Fly-Girls, Bitches, and Hoes

NOTES OF A HIP-HOP FEMINIST

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You know Boo, it's been six years since I've been writing about hip hop on the womanist tip and I'm still getting asked the same questions. At work, the intelligentsia types want to know if, "Given the undeniably high content of sexism and misogyny in rap music, isn't a declared commitment to both, well, incongruous?" And my girls they just come right out, "You still wit that nigga?"

So I tell them how good you do that thing you do. Laugh and say I'm just a slave to your rhythms. Then I wax poetic about your artistic brilliance and the voice (albeit predominantly male) you gave an embattled, in pain, nation. And then I assure them that I call you out on all of your sexism on the regular. That works, until someone, usually a sista-friend, calls me out and says that while all of that was valid that none of it explained why I stayed in an obviously abusive relationship. And I can't lie Boo, that would stress me. 'Cuz my answers would start sounding like those battered women I write about.

Sure, I say, all defensive. It's easy to judge—to wonder what any woman in her right mind would be doing with that wack motherfucka if you're entering now, before the sweet times. But the sweetness was there in the beginning of this on-again off-again love affair. It started almost sixteen years ago, around the time when Tony Boyd all mocked-neck and fine gave me my first tongue kiss in the back of I.S. 148 and the South Bronx gave birth to a culture.

Those old school deejays and M.C.'s performed community service at schoolyard jams. Intoxicating the crowd with beats and rhymes, they were shamans sent to provide us with temporary relief from the ghetto's blues. As for sisters, we donned our flare-leg Lee's and medallions, became fly-girls, and gave up the love. Nobody even talked about sexism in hip hop back in those days. All an M.C. wanted then was to be the baddest in battle, have a fly-girl, and take rides in his fresh O.J. If we were being objectified (and I guess we were), nobody cared. At the time, there seemed to be greater sins than being called "ladies," as in, "All the ladies in the house, say 'Oww!'" Or "fly-girls," as in, "What you gonna do?" Perhaps it was because we were being acknowledged as a complementary part of a whole.

But girlfriend's got a point, Boo. We haven't been fly-girls for a very long time. And all the love in the world does not erase the stinging impact of the new invectives and brutal imagery—ugly imprints left on cheeks that have turned the other way too many times. The abuse is undeniable. Dre, Short, Snoop, Scarface—I give them all their due, but the new school's increasing use of violence, straight-up selfish individualism, and woman-hating (half of them act like it wasn't a woman who clothed and fed their black asses—and I don't care if mama was Crackhead Annie, then there was probably a grandmother who kept them alive) masks even from my own eyes the essence of what I fell in love with.

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Things were easier when your only enemies were white racism and middle-class black folk who didn't want all that jungle music reminding them they had kinky roots. Now your anger is turned inward. And I've spent too much time in the cross fire, trying to explain why you find it necessary to hurt even those who look like you. Not to mention a habit called commercialism and multiple performance failures and I got to tell you, at times I've found myself scrounging for reasons to stay. Something more than sixteen years being a long-ass time, and not quite knowing how to walk away from a nigga' whose growth process has helped define your existence.

So here I am, Boo, lovin' you, myself, my sistas, my brothers, with loyalties that are as fierce as they are divided. One thing I know for certain is that if you really are who I believe you to be, the voice of a nation, in pain and insane, then any thinking black woman's relationship with you is going to be as complicated as her love for black men. Whether I like it or not, you play a critical part in defining my feminism. Only you can give me the answer to the question so many of us are afraid to ask, "How did we go from fly-girls to bitches and hoes in our brothers' eyes?"

You are my key to the locker room. And while it's true that your music holds some of fifteen- to thirty-year-old black men's ugliest thoughts about me it is the only place where I can challenge them. You are also the mirror in which we can see ourselves. And there's nothing like spending time in the locker room to bring sisters face to face with the ways we straight up play ourselves. Those are flesh and blood women who put their titties on the glass. Real life ones who make their livings by waiting backstage and slingin' price tags on the punanny. And if our feminism is ever going to mean anything, theirs are the lives you can help us to save. As for the abuse, the process is painful, yes, but wars are not won by soldiers who are afraid to go the battleground.

So, Boo, I've finally got an answer to everybody that wants to talk about the incongruity of our relationship. Hip hop and my feminism are not at war, but my community is. And you are critical to our survival.

I'm yours Boo. From cradle to the grave.[1]

Since definitions of feminism tend to be as disparate as the women who use them, let me define mine. My feminism places the welfare of black women and the black community on its list of priorities. It also maintains that black-on-black love is essential to the survival of both.

We have come to a point in our history, however, when black-on-black love—a love that's survived slavery, lynching, segregation, poverty, and racism—is in serious danger. The statistics usher in this reality like taps before the death march: in the last thirty years the number of black two-parent households has decreased from 70 percent to 38 percent. The leading cause of death among black men ages fifteen to twenty-four is homicide. The majority of them will die at the hands of other black men.

As the following South Bronx tales reveal, women are the unsung victims of black-on-black crime. Last month a friend of mine, a single mother of a newborn (her "babyfather"—a brother—abdicated responsi-

bility before their child was born), was attacked by a pitbull while walking her dog in the park. The owner (a brother) trained the animal to prey on other dogs and the flesh of his fellow community members.

A few weeks ago, my mother called upset to tell me about the murder of a family friend. She was a troubled young woman with a history of substance abuse, aggravated by her son's murder two years ago. She was found beaten and burned beyond recognition. Her murderers were not "skinheads," "the man," or "the racist white power structure." More likely than not, they were brown men whose faces resembled her own. Clearly, we are having a very difficult time loving each other.

Any feminism that fails to acknowledge how black folks in 1990s America are living and trying to love in a war zone is useless to black women and to men. Rap music is essential to the struggle against sexism because it takes us straight to the battlefield.

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My decision to expose myself to the sexism of Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, Snoop Doggy Dog, or the Notorious B.I.G. is really my plea to my brothers to tell me who they are. I need to know why they are so angry at me. Why is disrespecting me one of the few things that will make them feel like men? What are they going through on the daily that's got them acting so fucked up?

As a black woman and a feminist I listen to the music with a willingness to see past the machismo in order to be clear about what I'm *really* dealing with. What I hear frightens me. Booming track after booming track, I hear brothers talking about spending each day high as hell on malt liquor and chronic. Don't sleep. What passes for "40 and a blunt" good times in most of hip hop is really alcoholism, substance abuse, and chemical dependency. When brothers can talk so cavalierly about killing each other and then reveal that they have no expectation to see their twenty-first birthday, that is straight-up depression *masquerading* as machismo.

Anyone who is truly curious about the processes and pathologies that form the psyche of the young, black, and criminal-minded should check out the Notorious B.I.G.'s platinum album, *Ready to Die*. The album chronicles the life and times of the urban "soldier"—a blues-laden soul train that takes us on Biggie's life journey. We board with the story of his birth, strategically stopping to view his dysfunctional, warring family, his first robbery, his first stint in jail, murder, drug-dealing, getting paid, partying, sexin', rappin', mayhem, and death. Biggie's player persona may momentarily convince the listener that he's livin' fat without a care in the world, but other moments divulge his inner hell. The chorus of "Everyday Struggle"—*I don't wanna live no more / Sometimes I see death knockin' at my front door / I'm living every day a hustle / Another drug to juggle / Another day another struggle*—reveal that "Big Poppa" is also plagued with guilt, regret,

and depression. The album ultimately ends with his suicide and the following chilling words:

All my life I've been considered as the worst
Lying to my mother even stealing out her purse
Crime after crime from drugs to extortion
Made my mother wish she had a fuckin' abortion
She don't even love me like she did when I was younger
Suckin' on her chest just to stop my fuckin' hunger
I wonder if I died would tears come to her eyes
Forgive me for my disrespect
Forgive me for my lies.

The seemingly impenetrable wall of sexism and machismo in rap music is really the mask worn both to hide and to express the pain. Hip hop is the only forum in which young black men, no matter how surreptitiously, are allowed to express their pain at all.

When it comes to the struggle against sexism and our intimate relationships with black men, some of the most on-point feminist advice I've received comes from sisters like my mother, who wouldn't dream of using the f-word. During our battle to resolve our complicated relationships with my equally wonderful and errant father, she presented me with the following gems of wisdom: "One of the most important lessons you will ever learn in life and love is that you've got to love people for what they are—not for who you would like them to be."

This becomes crystal clear to me when I am listening to hip hop. As black women, we are hurt when we hear brothers calling us bitches and hoes. We feel that the real crime being committed isn't the name-calling but their failure to love us—to be our brothers in the way that we commit ourselves to being their sistas. But what we've got to realize is that a man who doesn't truly love himself is incapable of loving us in the healthy way we want and need to be loved. It's telling that men who can only see us as bitches and hoes refer to themselves only as niggers.

In the interest of our emotional health and overall sanity, black women have got to learn to love brothers realistically, and that means being honest with ourselves about where they are. Black men are engaged in a war in which the real enemies, racism and the white power structure, are masters of camouflage that have conditioned our men to believe the enemy is brown. The effects of this have been as wicked as they have been debilitating. Being in battle with an enemy that looks just like you makes it hard to believe in the basics of life every human being needs. For too many black men there is no trust, no community, no family. Just self.

Since hip hop is the mirror in which so many brothers see them-

selves, it is significant that one of the music's most prevalent mythologies is that black boys rarely grow into men. They remain perpetually post-adolescent or they die. For all the machismo and testosterone in the music, it's frighteningly clear that many brothers see themselves as powerless when it comes to facing the evils of the larger society.

As black women, we've got to do what any rational, survivalist-minded person would do after finding herself in a relationship with someone whose pain makes him abusive. We must continue to give up the love but *from a distance that's safe.* Distance is a great enabler of unconditional love and support because it allows us to recognize that the attack, "the bitch hoe bullshit," isn't personal but part of the illness.

As feminists, our focus has got to change. We can't afford to keep expending energy on banal discussions of sexism in rap when sexism is only part of a huge set of problems. Continuing on our previous path is akin to demanding that a fiending, broke, crackhead not rob you blind because it's *wrong* to do so.

If feminism intends to have any relevance in the lives of the majority of black women, if it intends to move past theory and become functional, it must rescue itself from the ivory towers of academia. Like it or not, hip hop is not only the dominion of the young, black, and male, it is also the world in which young black women live and survive. A functional feminism for us, one that is going to be as helpful to Shequanna on 142nd as it is to Samantha at Sarah Lawrence, has got to recognize hip hop's ability to articulate the pain our *community* is in and then use that knowledge to create a redemptive, healing space.

Notice my emphasis on "community." Hip hop is not only instrumental in exposing black men's pain, it is a vital tool in bringing to the surface the healing black women have got to do. It's time to stop ignoring the fact that these rappers meet women daily who reaffirm their depiction of us on vinyl. Backstage, the road and the hood are populated with women who would do anything to be with a rapper sexually for an hour if not a night. We do ourselves a disservice when we pretend to not know who rapper Jeru the Damaja is talking about when he says:

Dealing with bitchez it's the same old song
they only want you 'til someone richer comes along
Don't get me wrong strong black women
I know whose who total respect I'm giving . . .
Now a queen's a queen but a stunt's a stunt
You can tell who's who by the things they want
Most chicks want things, diamonds and Benz
Spend up all your ends
Probably fuck your friends . . .
They be giving up sex for goods.

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Sex has long been the bartering chip that women use to gain protection, material wealth, and the vicarious benefits of power. In the black community, where women are given less access to all of the above, "trickin'" becomes a means of leveling the playing field. Denying the justifiable anger of rappers—men who could not get the time of day from these women before a few dollars and a record deal—is not feminist or strategic. Turning a blind eye and scampering for moral high ground diverts our attention away from the young women who are being denied access to power and are suffering for it.

It may be more convenient to turn our "feminist" attention to "the sexist representation of women" in the latest Sir Mix A Lot video, to continue fussing over *one* sexist rapper, but it would be infinitely more productive to address the failing self-esteem of the 150 or so half-naked young women who are willing, unpaid participants. Perhaps instead of expending all of our energy reading brothers who call us out of name, we might examine how flip we are when it comes to using the b-word to describe each other. At some point we've all been the bearers or recipients of the competitive, unsisterly, "bitchy" ways in which we can sometimes act, particularly when vying for male attention.

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Similarly, feminism must confront the ways in which we are complicit in our own oppression. Men's exploitation of our images and sexuality in hip hop is, in many ways, done with the permission and cooperation of our sisters. We need to be as accountable to each other as we believe "race traitors" (that is, 100 or so brothers in blackface cooning in a skinhead's music video) should be to our community. To acknowledge this doesn't deny our victimization but it does raise the critical issue of whose responsibility it is to end our oppression. As a feminist, I believe it is too great a responsibility to leave to men.

A few years ago, on an airplane making its way to Montego Bay, I received another gem of girlfriend wisdom from a sixty-year-old, self-declared nonfeminist. She was meeting her husband to celebrate her thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. After telling her I was twenty-seven and very much single, she looked at me and shook her head sadly. "I feel sorry for your generation. You don't know how to have relationships, especially the women." Curious, I asked her why she thought this was. "The women of your generation, you want to be right. The women of my generation, we didn't care about being right. We just wanted to win."

Too much of the discussion regarding sexism and the music focuses on being right. We feel we're *right* and the rappers are wrong. The rappers feel it's their *right* to describe their "reality" in any way they see fit. The

stores feel it's their *right* to sell whatever the consumers want to hear. The consumers feel it's their *right* to be able to decide what they want to listen to. We may be the "rightest" of the bunch but we sure as hell ain't doing the winning.

I believe that hip hop can help us win. We can start by recognizing that its illuminating, informative narration and its ability to articulate our collective pain is an invaluable tool for examining gender relations. The information we amass can help create a redemptive, healing space for black men and black women.

We are all winners when a space exists for brothers to honestly state and explore the roots of their pain and subsequently their misogyny, sans judgment. It is criminal that the only space our society provided for Tupac Shakur to examine the pain, confusion, drug addiction, and fear that led to his arrest and damn near his assassination was a prison cell. How can we win if a prison cell is the only space an immensely talented but troubled young black man could dare utter these words: "Even though I'm not guilty of the charges they gave me, I'm not innocent in terms of the way I was acting. I'm just as guilty for not doing things. Not with this case but with my life. I had a job to do and I never showed up. I was so scared of this responsibility that I was running away from it." We have to do better than this for our men.

And we must do better for ourselves. We desperately need a space to lovingly address our failing self-esteem, the ways we sexualize and objectify ourselves, our confusion about sex and love, and the unhealthy, unloving, unsisterly ways we treat each other. Commitment to developing these spaces gives our community the potential for remedies based on honest, clear diagnoses.

As a black woman I am aware that this doubles my workload, but without these candid discussions there is little to no hope of exorcising the illness that hurts and sometimes kills us.

We've already tried, "You're wrong. You're fucked up and I'm going to light into you every time you do that shit." Let's flip the script and think about how much more effective it is to hear, "I love you and I want to always have you back. That's why I need to know why you're illing like this because it hurts me. And it's impossible for me truly to have you back when you're hurting me."

At the end of the day, I'd prefer the love to the empty victory of being right and alone anyway. Wouldn't you?

Note

1. "Girl Thing," Joan Morgan, *VIBE Magazine*, June/July 1995, p. 122.