

Alexis Dickerson

Caitlin Geoghan and Antoinette Cooper

FIQWS

December 2, 2019

The Progression of Women in Hip-Hop

From the beginning, men have dominated the rap game and very few female rappers reach the same level of fame. Being a female in hip-hop is difficult because of the way that society views women of color that do not fit the “ideal” standards. Women of color experience implications in the standards of beauty, education, and behavior. According to “Difference and Domination”, women of color experience lower wages and higher unemployment rates. Zinn and Dill elaborate how this reason has to do with the “patterns of hierarchy, domination, and oppression based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation are built into the structure of our society” (Zinn & Dill). Societies views have implicated women of color especially in hip hop and held them to standards not imposed on men in hip hop to the same degree. Women of color suffer overbearing amounts of sexism and racism in their everyday lives. The use of profanity and the way that female rappers dress are some examples of things that female rappers do that make people believe that they are “ghetto” or “uneducated.” This narrative, however, is not true. Many of the most famous female rappers to date are successful in their field because of their ability to stand out from the norms of women. Overtime, these women have been able to counteract the standards of being a women of color in society by their use of profanity in songs, fashion styles, and by being a woman in a leadership role.

Throughout the history of rap, misogyny is a common theme. “Bitch” is commonly used by male and female rappers. The word “bitch” in society carries a lot of meaning. It can be used as a derogatory term, a term of endearment, or an insult. The transformation of the meaning of the word bitch in society can be seen by the use of female rappers in their songs. In 1993, Queen Latifah released “U.N.I.T.Y” in which one can clearly see her opinion of the usage of the word “bitch.” Queen Latifah states, *“Everytime I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a ho/ Trying to make a sister feel low/You know all of that gots to go.”* She emphasizes that the use of the word “ho” or “bitch” should not be used because it is disrespectful to women. In contrast, in 1999, Missy Elliot released “She’s A Bitch.” Unlike “U.N.I.T.Y”, Missy Elliot owns the word instead of dismissing it. *“She’s a bitch/ When you say my name/ Talk mo’ junk but won’t look my way/ She’s a bitch/ See I got more cheese/ So back on up while I roll up my sleeves.”* Missy Elliot in this song, owns the word by explaining that she is so powerful and strong as she really is THAT bitch! Another way that the word was transformed over time can be seen in the era of the 2000s of rap music. Female rappers during this time period, began to use bitch in a more defensive and combative tone. More female rappers during this time were on the fight to the top of the rap game and thus, used bitch against them. An example of this can be seen in Nicki Minaj’s song “Barbie Tingz” which was released in 2018. *“I’m a bad bitch, fuck the bitch (uh)/ Bitch get slick, I’m a cut the bitch/ I’m a bad bitch, suck some dick (okay)/ If that bitch get slick, I’ll cut the bitch.”* The use of profanity from these female rappers have made them seem aggressive and like “angry black women.” But, why is the use of profanity from male rappers different from that of female rappers? These women are able to be pioneers in an industry that does not accept them because they are women. Duke University Press explains that the “‘mutineer’ women exhibit a

new energy, even an explosion of youthful anti-sexist and anti-racist consciousness that creates a stage in popular music poised for a renewal in the surge of women's militancy in the world” (Hobson, 2007).

Lennard Davis in “Constructing Normalcy” describes societies placement of norms on people with abnormal bodies and how they are treated. Overtime, the concept of an ideal man became the standard and this negatively impacted society. Quetelet, a French statistician, states “an individual who epitomized in himself, at a given time, all the qualities of the average man, would represent at once all the greatness, beauty and goodness of that being” (Davis, 12). Eventually, sticians and other officials, began to create numerical and graphical (bell curve) values of what the norm is. People that did not fit the norm were described as being a deviant or an extreme in the bell curve. An example of a deviant of the norm is female rappers who continue to push against the standards of “ideal” woman in the way that they dress and share their body in the media. In the 1990s to the early 2000s, the fashion trends for women included crop tops, articles of clothing with vibrant colors and patterns, and jeans. Female rappers however, such as Queen Latifah, were known to wear outfits that were inspired by African culture. As shown in Figure 1, Latifah is wearing colorful headwraps and eccentric gold earrings.



FIGURE 1

Another female rapper that went against the fashion trends at this time was Missy Elliott. Missy Elliott was usually seen in the late 1990s and the early 2000s wearing “masculine” clothing. Figure 2 shows her wearing a basketball jersey. Throughout both of these women’s careers, Missy Elliott and Queen Latifah

have been able to incorporate male or cultural clothing within their fashion. As time progressed,



FIGURE 2

fashion trends changed and not every female rapper managed to maintain their style of clothing. An example of a female rapper that experienced a change in her style was MC Lyte.

Nataki Goodall's "Depend on Myself: T.L.C and the Evolution of Female Rap" explains that MC Lyte originally "began her career wearing sweatsuits, sneakers, and dookie chains (large gold rope chains), toting a gat (a small handgun)" (Goodall, 86) as can be seen in her album "Lyte as

a Rock." However, MC Lyte changed her style when her album "Act Like You Know" was released. "MC Lyte, no longer 'one of the boys'.... Wearing her hair longer, her make-up heavier, and her clothes less unisex (more gender-coded)" (Goodall, 86). One woman who stands out with her clothing style is Nicki Minaj. She dresses promiscuously and emphasizes sex with



FIGURE 3

her body and her songs. Figure 3 shows Minaj during Paris Fashion Week with her breast exposed and her nipple covered with a jewel. Even though all of these women have a different style, they are all able to defy the gender and cultural norms set by society. It is important that these women are able to defy these norms because they are in a male dominated field. Because they are such a small percentage of the rap industry, these women must show

something about themselves that makes them stand out. Wearing ethnic clothing, masculine attire, or promiscuous dresses allows the media to be attracted to these women.

What does it mean to be a woman in a leadership role? Being at the top can be very difficult, especially when you are not surrounded by a lot of people that look like you. Women of color that are leaders in their professions, receive a number of backlash because of their identity. Throughout history, women have been viewed as submissive and quiet, however because these women are violating that standard they are viewed as “aggressive” or “bossy.” Women that are leaders are almost never respected because of society's sexist views. Because of this, and the competitive nature of the world, two women can almost never be at the top of their fields, therefore, they must battle it out. In rap, feuds are very common because in rap it is important to show how “badass” you really are. Feuds are always between people of the same sex. This is very interesting because a lot of the women in rap have the same, if not more, talent than male rappers. The reason why these feuds are with people of the same sex is because society believes that men are stronger and more aggressive in this field, whereas women are “bitches.” An example of a feud that occurred in the late 1980’s between two female rappers was between MC Lyte and Antoinette. The feud began when Antoinette took shots at MC Lyte in “The House that Rap Built.” MC Lyte then followed up with “10% Dis.” The feud continued for a while and can be considered one of the best feuds among female rappers. In comparison, today’s feuds between female rappers are more physical. In 2018 the feud between Cardi B and Nicki Minaj, not only contained diss tracks but also a physical fight. The shift in the types of feuds in the rap game shows another reason how societies view of female rappers have changed over time. In the late

1980's, rappers would settle their disputes through their lyrics. In today's pop culture, this is rare and most of the time, the disputes are settled physically.

The progression of female rappers over time is very compelling because it impacts the views of all black women. Since female rappers are prominent in the media, society shapes the views of all black women based on their actions and appearances. According to the Duke University Press, "in other words, black women's public performance of identity provided an example of "real" black femininity in opposition to the construction of black femininity within dominant discourses" (Reid-Brinkley, 2007). Female rappers are a large part of how black women are perceived. The sassy, aggressive, ghetto nature that female rappers emphasize in their music is not what every black woman possesses and thus, it is incorrect for society to shape black women as such. The question that must now be asked is why are these particular women, women in hip-hop, used to establish the image of black women? Why are women such as Michelle Obama, Oprah, or Maya Angelou not used to establish the image that America projects on black women? It's because these women in rap are reinforcing a view that America already has: black women are ghetto. It does not matter what they wear, what their lyrics profess, or how they behave in public. Due to the color of their skin and gender, these women are oppressed and experience misogyny even though they are successful. The way that these women are painted is not a reflection of who they are. They are not "ghetto", they are pioneers in a male dominated field, they are talented people who are able to shift the way the world sees rap music.

WORKS CITED

- Davis, Lennard J. "5. Constructing Normalcy The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century." *Beyond Bioethics*, 2019, pp. 63–72., doi:10.1525/9780520961944-010.
- Goodall, Nataki H. "Depend on Myself: T. L. C. and the Evolution of Black Female Rap." *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 79, no. 1, 1994, pp. 85–93. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2717669.
- Hip Hop Classic. "Queen Latifah in the 80s!! Female rapper who penned Ladies First." *Pinterest*.
Collage.
- Hobson, Janell and Dianne Bartlow. "Introduction: Representin': Women, Hip-Hop, and Popular Music." *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*, vol. 8 no. 1, 2007, p. 1-14. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/article/235556.
- Kravitz, Jeff. *1997 MTV Europe Music Awards*. 1997, Europe
Rex Features - Gallet, Swan. *Nicki Minaj in the front row*. 2017, Paris, France.
- Missy Elliott. Lyrics to "She's a Bitch." *Genius*, 2016,
<https://genius.com/Missy-elliott-shes-a-bitch-lyrics>
- Monk-Turner, Elizabeth and Sylvertooth, D'Ontae, "Rap Music: Gender Difference in Derogatory Word Use" (2008). *Sociology & Criminal Justice Faculty Publications*. 19.
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/sociology_criminaljustice_fac_pubs/19
- Nicki Minaj. Lyrics to "Barbie Tingz." *Genius*, 2018,
<https://genius.com/Nicki-minaj-barbie-tingz-lyrics>

Queen Latifah. Lyrics to "U.N.I.T.Y." *Genius*, 2016,

<https://genius.com/Queen-latifah-unity-lyrics>

Reid-Brinkley, Shanara R. "The Essence of Res(ex)pectability: Black Women's Negotiation of

Black Femininity in Rap Music and Music Video." *Meridians: feminism, race,*

transnationalism, vol. 8 no. 1, 2007, p. 236-260. Project MUSE

muse.jhu.edu/article/235563.

Zinn, Maxine Baca, and Bonnie Thornton Dill. *Difference and Domination*.

http://tupress.temple.edu/uploads/book/excerpt/657_ch1.pdf.