Invisibility Blues: The Absence of Women in Hip Hop

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No fan or scholar of hip hop culture can legitimately argue that women have been absent in hip hop because they have been around since hip hop's inception, especially in rap music. Put another way, women have been around in covert and overt ways in the *rap* game. Unlike the classic blues women of the 1920s and 1930s such as Mamie Smith, Alberta Hunter, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith, whose music was recorded and commercialized before blues men, women rappers' commercial successes occurred after that of men**.** Although their commercial successes happened after men's, women were never far away from the mic. Often, women were the text or subtext of male rappers' songs. The first commercial rap song in 1979 entitled "Rappers Delight" by the Sugar Hill Gang was recorded by an all male rap group, which consisted of Big Hank, Wonder Mike, and Master Gee. Part disco, part rap, part fun and delight, the first commercial rap song functioned to highlight the group's ability to get a party started. Big Hank raps: "but first I gotta bang bang the boogie to the boogie, say up jump the boogie to the bang bang boogie, let's rock, you don't stop, rock the riddle that will make your body rock" ("Rapper's Delight"). The opening lines may have been about partying but the subsequent verses *spit* by the rest of the crew most certainly involved women. Women became the subtext to Big Hank's opening party lines, especially the version of the song recorded for video viewing.

Wonder Mike, who rhymes after Big Hank in the music video version, calls himself the ladies pimp: "well, I'm imp the dimp the ladies' pimp, the women fight for my delight." Later on in typical male braggadocio fashion, Wonder Mike raps about his sexual skills to a reporter who calls herself Lois Lane. Mike raps: "he may be able to fly all through the night, but can he rock a party til the early light, he can't satisfy you with his little worm, but I can bust you out with my super sperm" ("Rapper's Delight"). It is clear in Wonder Mike's verse that rapping, partying, women, and sex go hand in hand. Nevertheless, Wonder Mike is not the only member of the group talking about women. Master Gee, the third member of the Sugar Hill Gang to rap on the video version picks up where Wonder Mike left off. According to Master Gee: "[his] name is known all over the world, by all the foxy ladies and the pretty girls" ("Rapper's Delight"). Furthermore, Master Gee rhymes: "I got a little face and a pair of brown eyes, all I'm here to do ladies is hypnotize" ("Rapper's Delight"). Women may not have been rapping on "Rapper's Delight" but they certainly were present.

For skeptics, to suggest that women played or currently have a role in hip hop culture and in rap music in particular might seem silly. Of course women played a role in hip hop culture and in rap music. The question that should be posed is not whether they have a role but what kind of roles did they have in the past and what kinds of roles do they have now? Were they minor or major players in a rap world that has been traditionally dominated by men? Writing about black women's roles in hip hop, Rana A. Emerson points out that: "African

American women have a significant presence in hip-hop and Black popular culture, and in music videos, where they appear as dancers; models; and most significantly, as performers" (116). Latina and white women have also appeared in rap music videos as dancers and models but not particularly as major rap performers. But, in 1998, well-known music critic Nelson George articulates another point of view about the role of women in hip hop. He writes authoritatively that**:**

> Hip hop has produced no Bessie Smith, no Billie Holiday, no Aretha Franklin. You could make an argument that Queen Latifah has, as a symbol of female empowerment, filled Aretha shoes for rap, though for artistic impact Latifah doesn't compare to the Queen of Soul. Similarly, you can make a case that Salt-N-Pepa's four platinum albums and clean cut sexuality mirror the Supreme's pop appeal, though neither of the two MCs or their beautiful DJ Spinderalla is ever gonna be Diana Ross (184).

Moreover, he contends: "I would argue that if none of these female artists had ever made a record, hip hop's development would have been no different" (184). George did not define development but one can probably surmise that he meant stylistically, lyrically, and technologically women have not contributed to the development of hip hop. He made that assertion ten years ago and in doing so characterized women's contribution to hip hop as minor, to say the least. While I respect George's assertion, I disagree with him. In a real way, women have been both minor and major players. After all, it was a woman who helped to commercialize rap music. According to Tricia Rose: "Sylvia Robinson of Sugar Hill records created the Sugar Hill Gang. By the early 1980s, 'Rapper's Delight' brought rap into the commercial spotlight" (56). Women rappers also brought women's issues to the forefront in ways male rappers did not; women such as Salt-N-Pepa, Mc Lyte, Queen Latifah, Yo-Yo, Queen Pen, Eve, and others discussed issues important to women. That alone gives women a major role in the development of hip hop. At the very least, their lyrical content changed the face of rap music.

Paradoxically, the assumption that women were and are absent in rap music is not far-fetched, even though I vociferously disagree with George's assessment about women in hip hop. The statement about women's roles, or lack thereof, must be historicized and contextualized. While Sylvia Robinson helped to place rap on the commercial map, women's voices *were* conspicuously absent in "Rapper's Delight." Members of the Sugar Hill Gang talked about what they could do with women and talked about the women they had and wanted but neither Robinson nor the male members of Sugar Hill Gang put women *on* the mic. However, early hip hop successes by male rappers did not stop women from surfacing as major and minor performers and contributors to hip hop culture and rap music specifically.

Visibility and Invisibility Blues

In this essay, I describe women's role in hip hop culture. I focus specifically on rap music, just one facet of hip hop to make the case that women have been both visible and invisible since its inception. I am interested in how, why, and in what ways they have been visible and invisible. On the one hand, women have been highly visible in rap music as video eye candy, as minor and major rap performers, as muses, and as the text and subtext of rap songs. Since the beginning of rap music women's bodies have been used and objectified in rap music videos. For instance, in the opening scene of The Fat Boys' 1985 video "Jail House Rap" several women clothed in tight dresses and skirts walk through the hallway of a prison. Interestingly, the song "Jail House Rap" has nothing to do with women. In fact, the song is about members of the group who are in jail because they were caught either stealing food or unable to pay for the food they ordered at a fast food restaurant. Oddly, the women appear again near the end of the video dancing. It is rather strange for seductively dressed women to be in jail, let alone dancing in a jail cell. That women are inside a jail hallway dressed provocatively and dancing seductively is strange, but they are there nonetheless. Used in that way, women were reduced to visible eye candy.

On the other hand, women have been invisible in rap music as models and dancers but also as performers, especially in the current rap climate. In other words, in rap music's present state, more often than not, women's invisibility has been brought on by the superficial use of their bodies in music videos and as minor sidekick performers. For instance, in Fat Joe's 2004 breakout hit "Lean Back," Remy Ma, a female emcee, is allowed to rap one verse while Fat Joe raps three verses. In the video version of the song, Remy Ma raps her verse and is barely present in the video after she has finished rapping. As a minor sidekick performer in both the song and video for "Lean Back," she is no longer needed after she raps her verse; she is visibly invisible.

Interestingly, the roles that women played in rap music have always been strained by the complex interplay of gender and power. Before 1986, when two women rappers successfully entered rap music as the group Salt-N-Pepa and their female deejay Spindarella, only one prominent female voice could really be heard on records. In 1984: "The first 'queen of rap,' Roxanne Shante, wrote and recorded a scathing rap in response to UTFO's 'Roxanne Roxanne,' a rap that accused a girl named Roxanne of being conceited for spurning sexual advances made by UTFO" (Rose 57). Surprisingly, Roxanne Shante was only 13 years old when she recorded "Roxanne's Revenge" (Rose 57). Even with Roxanne Shante's success in 1984 and Salt-N-Pepa's success in 1986, other individual female rap performers and female groups did not emerge in large numbers like their male peers. Sadly, but not surprisingly, in 1996, Mc Lyte reveals in an interview the small number of female rap categories:

> Referred to as 'crews,' reigning in three periods---the early 1980s, the mid-1980s through the early 1990s, and the late 1990s; 'Sha-Rock, Sequence, to me that's the first crew. Then you got a second crew which is Salt-N-Pepa, Roxanne Shante, The Real Roxanne, [Mc Lyte], Monie [Love], and Yo-Yo….Then after that you got Da Brat, Foxy Brown, Lil' Kim, Heather B' (qtd. in Keys 256).

If rap fans and scholars go back and examine the early 1980s male rap groups and individual male rap performers, their numbers far outweigh the quantity of female rap groups and individual female rap performers. The Sugar Hill Gang, Kurtis Blow, Whodini, Run DMC, The Fat Boys, and LL Cool J all released songs before Salt-N-Pepa's debut album. And, the list of other ethnic women on the mic is minuscule. In the early 1980s, there was one prominent Latina rapper, Joanne Martinez, "The Real Roxanne" and "Shauna Hoodes, a.k.a. Shaunie Dee, a significant white girl in the mix during the early '80s" (Veran 14).

However, when women have been visible as successful rap performers, particularly black women performers, they have utilized working class rhetoric with urban consciousness themes to connect to rap music fans. William DeGenaro defines the concept of working class rhetoric as:

> Working class rhetorics explicate the class struggle as it exists in rhetorical texts, paying attention to what rhetors say regarding social class and attempting to situate the discourse of those rhetors in their contemporary contexts…Working class rhetorics possess a certain consciousness---an awareness that class (and by extension, class division and class conflict) exists (6).

Female emcees located within the matrix of hip hop culture and rap music are locked within the intricate framework of gender, power, and class. Although successful female rappers and their fans come from a myriad of social classes, I argue that successful female rappers are affiliated with and build on urban working class issues and themes in their rap music. Thus, in order to frame a discussion about the visibility and invisibility of women in rap music, I turn to working class rhetoric to structure a theoretical framework for understanding the ways women performers have succeeded in rap music. I use the rap lyrics of Salt-N-Pepa, Mc Lyte, and Jean Grae as "rhetorical texts" to argue for the visibility of women in rap but also to contend that their music uses the rhetorical practices of urban working class communities.

Rap Music: It is a Man's World

Since its commercial inception in the late 1970s, the perception has been that rap music was men's domain. Successful male rap acts such as Whodini, Run DMC, The Fat Boys, and LL Cool J surfaced in the early 1980s to

commercial successes, even though industry insiders thought rap music was a passing fad. In spite of the proliferation of male rap acts, women eventually surfaced as minor and major rap performers. Murray Forman emphasizes: "all women 'crews' such as Sequence or The Mercedes Ladies were active in the early 80s as were mixed gender groups such as the Funky Four Plus One More (the one being the single female member)" (42). Unfortunately, in the early 1980s, women rappers were unable to get major recording deals. According to David Toop:

> Female rap acts were common at the outset but most failed to win major record deals and were subsequently reduced to the role of opening acts on live concert bills. Unable to sustain themselves on the meager income from the live engagements and the financially unrewarding contracts with small (and often unscrupulous) independent labels, many promising female rappers faded from the scene (qtd. in Forman 42).

Although women might have struggled early on to get major record deals, by 1986 rap group Salt-N-Pepa burst onto the rap scene with their first studio album *Hot, Cool, and Vicious.* The group consisted of Cheryl "Salt" James and Sandra "Pepa" Denton, two female rappers and Pamela Latoya "Spinderalla" Green, their first female deejay. Their producer, Herby Luv Bug is credited with putting the group together and writing the lyrics for their debut album. While Herby Luv Bug might have organized the group and written their lyrics, it was Salt-N-Pepa who were on the mic and whose voices propelled their debut album to go "double platinum" (Rose 154). Salt-N-Pepa would go on to release four commercially successful albums.

Salt-N-Pepa Take Over Rap Music

Salt-N-Pepa's commercial achievements signaled three important successes. First, as commercially successful female emcees, they illustrated that women were very capable of attracting a large fan base. Second, they demonstrated that women were competent female rappers. In other words, women could *spit* rap verses as well as men. Third, as rhetors, Salt-N-Pepa's music directly and indirectly argued for female agency both in the male dominated rap world but also in the larger society. Put another way, their music opened up a rhetorical space for urban working class women to challenge male patriarchy. Repeatedly, in the verses written for them and in the ones they wrote for themselves, Salt-N-Pepa put urban working class women's issues in the forefront unlike their male peers. Marcia A. Dawkins argues that hip hop artists invested in community building use rhetorical strategies to inform and persuade:

> The rhetorical nature of hip hop allows it to (1) tackle salient issues and aim at specific audiences; (2) use vocabulary with

> which the audience is familiar; (3) use rhythm to regulate how words are said and understood; (4) act as education and entertainment; and (5) move the audience to some action (63).

Following Dawkins' rhetorical theory model, I suggest that Salt-N-Pepa, Mc Lyte, and Jean Grae's music is educational, entertaining, and rhetorical.

As I have indicated previously, Salt-N-Pepa released four commercially successful albums. However, from 1986-1997, they released a total of five albums. In this section, my aim is to talk about their roles as female emcees, their visibility, and also to theorize the ways their rap music employs and invokes urban working class rhetoric. In other words, I specifically address the themes, urban vernacular phrases, and persuasive practices they used to connect to their fans, many of whom came from and identified with urban working class issues. I will not analyze each song they released, instead, I have chosen specific songs from their albums and made connections where and when necessary.

Hot, Cool, and Vicious is not an album in which Salt-N-Pepa are forced to imitate men's performative styles or adopt men's lyrical content. On the contrary, their debut album challenges male emcee's perception of female rappers, contest male superiority, and empowers female voices. *Hot, Cool, and Vicious* is also a humorous album that navigates the rough terrain of competition that is so indicative of the rap world. Three of the most commercially successful songs off their debut album are "Push-It"-the remix, "Tramp," and "I'll Take Your Man." Although their male producer is credited with writing and producing the entire album, I would be remised if I did not give Salt-N-Pepa their due respect. In other words, although Herby Luv Bug wrote the lyrics to their songs, Salt-N-Pepa are no dupes on the mic. As female emcees, Salt-N-Pepa are allowed to express their femaleness, boast about their sexual desires, and challenge men. In other words, Salt-N-Pepa are visible as rap performers and as rhetors. They are not positioned to be objectified like other women in male rappers' songs and music videos. They function as intelligent and self-assured women. For example, in "Push-It" Salt-N-Pepa are the aggressors. To the unknown men in the song they rap:

> Salt and Pepa's here, and we're in effect
> Want you to push it, back
> Coolin' by day then at night working up a sweat
> C'mon girls, let's go show the guys that we know
> How to become number one in a hot party show
> Now push it ("Push-It").

In this verse, Salt-N-Pepa push gender roles and boundaries. Instead of dancing like quiet and demure young women and waiting for men to ask *them* to dance, Salt-N-Pepa create an alternative space where young adult women dance provocatively and tell men what they want *them* to do on the dance floor.

The Role of Women in the Public Space

In order to more comprehensively talk about Salt-N-Pepa's song "Push-It," their and other female rap performers' songs and women's visibility in rap, it is important to briefly talk about the role of women outside of hip hop culture. Women, particularly black women in the 1980s, were still struggling with the negative perception of their bodies. Stated differently, the historical representation of black women and their bodies remained a site of contention. In Hazel Carby's groundbreaking text *Reconstructing Womanhood,* she describes the trouble black women experienced in a pre and post-slavery world that continued to view the black female body as marked. Carby writes: "black womanhood was polarized against white womanhood in the structure of the metaphoric system of female sexuality, particularly through the association of black women with overt sexuality and taboo sexual practices" (32). Black women were and are castigated because the mythology of slave culture renders them sexually aggressive and deviant. Unlike white women's bodies which could be identified as virtuous simply because they were white, black women's dark bodies were considered unchaste and dirty. This historical manifestation followed black women from all social classes, all regions, and all professions.

It was important for black writers, activists, and public intellectuals interested in character building to reformulate the negative representations of black women. The desire to change how whites and blacks viewed black women's bodies and sexuality happened during the 1890s and into the Harlem Renaissance period of the 1920s and 1930s. Specifically, the black elite and the growing black middle class writers of the Harlem Renaissance period believed literary and musical references to sex outside of marriage, provocative dancing, and sexual aggressiveness in any form propagated by members both inside and outside the race was problematic. For example, the black elite and the emerging black middle class shunned the classic blues women of the 1920s and 1930s. They thought blues women such as Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith were uncouth and their music shameful. They condemned the music because it talked openly about sex and sexual desires, intra-racial violence, women's power outside the domestic space, and homosexuality. They argued that those kinds of references in blues music hurt the image of all black people, especially black women. To provide working class black women and the larger society with an alternative image of *the black woman,* black club women worked diligently to remake the image of working class black women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Angela Davis: "as the club women went about their work of 'defending our name,' they disassociated themselves from working-class women's blues culture, and assumed the missionary role of introducing 'true womanhood' to their less fortunate sisters"(65). While blues music turned the heads of black activists and black public intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s, the lyrical content of rap music would do the same thing in the 1980s and in subsequent years.

The need to control the persistent negative images of black women continued as the formation of rap music took shape in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Since rappers first began distributing their rap music videos and even today, women performing in the videos have been marginalized and objectified in ways that have been disturbing. Sometimes the marginalization takes place because women have not been allowed to voice their concerns as equal contributors to rap music's formation, distribution, and production. Other times the marginalization takes place because women participate in their own marginalization and subjugation. In other words, women who dance in rap music videos whose bodies are used to titillate the sexual desires of male rap fans, sometimes consciously, other times unconsciously, allow their bodies to be sexualized and distorted. This marginalization and objectification happens to all racial and ethnic women. However, the historical representation of black women as licentious brings greater attention and scrutiny to the role of black women in hip hop. The women I have chosen to examine in this article complicate the relationship between representation, entertainment, and rhetoric. In one sense, Salt-N-Pepa, more than Mc Lyte and Jean Grae, used their good looks and heterosexuality to participate as dominant figures in rap music. Their good looks mattered as did their overt sexuality. In another way, Salt-N-Pepa's music was doing what their blues sisters' music was doing: finding an alternative way to speak for working class women. Angela Davis writes extensively about blues women and their working class consciousness. She argues that blues women defended working class black women against the black club women who wanted to improve and reconstruct working class black women's images. She writes:

> While the club women achieved great victories in the historical struggles they undertook against racism, and forcefully affirmed black women's equality in the process, the ideological terrain on which they operated was infused with assumptions about the inherent inferiority of poor---and especially assertive---women (65).

Moreover, Davis surmises: "in hindsight, the production, performance, and reception of women's blues during the decade of the twenties reveal that black women's names could be defended by working-class as well as middle-class women" (65). Salt-N-Pepa's music was fun, assertive, unapologetically sexual, socially conscious, and in many ways also defended the lives and experiences of urban working class women and by extension, all women in the late twentieth century.

Female emcees such as Salt-N-Pepa, Mc Lyte, and Jean Grae helped redefine the role of women rappers while simultaneously redefining and making sense of urban life for working class women. To the extent that rhetorical and representational difference is important, black women performers have

historically chosen alternative ways to represent their communities. Certainly, the classic blues women chose to use their own working class themes to represent working class people from the1920s and 1930s. In addition, Salt-N-Pepa's music represented an alternative way for young urban women to experience life but also to assert their own agency in the 1980s and 1990s. For instance, Salt-N-Pepa's song "Push-It" allowed young adult women to assert themselves in a social context in a similar way like their blues foremothers. Take for instance one of Ma Rainey's popular blues songs, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." First, both Rainey and Salt-N-Pepa's songs refer to a seductive dance. Second, each song's lyrics extend outside the cultural and gender boundaries of what so-called respectable women say and do in public places. In the 1920s and 1930s and in the 1980s and 1990s, it was not appropriate for respectable women to dance seductively, initiate close contact with men in public, or talk publicly about sexual skills. Yet, in each song, Rainey, Salt, and Pepa sing and rap openly about sexual desires and sexually stimulating dances. For example, the second and third verse of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" begins in this way:

> The other night at a swell affair
> Soon as the boys found out that I was there
> They said, 'Come on, Ma, let's go to the cabaret.'
> When I got there, you ought to hear me say
> Want to see the dance you call the black bottom
> I want to learn that dance (qtd in Davis 231)

There are two points I want to address about Rainey's song. First, the song references a cabaret. Second, the song mentions a sexualized dance of the 1900s. In the space of a few minutes, Rainey has stepped outside the boundaries of "respectable" womanhood. According to Sandra Lieb, Rainey's biographer:

> The term 'black bottom' referred both to a black person's backside and to the black sections of many Southern cities and towns. Ma Rainey wrote these song lyrics, but the black bottom had been a popular dance with Southern blacks even before Perry Bradford published 'The Original Black Bottom Dance' in 1919 (144).

Rainey's song was both provocative and humorous. Fast-forward from Rainey's blues song in the 1920s to Salt-N-Pepa's 1986 song "Push-It" and the likeness is apparent. Salt-N-Pepa rap:

> Yo, yo, yo, yo, baby-pop
> Yeah, you come here, gimme a kiss

> Better make it fast or else I gonna get pissed
> Can't you hear the music's pumpin' hard like I wish you would?
> Now push it ("Push-it")

The roles of women have been turned upside down again. In other words, Rainey, Salt, and Pepa are highly visible and are unashamed of their desires even though their music falls outside the realm of what is reputable for women in the 1920s and 1980s respectively. The gender and cultural lines remained firmly demarcated in the late twentieth century, yet, on their debut album, Salt-N-Pepa push those lines and in a real way challenge the way young urban women understand themselves and their social lives.

Salt-N-Pepa's Urban Working Class Rhetoric

Salt-N-Pepa's contribution to rap music is not limited to their visible roles as flashy and sexy women. More than anything, their music carved out a rhetorical space for an urban working class rhetoric. By referencing urban rhetorical events and situations, urban vernacular phrases, and arguing for their legitimacy as female emcees from Queens, New York, and contending for the respect of women, their music is positioned as intrinsically working class and rhetorical. Using Aristotle's conception of rhetoric as a guide, Karlyn Khors Campbell describes the ways that he defined rhetoric. She writes:

> Aristotle distinguished among kinds of truths…He recognized a different sort of wisdom or knowledge (*phronesis)* as needed to make decisions about social matters. These truths, not discoverable through science or analytic logic, he described as contingent, that is, as dependent on cultural values, the situation, and the nature of the issue. They were the special concerns of the area of study he called 'rhetoric' (5).

From their first to their last album, Salt-N-Pepa's music considered the social and economic implications of urban life, patriarchy, inequality, and femininity. Their albums did so rhetorically. As entertainment, education, and rhetoric, their music positioned women as empowered rather than powerless. James Lull writes about the influence of music on the body and mind:

> Music's impact takes place at a *physical level* (moving to the beat, dancing, imitating performers, ect); an *emotional level* ('feeling' the music, romanticizing, relating its themes to the experiences of the listener); and a *cognitive level* (processing information) (368).

Put together, their albums offered listeners an opportunity to move to the beat of their songs, relate emotionally to the stories told on their records, and to process their socially conscious rhymes. In addition, their music was persuasive. It argued for women's agency at a time when life in America for young urban people and young women in particular were affected by dwindling public policies and a lack of social services brought on by a post-civil rights backlash.

More than their first two albums, Salt-N-Pepa's third 1990 album, *Blacks' Magi*c, signaled a social and cultural transformation. In one sense, Salt-N-Pepa had matured as emcees before the eyes of the public. By 1990, they had been in the business for five years. They were multi-platinum selling artists. As their first album illustrated, their roles as female emcees helped change the face of hip hop culture and rap music specifically. On the second album, they continued to demonstrate their talents as visible rap performers in an ongoing male dominated music genre. Their first two albums' content continued to be fun and groundbreaking. Yet, unlike the first two albums, the third album allowed fans to witness their transformation as rap vocalists, lyricists, and rhetors. The songs on *Blacks' Magic* were more lyrically complicated, their rhyming skills were better, they wrote and produced some of the songs on the album, and their urban working class rhetoric was more apparent. For instance, I have indicated in a previous section that Salt-N-Pepa's music uses some of the urban vernacular phrases of the urban working class. In that way, I contend, their music consciously speaks to and attempts to persuade urban working class communities. This does not mean that other communities were not persuaded by their music. They were, after all, multi-platinum selling artists. Clearly, they sold music to a wide range of individuals from different socio-economic classes. However, for the purposes of my article, I submit that their words and messages were inherently working class; thus, their music utilizes a working class rhetoric.

Salt-N-Pepa's Urban Working Class Lyrics

In this section, I highlight and explain a few of the urban vernacular phrases and terms in *Blacks' Magic* that evoke an urban working class consciousness. For example, in their hit song "Expression," from their album, Salt raps:

> My girl Jilly wanna be like Jackie
> Fat rope chains and I think that's wick-wacky…
> Stan was scam, but Vinnie's legit
> Mercedes coupe hometroop with no kit
> A business man with a beeper for reason
> Not like Tim because it's in this season

Urban rap stars did not invent fat gold chains and beepers but these items certainly came to be identified with them. In fact, because rappers used gold

chains and beepers as status symbols, they became rhetorical objects that symbolized and embodied coolness, money, and power. In other words, rappers and subsequent rap fans who wanted to evince a cool posture like their favorite rappers wanted to or purchased the status symbols as well. Put another way, exposure from both male and female rap performers placed the fat gold chains and the beeper in both an urban and national context. As rap artists, Salt-N-Pepa remained committed to exploring the signs and symbols of the urban working class. In "Live and Let Die," the final verse ends: "That's the eight time that baser almost O.D.'d man…He's out there skeezin' with no jimmy hat." In the aforementioned lines, Salt-N-Pepa use terms that can be identified with problems associated with urban life. In the 1990s, drug use and sexual promiscuity continued to hurt the emotional and sexual lives of America's youth and young adult population. Salt-N-Pepa recognized the extent to which drug use and sexual impropriety were harming their rap music fans indirectly and directly and they knew which specific words would grab their attention. As the album continues on, references to urban vernacular words and problems arise repeatedly. For example, in the opening lines of "Swift" Salt raps:

> Put on your battlin' gear,
> But don't come strapped,
> Bullets are not needed,
> This time it's rap for rap

Or, in "Do You Want Me" Salt rhymes, "about some skeeze who did the squeeze" and in "I Like To Party" they rap:

> I'm an addict, strung out on dopeness,
> But you can't chew, sniff, or smoke this,
> If you wanna get high step by the speaker
> And overdose on somethin' sweeter (*Blacks' Magic).*

In their 1993 album, *Very Necessary,* Salt-N-Pepa continues to write urban inspired lyrics. For instance, in the song "Shoop," Salt raps, "well-a, I like 'em real wild, b-boy style by the mile" and in "Heaven or Hell" Pepa rhymes, "In the overcrowded streets of the city, I know it's shitty, but I can do without the pity, (Baby never lived in the ghetto)…or the projects, But I wear my Tim boots and Hi-Techs, and I wrecks havoc" (*Very Necessary*). In the previously mentioned lyrics in "Heaven or Hell," Pepa's lyrics embody two ideals. First, her words represent an urban street/working class-consciousness. Second, Pepa's lyrics criticize the turmoil of the street. In one sense, Pepa maintains spatial distance from urban *ghetto* but in another way she identifies with the urban working class clothing styles of the inner city. Whether Pepa is criticizing or embracing specific

aspects of deleted the urban working class communities, it is clear that she is inspired to write about and respond to urban working class life.

This is just a sample of the kinds of urban vernacular phrases they used in their rap songs. Certainly, the phrases do not only belong to Salt-N-Pepa or urban communities. Urban vernacular phrases are often borrowed and then adapted for use in various racial and ethnic communities. Nevertheless, for the purposes of my argument here, it is important to make a distinction between where the phrases originated and where the words are found later. Typically, because rap music and rap videos translated the urban experience for large segments of the American population, urban phrases and even urban clothing and hair styles trickled down to different regions of the country. Moreover, before the release of *Blacks' Magic* in 1990 or any of Salt-N-Pepa's albums, rappers were often known for interspersing new phrasing, new phrases, new spellings, new words, and regional affiliations in their rap songs. Salt-N-Pepa are no different. They are after all: "products of working-class black families…raised in New York City's Brooklyn and Queens Boroughs" (32). Undoubtedly, their experiences growing up in Brooklyn and Queens in the 1970s and 1980s constructed how they perceived the world.

In addition to using urban vernacular phrases to communicate with working class urban communities, as rhetors, they also addressed audiences who were in tune with their experiences as women and as rap performers who were concerned with uplifting women. In their own unique ways, from their first to their last album, Salt-N-Pepa argued that women deserved to be respected, deserved to enjoy sexual experiences, and allowed to be sexually aggressively. As young black women rhetors, they were in a unique position. They had to position themselves in a social place where they would not be seen as loose but also that what they proposed in their music was not viewed as immoral. By the time Salt-N-Pepa arrived on the music scene, the black ghetto was firmly entrenched in the minds of the American electorate. In other words, Americans viewed inner cities as bastions of filth, evil, and immorality. Unfortunately, for some drug use and gang violence were part of the everyday experiences of youth in large urban cities. Thus, Salt-N-Pepa had to stake out an alternative space where the discourse of their urban communities, used as both a musical backdrop and foregrounded as a major topic could be educational, entertaining, and rhetorical.

In many ways, they were a very successful and highly visible female rap group. On the one hand, with slick promotion, great visual videos, and sly rhymes, Salt-N-Pepa made it acceptable for everyday working class women in urban communities but also women in all regions to talk about sex, sex acts, and sexual desires. In their song "No One Does It Better" from their 1993 album *Very Necessary,* Salt rhymes: "I'm ready for the world, rub me down… proceed, Let's do it while you hold me in the air-don't drop me." In a later verse in the song Pepa raps: "cuz when the bugle is blown it's all tongue and no teeth, You're

getting' done between the sheets" ("No One Does it Better"). Or in their last album *Brand New* in the song "Do Me Right" Salt raps:

> Your ways got me singing your praise with the next phase
> I count the days, you're so amazin, I'm cravin' your skills
> My temperature's blazin' show me how it feels
> I'm savin' my secret sauce for the course (That's right)

Salt-N-Pepa's music functioned between a complicated social class nexus. As I have stated previously, black women's sexuality has traditionally been viewed by the larger society as too sexualized. This assumption by the larger society has also been adopted intra-racially. Put another way, when black women dancers and models *allow* their bodies to be used as sites for sexual pleasure in rap music videos or as video eye candy, then they become the object of scorn and criticism from members of their own community. Traditionally, elite and middle class black women have controlled the external models that were necessary to script better images of black women. Shanara R. Reid-Brinkley writes about the ways elite and middle class black women normalize "black femininity":

> Class status, demonstrated through the rhetorical and performative assumption of respectability, has historically functioned as a 'tool to regulate black behavior.' The stereotypical representations of poor and working-class black women 'become the texts of what not to be' for middle-and upper-class black women…Class ideology is a means of confining and controlling appropriate performances of black femininity. The 'black lady' can be held as the standard only if that representation can be defined in opposition to the over-sexualized, lower-class black woman, 'the jezebel.' (246)

The performative characteristic of Salt-N-Pepa's music was to assert dignity within the scope of an urban working class consciousness. Instead of rapping about changing urban working class women's values, behaviors, tastes, and morals, they argued instead for respectability within the lives and experiences of working class women. Salt-N-Pepa continued to use working class rhetoric throughout their tenure as visible female emcees.

Mc Lyte: A Great Female Lyrist

Lana Moore, better known to rap fans as Mc Lyte, was fast on the heels of her contemporaries, Salt, Pepa, and Spin. Two years after Salt-N-Pepa released their debut album *Hot, Cool, and Vicious*, Mc Lyte released *Lyte as a Rock* in 1988. Like Salt, Pepa, and Spin, Mc Lyte was born and raised in one of New York City's boroughs: "although born in Queens and currently based in Cali,

Mc Lyte has called the gritty asphalt of Planet Brooklyn home since the days when she walked to class in East Flatbush wearing a dungaree blazer and skirt uniform" (Gonzales 42). Whether Mc Lyte calls Brooklyn home, one thing is for sure, her visibility in rap music was as important as Salt-N-Pepa's but also different than theirs. As highly visible female rap performers, Salt, Pepa, and Spin used their sexuality and good looks to their advantage. They were rappers but they were also great performers on the stage. They wore revealing clothes and danced provocatively in their rap music videos and on the stage. Their producer Herby Luv Bug initially wrote their raps verses for them. As they matured as artists, they wrote their own verses but Mc Lyte is credited with writing her own verses even as a novice rapper. In addition, Mc Lyte was a better lyricist than Salt, Pepa, and Spin and her explosive and mature delivery separates her from them as well. What they do share as New York City bred artists is the working class rhetoric and urban consciousness evident in their music.

Undoubtedly, Mc Lyte's role and visibility in rap music is a product of her desire to be a true and well-respected artist. Simply put, Mc Lyte's rap style was more important than sex appeal. She did not intend to be eye-candy on the mic. Early in her career, Mc Lyte remarked: 'I wanted the male rappers to listen to my rhymes as opposed to looking at my body,' she says. 'I wanted to be taken seriously---like, 'Don't even look at that, just listen to what I am saying'" (Gonzales 46). Mc Lyte has been taken seriously ever since her first album was released.

As I indicated in an earlier section, this article is not focused on all of the rappers' songs. Rather, my aim is to talk about the individual and collective work of each artist as a way to talk about their roles in hip hop and to make distinctions where appropriate. In this section on Mc Lyte, I locate places where working class rhetoric with urban themes and phrases are apparent in her songs. I also address the ways that her music is persuasive. Additionally, I begin this section chronologically, using songs from Mc Lyte's earliest albums and ending with her 1993 album *Ain't No Other* to assert that she had a prominent role in hip hop and was a highly visible rap performer in late 1980s and 1990s. As a female emcee in the late 1980s and 1990s, Mc Lyte's lyrical talent, bold delivery, smooth rhymes, and urban lyrics was unmatched during her heyday.

Mc Lyte's Urban Working Class Lyrics and Themes

One of her most brilliant rap songs, "I Cram to Understand You," comes from her debut album *Lyte as a Rock.* Urban and witty, "I Cram" weaves together an inner-city narrative full of youthful naiveté about the perils of drug use and love. In the first verse, Mc Lyte uses "Empire" and the city as a constructive backdrop and a rhetorical site:

In Empire winked his eye, and then he kept walkin'

> And all of those who live in Brooklyn just know what I talkin'
> The roller disco where we all used to go
> Just to have some fun back in 1981
> You know that place, Empire Boulevard ("I Cram to Understand You").

In the third verse, she continues to use terms identified with urban living. She rhymes:

> Forgotten, next month we went to the Deuce
> Well, I thought it kinda strange cause you had lots of juice
> You knew the dopes, the pushers, the addicts, everybody
> Asked ya how you met em, said you met em at a party
> Then these girls tried to tell me you were sellin the stuff.

By the end of the fifth verse, Mc Lyte knows that her boyfriend has cheated on her with two girls: an unnamed girl and a girl named Crack. This rap song operates on multiple levels, which illustrates Mc Lyte's lyrical and delivery skills as a rapper. Moreover, rap fans are also introduced to Mc Lyte's rhetorical skills. In one way, "I Cram" is a cautionary tale. In another way, the song is an amusing summation on relationships between men and women. However, it is not didactic. As a rhetor, it is important to know one's audience. And, as a rhetor, Mc Lyte is familiar with her audience and knows the kind of words to use without being didactic and offensive. She is aware of the rhetorical events and situations, sites, and urban vernacular phrases that will connect with her working class urban audiences. Karlyn Khors Campbell identifies four ways to:

> Define an 'audience.' An audience is: (1) those *exposed* to the rhetorical act, the *empirical* audience; (2) the *target* audience, the *ideal* audience at whom the act is aimed; (3); the *agents of change,* those who have the capacity to do as the rhetor wishes, who can make changes; (4) the *role* the audience is asked to play as it is *created* by the rhetorical action (71).

Mc Lyte's song targets three specific audiences. First, she targets familiar Brooklyn friends and acquaintances who skated at the Empire. Second, she addresses women who have been cheated on. Third, she targets urban working class audiences who have been affected by the drugs that were having a negative influence on the social and economic lives of inner city residents in the 1980s.

In her second album, *Eyes on This,* released in 1989, Mc Lyte's rap songs remain entrenched in the experiences and realities of urban working class life. As a result, she continues to utilize working class rhetoric as a way to talk

about class issues affecting working class communities in large urban cities in the late 1980s. In another brilliant rap song "Cappuccino," Mc Lyte reveals her narrative sensibilities, smooth delivery, and rhetorical skills. Similar to her song "I Cram," "Cappuccino" is also a cautionary tale. In the song, the café becomes a rhetorical site where important decisions are made. In the narrative structure of the song, the narrator decides to go to the "Westside, midtown" to get a cappuccino. As it happens, the narrator has perhaps made the wrong decision. When she enters the café, she is "grabbed…by the throat" and subsequently "shot in a shoot-out" and dies. As the narrator continues to narrate her story, the ills of the city are foregrounded in the song. As the narrator frames the story, after death, she becomes a witness to the mistakes people made while living. Mc Lyte raps:

> Then I saw a girl, her name was Mary
> Introduced to drugs by her boyfriend Harry
> He sold crack to the kids on the uptown corners
> A social worker named Hannah Smith tried to warn her
> But she wouldn't listen, no one listens. ("Cappuccino")

On a micro level, the characters in "Cappuccino" participate in their own demise. Warned not to fall victim to the city's alluring street life, Mary, unfortunately, fails to heed the advice of a social worker who understands the hazards of drug use. On a macro-level, the narrator laments that all of "us" fail to listen and thus, death is the inevitable outcome for people who make poor decisions. Metaphorically then, the café acts as a rhetorical site and as a metaphor for poor decision-making. Marcia A. Dawkins describes the way hip hop rappers use metaphors. She contends: "hip hop rappers code and describe reality using metaphors and in so doing persuade their audiences to construct or frame the world according to their images" (65). Sonja K. Foss explains how rhetors effectively use metaphors,

> When metaphor is seen as a way of knowing the world, it plays a particular role in argumentation. Metaphor does not simply provide support for an argument; instead, the structure of the metaphor itself argues. The metaphor explicates the appropriateness of the associated characteristics of one term to those of another term and thus invite an audience to adopt the resulting perspective (301-02).

Mc Lyte's café metaphor is clever. Using the café as a rhetorical site and assigning meaning to a drink that causes her to "voyage through death" is a sign of her ability to use language creatively, argue effectively, and to influence different audiences inside and outside urban communities.

Even though Mc Lyte's rhymes evoke an urban working class rhetorical consciousness, her music still speaks to a broader audience. In light of her ability to cross geographical and ideological boundaries, her rap verses are never too far away from the realities, desires, and experiences of the urban working class. In her hit song, "RuffNeck," from her 1993 album *Ain't No Other,* Mc Lyte gives a specific *shout-out* to urban working class black males. She explicitly articulates a social and relational space for black males who are not rooted in an elite or middle class consciousness. In the first verse she raps:

> I need a ruffneck, I need a dude with attitude
> Who only needs his fingers with his food
> Karl Kani saggin' timbos draggin'
> Frontin' in his ride with his homeboys braggin
> Lyin' 'bout the lyte how he knocked the boots last night
> But he's a ruffneck, so that's alright ("RuffNeck)

This verse can be read in multiple ways. On the one hand, Mc Lyte has normalized urban working class black male characteristics. All too often, the ruffneck prototype urban black male embodied criminality. However, Mc Lyte recasts this prototype and makes him acceptable, despite his marginality. In her world, his sagging pants and Timberland boots are appealing rather than appalling. His social manners, clearly offensive to mainstream society, are sexy to her. Mc Lyte persuasively elevated the urban, street, working class black male with her hit song "Ruffneck:" "her biggest hit ever, and the first gold single ever by a female hip hop artist" (Gonzales 48).

In Mc Lyte's rap music repertoire, she certainly rapped about issues that were important to different social classes. Yet, throughout her career, she has paid homage to urban working class issues and challenges. Michael Gonzales calls Mc Lyte's raps "urban folklore" (45). Like her contemporaries, Salt-N-Pepa, during her primetime as a rap emcee, she was highly visible and important to the development of rap music. That she helped carve out an alternative rhetorical space steeped in the cultural practices, sites, and events of the urban working class is no small feat for a woman rapping in the late 1980s and 1990s. According to Gwendolyn Pough:

> Mc Lyte's lyrical skills and verbal prowess topped those of a lot of her male peers when she initially came out. Her flow was unique, and while some might say that we had never heard a girl rap like that before, I would venture to say that we had never heard anyone rap like that before. I cannot imagine contemporary rap music and Hip-Hop culture if Mc Lyte had never performed. Her delivery was so dynamic that she elevated the rap game by simply being in it (10-11).

Mc Lyte's contribution to the history of hip hop is vital. She was a pioneer in a rap world that was and remains dominated by male voices.

The Visibly Invisible Jean Grae

There have been major and minor women rap performers who were rapping during Mc Lyte's heyday and those who came after her. One of the most prominent female rap performers who was Mc Lyte's contemporary was Queen Latifah. After they faded from the spotlight as emcees, Da Brat, Foxy Brown, Lil' Kim, Trina, and Eve emerged in the mid to late 1990s. To a large extent, these ladies were highly visible female rap performers. In fact, Da Brat, Foxy Brown, and Lil' Kim's hyper-visibility was brought on by their bad tempers and poor choices. In some way, Da Brat, Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim have all been connected to the legal system. Da Brat was sued for assaulting a fan at a club and Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim have served jail time. Although their social behaviors are sometimes wanting, they were significant female emcees and their highly visible and volatile roles as rappers also helped change the role of women in rap from the mid 1990s to the 2000s.

Nevertheless, visibility is a weird and wonderful term. It would be difficult to talk about the role of women in rap music without writing about one of the most gifted rappers ever in hip hop: Jean Grae. Although Grae's skills as a rapper are phenomenal, she is, like many female rap performers in rap music today visibly invisible. She is not invisible because she cannot rap. Any initial interaction with Grae's songs reveals her talent. Unfortunately, in today's rap market, scantily clad women rappers with less talent sell more albums than women like Grae. Sadly, the balance that women rappers were afforded to be different physically, stylistically, and lyrically during Mc Lyte, Queen Latifah, and Monie Love's tenure has not really occurred in the 2000s. Grae's contemporaries, who *are* visible in rap music, like Lil' Kim and Trina use sex appeal and raunchy lyrics to sell records. Grae relies on her intellectual acumen and powerful observatory skills to sell records.

Her first album, *Attack of the Attacking Things,* was released in 2001. To date, she has released four full length studio albums. Unfortunately, her record sales have not garnered her commercial success. To judge Grae's talent on commercial sales would be a mistake. Grae's music embodies a rare combination of lyrical virtuosity and smooth delivery. Her rhymes are complex and her rhythmic flow is at once a fast syncopation but also a slow drive. Despite Grae's commercial invisibility, she has a huge underground following. To underground hip hop fans, Grae is *the truth.* They recognize her talent. In fact, Grae is so talented and her lyrical content so diverse, it is difficult to define the totality of her work. She is an eclectic artist who discusses a myriad of topics in her rap songs. Jason King states that: "she compels the underground to get crunk and the mainstream to crack books. She compels local yokels to think global…and internationalist dreams to get real (her style is rooted in New York

streets") (1). Despite Grae's range, it is not a problem to assert that she, like Salt-N-Pepa and Mc Lyte, employs and invokes the urban terrain and working class rhetoric to persuade listeners to act. Karlyn Khors Campbell defines a rhetorical act as an:

> Intentional, created, polished attempt to overcome the obstacles in a given situation with a specific audience on a given issue to achieve a particular end. A rhetorical act creates a message whose shape and form, beginning and end, are stamped on it by a human author with a goal for an audience (7).

For example, in "Block Party," on her 2002 debut album *Attack of the Attacking Things* Grae implores her rap fans to explore new geographical places and ideological terrains:

> Circulate, cultivate your mind and soul, your heart and your body
> So stagnant; niggaz, get off you block and travel
> Stop actin' like your flesh is metal and your hood's a magnet
> We need to globalize, further spread on this earth

In sum, Grae's position is that the physical space of the city block offers both comfort and limits to its inhabitants. In spite of the comfort familiarity offers, she argues that it is dangerous to remain physically and ideologically attached to one city block. In other words, Grae is mindful that constraint on one's physical space limits one's ability to understand oneself and the world at large. This problem affects many Americans but also urban youths who are economically incapable or are afraid to experience *life* outside their own home spaces.

Like Salt-N-Pepa and Mc Lyte, Grae's music continues to be inspired by the social landscape of urban life. As a product of the late 1980s and 1990s, Grae has witnessed the continual decline of civility among America's youth and she has observed the decline of artistry in rap music. In her song "My Crew" on her 2003 album *The Bootleg of the Bootleg EP,* she cleverly describes the extent to which violence has infiltrated the corpus of rap music narratives:

> We buried ourselves under the jail
> Without shovels, and dirt under our nails
> Bubbles with crime and trouble tales
> And street violence turned extreme
> Calling out names…
> But just realize what ya'll done
> We've given'em reasons to scream on us

Like many lovers of rap music, Grae is critical of artists who use violence as a muse to write empty and tired verses. Although violence is a real part of life for

youth living in America's inner cities, the often arbitrary and silly use of violence as a metaphor is unnecessary. Put another way, Grae argues against co-opting the troubles of the urban landscape to sell records.

There is much more to Grae's genius than what I have described here. What I can say is that Grae's attention to urban working class issues is as much a part of her repertoire as Salt-N-Pepa and Mc Lyte's music. Sadly, Grae is not as visible as Salt-N-Pepa and Mc Lyte. She, like many women in rap, is visibly invisible. One thing is for sure, however; she is not invisible because her body is used as a sexual prop in a rap music video. She is visibly invisible because her music has yet to receive adequate attention.

Conclusion

As rap music videos became more important in the distribution of rap music sales, women's roles in hip hop culture changed dramatically. On the one hand, in the early formation of rap music, women were all but invisible on a national scale. In local communities on the east coast, such as the New York City boroughs, all women crews and individual rap performers were visible. Even in neighborhood enclaves in Philadelphia women were visible rappers too. By the mid to late 1980s, women rappers were gaining visibility on a national and international scale. This is in part due to Salt-N-Pepa's visibility as the first successful female rap group. Following their successes, major rap performers surfaced. Mc Lyte, Queen Latifah, Monie Love, Yo Yo, Queen Pen, Da Brat, Foxy Brown, Lil' Kim, Eve, and a host of minor female emcees emerged such as Rage, Mia X, Rah Digga, and Remy Ma. But, interestingly, paradoxically, and simultaneously, while early rappers such as Salt-N-Pepa and Mc Lyte were rewriting the roles of women in rap music using an urban working class rhetorical consciousness to speak to the fans and the broader society, women's positive and visible roles all but came to a screeching halt. Of course Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim were successful rappers in the 1990s and 2000s respectively, but their raunchy lyrics did little to help put other women rappers on the mic. In essence, their relative success did not help the visibility of female rap performers.

While the female rap emcee is losing ground, women in rap music videos are as visible as ever. As the importance of rap music videos came to help rap albums sell, male rap performers strategically placed scantily clad women in videos that had nothing to do with the content of their rap songs. And, even when the songs were in some way connected to women, the camera's attention to women's breasts and butts only helped reinforce the idea that women really had and have no place in hip hop culture other than to excite young male rap fans. In the final analysis, women in hip hop remain visibly invisible.

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