Much had changed in my life by the time a million black men marched in Washington. I no longer live in Harlem. The decision had less to do with gun-shot lullabies, dead bodies 'round the corner, or the pre-adolescents safe-sexing it in my stairwells—running consensual trains on a twelve-year-old girl whose titties and ass grew faster than her self-esteem—and more to do with my growing desensitization to it all. As evidenced by the zombie-like stare in my neighbors' eyes, the ghetto's dues for emotional immunity is high. And I knew better than to test its capacity for contagion.

So I broke out. Did a Bronx girl's unthinkable and moved to Brooklyn—where people had kids and dogs and gardens and shit. And a park called Prospect contained ol' West Indian men who reminded me of yet another home and everything good about my father.

It is the Bronx that haunts me, though. There a self, long dead, roams the Concourse, dressed in big bamboo earrings and flare-legged Lees, guarding whatever is left of her memories. I murdered her. Slowly. By sipping miasmic cocktails of non-ghetto dreams laced with raw ambition. I had to. She would
have clung so tightly to recollections of monkey bars, sour pickles, and BBQ Bontons, slow dances to “Always and Forever,” and tongue kisses coquito sweet—love that existed despite the insanities and rising body counts—that escape would have been impossible.

It is the Bronx, not Harlem that calls me back. Sometimes she is the songsong cadences of my family’s West Indian voices. Or the childhood memories of girls I once called friends. Sistas who refused the cocktail and had too many babies way too young. Sistas who saw welfare, bloodshed, dust, then crack steal away any traces of youth from their smiles.

Their spirits are the spirits I see darting between the traffic and the La Marqueta vibes of Fordham Road. Their visitations dog my equanimity, demanding I explain why this “feminism thing” is relevant to any of their lives. There are days I cannot. I’m too busy wondering what relevance it has in my own.

... And then came October 16, the day Louis Farrakhan declared that black men would finally stand up and seize their rightful place as leaders of their communities. ... It wasn’t banishment from the march that was so offensive—after all, black women have certainly convened at our share of closed-door assemblies. It was being told to stay home and prepare food for our warrior kings. What infuriated progressive black women was that the rhetoric of protection and atonement was just a seductive mask for good old-fashioned sexism.


The “feminist” reaction to the Million Man March floored me. Like a lot of folks, I stayed home to watch the event. My phone rang off the hook—sista friends as close as round the corner and as far away as Jamaica moved by the awesome sight of so many black men of different hues, classes, and sexual orientations gathered together peacefully for the sole purpose of bettering themselves. The significance of the one group in this country most likely to murder each other—literally take each other out over things as trifling as colors or stepping on somebody’s sneakers—was not lost on us. In fact, it left us all in tears.

Still, as a feminist, I could hardly ignore that my reaction differed drastically from many of my feminist counterparts. I was not mad. Not mad at all. Perhaps it was because growing up sandwiched between two brothers blessed me with an intrinsic understanding of
the sanctity of male and female space. (Maintaining any semblance of harmony in our too-small apartment meant figuring out the times my brothers and I could share space—and the times we could not—with a quickness.)

Perhaps it was because I've learned that loving brothers is a little like parenting—sometimes you gotta get all up in that ass. Sometimes you gotta let them figure it out on their own terms—even if it means they screw up a little. So while the utter idiocy inherent in a nineties black leader suggesting women stay home and make sandwiches for their men didn't escape me, it did not nullify the march's positivity either. It's called being able to see the forest and the trees.

Besides, I was desperately trying to picture us trying to gather a million or so sistas to march for the development of a new black feminist movement. Highly, highly unlikely. Not that there aren't black women out there actively seeking agendas of empowerment—be it personal or otherwise—but let's face it, sistas ain't exactly checkin' for the f-word.

When I told older heads that I was writing a book which explored, among other things, my generation of black women's precarious relationship with feminism, they looked at me like I was trying to re-invent the wheel. I got lectured ad nauseam about "the racism of the White Feminist Movement," "the sixties and the seventies," and "feminism's historic irrelevance to black folks." I was reminded of how feminism's ivory tower elitism excludes the masses. And I was told that black women simply "didn't have time for all that shit."

While there is undeniable truth in all of the above except the latter—the shit black women don't have time for is dying and suffering from exorbitant rates of solo parenting, domestic violence, drug abuse, incarceration, AIDS, and cancer—none of them really explain why we have no black feminist movement. Lack of college education explains why 'round-the-way girls aren't reading bell hooks. It does not explain why even the gainfully degreed (self included) would rather trick away our last twenty-five dollars on that new nineties black girl fiction (trife as some of it may be) than some of those good, but let's face it, laboriously academic black feminist texts.

White women's racism and the Feminist Movement may explain the justifiable bad taste the f-word leaves in the mouths of women who are over thirty-five, but for my generation they are abstractions drawn from someone else's history. And without the power of memories, these phrases mean little to nothing.
Despite our differences about the March, Brent-Zooks's article offered some interesting insights.

... Still, for all our double jeopardy about being black and female, progressive black women have yet to galvanize a mass following or to spark a concrete movement for social change. ... Instead of picking up where Ida B. Wells left off, black women too often allow our efforts to be reduced to the anti-lynching campaigns of the Tupac Shakurs, the Mike Tysons, the O. J. Simpsons and the Clarence Thomases of the world. Instead of struggling with, and against, those who sanction injustice, too often we stoop beneath them, our backs becoming their bridges. ...

Why do we remain stuck in the past? The answer has something to do with not just white racism but also our own fear of the possible, our own inability to imagine the divinity within ourselves. ...2

I agree. At the heart of our generation's ambivalence about the f-word is black women's historic tendency to blindly defend any black man who seems to be under attack from white folks (men, women, media, criminal justice system, etc.). The fact that the brothers may very well be in the wrong and, in some cases, deserve to be buried under the jail is irrelevant—even if the victim is one of us. Centuries of being rendered helpless while racism, crime, drugs, poverty, depression, and violence robbed us of our men has left us misguided, over-protective, hopelessly male-identified, and all too often self-sacrificing.

And yes, fear is part of the equation too, but I don't think it's a fear of the possible. Rather, it is the justifiable fear of what lies ahead for any black woman boldly proclaiming her commitment to empowerment—her sistas' or her own. Acknowledging the rampant sexism in our community, for example, means relinquishing the comforting illusion that black men and women are a unified front. Accepting that black men do not always reciprocate our need to love and protect is a terrifying thing, because it means that we are truly out there, assed out in a world rife with sexism and racism. And who the hell wants to deal with that?

Marc Christian was right. Cojines became a necessary part of my feminist armature—but not for the reasons I would have suspected back then. I used to fear the constant accusations—career opportunism, race treason, collusion with "The Man," lesbianism—a lifetime of explaining what I am not. I dreaded the long, tedious conversations spent exorcising others of the stereotypes
that tend to haunt the collective consciousness when we think of black women and the f-word—male basher, radical literary/academic black women in their forties and fifties who are pathetically separated from real life, burly dreadlocked/crew cut dykes, sexually adventurous lipstick-wearing bisexuals, victims. Even more frightening were the frequent solo conversations I spent exorcising them from my own head.

In time, however, all of that would roll off my back like water.

_Cojones_ became necessary once I discovered that mine was not a feminism that existed comfortably in the black and white of things. The precarious nature of my career's origins was the first indication. I got my start as a writer because I captured the sexual attention of a man who could make me one. It was not the first time my externals would bestow me with such favors. It certainly would not be the last.

My growing fatigue with talking about "the men" was the second. Just once, I didn't want to have to talk about "the brothers," "male domination," or "the patriarchy." I wanted a feminism that would allow me to explore who we are as women—not victims. One that claimed the powerful richness and delicious complexities inherent in being black girls now—sistas of the post—Civil Rights, post-feminist, post soul, hip-hop generation.

I was also looking for permission to ask some decidedly un-P.C. but very real questions:

Can you be a good feminist and admit out loud that there are things you kinda dig about patriarchy? Would I be forced to turn in my "feminist membership card" if I confessed that suddenly waking up in a world free of gender inequities or expectations just might bug me out a little?

Suppose you don't want to pay for your own dinner, hold the door open, fix things, move furniture, or get intimate with whatever's under the hood of a car?

Is it foul to say that imagining a world where you could paint your big brown lips in the most decadent of shades, pile your phat ass into your fave micromini, slip your freshly manicured toes into four-inch fuck-me sandals and have not one single solitary man objectify—I mean roam his eyes longingly over all the intended places—is, like, a total drag for you?

Am I no longer down for the cause if I admit that while total gender equality is an interesting intel-
lectual concept, it doesn't do a damn thing for me erotically? That, truth be told, men with too many "feminist" sensibilities have never made my panties wet, at least not like that reformed thug nigga who can make even the most chauvinistic of "wassup, baby" feel like a sweet, wet tongue darting in and out of your ear.

And how come no one ever admits that part of the reason women love hip-hop—as sexist as it is—is 'cuz all that in-yo-face testosterone makes our nipples hard?

Are we no longer good feminists, not to mention nineties supersistas, if the A.M.'s wee hours sometimes leave us tearful and frightened that achieving all our mothers wanted us to—great educations, careers, financial and emotional independence—has made us wholly undesirable to the men who are supposed to be our counterparts? Men whose fascination with chickenheads leave us convinced they have no interest in dating, let alone marrying, their equals?

And when one accuses you of being completely indecipherable there's really nothing to say 'cuz even you're not sure how you can be a feminist and insist he "respect you as a woman, treat you like a lady, and make you feel safe—like a li'l girl."

In short, I needed a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays. And this was not my foremothers' feminism.

Ironically, reaping the benefits of our foremothers' struggle is precisely what makes their brand of feminism so hard to embrace. The "victim" (read women) "oppressor" (read men) model that seems to dominate so much of contemporary discourse (both black and white), denies the very essence of who we are.

We are the daughters of feminist privilege. The gains of the Feminist Movement (the efforts of black, white, Latin, Asian, and Native American women) had a tremendous impact on our lives—so much we often take it for granted. We walk through the world with a sense of entitlement that women of our mothers' generation could not begin to fathom. Most of us can't imagine our lives without access to birth control, legalized abortions, the right to vote, or many of the same educational and job opportunities available to men. Sexism may be a very real part of my life but so is the unwavering belief that there is no dream I can't pursue and achieve simply because "I'm a woman."

Rejecting the wildly popular notion that embracing the f-word entails nothing more than articulating victimization, for me, is a matter of personal and spiritual survival. Surviving the combined impact of racism and
sexism on the daily means never allowing my writing to suggest that black women aren't more than a bunch of bad memories. We are more than the rapes survived by the slave masters, the illicit familial touches accompanied by whiskey-soured breath, or the acts of violence endured by the fists, knives, and guns of strangers. We are more than the black eyes and heart bruises from those we believed were friends.

Black women can no more be defined by the cumulative sum of our pain than blackness can be defined solely by the transgenerational atrocities delivered at the hands of American racism. Because black folks are more than the stench of the slave ship, the bite of the dogs, or the smoldering of freshly lynched flesh. In both cases, defining ourselves solely by our oppression denies us the very magic of who we are. My feminism simply refuses to give sexism or racism that much power.

Holding on to that protective mantle of victimization requires a hypocrisy and self-censorship I'm no longer willing to give. Calling rappers out for their sexism without mentioning the complicity of the 100 or so video-hos that turned up—G-string in hand—for the shoot; or defending women's reproductive rights without examining the very complicated issue of male choice—specifically the inherent unfairness in denying men the right to choose whether or not they want to parent; or discussing the physical and emotional damage of sexism without examining the utterly foul and unloving ways black women treat each other ultimately means fronting like the shit brothers have with them is any less complex, difficult, or painful than the shit we have with ourselves. I am down, however, for a feminism that demands we assume responsibility for our lives.

In my quest to find a functional feminism for myself and my sistas—one that seeks empowerment on spiritual, material, physical, and emotional levels—I draw heavily on the cultural movement that defines my generation. As post—Civil Rights, post-feminist, post-soul children of hip-hop we have a dire need for the truth.

We have little faith in inherited illusions and idealism. We are the first generation to grow up with all the benefits of Civil Rights (i.e., Affirmative Action, government-subsidized educational and social programs) and the first to lose them. The first to have the devastation of AIDS, crack, and black-on-black violence makes it feel like a blessing to reach twenty-five. Love no longer presents itself wrapped in the romance of basement blue lights, lifetime commitments, or the sweet harmonies of The Stylistics and The Chi-Lites.
Love for us is raw like sushi, served up on sex platters from R. Kelly and Jodeci. Even our existences can't be defined in the past's simple terms: house nigga vs. field nigga, ghetto vs. bourgie, BAP vs. boho because our lives are usually some complicated combination of all of the above.

More than any other generation before us, we need a feminism committed to "keeping it real." We need a voice like our music—one that samples and layers many voices, injects its sensibilities into the old and flips it into something new, provocative, and powerful. And one whose occasional hypocrisy, contradictions, and trifeness guarantee us at least a few trips to the terror-dome, forcing us to finally confront what we'd all rather hide from.

We need a feminism that possesses the same fundamental understanding held by any true student of hip-hop. Truth can't be found in the voice of any one rapper but in the juxtaposition of many. The keys that unlock the riches of contemporary black female identity lie not in choosing Latifah over Lil' Kim, or even Foxy Brown over Salt-N-Pepa. They lie at the magical intersection where those contrary voices meet—the juncture where "truth" is no longer black and white but subtle, intriguing shades of gray.
Feminist criticism, like many other forms of social analysis, is widely considered part of a hostile white culture. For a black feminist to chastise misogyny in rap publicly would be viewed as divisive and counterproductive. There is a widespread perception in the black community that public criticism of black men constitutes collaborating with a racist society. . . .

Michele Wallace, "When Black Feminism Faces the Music, and the Music Is Rap" 
The New York Times
Lord knows our love Jones for hip-hop is understandable. Props given to rap music's artistic merits, its irrefutable impact on pop culture, its ability to be alternately beautiful, poignant, powerful, strong, irreverent, visceral, and mesmerizing—homeboy's clearly got it like that. But in between the beats, booty shaking, and hedonistic abandon, I have to wonder if there isn't something inherently unfeminist in supporting a music that repeatedly reduces me to tits and ass and encourages pimping on the regular. While it's human to occasionally fall deep into the love thang with people or situations that simply aren't good for you, feminism alerted me long ago to the dangers of romancing a misogynist (and ridiculously fine, brilliant ones with gangsta lean are no exception). Perhaps the non-believers were right, maybe what I'd been mistaking for love and commitment for the last twenty years was really nothing but a self-destructive obsession that made a mockery of my feminism.

I needed to know, once and for all, if it was in the best interests of me and my sistas to stay in what was—admittedly—a strange and often painful relationship. The time had come for a little heart-to-

heart, so I started by writing my homeboy this letter:

You know, Boo,

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

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

Sure, I'd say (all defensive). It's easy to judge—to wonder what any woman in her right mind would be doing with that wack motherfucker if you're entering now, before the
sweet times. But the sweetness was there in the beginning of this on-again, off-again love affair. It started almost twenty years ago, around the time when Tony Boyd all mocked-neck and fine gave me my first tongue kiss in the back of 1.S. 148 and the South Bronx gave birth to a culture.

The old-school deejays and M.C.'s performed community service at those schoolyard jams. Intoxicating the crowd with beats and rhymes, they were like shamans sent to provide us with temporary relief from the ghetto's blues. As for sistas, we donned our flare-leg Lees and medallions, became fly-girls, and gave up the love. Nobody even talked about sexism in hip-hop back in the day. All an M.C. wanted then was to be the baddest in battle, have a fly-girl, and take rides in his fresh O.J. If we were being objectified (and I guess we were) nobody cared. At the time, there seemed to be greater sins than being called "ladies" as in "All the ladies in the house, say, Owow!"

Or "fly-girls" as in "what you gonna do?" Perhaps it was because we were being acknowledged as a complementary part of a whole.

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

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

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

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

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

I’m yours, Boo. From cradle to the grave.

I guess it all depends on how you define the f-word. My feminism places the welfare of black women and the black community on its list of priorities. It also maintains that black-on-black love is essential to the survival of both.

We have come to a point in our history, however, when black-on-black love—a love that’s survived slavery, lynching, segregation, poverty, and racism—is in serious danger. The stats usher in this reality like taps before the death march: According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of black two-parent households has decreased from 74 percent to 48 percent since 1960. The leading cause of death among black men ages fifteen to twenty-four is homicide. The majority of them will die at the hands of other black men.

Women are the unsung victims of black-on-black crime. A while back, a friend of mine, a single mother of a newborn (her “babyfather”—a brother—abandoned responsibility before their child was born) was attacked by a pit bull while walking her dog in the park. The owner (a brother) trained the animal to prey on other dogs and the flesh of his fellow community members.

A few weeks later my moms called, upset, to tell me about the murder of a family friend. She was a troubled young woman with a history of substance abuse, aggravated by her son’s murder two years ago.
She was found beaten and burned beyond recognition. Her murderers were not “skinheads,” “The Man,” or “the racist white power structure.” More likely than not, they were brown men whose faces resembled her own.

Clearly, we are having a very difficult time loving one another.

Any feminism that fails to acknowledge that black folks in nineties America are living and trying to love in a war zone is useless to our struggle against sexism. Though it’s often portrayed as part of the problem, rap music is essential to that struggle because it takes us straight to the battlefield.

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

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

Anyone curious about the processes and pathologies that form the psyche of the young, black, and criminal-minded needs to revisit our dearly departed Notorious B.I.G.’s first album, Ready to Die. Chronicling the life and times of the urban “soldier,” the album is a blues-laden soul train that took us on a hustler’s life journey. We boarded with the story of his birth, strategically stopped to view his dysfunctional, warring family, his first robbery, his first stint in jail, murder, drug-dealing, getting paid, partying, sexin’, rappin’, mayhem, and death. Biggie’s player persona might have momentarily convinced the listener that he was livin’ that without a care in the world but other moments divulged his inner hell. The chorus of “Everyday Struggle”: I don’t wanna live no more / Sometimes I see death knockin’ at my front door revealed that “Big Poppa” was also plagued with guilt, regret, and depression. The album ultimately ended with his suicide.
The seemingly impenetrable wall of sexism in rap music is really the complex mask African-Americans often wear both to hide and express the pain. At the close of this millennium, hip-hop is still one of the few forums in which young black men, even surreptitiously, are allowed to express their pain.

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

This is crystal clear to me when I'm listening to hip-hop. Yeah, sistas are hurt when we hear brothers calling us bitches and hos. But the real crime isn't the name-calling, it's their failure to love us—to be our brothers in the way that we commit ourselves to being their sistas. But recognize: Any man who doesn't truly love himself is incapable of loving us in the healthy way we need to be loved. It's extremely telling that men who can only see us as "bitches" and "hos" refer to themselves only as "niggas."

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

Since hip-hop is the mirror in which so many brothers see themselves, it's significant that one of the music's most prevalent mythologies is that black boys rarely grow into men. Instead, they remain perpetually post-adolescent or die. For all the machismo and testosterone in the music, it's frighteningly clear that many brothers see themselves as powerless when it comes to facing the evils of the larger society, accepting responsibility for their lives, or the lives of their children.

So, sista friends, we gotta do what any rational,
survivalist-minded person would do after finding herself in a relationship with someone whose pain makes him abusive. We’ve gotta continue to give up the love but from a distance that’s safe. Emotional distance is a great enabler of unconditional love and support because it allows us to recognize that the attack, the “bitch, ho” bullshit—isn’t personal but part of the illness.

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

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

Notice the emphasis on “community.” Hip-hop isn’t only instrumental in exposing black men’s pain, it brings the healing sistas need right to the surface. Sad as it may be, it’s time to stop ignoring the fact that rappers meet “bitches” and “hos” daily—women who reaffirm their depiction of us on vinyl. Backstage, the road, and the ‘hood are populated with women who would do anything to be with a rapper sexually for an hour if not a night. It’s time to stop fronting like we don’t know who rapper Jeru the Damaja was talking about when he said:

*Now a queen’s a queen but a stunt’s a stunt
You can tell whose who by the things they want*

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

It might've been more convenient to direct our satis-fied rage attention to "the sexist representation of women" in those now infamous Sir Mix-A-Lot videos, to fuss over one sexist rapper, but wouldn't it have been more productive to address the failing self-esteem of the 150 or so half-naked young women who were willing, unpaid participants? And what about how flip we are when it comes to using the b-word to describe each other? At some point we've all been the recipients of competitive, unsisterly, "bitchiness," particularly when vying for male attention.

Since being black and a woman makes me fluent in both isms, I sometimes use racism as an illuminating analogy. Black folks have finally gotten to the point where we recognize that we sometimes engage in oppressive behaviors that white folks have little to do with. Complexion prejudices and classism are illnesses which have their roots in white racism but the perpetrators are certainly black.

Similarly, sistas have to confront the ways we're complicit in our own oppression. Sad to say it, but many of the ways in which men exploit our images and sexuality in hip-hop is done with our permission and coopera-
tion. We need to be as accountable to each other as we believe "race traitors" (i.e., 100 or so brothers in blackface cooning in a skinhead’s music video) should be to our community. To acknowledge this doesn't deny our victimization but it does raise the critical issue of whose responsibility it is to end our oppression. As a feminist, I believe it is too great a responsibility to leave to men.

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

Too much of the discussion regarding sexism and the music focuses on being right. We feel we're right and the rappers are wrong. The rappers feel it's their right to describe their "reality" in any way they see fit. The store owners feel it's their right to sell whatever the
consumer wants to buy. The consumer feels it's his right to be able to decide what he wants to listen to. We may be the "rightest" of the bunch but we sure as hell ain't doing the winning.

I believe hip-hop can help us win. Let's start by recognizing that its illuminating, informative narration and its incredible ability to articulate our collective pain is an invaluable tool when examining gender relations. The information we amass can help create a redemptive, healing space for brothers and sistas.

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

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

As I'm a black woman, I am aware that this doubles my workload—that I am definitely going to have to listen to a lot of shit I won't like—but without these candid discussions, there is little to no hope of exorcising the illness that hurts and sometimes kills us.