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**In the Same Boat and at Each Other's Throat:  
Gender Politics in Female-Male Collaborations in Hip Hop Music, 1996-2006**

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It is no secret that both female and male Hip Hop artists often participate in the overt objectification of women's bodies. On any given day, one can turn on BET or MTV and catch a glimpse of several scantily clad women dancing or gyrating at the disposal of one or more male rap artists. These visual images are also present in Hip Hop magazines, such as *The Source* and *XXL*, one that showcases a section called "Eye Candy," in which female models are featured wearing skimpy bathing suits and lingerie, while there is no such alternative featuring male models in the same manner. However, these women, whose counterparts are called "video hoes," have no voice; they never enter into a dialogue with the male rappers or audiences; they strictly serve as "eye candy," objects used to stimulate sexual desires. On the other hand, female rappers do have a voice, and they often enter into a dialogue with male rappers in the form of collaboration, also known as a "collabo." These collabos are important, because as Hip Hop critic Tricia Rose writes,

Dialogism resists the one-dimensional opposition between male and female rappers as respectively sexist and feminist. It also accommodates the tension between sympathetic racial bonds among black men and women as well as black women's frustrations regarding sexual oppression at the hands of black men. As Cornel West aptly describes it, 'the pressure on Afro-Americans as a people has

forced the black man closer to the black woman: they are in the same boat. But they are also at each other's throat.

I plan to look specifically at the collaborations between female and male rappers in order to analyze the dynamics of black gender relations as represented in Hip Hop and to critique the dialogue that happens *between* male and female rappers in regards to the sexual power, truncated economic opportunity, and sexism. Doing this will allow me to uncover the modes of acceptance, modes of complacency, and modes of resistance that black women have adopted in order to cope with the society in which they live. I will examine the collaborations of five of the most popular female rappers of the last decade: Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Missy Elliott, Trina, and Eve with some of the most popular male rappers, such as Ludacris, Nas, and Jay-Z.

Critics have taken notice of the tendency for black music to reflect the ongoing contradictions present in black American life. Stuart Hall surmised that "black popular culture, like all popular cultures in the modern world, is bound to be contradictory." One of the most prevalent contradictions in regards to black gender relationships that turns up in rap music is the affirmation of female rappers of patriarchal norms and the tendency for them to express heartfelt concerns with being independent or strong enough not to be taken advantage of by black men. This is demonstrated in Missy Elliott's remix to her song "Hoy Boyz," featured on her 1999 sophomore album *Da Real World*, which features male rapper Nas and female rapper Eve. In the song, Missy and Eve rap about liking "hot boyz," men who embody hypermasculine, gangster-like qualities, such as being involved in lucrative drug trafficking, using brute and aggressive force to protect their property and loved ones, and being excellent lovers. The "hot boy" is characterized through rapper Nas, who raps, "Get your momma's house shot up/ bodies all chopped up/ when them bodies pop up/ I ain't gettin' locked up." Interestingly, both Missy and

Eve embrace patriarchal norms in that they both desire to domestically take care of a man who can protect and take care of them financially, a man like Nas. Missy sings, “Can I move witchu/ Do you need some help?/ I’ll cook boy/ I’ll give you more.” Yet, they challenge patriarchal norms at the same time. Missy lets the same man know that she will not sacrifice her needs for his, and later in the song, Eve does the same. She raps, “Hot boy, keep me right/ Play your part and I’ll keep it tight/ Where else you gon’ be in the middle night/ but up in the sheets wit’ me, aight?” Like Missy, she refuses to settle for less than what she deserves, and in turn, will give her man what he deserves. Both Missy and Eve’s declarations closely resembles Joan Morgan’s “Memo of Retirement,” in which she declares her retirement from “men who expect her to support them unequivocally without having needs of her own.”

One other contradiction that surfaces in these collabos is the tendency for the female rappers to champion independence while declaring their ability to secure economic advancement by any means, even if that means taking advantage of the opposite sex. Morgan writes, “Sex has become the bartering chip many [young black] women use to gain protection, wealth, and power.” This is revealed in the collaboration between Foxy Brown and Jay-Z on the song “Ain’t No Nigga” from Jay-Z’s 1996 debut album *Reasonable Doubt*. In general, the song is about a woman excusing her mate’s sexual escapades outside of the relationship because of his ability to provide for her economically. Jay-Z raps, “Got you a beeper to feel important/ surrounding your feet in Joanie Degas and Charles Jordan [...] but love, you know these hoes be makin’ me weak [...] and so I creep,” indicating that he makes sure his girlfriend is more than economically stable, to the point of luxury, but can’t resist his sexual temptation for other women. On the chorus, a female singer croons, “Ain’t no nigga like the one I got [...] Sleeps around but he gives me a lot.” Using the framework of a traditional, monogamous relationship, most feminists

would argue that the fact that he sees other women is in itself oppressive, especially since most often, if women do not remain faithful, they are labeled derogatorily. Along these lines, Kimberlé Crenshaw reminds us that “unlike that of men [...] women’s sexual value is portrayed as a depletable commodity: By expending it, girls become whores and boys become men.” While this societal norm of what is acceptable sexual behavior for women and men cannot be excused entirely as a non-influential factor, what has to be considered is the fact that often, these female rappers often come from depressed financial situations and are primarily concerned with economic advancement more than tradition and monogamy. Foxy Brown makes it clear that she doesn’t care how her man “moves with them other mamis,” because she has his economic support. This is, however, problematic, because for some critics, like Sheila Radford-Hill, sexuality should more closely coincide with freedom of expression rather than economic advancement. She remarks, “In hip-hop, sex is not something you do to express who you are. Sex is something you do to get what you want [...] in ways that confuse freedom with license.”

To the contrary, other critics do acknowledge the level of freedom hypersexual female rappers express in their blunt sexual behavior. Pough contends that “the sexually explicit lyrics of these women rappers offer black women a chance to face old demons and not let the stereotypes of slavery inform or control their lives. [Their lyrics] offer black women a chance to be proud of—and indeed flaunt—their sexuality.” One female rapper that has been lauded as well as maligned for her hypersexuality is Trina. It is her affirmation that women can use their sexual power to get what they want. She also resists the tendency of black women to repress their sexuality because of societal norms that require women to be chaste. This is evidenced on Trina’s 2002 sophomore album *Diamond Princess*, on which she collaborates with rapper Ludacris on “B R Right.” In a line that reads like independence and freedom of sexuality, Trina

raps, “You saw me grace *The Source*/ You saw me work the *Vibe*/ Bitches, I work for mines.” She also adamantly advocates that women should be financially independent. Later in the song, speaking rather than rapping directly to her female audience, she says, “You got too much time on your hands. I want y’all [...] to get a job, up your game.” However, to the contrary, Trina makes it clear that for her, sex is not just about freedom of expression and that she will use sex to get what she wants. When Ludacris raps, “Either get dropped or drop them drawers [underwear],” Trina retorts, “Want me?/ This shit gon’ cost.” Still and yet, it should be noted that not all female rappers embrace the sex as commodity theory or mentality.

This is demonstrated in Eve’s song “Got It All,” a collaboration with Jadakiss on the Ruff Ryders’ (both their record label at the time) 2000 compilation CD *Ryde or Die, Volume 2*. This particular song is an example of the cases in which female and male rappers use the collabo to air out their grievances about one another. In the chorus, Eve and Jadakiss trade lines back and forth about whether or not all women are gold diggers. Eve declares that she is not, and Jadakiss begs to differ. While Eve raps, “Don’t want your dough/ I don’t want your cars/ Don’t want your jewels/ No not at all,” Jadakiss can be heard in the background negating her comments with a series of “Uh-huh,” “Yes, you do,” and “Stop lyin’.” Unlike Foxy Brown, Trina, and others, Eve does not express the desire to achieve economic advancement through her male counterparts. In this manner, she is resistant to the patriarchal norms of heterosexual courtship, which requires women to rely on men to “bring home the bacon.” In this way, Eve closely resembles female rapper MC Lyte, popular in the late 80s and early 90s. Rose quoted Lyte as saying, “Both of [men and women] need each other and we’re just coming to a realization that we do.” Rose further articulates that “Lyte constructs women’s independence and male and female codependence as compatible forces.”

In almost direct contrast with Eve, Li'l Kim is most known for being a hypersexual rapper who takes no issue with putting her body on display in rap videos, magazines, and in her stage performances. For many reasons, though, her blatant sexuality can be read as being resistant to the historical notion of black women to repress their sexuality. In remembering the sexual politics of the black clubwomen of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Pough recalls Hazel Carby's "policing of black women's bodies" and Darlene Clark Hine's "culture of dissemblance" theories. Pough writes, "Each phrase highlights extreme responses to the sexually stereotyped attitudes surrounding black womanhood. Carby's policing highlights the amount of control exerted on the lives of young black women so that they would not become wayward women who fit all the negative stereotypes. Hine's culture of dissemblance highlights the self-policing that black women during this time participated in as a mode of self-protection; it prohibited any public displays of sexuality." Contrarily, Li'l Kim makes no bones about being totally resistant to the prohibition of public sexuality. Interestingly, she can be found putting her body on display in a number of settings that are not intended for a predominantly male audience, such as the women's magazines *Vogue* and *Nylon*. However, there are contradictions in this as well. As Rose commented, "Works by black women rappers that place black women's bodies in the spotlight [...] affirm black female beauty and yet often preserve the logic of female sexual objectification."

Also contradictory is that Li'l Kim also positions herself as "one of the niggas" in many of her raps. Morgan finds this problematic, because she claims that "feminism is not simply about being able to do what the boys do—get high, talk endlessly about their wee-wees and what have you." However, like most female rappers, Li'l Kim does not identify herself as a feminist, and this type of posturing can be seen in her collaboration with rap group Mobb Deep on the

“Quiet Storm” remix on their 1999 album *Mobb Muzik*. Interestingly, in this song, Li'l Kim takes the opportunity to address important issues not concerning sex, but concerning her legitimacy as a rap lyricist. She directly attacks critics who charge that she does not write her own rap lyrics and that her success derives mostly from her association with deceased rapper Notorious B.I.G. She raps, “I’m a leader,” and “I put 100% in every line I drop.” In “Quiet Storm,” Li'l Kim proves that she can be more than just a sex symbol and can hold her own lyrically and be just as good as or *better* than her male counterparts, which is evident in most fans’ analysis that her verse was the best verse on the song.

In conclusion, Rose argues that “women rappers cannot be situated in total opposition to male rappers; they support and critique male rappers’ sexual discourse in a number of contradictory ways.” It has been my intent to use the collaboration between female and male rappers to illustrate how this support and critique is demonstrated on a relatively equal playing field. I assess the collaboration as an equal playing field, because it allows both the female and male rapper to lyrically express their concerns on whichever topic they choose. Neither voice is privileged, and neither voice is silenced. It has been recognized in this essay and other literature on Hip Hop that there are many contradictions in rap music. Rana Emerson argues, “In the cultural productions of black women [...] hegemonic and counterhegemonic themes often occur simultaneously and are interconnected, resulting in a complex, often contradictory and multifaceted representation of black womanhood” (117). In the collaborations I have looked at here, affirmations of patriarchy have been coupled with declarations of independence, the mentality that embraces sex as a commodity has been coupled with the mentality that sex is not for sale, and staunch femininity has been coupled with the ability of some female rappers to traverse into realms of masculinity. The themes present in collabos and rap music in general are

not limited to those I have uncovered here; however, what the analysis of these specific collaborations provides is an opportunity to understand how black women and men interact in regards to gender politics in a genre of popular culture that claims to be representative of a mass amount of black individuals. What is true of female-male rap collaborations and rap music in general is that there are a number of contradictions and tensions that, again, can be critiqued in order to understand the music that Radford-Hill claims, with warrant, “is defining our sons’ and our daughters’ social attitudes and political perspectives.”