

HIP-HOP: RECONSTRUCTING THE IMAGE
OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN
Melissa Connerly

Hip-hop has become one of the dominant forms of popular culture in this country as well as overseas. It is a significant part of the African American culture, which includes the music genres rap and rhythm-and-blues; it has often been described as a community or a movement, and plays an important role in shaping its audience through music, videos, and even dance. Hip-hop, and in particular rap music, has served as an outlet for African American men to articulate the problems they have in living in an oppressive society. However, over the years rap music has become commercialized, and lyrics now focus on things such as money, clothes, cars, and sex. And more and more, male African American rap artists have begun to exploit African American women, including female rap artists, making hip-hop a battleground for African American men and women. This battle is a struggle for power. In his essay "From Culture to Hegemony," Dick Hebdige discusses how power can shift from one cultural group to another, as what is normal and what is not normal is reconstructed and changed. Female rap artists Lil' Kim and Queen Latifah are examples of this process. These artists are pioneers in a rap industry that is dominated by men. However, it might be argued that to gain their positions in the rap industry, they have assumed the slave-rooted roles that African American women have had to fight to live down, the roles of the "Jezebel" and the "Mammy." The "Jezebel" can be defined as a sex object, a stereotype of the promiscuous African American woman, which is the most common image of African American women. The "Mammy" can be defined as the mother-like figure whose only job is to nurture and take care of others. If it is true that Lil' Kim and Queen Latifah take on these roles, how does it affect their audiences? Where do African American women look for models to overcome the stereotypes placed on them by a white patriarchal society if the hip-hop community brings new life to the stereotypes? In fact, they should look to the hip-hop community itself, as it seems that the only way to destroy these stereotypes is for African American women such as Lil' Kim and Queen Latifah to embrace them. The place where these stereotypes were re-born will be the same place they are changed and reconstructed for the better.

The most popular artists of the hip-hop industry have become icons, and in turn play a major role in shaping their audiences. The most influential artists are those who are able to inspire their audiences to do something out of the ordinary, or who leave a lasting impression through their lyrics and music videos. In his essay "Popular Culture," John Fiske states, "In industrialized societies the people make their own culture out of resources that are not of their making and not under their control. Popular culture typically involves the art of making do with what is available" (326). Fiske implies that people take the products of popular culture such as rap music and music videos and decide which ones will actually be popular, and in doing so, exert their ownership over the culture. He extends this concept when he states, "But popular discrimination does not stop at the selection of the commodity or text, it then selects the functional elements within it" (327). The products of popular culture are then re-examined, and the key points and themes extracted from things such as rap music lyrics and music videos for everyday use. The authors of *Gender Talk*, Johnnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, would agree with Fiske's concept of how popular culture works, and argue that the process is not always positive. As Cole and Sheftall state,

The severe sense of alienation between the sexes is most notably reflected in the frequent descriptions of Black girls and women as "bitches," "hos," "skeezers," "freaks," "gold diggers," "chickenheads," and "pigeons." Rap music videos are notorious for featuring half-clothed young Black women gyrating obscenely and functioning as backdrops, props, and objects of lust for rap artists who sometimes behave as predators. (186)

Most of the derogatory words have been coined by rap artists themselves and have become a part of the language or slang. Essentially such offensive words and explicit images are the "functional elements" within rap music and music videos, and these key elements are disparaging towards African American women. The insulting words, often just made up to rhyme in a song so an artist can sell his music, become a part of the everyday language of many African American men. This is what essentially makes the process within popular culture, as Fiske describes it, negative.

A current example of the trend described by Cole and Sheftall can be found in the song "Tip Drill" by rap artist Nelly. In the chorus of the song, Nelly repeats, "I said it must be your ass cause it aint ya face, I need a tipdrill, I need a tipdrill," implying that he wants a female who is promiscuous and willing to do almost anything sexual. He emphasizes that

the attraction of this female has nothing to do with her face; in fact, what she looks like does not matter at all. His interest depends solely on how open she is sexually, behavior that defines what a "Tip Drill" is. He has reduced the African American woman to nothing more than a sexual accommodation. One might argue that Nelly's "Tip Drill" is equivalent to the "Jezebel." Both the video and the musical content of the song degrade women. Additionally, the music video displays images of women in very explicit and almost pornographic positions, including one in which a woman presents her bare bottom to be used as a credit-card-scanner. This image is linked to the line, "We throwin money in the air like we don't give a fuck. Lookin for a tipdrill, I mean a tipdrill." The money he has, Nelly implies, is what attracts these kinds of women. Cole and Sheftall quote Kevin Powell when he states:

Many of us men of color have held tightly to white patriarchal notions of manhood—that is, the way to be a man is to have power. Within hip-hop culture . . . that power translates into material possessions, provocative and often foul language, flashes of violence, and blatant objectification of and disrespect for women. Patriarchy, as manifested in hip-hop, is where we can have our version of power within this very oppressive society. (184)

Our society validates the idea that the man is the one that has the power, the one who has to be in control; he is the head of the household and women are inferior, or cannot perform the same duties as a man. These chauvinistic ideologies are a part of "white patriarchal notions of manhood." Powell argues that African American men within the hip hop community conform to these ideologies and try to establish through music and music videos the power they cannot have in society. The content of much rap music and videos deals with violence both in the exploitation of female anatomy and in slaughter and carnage. Nelly expresses his power through his money, because he feels it is the key to getting everything he wants, including sexual favors from women, an idea depicted in the image from his "Tip Drill" video.

The song "Tip Drill" and its video can primarily be seen on BET's "Uncut." How is it that a network that is supposed to be supportive of the Black community as a whole would play a song and video that depict African American women in such a derogatory way? BET attempts to stay in good standing with many of the artists, so deciding not to play a video because of its content would jeopardize the relationship the artists have with the television

station. On the other hand, BET was recently willing to take a video by Eminem out of rotation because of its attack on Michael Jackson's character, but they have not stopped playing videos that slander the integrity of many African American women. When problems like this arise, where, then, do African American women look for support in a society that also wishes to oppress them? These situations often leave the African American female audience confused as to what to do to live down these images. BET has served as hip-hop's outlet when other stations such as VH1 and MTV were primarily playing pop and rock music. Over the years, BET has become commercialized and would rather play videos that will attract a large audience than those that are respectful to African American women. As BET tries to keep up with the other popular music video television stations, they put African American females in a position where they have nowhere to turn for affirmation. Neither VH1 nor MTV has a late night music video show that plays videos that are as explicit as the ones played on BET's "Uncut."

The hip-hop music industry has been recently plagued with success and its influence is everywhere. In "Spoiled by Success," Kristi Turnquist explores the success of the hip-hop music industry. She states, "Hip-hop—its slang, style, rhythms and influence—is everywhere. Stars like Fat Joe are selling soda. Rappers like Mos Def and Ice Cube have become Hollywood actors" (1). Since the hip-hop industry has become so dominant and influential, it can be argued that African American women should look to the hip-hop community for a positive outlet, just as their African American male counterparts have used the rap industry to slander them. Examples of this positive use can be found in the work of artists such as Lil' Kim and Queen Latifah. These women are substantial rap artists who were and still are a part of the audience of African American women who are subject to degradation. Each artist is unique, taking on a different role to change the depiction of the African American woman. Marla Shelton writes, "These pioneering cultural producers ongoingly confront ideologies and visual paradigms in the industry that hinder production of enlightened images of African American women" (107). Shelton refers to female rap artists as people who fight to change the negative images of African American women in a revolutionary way.

Rap artist Lil' Kim attempts to change the way in which African American women are depicted in rap music and videos such as Nelly's "Tip Drill" by constructing an alternative

femininity and in doing so shifting the power from the industry's male artists to its female counterparts. Hebdige states:

The term hegemony refers to a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert "total social authority" over other subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by direct imposition of ruling ideas, but by winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural. (15-6)

Hebdige argues that it does not take much for one group, such as male rap artists, to exert their power over another group, such as female rap artists. It does not take a carefully thought-out plan or a bunch of threats for people to think that one group of people has power over another. In the case of rap music, male artists only had to make the form of music specific to their struggles in order for them to dominate it. Male artists made it seem "both legitimate and natural" for rap music to be a medium that they dominate by what they choose to rap about and the style in which they rap. Similarly, one might also argue that it would take the same kind of effort for the female rap artist to gain a prominent position in the rap industry.

An example of this kind of female artist can be found in Lil' Kim and her music. In the song "No Matter What They Say" from *Notorious K.I.M.*, she says:

Everywhere I go red carpet
Gave the keys to the valet tell 'em park it
Then I jumps out the Azure, a Lil' Kim aura
Girls making faces like Ace Ventura
And my B-A-D G-I-R-L-S is in the stretch LX
Aint shit you can tell us
Even got some of these niggas jealous
But tonight it's not about the fellas

Here, Lil' Kim asserts that she has achieved the status of any other rapper in the industry, including the male artists who dominate it. In the first lines she lets her audience know that she has the wealth and fame the male rap artists have maintained and reserved only for themselves. In the last lines she asserts that not only is she successful in the male-oriented business that she is a part of but, in fact, that many of the male artists are jealous of her success. Lil' Kim has shifted the power in the rap industry through her own lyrical content.

On the other hand, Bridgette McCullough, author of "Black Erotica," would argue that Lil' Kim has done nothing to better the position of the African American woman. She states, "The lack of self-ownership which Lil' Kim exemplifies is a growing trend among contemporary black female performers, and threatens to diminish the fortifying role that our music has traditionally played in our lives" (3). McCullough implies that even the lyrics above cannot be part of a movement towards the reform of the image of the African American female. She asserts that Lil' Kim professes to be something that she is not, thus invalidating her claims. However, McCullough overlooks that whether or not Lil' Kim is what she claims to be, her lyrics are an example of how African American females can attempt to overcome the images society has set for them. As Lil' Kim was, and still is, a part of the audience looking at the transformation of hip-hop and rap music, she sees how African American women are being depicted in derogatory way and she takes the same medium that disrespects them and turns it into a safe haven.

Lil' Kim, as an artist, has embraced the negative images of the African American female, and changed them in such a way that they could be considered acceptable. Hebdige states:

Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go "against nature" interrupting the process of "normalization." As such they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the "silent majority," which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus. (18)

Hebdige argues that the method in subculture is especially important in that its differences from other cultures are those that go against what is normal or what is considered normal, such as the products of high culture. In the end, what makes it out of the ordinary is what makes it so important. This same concept can be applied to some of what Lil' Kim says in the second verse of her song "No Matter What People Say": "If I was you I'd hate me too / Louie Vatan shoes an a whole lot of booze / Every other week a different dude and other crews." Here, Lil' Kim takes on a powerful, masculine role of heavy drinking and promiscuous sex. This is Lil' Kim's "style"—her words are weapons as she uses the actions of men to describe what the success of her career has brought her. In essence, this is what has made Lil' Kim what she is. However, those who oppose this such as Bridgette

McCullough would argue that Lil' Kim takes on the role of "Jezebel" which African American women have tried to live down since the institution of slavery.

Lil' Kim is a female rapper who is more than comfortable with her sexuality and she expresses it through her music. Her lyrical content suggests that she takes on the role of the "Jezebel" described by Marilyn Yarborough and Crystal Bennett as and "the promiscuous female with an insatiable sexual appetite" (3), and "alluring and seductive as she either indiscriminately mesmerizes men and lures them into her bed, or very deliberately lures into her snares those who have something of value to offer her" (1). For example, in Lil' Kim's song "How Many Licks," also from her album *Notorious K.I.M.*, she explores every aspect of what it means to be a "Jezebel." She boasts of infidelity, outrageous behavior, and a wide variety of partners including Tony the Italian who "[c]alled his girl up and told her we was bonin," a "Puerto Rican papi [who] used to be a Deacon," and "this black dude I called King Kong." This is the behavior one would characterize as breathing new life into the term "Jezebel." However, we must look at what she is doing as a female rapper. Her image, popularity, and position in the rap industry put her in a place where these lyrics are going against the principles society has set for women in general. Fiske states:

Thus in a patriarchal society such as ours, the social relations between the genders grant masculinity the position of power but actual relationships between individual men and women may conform closely to the gender relations or may oppose, modify or struggle against them: relationships are not totally determined by social relations but they can never be free of them either.
(322)

Fiske's idea about gender roles in regard to relationships can be applied to rap music and the concept of the "Jezebel," in that the male is granted more power than the female and that power includes having the freedom of sexuality. Men are more likely to be promiscuous, and in our society that is accepted. Lil' Kim destroys these ideologies because her prominent position in the rap industry allows her to do so. People such as McCullough would argue that by taking on the role of the "Jezebel" she has done nothing but conform to the negative depictions of African American women that have been passed down by a white patriarchal society and given new life through rap music. On the other hand, Hebdige would agree that her "style" is significant in that she does embrace these roles. In doing so, she is "interrupting the process of 'normalization'" and reshaping the identity of the female rap

artist as well as the African American female outside the rap industry. She takes what the male rap artist uses to degrade women and makes it part of her image, leaving male rap artists such as Nelly in a situation where the lyrics of songs such as "Tip Drill" are not as strong as they once were because Lil' Kim makes them acceptable. She makes her lifestyle and her sexuality something that all women should try to obtain. Her "I don't care" demeanor and the happiness her lifestyle seems to bring her make it a lifestyle that many other women would not mind enjoying for themselves. Lil' Kim's actions take on a form of female liberation, where being open sexually is not only reserved for the men in our society.

Queen Latifah is also a female artist who re-conceptualizes the negative image of African American women, but in a very different way. She establishes that there is pride and dignity in being an African American woman, and that these women should be treated with respect. Fiske states that "The people, then are better recognized by what they do than by who they are, and popular culture, by analogy is better recognized by what it does than by what it is. Popular culture is more a culture of process than of products" (323). Fiske expresses the idea that the products of popular culture are not as nearly important as the process by which popular culture is chosen and put to use. The way in which popular culture is used can be applied to the lyrics of Queen Latifah's "U.N.I.T.Y."

Instinct leads me to another flow
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

Queen Latifah expresses the unpleasant feeling that she gets when she hears a man calling a woman by a derogatory name. She demands for the behavior to stop, and continues to talk about how females get called out of their name, referring to her own experience.

I had my cutoff shorts on right cause it was crazy hot
I walked past these dudes when they passed me
One of 'em felt my booty, he was nasty
I turned around red, somebody was catching the wrath
Then the little one said (yeah me bitch) and laughed
Since he was wit his boys he tried to break fly
Huh, I punched him dead in his eye and said "who you calling a bitch?"

Queen Latifah provides her audience with an example of how by just being a woman she is subjected to disrespectful behavior. She traces the experience and then ends it triumphantly. The gesture shows that she will not tolerate the demeaning behavior acted out by a man; she lets it be known that this type of behavior in fact has consequences. Fiske characterizes popular culture and the people of popular culture by what they do. This is essentially what makes this excerpt of Queen Latifah's song significant. What she does sets the example for other African American women; in fact, she has also been a pioneer for rap artists, such as Lil' Kim herself. She paved the way for Lil' Kim to be able to fully express herself through her own lyrics by being one of the first rappers to do so.

However, outside the hip-hop community in other aspects of her career, Queen Latifah takes on the role of the "Mammy." Marilyn Yarbrough and Crystal Bennett describe the "Mammy" as "everyone's favorite aunt or grandmother, sometimes referred to as 'Aunt Jemima,' is ready to soothe everyone's hurt, envelop them in her always ample bosom, and wipe away their tears" (1). The "Mammy" is an African American female who is always willing to help take care of someone besides herself and those in her family. At the time of slavery this person was her owner, and now as these roles have been given new life, in her movies *Bringin' Down the House* and *Taxi*, Queen Latifah takes care of two white men who are helpless and cannot take care of themselves. In both of these movies she plays the role of the typical black "Mammy." However, the stereotype goes even further. In *Bringin' Down the House*, she plays a woman who, in exchange for legal assistance, helps a lawyer (played by Steve Martin) to get his life together, solving his problems with his children and his love life. In *Taxi*, she serves as a cab driver for Jimmy Fallon, who was not responsible enough to keep the driver's license necessary for his work as a detective. She nurtures both of these men and carries the weight of fixing their lives because they are unable to do so. Her roles in these movies show that she does not control her own image outside the hip-hop community. She has no power to change the image of the African American woman in the society she lives in, dominated as it is by the ideologies of a white patriarchal society. Hebdige can be used to describe how and why Queen Latifah is unable to obtain the power to change her image outside the hip-hop community.

Hegemony can only be maintained so long as the dominant classes "succeed in framing all the competing definitions within their range" (Hall 1977), so that the subordinate groups are, if not controlled, then at least contained within an

ideological space which does not seem at all “ideological” which appears instead to be permanent and “natural,” to lie outside of history, to be beyond particular interests. (16)

Hebdige would argue that the reason that Queen Latifah is unable to control her image outside the hip-hop community is because the power exerted by society suggests that the roles she plays in these movies are not out of the ordinary. Society is able to make her operate under a set of principles they set, which she cannot see or fully understand, so that she does not realize there is anything wrong with playing the typical African American female in a movie where one would describe her as being “ghetto” and displaying the characteristics of the “Mammy.” This is exactly why rap artists like Queen Latifah must rectify the gender problem within the hip-hop community. By doing so they will be able to change this set of principles and pave the way for African American women to do more than play the roles Queen Latifah has played in movies and be regarded as people who can achieve much more in life.

Queen Latifah’s message in her music essentially discusses how the image of African American women needs to be changed. In her song “Ladies First” from her album, which is also entitled *All Hail the Queen*, she sings,

I break into a lyrical freestyle
Grab the mic, look into the crowd and see smiles
Cause they see a woman standing up on her own two
Sloppy slouching is something I won’t do
Some think that we can’t flow
Stereotypes, they got to go
I’m a mess around and flip the scene into reverse
Who said the ladies couldn’t make it, you must be blind
If you don’t believe, well here, listen to this rhyme
Ladies first, there’s not time to rehearse
I’m divine and my mind expands throughout the universe
A female rapper with the message to send
Queen Latifah is a perfect specimen

Through this verse of the song, Queen Latifah is able to express the importance of African American women by defining her own attributes: she has the strength and courage men

would not expect her to have, and has overcome the traps society has set for her as well as other African American women. Her overall message is that African American females like herself are far more than what the hip-hop community and the rest of society portrays them to be. Her message relates to Hebdige when he states

The struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology is therefore always, at the same time, a struggle within signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of everyday life. (17)

Hebdige's argument conveys that what Queen Latifah says in her songs is important because what the rest of society says about African American women is important as well. Both of these "different discourses" play a major role in how African American women will be regarded on a day-to-day basis. The discussion of how African American women are to be viewed in the hip-hop community, and then in the rest of society, rests on the principles society has already set and the ones that Queen Latifah sets within the rap industry. Therefore, it is within the hip-hop community, a place where African American women have been disrespected, where the battle against how the rest of society views these women is waged.

In order for African American females to overcome the negative images attached to their womanhood, they must look to other African American females such as Lil' Kim and Queen Latifah to find examples of how the stereotypes can be overcome. Many would argue that these two artists are not the best examples of African American female liberation since they take on the slave-rooted roles of "Jezebel" and "Mammy," with Lil' Kim becoming one of the raunchiest female rappers in the industry, and Queen Latifah nurturing two white men in her recent films. One might even take the argument as far as saying that Lil' Kim could have very well been one of the girls in the Nelly video as she raps about doing many of the sexual things described in the song lyrics and video of "Tip Drill." In respect to that argument I believe that working to change the way that African American women are depicted by male rap artists and the way they are looked at by a white supremacist society is a sensitive subject. Having nowhere else to look for other examples of how an African American woman should be depicted, they are forced to embrace those that are already out there. If this is the situation that African American women are in, then Queen Latifah's approach to reconstructing the already-misconstrued set of norms that are so negative toward

African American women is the best way to change them. She is a walking example of the success African American women can obtain through hard work, and without controversy. Although she took on the role of "Mammy" in her most recent movies, her tenacity to change that image has led her to play a role in which she is her own woman in the movie *Beauty Shop*, by the same producers as *Bringin' Down the House*. This shows that she has changed the views of the people around her. Lil' Kim's lifestyle, however, has landed her in trouble. Recently put on trial and convicted, she has taken the masculine style to an extreme without stopping to think about the consequences. Nevertheless, like Queen Latifah, she has exerted a tremendous effort to change the hip-hop stereotypes of African American women

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COMMENTARY

Ryan Gogol

The claim that Melissa Connerly sets out is a rather serious matter. Not only must African American women wage a battle in the hip-hop community itself in order to fight those stereotypes leveled against them, but she also writes, "the only way to destroy these stereotypes is for African American women such as Lil' Kim and Queen Latifah to *embrace* them" [emphasis added]. This second claim is considerably stronger than the first, as it is premised on the assumption that Lil' Kim and Queen Latifah are essentially *forced* into taking on their slave-rooted roles (respectively, the "Jezebel" and "Mammy"). One may pose this idea in the form of a question: that is, what *choice* do these women have if they are unable to ever fully escape the preconceived roles, norms, and social relations imposed on them by an unjust society. I would argue that they did in fact have choices available to them, and that the more that each artist has chosen to resist, rather than embrace, her respective role, the more successful her attempt has been at reconceptualizing the image of the African American woman.

While Connerly is right in saying that Lil' Kim has made some seriously misguided decisions and that she took her "Jezebel" style a bit too far, it is clear that there were other motives behind her choice of lyrics other than the desire to change the image of the African American woman in hip-hop. In order to illustrate this point, permit me, for a moment, to recap the three forces that Connerly posits as having considerable influence on the lyrics that African American men write to objectify women: (1) the commercialization of the rap and hip-hop industries, which forces artists to come up with lyrics that sell, i.e. ones that rhyme for the sake of rhyming and make the overwhelmingly male audience that listens to them feel like they are in a position of power; (2) the actual need felt by most male rappers to have power over women in a society where white men retain the majority of privileges and wealth; and (3) the further commercialization of music channels, such as BET, which sensationalize their program content in a cut-throat competition for higher ratings. But while such forces may tempt artists to stereotype African American women, they hardly

justify the decision to do so. Artists have to be able to survive in the industry without resorting to negative stereotypes, or there would be no variation in hip-hop or rap content. Queen Latifah, in resisting stereotypes, is a prime example of such variation. So we see that Lil' Kim's decision to shock and awe was instead influenced by the aforementioned commercial pressures. She had the choice available to her to resist these pressures, but it appears that the revenue earned from her sensational content has certainly been as much of a driving factor in her career as it has been for male artists; unless, of course, we want to say that men are necessarily more money-driven and power hungry, and therefore more susceptible, to this kind of temptation. Thus by moving away from the concept of embrace, and more towards what realistically seems like a strategic decision on Lil' Kim's part, we see that embracing one's negative roles, in this instance, becomes no more than mere co-optation into the system that one is trying to fight.

Queen Latifah also clearly has a commercialized incentive to take on her respective "Mammy" role. But even though she is pressured into adopting this position, I would not go so far as to say that she is necessarily forced. Connerly writes of the singer's Hollywood role in *Bringin' Down the House* that she operates "under a set of principles that [white society sets], which she cannot fully see or fully understand, so that she does not realize there is anything wrong with playing the typical African American female." But while the film is laden with stereotypes that associate Queen Latifah with being "ghetto fab," she is anything but the servile "black maid" or "Mammy." In fact, she continuously refuses to accept this role, relying instead on her stylistic humor to get her audience to recognize, with a certain level of incredulity, that racism is still very much alive today, even among the supposedly educated or well to do. So although some of the stereotypes in the movie actually compromise Queen Latifah's efforts to change the public image of the African American woman, she is making a conscious choice not to embrace all of them. Moreover, this same choice exists in the world of hip-hop where African American women struggle to change the negative image male artists have created for them. Queen Latifah chooses a style that is critical of existing social attitudes, addresses them head on, rather than merely accepting them at face value as Lil' Kim has been inclined to do.

While men and women each have their own battles to fight in the hip-hop industry, it is evident that both sexes are heavily influenced by the commercialization of the music industry and the prejudices of white patriarchal society. But both male and female artists

can and *do* resist such pressures. It is in this regard that I agree with Connerly's point that Lil' Kim's open acceptance of her role as "Jezebel" was probably not the best way to go about changing the image of women in the industry. Indeed, this idea of "embracing" adversity may appear rather plausible on the surface. However, we need to go further in assessing *the extent to which* each artist had really embraced their roles. I should say this is more than to merely puzzle over what is meant by the word "embrace." It is to ask how much Lil' Kim and Queen Latifah were forced into accepting their respective roles, what other options they had available, and why they made the choices that they did.

RESPONSE

Melissa Connerly

I suggest that hip-hop has a gender problem, and that within this problem, a negative image of African American women has been created by the male artists in the community. I believe that the only way these images can be reconstructed is through the hip-hop community itself. If the males of the hip-hop community do not find it necessary to display African American women in a more positive manner, then neither will the rest of the society. Thus, African American women will be left in a position where they are unable to win, because the odds are stacked too high against them. I argue that the only way to begin to change the negative stereotypes and images African American women have carried for so long is to embrace them, and women such as Lil' Kim and Queen Latifah have done so, as they were also forced into their respective roles.

Ryan Gogol challenges my claim, asserting that these women have choices, and that those who choose to resist the negative images of the African American woman will be more successful in reconceptualizing the images to more positive ones. I agree with Gogol to the extent that both Lil' Kim and Queen Latifah had choices in what they wanted their respective role to be, but in the context of changing the image of African American women and the context of their lives I feel as though they did not.

Lil' Kim chose to be a rapper, in an industry which is dominated by its male artists. One must fully understand that being an artist, whether it is rap or any other genre of music, is difficult. Lil' Kim found herself in a forced-choice situation where she was fully aware that many artists, whether male or female, might never have a full career, and that the chance

of a female artist to prosper continues to be less than that of a male. In order to see that Lil' Kim was forced into her role, it has to be understood that if she did not become what she is, then we would not know Lil' Kim as a rapper. Her image was essentially created for her, and she used it to her advantage only to pursue her dream of being a rap artist. Gogol writes that Queen Latifah resists the decision to engage in the stereotypical behavior that Lil' Kim chooses, but he overlooks the fact that Queen Latifah is no longer a rap artist. Her career has in no way reached the status of Lil' Kim's. Rather, Queen Latifah turned to a totally different medium, and still ended up embracing the negative images of African American women. I do not think that Queen Latifah refuses her role; if so, then she would have not decided to play in the movies *Bringin' Down the House* or *Taxi*. In both movies she takes on the role of a servile African American woman in a modern context. The humor in these movies leads the audience to believe that she thinks it is acceptable, even funny, to be "ghetto fab" when it is not. However, Queen Latifah uses her roles to her advantage to obtain better ones. She has paved the way in a white-dominated industry for African American females to play roles other than those of the "ghetto fab" female or even the "Mammy." Along similar lines, Lil' Kim's embrace of these images tones them down. She turns them into a luxurious lifestyle, and spreads the message that it is not wrong for a female to explore the same options as men. In her way, she is destroying the concept that men and women are different, and that men are allowed certain exceptions in regards to their behavior whereas women are not.

I agree with Gogol that both Queen Latifah and Lil' Kim had "commercialized incentive[s] to take on [their] respective roles" but I feel as though they took them further than that and essentially helped reconstruct the image of the African American women. Although I prefer Queen Latifah's methods to those of Lil' Kim, it still does not change what she has done to help in this reconstruction. While I agree that "both male and female artists can and do resist such pressures," those that do often do not have successful careers. With successful careers such as those Lil' Kim has in the rap industry and Queen Latifah in movies, it is easier to get your point across because you are seen and heard.