'You Heard My Gun Cock': Female Agency and Aggression in Contemporary Rap Music

Donna Troka, Department of American Culture, Emory University

> In the twenty-plus years of hip hop history on record, a period that has produced black vocalists Chaka Khan, Whitney Houston, Anita Baker, Tracy Chapman, Mary J. Blige, and Erykah Badu, *there are no women who have contributed profoundly to rap's artistic growth*. Aside from Latifah and Salt-N-Pepa, MC Lyte has recorded for over a decade and Yo-Yo has garnered some respect. (Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliot, a rapper, singer, and writer from Virginia, has emerged in the late 90's as the multifaceted female in the form and is becoming a seminal creative force). *Yet I would argue that if none of these female artists had ever made a record, hip hop's development would have been no different.*[1]

> To the degree that institutions and social practices encourage, tolerate, or enable the perpetuation of violence against members of specific groups, those institutions and practices are unjust and should be reformed. Such reform may require the redistribution of resources or positions, *but in large part can come only through a change in cultural images, stereotypes, and the mundane reproduction of relations of dominance and aversion in the gestures of everyday life.*[2]

I begin this essay with two quotes. The first is from Nelson George, author of *Hip Hop America*, a book which discusses the history and present of hip hop culture and rap music, and which won an American Book Award in 1999. The second quote is from philosopher and social theorist Iris Marion Young and is found in her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Here Young suggests some strategies for resisting and ultimately overcoming oppression. These two quotes nicely frame my argument. George's argument illustrates what I call the male-centered "masternarrative" of rap music. A narrative which limits the participation and success of women in rap music today and has limited and erased the participation and success of women in rap music

[1] George, Nelson. *Hip Hop America*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998. Pg. 184, my emphasis.
[2] Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. Pg. 63, my emphasis.

in the United States historically. Young's quote is useful because it suggests certain strategies for women in rap and proposes ways to resist such erasure and oppression.

I would like to begin my journey from George's quote to Young's quote by looking at the work of Tricia Rose; namely, her book, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Starting with her fifth chapter "Bad Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music," I discuss what women in rap music historically have contributed as well as what issues they have addressed. From there I move to the introduction of *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, edited by Kimberle Crenshaw (among others), and investigate the ways in which Crenshaw discusses racialism, representational politics and the simultaneity black women face in being *both* black *and* women. It is at that time I would like to introduce a specific discussion of female rapper Eve and her song and video for "Love Is Blind." This work will act as a bridge between Crenshaw's work and Young's discussion of the five "faces of oppression." I will discuss both how the insights of Crenshaw's and Young's theories are found in Eve's work, and also how Eve's work informs and embodies their theories. By using a fairly recent example of Eve's song "Love Is Blind" (released in 1999), I hope to update some of the work Rose did when she published her book in 1994.

Rose's book, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, is an important work for many reasons. Not only does it critically analyze rap music, it also situates hip hop culture within a specific socio-political moment and region. Along with this, Rose also reports on female and male rappers' roles up until the year she published in 1994. At that time Rose explains that "although male rappers' social criticism often contests police harassment and other means by which black men are 'policed,' black women rappers' central contestation is in the arena of sexual politics" (147). Rose focuses on the ways in which female rappers are in "dialogue" with several different ideologies and communities: black male rappers, dominant notions of femininity, feminism, and black female sexuality (148). By constructing female rappers as "in dialogue," Rose can then "consider the ways black women rappers work within and against dominant sexual and racial narratives in American culture" (147). Rose also points out that during her research for her book she found three main themes addressed in the music of female rappers: heterosexual courtship, the importance of the female voice, and "mastery in women's rap and black female public displays of physical and sexual freedom" (147). In the last seven years, I would argue, female rappers have also begun bringing to the forefront issues of economic independence, and the importance of community, female self-reliance and resistance to all types of abuse and violence. Therefore, since Rose published her book, women rappers have expanded the topics that they rap about while maintaining the traditions that she cites.

The two things that Rose, in 1994, saw as most important for women in rap to accomplish was a restructuring of the parameters of heterosexual courtship and/or a critique of these parameters; and the need for:

> substantial female public sphere presence and contestation… [which] must involve more than responses to sexist male speech… [it] must also entail the development of sustained, strong female voices that stake claim to public space generally (163).

Over the last few years, then, women in rap have begun to restructure those parameters of heterosexual courtship such that women can have equal relationships with men while maintaining their own autonomy. Female rappers have articulated through their lyrics and their own personal activism that the abuse of women is intolerable and it will be resisted and reproved. Through the work of women like Eve (whom I will discuss later), a "substantial female public presence and contestation" has emerged and grown throughout hip hop culture (163). This presence has been creative, proactive and powerful and it continues on into the next generation of female rappers.

So while the landscape may be "improving" for women in the rap music industry, it is by no means an ideal place for black women (much like larger American society). In both places, black women bear a double burden of oppression based on both race and gender (along with possibly class, ability, sexual orientation, etc.). Kimberle Crenshaw addresses this exact issue in the introduction to one of her edited works, *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*. Here she begins explaining that critical race theory is both a "left intervention into race discourse" and a "race intervention into left discourse" (xxii). Crenshaw also defines the term racialism: it "is to power what essentialism is to identity – a narrow, and frequently unsatisfying theory in which complex phenomena are reduced to and presented as a simple reflection of some underlying 'facts'" (xxiv). Crenshaw continues explaining that in "Black racialist circles, the felt necessity to articulate a stable vision of group identity and interest has underwritten a 'representational politics' in which the experience of one segment of black America is taken to be representative of black experience" (xxxi). As a result, Crenshaw concludes "Black racialism yields a flat, fixed image of racial identity, experience and interest, which fails to capture the complex, constantly changing realities of racial domination in the contemporary U.S." (xxxi). This racialist thinking then suggests there is a monolithic "black experience" which not only ignores and silences many, it also functions to erase differences and nuances throughout black communities, leaving only a stereotypical one-dimensional image of black folk's lives. Crenshaw specifically addresses the erasure of black women with a racialist politic:

> The black racialist account proffers a vision of racism which por-

> trays racial power primarily through its impact on African-American males. Because it is unwilling or unable to apprehend the ways in which racial identities are lived within and through gendered identities, racial essentialism renders the particular experiences of black females invisible (xxxi).

This last quote eloquently articulates the ways in which women rappers and their experiences are virtually erased from the male-centered "masternarrative" that Rose says focuses on responses to police brutality and harassment, while others believe it focuses on violence and misogyny.[3] In the eyes of many, hip hop is a black (maybe Latino) male cultural form where women are merely interlopers.

It is here that I would like to turn to my discussion on Eve's song and video, "Love Is Blind," while simultaneously incorporating Young's insights on the five "faces of oppression." Eve's work juxtaposed with Young's theory is useful because it not only illustrates how female rappers *are* contributing profoundly to rap's artistic growth, it also elucidates the way in which Eve is changing cultural norms by creating a song and video that address simultaneously her experiences of being black and female.

For the purposes of this paper I will focus on Young's discussion of oppression, and more specifically, the way she divides oppression into five categories or "faces." Young explains that oppression is in fact a "family of concepts and conditions" which break down into exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence (40). It is within the last three "faces of oppression" that Young more directly addresses some issues that become apparent in Eve's song and video for "Love Is Blind." For Young's third category of oppression, powerlessness, she says, "most people in society do not regularly participate in making decisions that affect the conditions of their lives and actions, and in this sense most people lack significant power" (56). Within the first stanza of her song, Eve addresses the multifaceted nature of power within a heterosexual relationship. She begins the song addressing it to the man who killed her female friend: "Hey, yo I don't even know you and I hate you/See all I know is that my girlfriend used to date you/How would you feel if she

[3] This stereotype of rap music as only violent and misogynist, again erases the pro-woman, sometimes very politically-based work of many women and men in rap music. At the same time, there are both men and women who create very violent and/or misogynist rap music. An example of a representation of this very male-centered "masternarrative" of rap was the hip hop exhibit "Roots, Rhymes and Rage" at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. All the "large" or "main" displays focused on men (Biggie, Tupac, Snoop, Ice T, Ice Cube, Dr. Dre) and aside from a few pictures and artifacts and a two-paragraph wall display, female rappers were not well represented throughout the exhibit.

held you down and raped you?/Tried and tried but she never could escape you."[4] At this time in the video, we see Eve in the hallway of an apartment complex, knocking on the front door of her friend's house while inside a group of men watch television, two children color at the kitchen table and the female friend gets ready for a night out. Once the abusive boyfriend realizes his girlfriend intends to go out with Eve for the evening, he comes into the bathroom and begins beating her, and then drags her into the bedroom and throws her onto the bed. Eve continues singing, "That nigga had the power to make you crawl for him/I thought you was a doctor be on call for him/ Smacked you down cause he said you was too tall for him."[5] As the boyfriend pushes Eve's friend onto the bed the scene flashes between a non-consensual abusive scene where he is on top of her hitting her to a consensual, intimate moment on the bed. This moment articulates how complicated power and relationships are as well as how one site (the bed/bedroom) can be both a site of abuse of power as well as a site of love and intimacy. It is this cycle from love to tension-building to violence back to honeymoon/love that often convinces women to stay in abusive relationships.[6] These scenes, along with Eve's lyrics that investigate the ways that the boyfriend controlled, manipulated and threatened Eve's friend, illustrate how Eve is telling the story of a black woman who is, in many ways, oppressed by her powerlessness in a relationship with a black man.

Cultural imperialism, according to Young, is the experience of "how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's own group and mark it out as other" (58). Black women in rap music in the United States experience a multi-layered cultural imperialism. In the first place, people of color, specifically African American people (both women and men), experience cultural imperialism as part of the white supremacist society that the United States is. Secondly, as I stated earlier and Crenshaw reiterated, black women experience a double burden (and sometimes a triple, quadruple and so on…) because they are simultaneously oppressed as both women and as people of color. The fact that Eve's video addresses domestic violence within a black relationship is revolutionary on many levels. Not only could Eve be seen by some as a "race traitor" for airing the dirty laundry of the black community (in telling the story of black male on black female violence), she can also be seen as taking a chance by telling the story of a woman's retaliation for that violence. Finally, women within rap music also experience a type of cultural imperialism in that often their experiences and perspectives are made invisible while they are also marked as "other."

[4] Eve. "Love Is Blind." *Ruff Ryder's First Lady*. Interscope, 1999.
[5] Eve. "Love Is Blind." *Ruff Ryder's First Lady*. Interscope, 1999.
[6] White, Evelyn C. *Chain Chain Change: For Black Women Dealing with Physical and Emotional Abuse*. Seattle: Seal Press, 1985.

In other words, black women are neither *male* nor *white*, two prized markers of "normalcy" and "neutrality" in the United States, and are therefore marginalized and othered.

The last "face of oppression" that Young discusses is violence. She explains "what makes violence a "face of oppression" is less the particular acts themselves, though these are often utterly horrible, than the social context surrounding them, which makes them possible and even acceptable" (61). Much like the many levels of powerlessness that are exhibited in Eve's song and video, there are many levels of violence uncovered as well. First and foremost, Eve's song illustrates how domestic violence functions as a social practice, how it is often seen as a "private" matter that takes place in the domestic sphere and should not concern those outside of the home. In the video, when the abusive boyfriend drags his girlfriend into the bedroom to continue beating her, the camera pans onto one of the males sitting watching television. He watches the abuse, very obviously in disgust, as he shakes his head and lowers his eyes, but he *does nothing to stop it*. It is not until the little girl lets Eve in that the violence ends because Eve pulls the boyfriend off her friend. Another type of violence that this song and video address simply by being in existence is the systematic/institutional violences of racism and sexism that ignore, erase and invalidate the experiences of women of color who are in abusive relationships. By taking a chance as an already marginalized member of a white supremacist society and a male-dominated music industry, Eve not only tells the story of domestic violence, but puts it in the context of a black heterosexual relationship as well as suggesting the possibility of women retaliating against domestic violence. This is both courageous and revolutionary. With this song and video, Eve resists those institutional and systematic violences of sexism and racism that attempt to erase her and her experiences. The last type of violence that Eve addresses in this song is the obvious violence of the boyfriend battering and ultimately killing his girlfriend, along with the imagined (or possibly real depending on how you read the song and video) violence at the hands of Eve as revenge for the murder of her friend. In the song we hear Eve sing:

> And before you had the chance to get up/You heard my gun cock/ Prayin' to me now, I ain't God but I'll pretend/I ain't start your life nigga I'mma bring it to an end/And I did, clear shots and no regrets, never/Cops comin' in, watch me going to jail/Nigga whatever my bitch, fuck it my sister/You could never figure out even if I let you live/What our love was all about/I considered her my blood and it don't come no thicker.[7]

[7] Eve. "Love Is Blind." *Ruff Ryder's First Lady*. Interscope, 1999.

This scene in the video shows Eve and friends and family at her friend's funeral and as the abusive boyfriend appears, Eve goes after him and punches him in the face and he falls to the ground. While on the ground, he looks up to see Eve ostensibly pull out a gun from behind her back and point it at him. He puts his hands up in front of him and pleads for his life. Shortly thereafter, a bright ball of light accompanied by a flock of white doves floats up from the ground and when the scene cuts back to Eve's hand all we see is a fist where the ball of light/possible gun was. The lyrical representation leaves no real room for interpretation (she is bringing his life to an end and going to jail) and therefore it is clear that she has killed him. The visual representation is more vague. We are not sure if she did not have a gun because it is not allowed in rap videos, or because that was not the message she was sending. It is also possible Eve was more invested in the *possibility* of retaliation (and the message such a representation would send to both men and women in the audience) than the actual retaliation. She is not only telling a story of domestic violence, but is also critical of the different types of violence members of her community must deal with, and she offers up some possible suggestions (imagined and real) for dealing with such violence.

So, then, has Eve "change[d] cultural images, stereotypes, and the mundane reproduction of relations of dominance and aversion in the gestures of everyday life" as Young suggests we must do to begin to eradicate oppression? I would answer yes. With her song and her video, Eve has brought to the forefront the issues and experiences that black women deal with today and how they stem from the simultaneity of both their race and gender (and possibly class and so on…). Because she has done this within the context of rap music, she has also begun to change the male-centered "masternarrative" of rap music and hip hop culture that folks like Nelson George hold so close to their hearts. Eve has also brought to the center (a very public and large center – this video ran a great deal on mainstream stations like MTV and BET when first released), the issue of domestic violence and how real and serious it is and how it is *not* a private matter. Lastly, Eve tells the story of a woman fighting back against a man on the behalf of her murdered female friend. She does not shoot this man because he "did her wrong" or in order to maintain some sort of heterosexual relationship for herself, but for her "girlfriend" – her "sister." This display of black sisterhood, a loyalty and camaraderie that is rarely seen in popular culture among women, falls in line with the tradition of "womenlove" as is seen in Toni Morrison's book Sula. At the same time, I do not think the "job" is done. More people like Eve must continue to change cultural norms and re-imagine relations of dominance to move toward a more equitable future for rap music.

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