, natural, enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures for ever closed to the profane. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 7)

Western systems of social order are marked by distinctions (of power and economic and cultural resources), coded through distance to and from 'civilization'. Civilization is constructed against otherness, of Blackness as otherness, and measured by the distance from the explicitly sexual. The civilizing system can hold no worth to Black women, for as Lola Young (1990) notes, Blackness itself connotes 'difference'; when the subject is also a Black woman the difference is reinforced. Gilman (1992) notes how black female sexuality became equated with prostitution in the 19th century. This equation established a legacy in antithesis to notions of white civilization and also to white femininity. Femininity came to be defined against the sexual (Ware, 1992). Some Black female rappers make a point of distancing themselves from any civilizing system. They refuse to succumb to the civilizing discourses of femininity that contain and silence women's sexuality, labelling it and condemning it as vulgar. Racism, Angela Davis (1982) argues, has always drawn strength from its ability to encourage sexual coercion. The female rappers celebrate the power, of their sexuality and refuse to be morally evaluated and censured. They refuse to be civilized.

In this sense they are dangerous. They embody a threat to moral and social order and they encompass a threat to the forms of masculinity that would wish to control them. Mercer and Julien (1988) note how definitions of sexuality are deeply linked to racism because

sex is regarded as that thing which par excellence is a threat to the moral order of Western civilisation. Hence one is civilised at the expense of sexuality, and sexual at the expense of civilisation. Moral order, they argue, has always been set against the 'chaos' of sexual abandon, which constitutes a threat to the social order. (Mercer Julien, 1988, p. 108)

In order to construct such a threat, the Black female rappers have to use and subvert the language of masculine power; the language of objectification and conquest, for instance:

```
Is this all I get?  
Is this supposed to be good dick  
Damn  
You said you was a good lover  
But yous a two minute brother  
Nigga I ain't even bust a sweat  
Not to mention I ain't came yet  
I was about to be cool for what with it rocking  
But his shit shrivelled up like a Vienna sausage  
Now I'm hot and got an attitude  
It's time for dinner and I'm serving seafood
```

On you knees motherfucka, let your tongue stroke
Put it on that bit till it hits my throat
('Two Minute Brother' , 1991)

By removing themselves from the feminine subject position of passive receivers of male prowess and performance, they take up places within a masculine subject position and invest the male sexual discourse with new meanings. By using what Audre Lorde defines as the 'master's tools', i.e. masculine language (and what language is not?), the female rappers deny the power of the original language to position them as its objects. They use all the discursive resources available to them to create a discursive shift by disempowering the male meaning. This shows that these young women are able to use their knowledge of masculinity to subvert the regulative mechanisms inherent within it, effectively creating a female power/knowledge position based on their ability to subvert masculinity. For instance, they draw on and subvert the Black musical traditions of slackness, rudeness, toasting and boasting[27] by using the strategies of the trickster,

who inverts the universe of the master because the master fails to understand the words on the tongues of the oppressed can become tools that initiate a reversal of roles and subversion of the system which he (the master) has so carefully crafted. (Hope-Scott, 1992, p. 305)

The female rappers also assert control over their own sexuality by shifting from a receptive position to a demanding position. Rather than defining female sexuality as 'lack', 'invisible', 'subjective annihilation', 'objectification' or by 'eroticizing their own degradation' (as some feminist theorists would have it), they are defining themselves by defiantly speaking their own sexuality. BWP use explicit sexual language to demand the fulfilment of their sexual desire in a straightforward statement of want.

It would be very difficult to think that any men could have control over them; they are more of a male nightmare than a male fantasy. This demand discourse does not sit neatly alongside the feminine and maternal discourses of caring, duty, obligation and responsibility. The only responsibility that BWP will take is for themselves against HIV and pregnancy ('Jimmy muss' wear a raincoat'). This is quite different from the young white working class women that I studied (Skeggs, 1991) who, in a similar way, had a great deal of knowledge about masculinity and were able to undermine and challenge male power, yet were unable to express their own sexuality. Because of their investments in the duty and responsibility discourses of caring, they were unable to place themselves into a demand discourse. They were condemnatory of those who could.

BWP refuse to take emotional responsibility for the management of the male ego and relationships. In so doing, Carby (1986) argues, they are challenging the racist process that displaces female desire onto female duty:

Black female sexuality was frequently displaced onto the terrain of the political responsibility of the Black woman. The displacement of female desire onto female duty enabled the negotiation of racist constructions of Black female sexuality but denied ... sensuality and in this denial lies the class character of its cultural politics. (Carby, 1986, p. 12)

BWP etc. would never gain the independence and autonomy they want by trying to fit into those notions of duty and caring which sublimate the expression of sexual desire. They refuse to see their sexuality as a duty. Notions of duty and caring are also part of the ideological package of civilization from which, by virtue of their black and working class positioning, they would always be distanced. Statements of sexual desire framed as demand do not fit into the romantic framework of relationships. In fact, most female rappers dismiss romance as a scam. Nikki D maintains that it is a male conspiracy to trick women into giving up their bodies to false promises.

Some theorists argue that, when women speak of sexuality using sexually explicit language, they are just colluding in the male pornographic position. In fact, for Black and white working class women, sexuality is one of the few cultural resources that they can use for the construction of embodied self-worth. Speaking of sexuality is not a privilege, as some theorists have suggested, but a means of collapsing the dichotomy between public and private spheres and exposing the power relationships that control women. Hurtado (1989) argues that the public/private dichotomy is relevant only for the white middle class because, historically, the (American) state has intervened constantly in the private lives and domestic arrangements of the working class. The political consciousness of women of colour, she argues, stems from an awareness that the public is personally political.

Speaking of sexuality directly exposes the distinctions that exist between women. Only those who are economically safe (with enough cultural investments to enable them not to address sexuality) can ignore it. The women who are continually defined as the embodiment of sexuality (e.g. Black and working class women), whether they want to be or not, have to find a way to deal with this continual categorization. Directly confronting categorization may be one way, for sexuality is a component of subjective construction. To deny or to denigrate it leads to wilful ignorance of a class-defined cultural and economic resource. As Nikki D says: Gotta up the Ante for the Panties. Because women have been exploited through their sexuality this does not necessarily mean that they cannot experience it as something positive and controllable. The fact that Black and working class women's sexuality has been labelled, historically, as dangerous and threatening only highlights the on-going hegemonic attempt to contain its power.

These Black female rappers are well aware that, in a racist and sexist society divided by class, sexual relationships are underpinned by power, control and objectification. They want to have power and control over their own sexual relationships, as did the blues singers who used it to construct themselves as sexual subjects:

The 'Classic Blues' of the 20s and 30s is a discourse that articulates a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality ... which also tries to reclaim women's bodies as the sexual and sensuous objects of women's song. (p. 12)

Angela Davis (1982) identifies the difficulty for Black women of this recuperation process from object to subject because enslavement relegated Black women's sexuality to the market place of the flesh. The blues singers, Spillers (1989) argues, attempted to do this by teaching

Black women much that is positive about their sexuality. Bessie Smith, for instance:

With her Black women in American culture could no longer just be regarded as sexual objects. She made us sexual subjects, the first step in taking control. She transformed our collective shame at being rape victims, treated like dogs, or worse, the meat dogs eat by emphasising the value of our allure. In so doing she humanised sexuality for Black women. The importance of this is often lost. (Russell, 1982, p. 131)

BWP are continuing this recuperative process. They are challenging the dominant representations of Black women in music, such as those identified by Steward and Garratt (1984) who reveal the long tradition of exoticizing and taming the Black woman singer, of coding her as animalistic. They refer to Tina Turner's 1984 tour poster which had her rushing towards the camera, in a skirt made from animal fur, with tails hanging from her waist. The caption reads: 'Captured live'. Grace Jones was similarly portrayed on all-fours, caged and snarling at the viewer. In opposition to this, the female rappers represent themselves as either everyday home girls (BWP, Salt 'n' Pepa, Nikki D, LA Star, Shazzy, MC Lyte, Monie Love, Cookie Crew etc.) or African Queens (Queen Latifah, Isis, Harmony etc.). In doing so they assert a sexuality that is not framed by the traditional racist mythology.

The assertion of sexuality is also constructed with irreverence and humour. These female rappers are young women enjoying themselves, taking pleasure from their inability to be controlled; and pleasure from the disturbance they cause. Even Russell Simmons (exceedingly powerful Black man, chair of DefJam records, manager of Public Enemy and chair of Rush Associated Labels, which finally released the BWP album *The Bytches*) refused to release the album unless a line was deleted from 'Two Minute Brother'.

Female rappers make a distinction between overtly expressing sexuality and being available for sexual usage. This equation between usage and expression has been particularly effective in silencing the expression of women's sexuality (Lees, 1986). All the female rappers make it abundantly clear that they are not available for use; their expression of sexuality, and how and when they choose to use it, is solely a matter for themselves. In 'Shake Your Thang' Salt 'n' Pepa force a wedge between overt female sexual expression and the presumption that such expressions are intended to attract men.

In order to be seen as civilized, distance has to be drawn from the sexual but also from the popular and the artificial. Ironically, Queen Latifah (located in the popular music industry, and even using samples from Madonna on her last album) disassociates herself from the frivolity of pop music. She wants her music to be seen as serious. Many rappers draw distinctions between their authenticity and the more obviously pop music of MC Hammer. The mapping onto the division of serious/trivial by those with political claims has a long history; Wallace (1979) documents how the militants of Harlem had no patience with the singing and dancing of the Nationalists. Now the Nationalists want to impose distinctions within popular music itself[28]. The dichotomy serious/trivial is over-layered by other dichotomies:

serious/trivial

authentic/commodified
natural/artificial

and as Hebdige (1988) has shown: masculine/feminine. Rose (1990) cites Nelson George, a music critic, who claims that the popularizing of rap will lead to its 'cultural emasculation'. To claim serious intent and authenticity the artificial, vulgar and frivolous must be dismissed. 'Shakilya' by the Poor Righteous Teachers provides an example:

Shakilya's not attracted to material things
She's the perfect presentation of a wise Black queen
With no stupid chains on her neck
She's what a woman should be
Silly suckers still sweat but
She's devoted to me
(1990, of the album Holy Intellect, Profile Records)

BWP, Salt 'n' Pepa etc. do not want to be judged by these false dichotomies (especially men telling them what they should be), which only serve to maintain distinctions. They embrace the popular and, by doing so, insert social class as a feature of distinction. They recognize that their positioning in the popular locates them in an anti-pretentious, anti-intellectual and irreverent medium; to claim authenticity is to misunderstand the operations of the; popular. It is also racist because it reproduces the association of Blackness with nature and authenticity (Gilroy, 1987). (Authenticity is itself commodified. It is just packaged differently, in a distinctive rather than popular form.) By not condemning, but rather using, the popular, Salt 'n' Pepa aim to speak to the largest female market possible. They argue that a form of entertainment has to be used which can reach as wide an audience as possible, in a style which will speak to the largest audience possible. A belief in authenticity restricts the audience that could be addressed (what would be the point of speaking to white people?). It limits the forms that could be used to articulate Black experience. It also assumes a pure, singular, homogeneous Black expression[29]. Thankfully, Reid (1991) notes how, in Britain, there has been a shift in Black cultural politics in the name of diversity. Popular music can never be authentic because it draws upon a bricolage of sounds from varying different sources, histories and associations. It was postmodern long before the term was invented.

West (1992) argues that rap is a cultural form of moral guidance. For BWP and others, rap is a challenge to the traditional moral discourses that contain women. For the female rappers associated with the Nation of Islam, an alternative civilizing system is established which proscribes a traditional position for women: as reproducers and upholders of the Black Nation, heterosexual and supportive of men. In this sense, rap can be seen as the site for competing moralities. The Poor Righteous Teacher's track 'Shakilya' illustrates the not-so alternative civilizing system. It praises the strength and moral rectitude of the Black women and allocates her a position of sanctity-all of this within a debate concerned with which man (good or bad) has access to her:

You're no hooker, no slut, you're no bitch and she listens
You're the mother of civilisation
I hate them snakes who disrespect you
They often disrespect you when they cannot sex you

Shakilya's civilised and she's despised to drudge herself
Shakilya's the Black woman and she loves me like to death
...
She's mine, mine, mine,
Wake up the Black Queen's mine
(1991, 12" mix, Profile Records)

This track creates distance from the sexual by condemning those women who are directly associated with it, asserts the civilizing duty of women, and claims the power of ownership. It is a message of discipline and righteousness for Black women very similar to that of male-dominated Western capitalist-Christian societies. This may be because early Black nationalism in the States from the mid- to the late 19th century was 'absolutist, civilizationist, elitist and based on Christian humanism.'^[30] Black nationalist men supported the development of women's educational opportunities because they believed it would be a means of bettering civilization (Scott, 1992). Black women, Hope-Scott (1992) argues, played an important and leading role, historically, in the Black nationalist struggle, but this was always dependent on their acceptance of the 'alternative' moral order. Interestingly, Queen Latifah locates herself within this alternative civilizing system, taking care to distance herself from the vulgarity of BWP:

I like some of what BWP does. That one song 'Coming Back Strapped' where some guy is beating up this woman and she comes back with a gun and blows him away ... I like that . . . I tend towards more subtle, let's talk it out, way of doing things, but sometimes direct action-abrupt and nasty-that's the best way. BWP are just saying 'stand up for yourself and don't be bullied by any man'. I just have some problems on the vulgar way they say certain things. (Hip-Hop Connection, Feb 1992, p. 29)

Abrahams (1976) argues that Black women carry responsibility in their language and that maintaining respectability involves monitoring others' presentational techniques. So the choice for female rappers is either the acceptance of an alternative civilizing system, or the complete rejection of any moralizing discourses used to contain women and the expression of their sexuality.

Talking back against

The female rappers speak in a way that is unlikely to be associated with feminism. Firstly, this is because the use of pop music (rap is just one variety) is associated with entertainment and with the frivolous. Secondly, as Ngcobo (1988) notes, only a few Black women are feminists in the sense understood by white middle-class women. Numerous Black writers have documented the way in which feminism is seen by Black women as a white ideology and practice that is anti-men in a way that is incompatible with the Black struggle against racism (Amos & Parmar, 1984; Bryan et. al, 1985; Spillers, 1984; hooks, 1989; Joseph & Lewis, 1981). In the interviews with Tricia Rose, (1990) Queen Latifah, MC Lyte and Salt were all reluctant to define themselves as feminist, although they admitted to supporting feminist political struggles and ideals. The rappers are speaking their feminism to Black men as well as women, encouraging dialogue that challenges sexism. Rose (1990) suggests that the only way to make links between different feminisms is as follows:

we should be less concerned with producing theoretically referential feminist theories and more concerned with linking these theories to practices, thereby creating new concrete ways to interpret feminist activity. This will involve broadening the scope of investigations in our search for Black women's voices. (Rose, 1990, p. 128) .

Barbara Christian (1987) argues that people of colour have always theorized, often in narrative forms, riddles and proverbs, and through play with language. Rap is just one example of that theorizing., She argues that the Black women she grew up with continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language, that unmasked the power relations of the world.

The talking back to the civilizing structures of control, difference and distinction; to masculinity (to racism, to sexism) needs to be set against the dominant representations of Black women as animalistic, dutiful servants and comforting or restraining mothers (Bobo & Seiter, 1991), and against the cultural space that is given to Black women in the current political and economic climate. In the last 10 years, under the influence of Reaganomics and Thatcherism, there has been an increasing feminization (see Lister, 1987) and racialization of poverty (32.7% of the 12% Black population of the United States now live below the official poverty line; for those who live in cities there has been a 49% increase in African-American poverty; the poverty gap between Black and white families has grown since 1970, with Black families earning on average about 60% of what white families earn[31]. In Britain, Wilson (1987) argues, Black women have been hit hardest by Thatcherism. This also needs to be seen alongside the increasing number of racist attacks, and the increasing legitimization of racism (Barker, 1981).

It also needs to be set against what Fine (1988) defines as the "missing discourse of desire". She charts the way in which women learn to suppress any articulations of sexual desire; how the language we have for articulations of desire is inadequate, leading to the promotion of female sexual victimization rather than autonomous expression; and how we learn to frame sexual expression through institutionalized heterosexuality (e.g., romance and marriage). Thompson (1990b) suggests that it is rare for young women to embark on sexual encounters feeling in possession of their sexuality. Rather they feel that sex is something that is done to them. The female rappers directly challenge this suppression of female sexuality.

The music industry, famous for its sexism and racism, has had to provided a space for these feminist challenges. In order to market what is happening 'on the street' back to those 'on the street' and in the suburbs, it must take account of what is happening there.

The anger, rage and frustration expressed through violence, glamour and sexuality is marketable to a white audience who can take voyeuristic delight in it, whilst remaining safe. Rap is also marketable for other reasons as Gilroy (1990) argues:

Black expressive culture has decisively shaped youth culture, pop culture and the culture of city life in Britain's metropolitan centres. The white working-class has danced for forty eroticism, and gender conflict enjoy within black folk culture has given them a wider constituency. Their Rabelaisian power to carnivalise and disperse the dominant order through

an intimate yet public discourse on sexuality and the body has drawn many outsiders into a sense and complex network of black cultural symbols. (p.273)

Gilroy (1987) argues that it is emotional realism and the candid, expressive voicing of sexual desire that accounts for the immense popularity of Black music amongst whites in Western societies.

Rap is one area of the music industry where women hold power: Sylvia Robinson of Sugarhill was instrumental in getting the original Rapper's Delight into circulation in 1979; Monica Lynch is president of Tommy Boy Records, the core of Time Warner's rap industry; Carmen Ashurst Watson is president of Def Jam; Ann Carlyle is senior vice-president of Jive; Pat Chardonnay runs Priority Records. Virgin Records benefit from Black women such as Cledrah White who have made it into the industry through Black radio stations. Debi Fee edits the American Rap magazine Yo! which has international distribution and Lady B, a Philadelphia DJ who was the first recorded rapper in 1978, is founder and Editor-in-Chief of Word Up!, a tabloid devoted to Hip-Hop.

Queen Latifah, one of the most popular rap artists, is setting up her own record label with another female rapper, Sha-Kim. Female rap sales are small in comparison to Male rap, but not insignificant: MC Lyte's 1988 Paper Thin sold over 125,000 copies in the first six months and Salt 'n' Pepa's first single 'Expressions' went gold in the first week and stayed in the number one position on Billboard's Rap Chart for over two months (Rose, 1990). All this needs to be set against the dominant objectification of women (both Black and white) in popular culture in general and in the mainstream music industry in particular.

Talking back is specifically related to the conditions of its production and consumption; to the circulation of, and relation to, other images; and to the location of the reader. BWP, for instance, offer a blend of fantasy (usually revenge and/or sexual) in direct opposition to the many discourses that are used to contain the expression of women's sexuality. They resist the dominant images of women as victim. But responses to BWP will be dependent upon the social location of the audience: they can be read as hilarious; ideal revenge; crude, vulgar and pornographic; realistic and ambivalent. BWP etc. both represent and speak to the experience of the group of young Black women interviewed by Sharon Thompson (1990a), who pride themselves on their ability to use and abuse men in their search for autonomy, fun and pleasure.

Speaking to:

Thompson (1990a) analysed narratives of sex, romance and pregnancy gathered from interviews with over 400 African-American teenage girls. She documents a small group whose everyday activities sound remarkably similar to the lyrical expressions of Black female rappers. This group define themselves as part of the long herstory of Black tricksters. They

. . . multiply contradictions, play all sides of paradox, pursue probabilities and pleasures to the limit and make a joke out of duality. Although their existence is shot through with

marginality, they downplay it as they do with all vulnerability . . . they brag that they are difficult to pin down; moody; nasty; slick ... they transform weakness into strength. (Thompson, 1990a, p. 271)

Thompson argues that explicit sexual intentionality distinguishes this group of narrators: they excel in being 'nasty' and cold, being beyond romance, able to take or leave it. They describe their sexual appetites as insatiable. Proposing that this insatiability drives them to all types of sex, they see themselves as dangerous, proclaiming their sexual appetites and practices as potentially deadly weapons[32]. They are 'uncivilized' and ungovernable. Overall, they portray themselves as invulnerable. They are strong young women who take their pleasure and defend their bodies and their rights. In this sense their daily practices actually correspond to the lyrical representations of BWP and HWA and, like the lyrics of the female rappers, their lives are what Thompson (1990a) describes as "drastic entertainments". Hence, they are not representative of all young Black women; rather, they are located within specific socioeconomic circumstances, informed by Black history and cultural capital, which they use to their advantage. Different use of cultural capital is made by the young Black women interviewed by Ladner (1972), Mac an Ghail (1988), Fuller (1980), Riley (1981) and Mirza (1992) who make different use of their restricted access to economic and cultural resources.

Conclusion

The Black female rappers demonstrate that responses to racism are gendered and classed. They draw on the long history of Black female musical resistance, and on their current cultural resources to talk back to racism creatively. In so doing they theorize, in their own terms, their positioning as Black women in heterosexual, colonialist-capitalist relations. They also break the silencing imposed on the expression of female sexuality by its location in moralizing discourses. They demonstrate that sexuality is used as a cultural and economic resource as well as being an institutional discourse (heterosexuality) and practice. Thus, access to the discursive subject positions of the civilizing systems (such as femininity and morality) are related to locations in the social formation. Cultural capital is always gendered, raced and classed.

The female rappers defiantly talk back to a dominant civilizing system of distinctions which always positions them as 'other', as different and as For as Venn (1992) notes, representations of otherness are not just textual, they have been firmly anchored in the solid grounds of slavery, colonialism and capitalist practices. The female rappers are not able to challenge their structural positioning, but can subvert relations of domination and subordination by using the same language that has been employed to condemn and objectify them and by investing it with new meanings.

Bhabha 1983 emphasizes the basic ambivalence at the heart of colonial discourse which both fixes and assigns its place to the 'other', yet strives to capture an otherness which it conceptualizes as wild, chimerical, excessive and unknowable. The female rappers make it difficult for the colonizer to capture, locate and legitimate the positioning of them as the powerless other. They make it clear they are ungovernable, difficult and cannot be fashioned in the image of male fantasy and fear. They cannot be normalized or disciplined. It is this

attack on 'reason' that Walkerdine (1987) identifies as most disruptive, as it will not allow the conversion of conflict into discourse. In this sense, female rap constitutes a representational threat to the moral and social order that endeavours to keep women firmly in their place.

BWP make it abundantly clear that if any male is racist or sexist towards them they will just blow them away with gun fire. This may not be the ideal solution, but it might stop men believing that they have unconditional access to women. By using masculine subject positions and using the techniques of masculinity, the female rappers expose the unequal gendered access to power and the concomitant process that normalizes inequality. Just as Ice T uses his music to 'threaten' the police into accountability, BWP etc. use their music to make men equally accountable. All this is done within a framework of fun and pleasure, in which they take great delight in taking control. The popularizing of masculine power as precarious can lead to a renunciation of that power, which Foucault (1972) argues is one of the conditions for the development of new fields of knowledge, whereby power/knowledge relations can be reconstituted.

As Christian (1990) argues, the female rappers are putting themselves into existence against powerlessness. The music challenges the way in which they live their lives on a day-to-day basis, as they refuse to accept the normalization of the powerlessness of women through the regulative power of masculinity. The anger, power and rage they display distances them from passive notions of femininity and from the control of men. Whilst engaged in battles of sexual politics with Black men, the female rappers have created economic spaces for women in the music industry. They are engaged in improving the circumstances of their degradation on all fronts.

The racism of the music industry provides a space for Black women to be sexual[33]. Rather than reproducing the, animalistic, exotic images of Black women that the music industry usually circulates, the female rappers trade on their ordinariness. By challenging the location of women in the moral discourses of caring, obligation, duty and responsibility, which posit support for the male ego, they play with their power to expose the fraudulent myth of male sexual prowess. They speak directly of two-minute brothers and shrivelled dicks. They strike fear into the heart of most male insecurities. The demand discourse they use defines them as independent (if heterosexual) and autonomous.

By fully embracing the popular they speak to the widest audience possible, refusing to be contained by racist equations of black equals authentic. It is unlikely that they will speak (in a dialogic way) to those who have made investments in cultural distinctions and are part of the civilizing systems of femininity and morality. They do, however, speak directly to those, such as Sharon Thompson's interviewees, who have the least to lose through direct challenges to racism and masculinity. Ethnographic research with young white working class women suggests that they will compromise their feminism and autonomy for economic and emotional investments in men (Skeggs, 1991).

The female rappers, along with young women's magazines such as *Just Seventeen* and *Mizz*[34], create a discursive shift which allows young women to be positively associated with the term 'stropky'. This now describes a whole lifestyle from clothes to music to attitude,

enabling the construction of new subjectivities. In this sense female rap is feminism without theory. It is proto-feminist pop. Probyn (1992) would describe it as the popular use of transformative spaces: doing the feminist struggle on the popular front. Just as official institutions have had to engage with feminism, so too have young women; contemporary research suggests an increase in feminist sensibilities (Mac an Ghail, 1988; McRobbie, 1991; Frazer 1989; Skeggs, 1991). Harding (1986) suggests that feminism is seeping through into everyday practice but she doesn't know where it is coming from. I would argue that popular music is one site. And whilst BWP etc. represent an extreme position with only limited distribution, their lyrics and attitude are incorporated into more mainstream acts such as Madonna and Neneh Cherry. As Vron Ware (1992) has shown, Black women have a long history of enabling the white feminist struggle.

BWP etc. have created a popular space for women to speak a sexuality which is about their desires in a way which is ungovernable and impossible to contain, yet is automatically located with control, fun, autonomy and independence. They speak against all the institutional, structural and discursive attempts to control the expression of women's sexuality. If male rap music illustrates vividly the discursive nature of the boundaries through which Black men define themselves, then female rap illustrates the challenge to the regulative discursive structures (such as morality, motherhood and caring) that attempt to define women. This is a rare phenomenon, but one for which we should be very grateful.

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Notes

1. They also challenge the racism of white female employers in a very un-feminist way in a song called 'Kotex', demonstrating how the concept of sisterhood is underpinned by 'race' and class relations. This track, however, does operate as another revenge fantasy over racism and powerlessness at work.

2. The increase in the publication and distribution of Black women's literature is another important site (see West, 1992).

3. Interview in Rolling Stone, August 20th 1992, p.32.

4. Reportage Channel Two, 10th April 1991. Such high numbers have led some commentators to suggest that this is state control at its most effective.

5. Samples of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King are also used by white dance bands in Britain. This suggests interesting challenges to William's (1973) interpretation of hegemony. Historical positions of resistance have been incorporated into the mainstream by two different groups to signify different political positions to different effects.

6. Interview in Rolling Stone, August 20th, 1992 p.30.

7. From an interview with June Jordan by Prantibha Parmar in her film In Place of Rage C4, 1992.

8. Black masculinity is divided by class, sexuality, age and nation. All Black masculinities have the experience of racism in common. Mercer (1988) argues that it is important not to see Black masculinity as a unified ideological grouping.

9. Whereas commodification and objectification through music are usually associated with incorporation, it may be that the continual presence of aggressive and overtly sexual Black men keep the threat of Black power, and the subsequent racism that is used to contain it, continually on the agenda. The myths of primitivism are also reworked by Black men to threaten white men with their unpredictability.

10. Tang Nain (1991) points out that Black men in the USA usually earn more than Black and white women. This does not, however, take into account the high unemployment of Black men. Those who earn may be able to earn more than women, but the majority do not earn.

11. This may be one reason why Black men hold a value for white women; they can use them in a power battle against the white man.

12. Ice T's last album *Body Count* which uses speed metal with a rap mentality sold 90% to a white audience(ref.: *Rolling Stone* August, both issues, 1992. p.30)

13. p.15, *Hip-Hop Connection* no.36,Jan. 1992

14. By doing this he can sell to both the 'knowing' audience who can read it as irony and construct distance from it in order to make themselves feel superior; he can also sell it to the audience who directly buy into representations of violence towards women. It is a very clever marketing strategy and not dissimilar from what white rock and heavy metal music has been pumping out for years, selling millions of records and publicly unchallenged by other male or female musicians. Moreover, white male musicians have also been able to publicly 'play' with racist sentiments and Nazi paraphernalia (e.g., *Sex Pistols*, *Guns 'n' Roses*, *Nitzer Ebb*, *Leibach*).

15. She quotes Imiri Baraka's (*LeRoi Jones* one of the original *Black Panthers*) play *Madheart: A Morality Play*, *Maulana Ron Karenga's The Quotable Karanga* and *Ishmael Reed's The Last Days of Louisiana Red* to chart the marginalization of women in the Black nationalist struggle.

16. This is actually visualized in the film *Boyz in the Hood* (dir.: *John Singleton*) where *Yo-Yo* asks *Ice Cube* why he always has to use derogatory sexual terms when he refers to women.

17. Interview with *Roxanne Shante* by *Ian McCann* in *The Face*, no.13, October 1989. p.55.

18. p.21 *Hip-Hop Connection*, no 36,Jan. 1992.

19. *Barbara Smith* (1972) argues that heterosexual privilege is the only privilege that Black women have.

20. From *Marisa Fox 'Dis Divas'* in *Blitz*.

21. From *Marisa Fox 'Dis Divas'* *Blitz*.

22. Although sadly *Roxanne Shante's* most recent record '*Big Momma*' (off the album, *The Bitch is Back*, September 1992) curses nearly all the other female rappers. They collectively responded on a TV programme *The Jane Show*. Reported in *Hip-Hop Connection* no.44, Sept. 1992, pp.14-15.

23. *Hip-Hop Connection* no.36,Jan. 1992, p.21.

24. *Ngcobo* (1988) takes issue with this arguing that many of the attitudes of Black Anglo-American men to Black women were formed in Africa and were then later negotiated in relation to white colonialist male power.

25. *Hall* (1992) argues that events, relations and structures so have conditions of existence and real effects, outside of the sphere of the discursive, but that only within the discursive,

and subject to its specific conditions, limits and modalities, do they have or can they be constructed with meaning. How things are represented and the 'machinery' and regimes of representations in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive role, after the event. The scenarios of representation thus have a formative place in the constitution of social and political life.

26. *Again, there are similarities with the representations of white working class female sexuality and the attempts to contain and control it.*

27. *Spillers (1984) describes 'toasts' as extended and elaborate male oratorical display under the ruse of ballad verse. The female of the toasts is appropriately grotesque, tendentiously heterosexual, and olympically comparable in verbal prowess to the male, whom she must sexually best. The sexual and oral competition between the female and male characters of the story traditionally ends with the woman being subdued or sexed into oblivion. Rudeness was the aggressive assertion, through Jamaican 'patois' of an angry and aware race and class identity, full of swagger, sex and violence; a living index of the extent of the Black male's alienation from white society (Hebdige, undated). This was incorporated into Reggae and Ska, sometimes through 'scatting' i.e. singing impromptu lyrics across a basic beat music. 'Slackness' refers to explicit descriptions of sexual organs and sexual acts and had its place in Reggae, Ska, Rock steady, Blue. It was usually the prerogative of the male.*

28. *This is not dissimilar to academics who dismiss the value of popular music, for as Tricia Rose (1990) notes: "If I were to suggest that rap music produced some of the most important contemporary Black feminist cultural criticism you would surely bemoan the death of sexual equality." (p.110)*

29. *Bailey and Hall (1992) argue that there is no value in saying that any one black discourse carries forever the sort of guarantee and security of being the right way to represent things; this can only lead to closure rather than the opening up of new discursive opportunities.*

30. *Wilson Jeremiah Moses quoted by Joyce Hope Scott (1992).*

31. *Data taken from US census bureau figures 1992, Report of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the National Urban League Report and the Population Reference Bureau.*

32. *The interviews with Sharon Thomas which were part of a six- year study (1980 1986) were gathered and the article written before the moral panic surrounding HIV and AIDS.*

33. *White women are rarely given the same space. Madonna's power and control over her sexuality has increased in relation to her distance from the everyday. The less real she appears the more space she has to play with sexuality.*

34. *McRobbie (1991) and Winship (1985) suggest that young women's magazines such as Mizz and just Seventeen have played an important role in the increased feminism of young women.*

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