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“There Are Bitches and Hoes”

Are you familiar with politics? The President's number two man, who had to resign based on him using a dating service. Maybe he's hangin' out with hoes that we mention in the music?

—50 Cent, responding to a question raised during a press conference about whether he intended to change his lyrics in light of the 2007 Don Imus incident, nahright.com/news/2007/05/17

*Three 6 Mafia took home the best original song Academy Award last night (March 5, 2006) at the Kodak Theater in Los Angeles. Drawn from the film “Hustle and Flow,” the group’s “It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp” also made history as the first rap song ever performed at the event. . . . “This is big for hip hop, but we’re also representing for the black community, letting kids know you can do something positive and make it bigger than life,” Three 6 Mafia’s Jordan “Juicy J” Houston recently told *Billboard*.*

—Jonathan Cohen, *Billboard* magazine, March 6, 2006

Bitches ain't nothing but hoes and tricks.

—Snoop Dogg chorus of Dr. Dre, “Bitches Ain’t Shit,” *The Chronic*, 1992

ONE OF THE SIGNATURE ICONS that drives commercial hip hop is the pimp. An important facet of urban street cultures and illicit economies, and once relegated to folklore, underground vernacular culture, and the margins of mainstream society, pimps

have become popularized and mainstreamed. Building on the glamorization of black pimp culture in blaxploitation films of the 1970s and on the influence of raw sexual hierarchies exported from prison culture, many rappers began drawing from pimp culture, style, slang, and attitude as part of their identities. Rappers such as Too Short, Snoop Dogg, Ice T, now deceased Pimp C, Dr. Dre, David Banner, 50 Cent, Nelly, and Lil' Pimp brag about controlling women like pimps, being stylish like pimps, and about being pimps themselves; promote pimp-based products (e.g., Nelly's energy drink, Pimp Juice); and elevate former pimps like the Archbishop Don "Magic" Juan to cult-like status. Pimp culture has saturated commercial hip hop. As T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting has put it: "The 'g's up, ho's down' mentality of late 1980s hip hop laid the groundwork for the 'pimp-playa-bitch-ho' nexus that has come to dominate hip hop." Strippers and groupies, already praised and demeaned for their sexual actions, are now also being promoted and contained within this pimp-ho framework. Pimping style and attitude have migrated into other facets of mainstream popular culture, such as the car-customizing show *Pimp My Ride*, "Pimp and Ho" Halloween and theme parties, the film *Hustle and Flow*, and cable network programming exposing pimp culture. Pimping is everywhere these days.¹

Despite the cuddly, fuzzy-hat image of pimps in some mainstream outlets and celebrated films like *Hustle and Flow* that attempt to generate sympathy for pimps, pimp ideology and its expression in popular culture are fundamentally exploitative to women. Dominating prostitutes and living off of their sex work, street pimps use physical violence (including rape) as well as emotional and psychological manipulation to control prostitutes. Phrases like Snoop Dogg's famous rap lyric "Bitches ain't shit but hoes and tricks" capture pimps' fundamental attitude: Women are bitches, and bitches are whores and prostitutes.

Taking a brash attitude in defense of these exploitative terms, most defenders of this trend in hip hop rely on the idea that they are talking about a reality of life and dare people to deny it. This was part of 50 Cent's strategy at a May 2007 press conference where he defended his lyrical talk of hoes, reminding the inquiring journalist that

a high-level government representative had used prostitutes: “Maybe he’s hangin’ out with hoes that we mention in the music?” Sometimes defenders extend the argument by concluding that, since prostitution is a fact of life, there are more important issues facing society.

These defenses can be categorized into four types of responses: “There Are More Important Things to Talk About,” “Men Are Hoes, Too,” “We’re Not Talking About All Black Women,” and “There Are Bitches and Hoes.”

“There Are More Important Things to Talk About”

Reporter’s question:

50, how do you feel in light of the whole Imus and Oprah thing?

“I don’t feel . . . you know . . . it’s not a tragedy to me that that’s happening. I think for a moment, our country forgot that our country is at war.”

—50 Cent, at a news conference related to the 2007 Imus incident

I honestly feel it’s a lot more important things [to worry about], if you want to fix America, you have to start at George Bush and work your way down—you can’t start at hip-hop and work your way up.

—T.I., in an MTV interview, www.MTV.com, April 23, 2007

FOR A LONG TIME NOW, rappers have tried to suggest that there are much bigger and more important things to talk about than sexism in rap music. Referring to wars, hunger, poverty, and Hurricane Katrina, among other disasters, rappers and their various representatives attempt to draw attention away from the apparently lowly topic of sexism, especially talk of hoes. Who, they seem to imply, wants to defend bitches and hoes anyway?

This is an easy deflection. Sure, it’s important that we talk about crises like the war in Iraq and global warming. No one is saying that

we shouldn't talk about them. In fact, if commercially successful rappers produced as many songs about global warming and George Bush's war in Iraq as they do about so-called bitches and hoes, and if radio stations actually played these songs to any significant degree, those rappers could effectively address questions about global warming and the war.

But they don't. Often, the only reason they even mention the war is to deflect attention away from the question of how corporate-sponsored hip hop negatively represents women. Yet all the while, they posture as if they are interested in these larger issues.

Yes, the media drum up celebrity drama for ratings (focusing on Anna Nicole Smith and Paris Hilton, etc.). Television and Hollywood film producers seem addicted to hookers and strippers, relying on the hyper-exploitative sexualization of women to raise these ratings. And all of this distracts us from crises like the war in Iraq—which, without a doubt, receives inadequate media attention. But the distraction factory's sexism and war evasion—beyond rappers' participation in both—isn't the question on the table.

This answer—that there are more important things to talk about—and ones like it suggest a hierarchy of importance (e.g., that black male sexism against black women is less important than the war in Iraq). They prompt listeners to subordinate their concern over how black women are being represented by their own community's music and culture in the interests of a “larger” national threat of war. Ironically, rappers insult their own value when they deploy this evasive strategy. Are they saying that the issues brought up in their music are unimportant, less worthy of discussion? If there are so many more important things to talk about, why aren't they rapping about these more important issues far more often?

When the war is over, they'll find something else “more important” than sexism about which we should be concerned, and the portrayal of black women will remain unimportant. We can fight more than one “war” at a time, thank you. We must deal with the question at hand if we want to be taken seriously.

“Men Are Hoes, Too”

How can you say I'm degrading women, when I call myself a ho? I'm degrading myself! Look at me. I'm rich and successful, and I'm degrading the hell out of myself. . . . Rappers may degrade women, but we degrade men, too, so that pretty much cancels itself out.

—Ludacris, in a *Playboy* magazine interview,
October 2006

SOME RAPPERS CLAIM that they refer to men as hoes too, so they're not just attacking black women. The logic is that *anyone* who has “too much” indiscriminant sex—for money or other perks, or just for personal fun—deserves to receive this label. *Please.*

The culture at large happily excuses, even rewards, male sexual promiscuity (as long as its heterosexual)! In black street parlance, that's what the exalted “playa” is centrally about: a man who gets lots of sex (and the power associated with getting lots of sex) from many different women, without risk or loss of power. The idea of a male ho requires that we interrupt the already positive status that men accrue from getting lots of sex from lots of women. If “ho” is going to be an insult for men, it has to convert male access to power into loss of power as a result of a busy sex life. In short, the negative label associated with women's sexual behaviors is needed to achieve this twist. The real purpose of calling a man a ho is to insult his manhood by using an insult for a woman who has had many sexual partners, thus turning his male sexual prowess into sexual weakness—a status that sexist worldviews usually reserve for women. Thus, men can be labeled “hoes” only if women are already attached to this term. (Yet male hoes are not equivalent to female hoes even when the same term is used.)

The same logic applies when men are called “bitches.” It's a way of insulting their manhood, by carrying over an insult leveled at females—already presumed to be of lower status. So, the use of anti-female, sexist name-calling to insult men doesn't change the system

of sexist language that associates these insults with women. Rather, such usage just reinforces the system by adding a few men to the lowly ranks of sexually demeaned women. In no way does it affect men as a *group* in the way that constant name-calling against women does.

And in any case, the comparison itself isn't very realistic: The use of these labels to describe men is far less common in hip hop than their use to describe women. Again, this defense avoids what is actually taking place in far too many lyrics, where the power of language is used against black women.

We live and breathe in a world that normalizes sexism. But this does not excuse it, nor can reproducing it with consistency do anything but replicate it. Once one has a highly profitable career, with access to all kinds of resources—monetary, educational, intellectual, social, political—then remaining ignorant and squandering it to generate personal and corporate profit is tantamount to becoming the ultimate puppet. The biggest-selling, most-promoted rappers such as Jay-Z, 50 Cent, Nelly, and Lil' Wayne, who continue to depend on pimp, hustler, and playa street culture for their livelihood, have the legitimate excuse of their origins for a “hot minute”—but a few years after that, it's hogwash. (As legendary rapper Rakim once said: “It's not where you're from, it's where you're at.”) By choosing to represent this sliver of black life at the expense of all the other modes of survival and growth that poor black people have devised, these rappers are choosing to continue to reinforce the most limited, destructive thinking and acting about women (for excessive personal—and corporate—profit) without taking any personal responsibility for it. Sexism sells, mostly because we refuse to fight sexism with any seriousness.

During the heated weeks following the 2007 Don Imus incident, when a disc jockey used what he claimed was regular slang in hip hop to “jokingly” refer to the nearly all-black Rutgers women's basketball team as “nappy-headed hoes,” many media outfits seemed comfortable employing the “others do it so why should Imus get so much heat” excuse to create a “logical” framework for Imus's sexist and racist comments, and rappers railed at this misdirection, claim-

ing that Imus and MSNBC had more power and thus more responsibility for their actions. But many rappers, backed and distributed by similar corporations, do the same in self-defense. Both use the “sexism is everywhere” argument in one way or another to deflect attention away from their personal responsibility and their relationship to corporate complicity in its perpetuation.

“We’re Not Talking About All Black Women”

(bitch) Sisters get respect, bitches get what they deserve.

Sisters work hard, bitches work your nerves. . . .

I love my sisters, I don’t love no bitch.

—“Bitches and Sisters,” by Jay-Z (*Blueprint 2: The Gift and the Curse*, 2002)

SEXISM SOCIALIZES ALL WOMEN AND MEN; it is a group-based form of discrimination against women that can’t be avoided by any of us unless it is challenged and reduced for all of us. To exercise the power to label others who are less powerful than you in one way or another—especially, as in this case, when these labels are part of a long-standing process of racist and sexist insults—is to participate in sexist and racist attitudes. So, to say “I am not referring to all black women when I use these terms” (which suggests that *some* women are “bitches and hoes”) is sexist name-calling that normalizes sexism for all women, especially all black women.

The fiction of separation—good sisters over here/bad sisters over there—is one that some male rappers, fans, and other apologists use to justify their perpetuation of negative images and ideas about black women. This separation of black women into the good ones (the ones we are not insulting) and the bad ones (the ones we have the “authority” to label and insult) is a primary means by which sexism and other forms of discrimination work. (Remember “good blacks and bad blacks”? “Good immigrants and bad immigrants”? “Model minorities and problem ones”?) The idea is to establish negative

group terms for the dominated or discriminated group and then find the “good” members, the ones who wind up serving as exceptions. This proves the rule, thus perpetuating the group discrimination for everyone.

Some hip hop artists defend their endless self-aggrandizing talk about dominating “bitches and hoes” by saying that they are not talking about all women. But “bitches and hoes” are all the women they talk about. The valorization of the gangsta and pimp also highlights and celebrates the very women they degrade, encouraging young women fans to emulate the behaviors of “bitches and hoes” to get attention, to be desired, and to be considered sexy. Bitches and hoes get all the attention in hip hop. Of course, many women participate in the videos and other aspects of the culture that demeans them—and female fans emulate these behaviors, too. Some point to women’s cooperation with sexism in hip hop to say that it cannot, therefore, be that bad and that women must not really mind. While being a black gangsta is the primary means of gaining recognition, money, and fame for males in hip hop, behaving in hyper-sexual ways is, for some women, the only means of making any gains at all. Men have gangs, drug dealing, and pimping; sex is the street economy open to women. Pointing to women’s participation in a system that exploits them to prove it isn’t sexist falsely assumes that sexism is sexism only when all women label it so. It also denies the power of socialization in creating our collusion with social relationships that hurt us. Again, since sexism socializes all men and women, we have to work against it; being anti-sexist doesn’t come naturally in a system that rewards us for participating.

Because street culture and the exploitative culture on which it is based have become such key sources of black identity in the hip hop generation, many young black women parrot the sexist ideas that are so widely circulated in hip hop; it’s a key to belonging. For many young black women, the language of commercial hip hop about black sexuality has influenced their understanding of black women, not just reflected it. Sexism works best when women are isolated

from and pitted against one another (as detailed in the song "Bitches and Sisters"). Isolation and conflict ensure that they will sustain and internalize the terms of insult and control used to keep things as they are. Women are rewarded by men for participating in this system.

Young women are also coerced into participating by the dictates of record-industry marketing. As noted by Glen Ford, a veteran radio and rap video programmer and current executive editor of the *Black Agenda Report*, the consolidation of these limited identities is directly related to corporate pressure:

The term "street" became a euphemism for a monsoon of profanity, gratuitous violence, female and male hyper-promiscuity, the most vulgar materialism, and the total suppression of social consciousness. A slew of child acts was recruited to appeal more directly to the core demographic. Women rappers were coerced to conform to the new order. A young female artist broke down at my kitchen table one afternoon, after we had finished a promotional interview. "They're trying to make me into a whore," she said, sobbing. "They say I'm not 'street' enough." Her skills on the mic were fine. "They" were the A&R [Artists and Repertoire] people from her corporate label.²

Some young women who are angered by this hyper-sexism speak out, but many do not. To be publicly and strongly against sexism in the music industry is to guarantee one's marginality. And to challenge sexism in the black community (as in larger society) is to discourage public support; in fact, doing so is often perceived as an anti-black community action and can make one a target. For black women—who are already marginal in larger society—taking a stand in a way that might alienate them from their local community is painful and difficult and often not worth it. So, instead, there is a great deal of silence or skirting of the issue, as black women try to find ways to manage what is a hurtful, insulting, and discriminatory language of belonging. One such way is to agree that "there are bitches and hoes."

“There Are Bitches and Hoes”

J-hood: My goal down here is to have fun, and, get up on some of these girls, man.

Hurt: Do you have any problem, with like, rappers calling women bitches and ho's and stuff?

J-hood: Nah, cause to tell you the truth, some of them is bitches, see? You gotta realize that, you got the sisters, but then, the bitches. Huh, you look? You got your sisters. . . .

Hurt: Are you saying that those are the bitches? [J-hood is looking toward a group of women in bikini wear.]

J-hood: Uh-huh.

Hurt: What makes those the bitches?

J-hood: Them the bitches, cause—you see how they dress, just look how they dress, sisters don't dress like that. Huh? Look at that ass, look! I might go over there and smack it!

—Interview with J-hood at BET's *Spring Fling* in Byron Hurt's film *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* (Independent Television Service, 2007)

IN THE SAME SCENE, Hurt asks these women what they have to say about being called “bitches.” They reply that they consider themselves classy and say that the men who said this about them had a “personal problem within themselves.” Unfortunately, it's more than a personal problem; it reflects a core element of how sexism works. Female fans, too, blame women who wear hyper-sexualized hip hop–inspired clothing and participate in hip hop videos and stripper and groupie culture. This was a common response to the Spelman College women's challenge to Nelly's “Tip Drill” video and the press their protest produced. As one student said: “I feel as though the women in the videos need to take responsibility for their actions, and start respecting themselves. Nelly is not the one to blame.”³ Even more dramatic were the attacks on Karrine Stefan, author of *Confessions of a Video Vixen*, who was subjected to “rancor, contempt, and

abuse . . . from blogs to interviews with Tyra Banks, the Queen of Dice, and Slice and Mix-It Up, Wendy Williams, Miss Jones @ Hot 97, and Star and Buc Wild at 105.1."⁴

There is no doubt that those fans who seek affirmation by emulating the women simultaneously glamorized and demeaned by hip hop images and stories should be educated about how they are being manipulated. What appears to be expression of sexual freedom is, in fact, participation in an industry that reinforces male sexual fantasy and power. But the extraordinary double standard on which women's sexual participation is judged by men (and women) reflects the same patriarchal system at work. It's bad enough when people exploit themselves, but far worse when others use them to gain success and fame, and then deny that their status depends on the exploitation of others.

The constant public labeling of black women in hip hop as "bitches and hoes" has forced young women to stake out a position. Some embrace "bitch" as a term of empowerment and also try to reverse the sexual-power exchange, calling men "hoes." Women who use "bitch" in this subversive way are trying to challenge the language of sexism; men who use "bitch" are ultimately supporting such language. Many women and girls say that since they are not "bitches and hoes," these rappers are "not talking about me" because I don't "behave that way." So, "it doesn't impact me." In some cases, this kind of distorted self-defense is a valiant but tragic effort to pretend that such labeling is not hurtful to all women no matter how one acts. It's often a matter of survival to craft this defense, as the distinction is mostly a fiction. In the film *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, Byron Hurt makes the following point to a young woman who tries to use this defense: "It's funny when I hear women say, 'when these rappers are calling women bitches and ho's, they're not talking about me.' It's like, yo, they *are* talking about you. If George Bush was to get on national TV and make a speech, and he started calling black people niggers, would you be like, 'I don't know who George Bush is talking about, but he ain't talking about me'?"

The line between women who “deserve” to be called these names and those who do not does not exist. Winding up on one side or another of this imaginary divide is at the discretion of the males (and sometimes females) around you; it’s not a choice you get to make. Remember the “classy” women at BET’s Spring Fling whom J-hood confidently identified as “bitches”?

“Nappy-Headed Hoes”

Imus: That’s some rough girls from Rutgers. Man, they got tattoos and—

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McGuirk: Some hard-core hoes.

Imus: That’s some nappy-headed hoes there. I’m gonna tell you that now, man, that’s some—woo. And the girls from Tennessee, they all look cute, you know, so, like—kinda like—I don’t know.

—Transcript of *Imus in the Morning*,
www.MediaMatters.com

It’s a completely different scenario. Rappers are not talking about no collegiate basketball girls who have made it to the next level in education and sports. We’re talking about hoes that in the ‘hood that ain’t doin’ sh—, that’s trying to get a n—for his money. These are two separate things. First of all, we ain’t no old-ass white men that sit up on MSNBC going hard on black girls. We are rappers that have these songs coming from our minds and souls that are relevant to what we feel. I will not let these mutha—as say we in the same league as him.

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—Snoop Dogg, responding to Imus calling the Rutgers women’s basketball team “nappy-headed hoes,”
www.MTV.com, April 1, 2007

IN APRIL 2007, radio disc jockey Don Imus used what he claimed was regular slang in hip hop to “jokingly” refer to the nearly all-black Rutgers women’s basketball team as “nappy-headed hoes” during their bid for the women’s national championship. Before anyone

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could detail what actually made these comments so problematic, the immediate media aftermath was marked by an extraordinarily swift move from discussion about Imus's responsibility for his *own* comments to discussion about hip hop artists and *their* responsibility (not Sony's, Time Warner's, or some other corporation's responsibility) for making these comments commonplace. So, even Imus, who has shown no general familiarity with or investment in hip hop parlance, was able to turn his own comments into a hyperbolic referendum on hip hop. Imus said that although he admits he had no right to use the now-infamous phrase, he knows "that that phrase didn't originate in the white community. That phrase originated in the black community" (www.Oprah.com).

This assertion, of course, is not true, except in the most narrow, literal sense. The ideas and negative terms in that phrase did not originate in the black community. The idea of very curly textured hair as "nappy" hair, and its use as an insult, is one of many dehumanizing strategies devised during the Western enslavement of African people. The idea that black people are sexually immoral and excessively promiscuous (the "ho" part of the phrase) originated in the same place. Disparaging black people's skin color, hair, lips, noses, and other distinctive characteristics as well as suggesting that they are immoral—especially sexually—helped justify the violence and domination of black people, including the rape of black women. It also falsely and deliberately elevated the value of whiteness, including the straight hair and other facial and physical characteristics associated with Europeans. White women were sexually valued because of their supposed chastity and thus they automatically attained a far higher status than black women, who were deemed not only ugly but unfeminine and, thus, acceptable targets for violence and unworthy of protection.

In the case of hair assessment, black people internalized this insulting multientury attack on self-worth and value but also turned it into a source of pride; thus, the term "nappy" can be used as an insult from nonblacks, an internalized insult hurled among blacks, and a means used by black people—women especially—to embrace

what has been so systematically and openly despised. The use of black slang—“ho”—to reiterate the Western idea of black women as whores does not make black culture a point of origin for Imus’s hostile-comedic use of this phrase, either. Black women were presumed to be sexually excessive and often labeled whores by white society throughout U.S. history. So it shouldn’t be surprising that blacks invented a slang word or phrase for the term. But developing black slang for it doesn’t make the idea black. (If that were the case, it’d be like saying that, since some black people call money “cream” or “duckets,” blacks invented U.S. currency.) The use of “ho” in black slang and in hip hop is a function of how people under siege reflect, internalize, and resist the language and ideas of the intertwined strands of Western patriarchy and racism. That’s a curl that we have to straighten out.

The claim that Imus’s insult was actually “a black thing” went unchallenged, and the mainstream media then began analyzing Imus’s comments in terms of their so-called origins in hip hop. Angry conservatives and Imus fans wrote endless blogs calling the whole thing a racist double standard. Al Roker, the lighthearted, apolitical NBC weather man and *Today Show* entertainment host, whose MSNBC column took a stand against Imus’s language and defended his firing, received an overwhelming number of responses, many in defense of Imus and nearly all of these claiming a double standard. Many were angry that Imus should be held accountable for calling women names since others get away with it. In other words, if rappers can call women names, why can’t Imus (as in, why can’t we)? On another website, the author of a conservative column titled “Racial Double Standards to the Nth Degree” claimed that “Imus’s firing is thus a pure example of the anti-white double standard that governs our world.”⁵ The otherwise familiar polarization between those who are for and those who are against hip hop now included highly visible black leadership on the anti-hip hop side, including political/business/media representatives such as Al Sharpton and the former editor of *Essence* magazine, Diane Weathers. Al Sharpton has long challenged much of what takes place on commercial hip hop/hot

urban radio. But others were perhaps emboldened by Bill Cosby's recent generalized attacks on what he considers the bad behaviors of poor black people. (These are discussed at length in Chapter 3.)

The *Oprah Winfrey Show* held two town forums on hip hop in April 2007—both generated by Imus's use of racialized sexist comments. Neither forum featured a speaker who could talk in an informed manner about the history of sexism against black women. No black feminists—women who study, understand, and can explain the larger issues in plain English—were there, much as the forums needed a black feminist equivalent to Dr. Oz or Dr. Phil. And although Al Sharpton, Diane Weathers, journalist Jason Whitlock, talented singer/songwriter India Arie, and writer Stanley Crouch were called "experts" by Oprah on her website, none of them specialize in the study of hip hop or the history of sexism against black women. Only male critics and activists and high-profile media women who were "fed up" and reacting from personal points of view were included. In addition, the speakers were separated into groups comprising those who "represent" the critics of hip hop and those who "represent" its corporate, "professional" supporters, thus sustaining the polarized terms that have marginalized black feminist women of the hip hop generation in this conversation.

During these shows, Snoop Dogg took a good deal of the heat generated by this conversation—mostly, I imagine, in reaction to his highly inflammatory defense of rappers' use of terms like "bitch" and "ho." At the heart of Snoop's challenge to Imus is the idea that because these are the terms of the "street" and Snoop comes from the street, he knows what he is talking about. But does this legitimate his sexist name-calling?

Although the roots of the common portrayal of black women as ugly, aggressive, and hypersexual were formed long ago, there is a more recent term that bears importance here. The term "welfare queen," coined by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, typecast poor black women on welfare as sexually irresponsible, money-hungry, and lazy. To drum up support for drastic reductions in public welfare assistance, those who used this term accused economically limited black

women of manipulating and cheating the welfare system by having babies to increase their welfare assistance payments. The label “welfare queen” relied on the already sedimented idea that black women are sexually deviant and untrustworthy. Now, as the term implied, they were whoring themselves for state assistance.

This kind of racist and sexist name-calling is pretty similar to what Snoop claims about the “bitches and hoes” in his ’hood: “that ain’t doin’ shit, that’s trying to get a nigga for his money.” It’s just that he says he has a right to do it because he knows them from personal experience. Snoop’s attitude about poor black women isn’t any better than that of many of the conservatives who attack him.

Snoop’s “I know them from personal experience” defense also uses a racial authenticity argument to justify his sexism. Snoop and many other multi-platinum rappers from tough, poor black and brown neighborhoods continue to *choose to represent a sexist perspective about reality they no longer have*. There are many men and women in the ’hood who don’t hold his sexist views, and he can’t legitimately rely on his so-called reality to justify his own perpetuation of this image of black women. After several years of hits and celebrity living and socializing out of the ’hood, traveling the world, and having access to nearly any and all manner of ideas, knowledge, and new forms of socialization, to act as if they have no meaningful relationship to women beyond the ones they call “bitches and hoes” is ridiculous. Like they still live in a rented apartment in the ’hood and a brigade of money hungry black women are figuring out ways to take their riches?

Rappers are not under assault by black women whose behavior they don’t like. The gangsta rapper image *needs* “bitches and hoes,” and so they continually invent them. Women, so labeled, add lots of status and value to gangsta and pimp images. If you can’t have lots of women serving and servicing you, then how can you be a real player, a real pimp? So, the process of locating, labeling, partying with, and then discarding black women is part of the performance that enhances gangsta- and pimp-style rappers’ status and, thus, their income. If, as Jay-Z raps in “99 Problems,” “I got 99 problems but a

bitch ain't one," then why bother telling us about her inability to give him problems—unless controlling bitches is part of his power? Similarly, Snoop and other rappers at his level don't have any reason to fraternize with women whom they feel are out to "take their money." So, if they're "just keeping it real," then they need to stop pretending that they are victims of black women out to take their money. That's nonsense. If they're so good at identifying women they insist should be called bitches and hoes, then it shouldn't be too hard to stay away from them. And, if they're able and want to stay away from them, then there's no reason to rap about them constantly.

I'm not saying that all women are above criticism. But if people want to challenge someone's behavior because they don't like it, they should talk about the behavior and say why it's problematic rather than using generalized, sexist, or racist language and labeling. The culture of women's sexual behavior promoted by hip hop videos shapes the actions of young black women in ways that will bring them attention and status. So, in a sense, hip hop is becoming a "bitches and hoes" factory, encouraging girls and young women to play the limited roles assigned to them.

Conservative responses to hyper-sexual popular culture usually involve an anti-sex agenda, one that functions to contain women's sexuality while failing to fight sexism or to work toward women's overall freedom. Rappers and corporate industry representatives highlight the sexually repressive tone and agenda of conservative attacks on hip hop in order to encourage women's complicity with their own exploitation. Indeed, the two positions—sexual exploitation and sexual repression—are birds of a feather. I am not interested in a less sexually open society or in sexual censorship, and I am not against sex workers or a gender-equal sex industry that protects women's rights and work conditions. Rather, I am concerned about black women's overall freedom and equality. This involves genuine sexual freedom of expression—not freedom of expression tied to sexist male fantasies or to male-dominated sex trades in which women are demeaned and degraded in order to appear to be sexually free. Nor does it involve women's sexual repression—a returning to sexual domination of

women through sexual repression in the interests of patriarchal male control. Sexual explicitness does not have to be sexually exploitative. If we don't make this distinction when we fight against the constant barrage of "there are bitches and hoes," then we wind up with a sexually repressive call for less sexuality.

The problem in commercial hip hop as it has evolved over the past fifteen years is that terms of sexual exchange are now so exploitative and overarching that nearly everyone is cast as either a player (the one in control) or the one getting played (the one being dominated). Women are nearly always on the latter end of this exchange and their only way out is to either confine their sexuality or try to become players. Those who reverse the terms and do try to become players are often relabeled "bitches and hoes" who are "trying to take a nigga's money." So, either way, they lose. This blending of sexual explicitness with sexual exploitation is hurtful and destructive for black women and for black male/female relationships and the black community generally.

So, although hip hop isn't primarily responsible for America's sexism, it is the most visible and extreme engine for it in black popular culture, which means that it has a special impact on black women and men who, because of the racist and sexist world in which they live, rely on black culture as a source of reflection, support, and affirmation. This is one key reason why it's important to make sure that black popular culture is not overrun by the worst forms of domination and inequality. Making sexism sexy only makes life harder for everyone, especially black women and others in the black community who already have too many unfair hurdles to overcome.

Instead, let's demand that empowered women be in charge of their own sexual imagery and give them the freedom to express themselves as they see fit. There is no evidence that most young women want to replace the more sexually explicit brand of sexism they currently manage with a repressed version of sexism. This less-repressed one gives them more day-to-day freedom, even though it is often highly exploitative. The anti-sex agenda of many conservatives is unappeal-

ing, disempowering, and uninterested in promoting women's rights or fighting sexism.

We have to work hard against what destroys who we are, what prevents us from reaching our best selves and stalls our efforts to create a truly just society. Many of the artists and executives who deflect legitimate criticism with the kinds of excuses presented here defend their constant use of highly insulting racist and sexist ideas about black women while profiting from it. We need to understand the roots of sexist images and work to reduce their impact, visibility, and perpetuation everywhere, not only in hip hop. We also have to confront the reason why these images are so successful as products sold to millions of people from all racial backgrounds. If the mainstream media were to cast a serious light on this crisis, it would be far more powerful to do so in a way unrelated to Imus's self-serving efforts to save his career. Doing so on the heels of Imus's sneaky misdirection only reinforces society's lack of concern for such images and perceptions of black women.

When asked about their lyrics, many rappers respond to the terms set out by conservatives who attack them, not to the many black women who have generally supported hip hop but find this escalation of highly destructive imagery a problematic betrayal. The fact that conservatives attack male rappers doesn't mean that these rappers' lyrics and their too-easy defense of their portrayals of black women are worthy of progressive defense. Save the defense for the young men and women who are willing to stand up for what is right, not for those who pander to what is clearly wrong and unjust because "it's the way it is," "other people do it," "I get unfairly attacked for it," and "conservatives don't understand or like it." We can attack the conservatives about plenty of issues, but we shouldn't marshal black people's solidarity in the service of defending sexist attacks on black women. Not in hip hop, and not anywhere else.

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