“Unladylike Divas”: Language, Gender, and Female Gangsta Rappers*

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Introduction

Gangsta rap, or “hardcore” rap, is a genre of music that historically has been dominated by male recording artists. There is a well-known perception that much of the discourse that takes place in this genre imposes upon certain women categories of status that are taken to be lower than the statuses that the men themselves take (e.g., *bitches* and *hoes*, etc. vs. *pimps* and *hustlers*, etc.). Although some scholarly attention has focused on these kinds of masculine discourses, to my knowledge there has been no systematic study of the ways in which female rappers have taken the discourse styles and subject matter used by the men in gangsta rap and appropriated these in their own verbal art. Most studies have focused on issues nonspecific to women gangsta rappers. For instance, Guevara discusses females trying to maintain a socioculturally “traditional” femininity within hip-hop music and culture. Berry discusses the “positive feminine images” and emergence of black feminist empowerment found in female rappers of the 1980s and early 1990s. Rose devotes but a single paragraph to “gangsta bitches.” She cites one group, Boss, as undermining its own efforts to “pull the trump card on gangsta posturing about sexual prowess” by allowing men to sing their chorus about “letting a ho be a ho” (174).

In this paper I will focus on the performativity of gendered identities. I will take the discourse discussed below—gangsta rap narratives performed by women—to be performances about femininity and performances of femininity. This approach follows Cameron, who examines the discourse of young heterosexual male American college students and analyzes these as performances about and of masculine gendered identities. I will discuss the negotiation of femininity by women artists who perform within a genre of music, gangsta rap, which is traditionally an environment of masculine performance, and which is often perceived to be hostile toward women.¹

Here I will limit my discussion to three female rap artists: Mia X, Lil’ Kim, and the Lady of Rage.² I will claim that these women artists construct, in and through their discourse, alternative femininities that are counterhegemonic to both the norms of femininity in mainstream American society, and the norms of femininity imposed by traditional categories used by males in gangsta rap. I maintain that these alternative femininities are fundamentally ones that claim social power in discourse and, by making these discursive assertions, claim actual social power.

I fully acknowledge that each of these women has her own individualized style, and that the notion of “hegemonic femininities” is problematic.³ Indeed, to the
extent that every individual understands and experiences these hegemonic femininities in different ways, this term is impossible to define in a precise way. However, I will assume that each artist is at least aware of the characteristics of “lady-ness” enunciated by R. Lakoff and others, which include, but are not limited to, assumptions of appropriate ways of speaking for women. Among these are volume, pitch, and such discourse-level factors as mitigation, cooperation, and accommodation, as well as a prohibition on the use of taboo lexical items and topics for discussion.\textsuperscript{4} Such characteristics are also assumed by Coker when, in discussing the use of “pornography” and profanity by novelist Kathy Acker, she states that:

[Acker's] use of taboo words is even more pornographic than Henry Miller's because our cultural mores insist that their use by women is more offensive than their use by men. While male use of taboo words is often testimonial to their virility and social power, female use of taboo words indicates a character beyond the pale of cultural redemption. (Coker 147, cited by Korinkova)

While what constitutes “pornography” or “cultural redemption” is debatable, it is clear that one of the common links among all these women artists and their verbal art is a consciousness that they are engaged in untraditional feminine discourses. Since the use of profanity is only a part of the untraditional discourses involved in gangsta rap, this article will provide other examples of women’s discourse that is “testimonial” to their social power.

The genre of gangsta rap historically has been performed and dominated by males. Thus, it is possible to suppose that the features, or ways of speaking, of the genre have come to be associated with masculine performance. These include “gangsta” images and themes, explicit language, and the actual performance features: cadence, volume, pitch variability, etc. I take the recent use of these features by certain women to indicate that these features are not “masculine,” but “gangsta,” and that these women’s ability to participate in these discourses utilizing these styles is demonstrated in their actual participation.

**Gangsta rap narratives**

Most gangsta rap lyrics tell stories, and these stories are considered legitimate only if the author can persuade the audience that the artist knows (i.e., has phenomenal experience in) what she is talking about. Further, this persuasion is actually performed in the telling of the stories. Hence, much of the discourse in the genre of gangsta rap will be considered here to be “narratives of personal experience,” as discussed by Ochs and Capps. Assuming the position held by Ochs and Capps, and, true to the nature of gangsta rap narratives, these stories need not be empirically “true,” they just need to be “verbalized . . . framings of a sequence of actual or possible life events” (19, emphasis added). That is, the stories told in gangsta rap narratives must be able to be true.

At this point, I should mention briefly what is actually talked about in gangsta rap narratives. Gangsta rap is generally considered a subgenre of the larger category of rap music, which itself is a subcategory of hip-hop. Gangsta rap is differentiable from other rap music in that gangsta rap makes use of images of urban life that are often associated with crime. These images need not be employed within the style of music known as rap, which existed long before it became
“gangstafied.” The imagery of gangsta rap includes the selling and using of illegal drugs; firearms and their use on other people; various sorts of crime (murder, armed robbery, pimping, etc.); and what might be regarded in some circles as “promiscuous” sex. Of course, in the “real world” none of these things is confined to the inner city, or “ghetto,” but, crucially, the gangsta narratives usually are. Thus, the genre of gangsta rap is defined here as rap music that situates gangsta images in gangsta territories. I will also note that not every song recorded by an individual rapper would fall into the category of gangsta rap, but that many of these rappers (including Mia X and Lil’ Kim) explicitly refer to themselves as gangsta rappers nevertheless.

Linde discusses individuals’ uses of “life-story” narratives to create the sense of coherent “selves,” and it is from this perspective that Erving Goffman’s notion of framing can be fruitfully explored with reference to the narratives in gangsta rap. Many (if not most) of the songs written by gangsta rappers can be construed as a narrative sequencing of typically fictional events. Actual allusions to real-life narratives of people who have graduated from perpetrating the kinds of events that they rap about to rapping about them are not uncommon in gangsta rap. However, these narratives often stress the lack of agency of the individuals involved in these often-illegal acts, which they are, according to them, given little choice to avoid. While this lack of agency contrasts with Linde’s findings in her analysis of professionalized, American upper-middle-class personas, it makes sense if we view the situations rapped about as inherently noncoherent. Thus, the rappers’ professed involvement in them is not, from their perspective, of their own choosing. For example, in these discourses there is reference to how the system into which black individuals in poor inner cities are born is “fucked up”; how the violence and gangs were there before they were born; how in order not to be victimized, one has to join the gangs for protection (thus, participation is not really optional); and how access to desired material things is unequally distributed, and one has to protect one’s own, with violence if necessary, etc.

Within a frame of trying to understand what the rappers have experienced and why people engage in such activities, these narratives can be seen as giving coherence to the life-stories that are rapped about. From a different point of view, that of perceived notions of hegemonic white, middle-aged adult mainstream culture, the songs can be seen as trying to disrupt any sense of that mainstream coherence. By using profanity and threatening language, and evoking images of illegal (if not immoral) activities (drugs, violence, etc.), rap music can be seen as disruptive to the norms of mainstream culture.

Linde begins her discussion by stating that “in order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story” (3). I hope to show, by analyzing the discourse used by female gangsta rappers, that Linde is correct but that these notions themselves operate within specific frames. While these “unladylike divas” may not be “good” or “socially proper” individuals (and their life stories are probably not “coherent” or “acceptable”) with respect to mainstream professional American society, they are so with respect to the culture and genre of verbal art in which their stories are crafted, embedded, and understood. In short, the performances of these narratives help to construct coherency in the life stories of these female gangsta rappers; and, in these tellings, the female gangsta rappers are able to construct a novel kind of femininity.
Before getting into the data, however, I would like to emphasize that these narrative tellings are specifically crafted representations. I will be examining these songs as texts, and, although I will discuss the formal features of these individual texts and similarities across texts, I will leave for future research how these texts are received. I will also omit discussion of the broader sociocultural meanings these texts may evoke or inspire. Both Rose and Berry offer very valuable macrolevel discussion of the larger context of women rappers within American society, and discuss further issues of ethnicity, gender, etc. I focus here on the microlevel of specific representations of “selves” created through discourse.

Reconstructing gender in the performance of gangsta rap narratives

There are multiple axes of normativized behavioral expectations for women in any society. These include kinds of discourse that one can engage in and on the things that can be talked about, including aspects of one’s own personal narrative. There are also limits on the kinds of social activities that one can engage in, including the participation in violence and in sexual situations. The failure to engage in any of these activities in the appropriate ways (or, to the same effect, success in engaging in these activities in inappropriate ways) could lead one to be deemed “unladylike.” The general topic of “ladylike” verbal behavior will permeate the discussion of each of the sections below.

Un-ladylike, unlady-like, and/or surprisingly ladylike

There are at least two distinct perspectives on “being a lady” in gangsta rap. One is that taken by Mia X, who has coined (and by coining, claimed) the phrase “unladylike,” which flies in the face of traditional norms of “ladylike” lyrical behavior, thus rejecting them. The other is that of the Lady of Rage, who intends to expand the traditional norms of “ladylike” lyrical behavior to include her own, thus transforming them. Neither artist accepts the hegemonic norms, and, given the genre, conformity to these norms would be impossible.

As noted in the first endnote(*) of this article, Mia X casts herself as the “Unladylike Diva.” One of the interesting and artful things about this complex morphological entry is its inherent ambiguity. There are two possible interpretations. On one, Mia X asserts her ability to be un-ladylike, in the hegemonic sense used by R. Lakoff, where women in mainstream American culture are expected to act in certain ways deemed “ladylike.” On the other reading, Mia X is asserting, through her own performance, her own kind of feminine identity as the “Un-lady,” in that her performance is unlady-like. The point here is that her performance, and her persona, are both “un-ladylike” and “unlady-like” simultaneously, and that the two are mutually constructing. To the extent that her lyrical performance is un-ladylike, she is being unlady-like. The metadiscourse that Mia X employs to this end can be exemplified by a short excerpt from Mia X’s contribution to Master P’s song “Make ‘em Say Ugh”:6

1 Home-grown in the ghetto, so feel the wrath of this sista—
2 It’s like you’re fightin’ ten niggas—
3 Forget the baby boys, it’s the biggest mama-mia—
4 The un-lady-like diva, lyrical man-eater—
5 Believe her, or see her, and get that ass embarrassed…
In this excerpt, Mia X asserts her origins (the ghetto), which give her words legitimacy. She makes a claim for strength in pugilistic matters (presumably verbally or physically), which is the equivalent of “ten [male] niggas.” She also comments on size. She is the largest both physically, being a physically large woman, and also metaphorically. Her size is also, according to her, indicative of her social immanence. Mia X calls herself “the lyrical man-eater,” and exhorts men to believe that she is their lyrical superior, lest they attempt to confront her with a challenge that would result in getting their “ass embarrassed.”

This example, among other discourses that Mia X employs, illustrates her acknowledgment that there are expectations of “ladylike” behavior for women in American society, and that she does not fulfill these expectations in her raps (i.e., when she is “on the mic”). She does not fit, and this unwillingness to conform her art makes her the “unladylike diva.”

By contrast, the Lady of Rage, as can be seen by her moniker, identifies herself as a “lady,” although she too refuses to conform to the hegemonic expectations of the kinds of verbal behaviors that “ladies” can normatively engage in. Her self-awareness of her lack of fit into the hegemonic expectations of lady-ness can be seen in the following excerpt from her song “Big Bad Lady”:

1 Stompin’ through your territory—
2 New rap female category … winna—
3 And your style gets played-out, like the Spinners.
4 Not soprano, or alto, the Rage is a tenor.
5 My voice is just right, I bust hyp—
6 Odermic needles in your mind’s eye,
7 make you hip-hop junkies wanna fly
8 like eagles: my style’s as sharp as cathedrals’ steeples—
9 Showin’ and provin’ that even a lady can be diesel.…

Here, Rage illustrates a few different things in a very few lines of text. First, her use of the word “stompin” indicates that she is using a nonhegemonically feminine mode of ambulation. Second, the fact that she is saying that she is stomping “through your territory” is indicative of a degree of assertiveness, in that she is defiantly transgressing some kind of boundary (both metaphorically and literally), which is perhaps untraditional or unexpected for women. In line 2, her acknowledgment of the fact that she belongs to a “new female category” points to the history of the kind of music with which she is engaged, which has only recently been occupied in any prevalent way by women. From this we can infer that the transgressed boundary in line 1 is indeed that of hip-hop music generally, and probably gangsta rap specifically. In lines 4 and 5 she discusses her own physical voice, which is lower than may be typically expected from females. But, as she says in line 5, this is okay, her “voice is just right.” This disjunction between her average pitch and the expected average pitch for females can be connected to the disjunction between her attitude (one of assertiveness, toughness, and, ultimately, power) and that which is typically associated with or expected from women in the dominant society (Graddol and Swann). And, finally, in line 9, the metadiscursive reflection on her own text illustrates the counterhegemonic nature of that text and indexes possible interpretations of her atypically feminine performance. Her discourse “shows” and “proves” that “even a lady can be diesel.”
The approaches taken by both Mia X and the Lady of Rage illustrate awareness of hegemonic notions of femininity and deliberate flouting of that hegemony. As originally formulated by R. Lakoff, these expectations were held over middle-aged, white, middle-class women and included “powerless” language, which entails indirectness in speech (hedging, mitigation, euphemization, etc.). As can be seen from the lexical choices alone, these women are quite direct. In the terms used within the communities of practice that they engage in and in which they are engaged, they do not “bullshit” and they do not “fuck around.” This directness also manifests itself in speech volume and speed. Their loudness indicates assertiveness, and their skill with quick language use indicates practice. Their discourse is planned and not sudden, which indicates much intentionality, as opposed to accidental outbursts, which, one could imagine, could be attributed to “hysteria” or the like.

The fact that both women are aware of the sociocultural expectations of indirectness and are able to get around them in their own discursive practices must be seen as an example of an assuming of power. Part of the power that they claim to have within their narratives is the real-life power that they are actually claiming for themselves when they are talking about this power. In this way, the fictionalized narrative selves that they create in their songs help to reinforce both the real-world and narrative-world femininities. A crucial part of these femininities is agency over one’s own actions, and this agency is actually constructed in the performance of these raps.

Reappropriating male words

There has been much discussion in the sociolinguistics literature regarding the reappropriation of derogatory words once used by whites against blacks, as in the case of the lexical item “nigger” being appropriated as the solidarity-marking “nigga” within hip-hop culture (Morgan) and black culture generally (Smitherman). Similarly, there has been a trend toward young women’s reappropriation of previously derogatory terms used towards women by men, such as bitch and ho, which can also be used as a marker of solidarity among the categorized group (Sutton).

Both kinds of reappropriation are operative within gangsta rap, and confirm Tannen’s observation that “the symbols that display power (differing status) and solidarity (equal status) are often the same, so every utterance is potentially ambiguous as to whether it is establishing power or solidarity” (147). For example, in Mia X’s song “I’ll Take Ya Man ‘97,” she alternately refers to her addressee (any of among “the many bitches that [she] does not like”) as bitch and also herself as bitch. It is likely that the artist has and displays “solidarity” to herself and presumes power over the addressee. However, this establishment of power and solidarity is not inherent to the discourse itself, but is evident in how the discourse is told and intended to be interpreted. In other words, power and solidarity are not inherent in the actual words being used, but instead emerge in the actual use of the words in a particular context.

For example, in “I’ll Take Ya Man’97,” Mia X refers to herself as “the better bitch, the clever bitch.” This use of definiteness gives the presupposition that Mia X and the addressee are “bitches.” However, crucially, Mia X asserts that she is better and more clever than the addressee, ranking herself relatively higher on a
continuum of bitch-ness. Similarly, Mia X had previously framed the addressee as a ho by the time she states that “Now you can call me a raw man-stealin’ ho/But I couldn’t take your man unless he’s good to go” later in the second verse. Here, she acknowledges that the addressee has access to and ability to use the lexical item ho toward her (and perhaps even the justification for doing so), but Mia X does not recognize this sort of power as being operative in this context. The relevant power, given the frame set up by the discourse of the narrative, lies in being in control of the disputed man. According to the frame of this discourse, Mia X has asserted power in stealing the man from the addressee, and nothing that the addressee could possibly say could alter this (fictionally) empirical fact. Crucially, though, she insinuates that she is better and more clever than the addressee, ranking her relatively higher on a continuum of “bitchness.”

This reappropriation and redefinition of male words and reference to the continuum of “bitchness” is also evidenced by one of Lil’ Kim’s own verbal tags: “The Queen Bitch.” I should note that this ideology of a continuum of bitchness reinforces claims that are made, for instance by Ice Cube and Too Short, that “all women got a little bitch in ‘em.” However, the way that these female rappers choose to define this term and how they apply it to themselves most likely differs in some way from what Ice Cube and Too Short had in mind when they wrote those lyrics.

That I have framed my discussion in terms of reappropriation is indicative of my position that these women are engaging in dialogicality and intertextuality, in the vein of Bakhtin. The terms “bitch” and “ho” have been circulating within rap music for some time, and in the larger society for even longer. These women have taken these terms from other circulating discourses and inflected them into their own discourses with the meanings that they accept for themselves. Thus, they have taken preexisting categories and have redefined these according to their own intentions and understandings, in the same way that they have redefined what it means to be “ladylike.” Here again, this agentive recontextualization is an indication of a kind of power: the ability to accept or reject labels for oneself, as well as projecting them onto others.

Words as weapons, and words with weapons

There are two aspects of verbal competition in rap music. The first is the literal element of rap performance as being competition, in which there are recognizable winners and losers in “lyrical combat” (Foytlin et al.). This involves language use. The second involves what is occurring in the actual language used, i.e., what is being rapped about.

Although the data examined here are rehearsed performances edited for mass production within the contexts of albums for sale (as opposed to the freestyling examined by Foytlin et al.), there is still a definite element of competition in the use of the rapper’s skills in performance. In addition, there is clearly an element of daring the audience to try to rap as well as the artist in question. This is not intuitive from any formal features of the rapping style, but can be inferred from the content of the lyrics as well as the ethnographic background of the genre, which evolved from MC competitions that used to be held in the 1980s. These venues often involved audience participation, and included competition in devising new rhymes and delivering them with oral skill, as well as mix-mastering, scratching,
etc. Within the realm of lyric content, other rap musicians are often directly addressed within specific songs, and the rappers often flaunt their own skills and place them above those of other rappers.

For instance, Mia X begins “I’ll Take Ya Man ’97” with the line “Mia X is back and I’ve come to out rap you...,” which implies that she understands herself to be involved in a skillful competition with her addressee in her rap performance. Likewise, the Lady of Rage intones, in line 3 from the “Big Bad Lady” lyrics above, “Your style gets played out, like the Spinners...” By this she is indicating that the addressee’s style of rapping is “played out,” or, to use an animated metaphor, “old and tired.” This invokes a common ideology held in the rap community that rap songs and music styles should be fresh and new, and should neither overly reiterate well-worn styles nor be attached too closely too often with well-known styles or artists (such as the Spinners) from the past. This ideology accompanies the fact that new artists and new songs gain rapid popularity quite frequently, and there is rapid turnover in both songs and artists. Either way, Rage’s use of this line toward her imagined addressee is clearly an example where her own musical style is placed in competitive comparison with that of another. With this juxtaposition she asserts that her own music is indeed fresh, and that it wins the lyrical battle with the addressee. While the opening line above for Mia X does not indicate this specifically, “freshness” is just one possible axis of comparison among others that she may have in mind when presenting her own rap as superior to that of her addressee. Other axes of comparison could involve cleverness of lyrics, speed and skill of delivery, the use of well-known tropes of the genre, etc.

The other kind of “battle” is found within the discourse itself. One of the most prevalent reoccurring uses of metaphor in rap music is that of words are weapons and, within the frames of the narratives, these metaphors are used to imply that words can do serious bodily harm to their “targets” (cf. the famous “Sticks and stones...” aphorism in English).

For example, the Lady of Rage has repeatedly referred to herself as “the lyrical murderer” and attributed to herself the quality of being “fatally feminine,” both of which evoke images of dead MCs who have failed in their attempts to out-rap her. She details the fates of such MCs in the following excerpt from her song “Sho Shot”:

1 Shitty MC’s I be flushin’ down the commode
2 As I explode, cock back and reload
3 Ride a beat t’il they say <H ‘whoa’ H>
4 And then they tell me <H “Mama, don’t hurt me no mo’” H>
5 I’m strictly about these skills, on the real-a
6 I’m strictly ‘bout the sho-shot, cold killa

Lines 5 and 6 exemplify her focus on the skill of the rapper, and the use of the local deictic “these” in line 5 indicates her own skills. Line 6’s reference to herself as a “cold killa” shows her use of the “words are weapons” metaphor, as does the chorus of this particular song, which includes the line “the lyrical attack is where my ammo is at.”

Graddol and Swann discuss the social meanings of actual voice pitch. Of note here is the fact that in lines 3 and 4, Rage, in quoting her interlocutors, raises the pitch of her voice, literally complicating the “voice system” (Hill 109) being utilized here by the speaker. As mentioned above, Rage’s voice pitch is relatively
low for a woman and the majority of her lines are delivered in the lower pitch ranges. Here, Rage uses a higher pitch to indicate the pleading of her lyrical enemies. I take this raising of her voice to indicate that these enemies are male rappers (the vast majority of other rappers), and that the fact that they are using a high-pitched voice suggests either metaphorical effeminization or puerilization. The fact that they address her as “Mama” leads to the latter conclusion.\(^{11}\)

Thus, with just the raising of her voice in two attributed quotations, Rage asserts an inverse iconicity between pitch height and social status. The person with the lower voice is in the authority position, in that she is the one causing harm and from whom mercy is begged. The person whose voice pitch is raised is actually lowered in social status. This, of course, perpetuates dominant ideologies of the pitch—social status relationship. Nevertheless, this lowering of the enemies creates real social damage (i.e., the people for whom these attributions are made would probably deny them), even while the discourse in which it is embedded is metaphorical.\(^{12}\)

Mia X participates in a larger discourse that the members of her rap cohort, the “No Limit Soldiers,” utilize. The leading artist/producer and founder of the No Limit Records label, Master P, refers to himself as the “Colonel of the Tank” and the “Commander in Chief.” The “Tank” refers to the No Limit organization, and his “soldiers” are those rappers whom he employs (and, in keeping with the metaphor, deploys). Mia X is the “First Lady of the Tank.” The contradiction of being the “unladylike diva” at the same time that she is the “First Lady of the Tank” is an illustration of how different discourses can circulate simultaneously within a single text. These two words (both verbal tags, or self-appellations) invoke different images in the hearer, and provide the artist with multiple ways of representing herself.

In addition to the words are weapons metaphor, I would be remiss if I did not mention the fact that the genre is replete with images of actual (“actual” within the nonfiction frames of the rap narratives) violence, and, indeed, it is the use of this imagery that motivates the identification of the genre gangsta rap independent of the larger categories of rap music and/or hip-hop. It is perhaps here that the appearance of females, given dominant notions of gendered expectations for women, is most unexpected, in that femininity is widely associated with vulnerability and masculinity with dangerousness, which is often reflected in disjunctive levels of perceived threat (Hollander 2000). Not only do the women of gangsta rap engage in the discourse about the violence that occurs in the narratives in their songs; they place themselves within those narratives and often at the heart of the violence.

Examples of this can be found both within the narratives and within the framing of these narratives, as in the following skit, which precedes Lil’ Kim’s song “Spend a Little Doe.” The skit constitutes lines 1–9; the actual song begins with lines 10 and 11.

[pre-song skit: a man is reunited with his woman after she has just returned from spending three years in prison]
1 Man: Mmmm, baby, I missed you—
2 Woman: [sexy laugh] I missed you too….
3 M: I waited a looong tiiime for this—
4 W: [coyly] So why you didn’t come to see me, don’t conversate me or nuthin’?
5 M: I ain’t wanna see my bird in no cage—but I’m ready to take care of you now….
6 W: [crescendo] huh— now? after three years? three \textit{motherfucking} years, nigga?
7 M: well—
8 W: you know what?
9 [the sound of a gun cocking is heard, and then the music starts and the actual lyrics begin]
10 Hasta la vista, bye bye—
11 Kiss your kids, it's the gangstresses—
12 What'chu think this is, nigga?
13 Con yourself: it's just a little robbery? …

In this skit, a woman is released from prison and is reunited with her man. Now that she is available again, he is happy to see her, and is excited about reuniting and re-igniting the old flame that they once shared. Conversely, the woman, having been incarcerated for three years without a visit from this man, is not going to have this. Not only is she mad about having been ignored and stranded in her time of need, she is also going to punish this man.

Her anger is represented with increasing volume starting at the beginning of line 6, and continues into the actual song performance in lines 10–13. While Lil' Kim begins with a demure, "sexy" intonation, she abandons the less powerful position, which is indicated through agreement ("I missed you too") and requests for information ("why didn't you … or …"), to a more authoritative position. In this more powerful stance she uses a direct form of address (with the aggressive tag "nigga") and more forthright language (explicit intensifier "fuckin'"), as well as a more assertive tone (indicated in increased loudness). The assertion of control is completed by line 8, when she asks the question, "You know what?" This is less a direct question requesting information than a rhetorical discourse marker indicating that the speaker is about to make a proclamation about how things are going to be. That is, this rhetorical question is a presentative framing of an assertion of agency. This agency and assertion of control is indicated with the presentation and preparation of the "firearm" in line 9, which also serves to draw attention to the vocal performance, where Lil' Kim maintains control throughout the entire rest of the rap.

Returning to the notion of violence, lines 10 and 13 make clear that the motivation here is not robbery, and that the man in this narrative is about to be murdered. The betrayal of this rapper by this man, within the frame of this particular narrative, is furthered later in the song, when Lil' Kim continues:

14 When in need I lied for you, cried for you—
15 You know this down-ass bitch would have died for you.
16 I used to sweat you, but now forget you—
17 I'd rather dead you: and wet you like I never met you.

If the cold-blooded murdering of her man does not make a woman "unladylike," then this notion would surely have to be abandoned altogether.

Making "bitches" out of men

In addition to Rage's raising of men's pitches in the reported speech in the "Sho Shot" lyrics given above, another common theme in female gangsta rap is the sexual manipulation of men. It is here that the reversal of the possible sex roles generally attributed to women in gangsta rap occurs, and the switching of power
roles, vis-à-vis sex roles, is accomplished. While the history of gangsta rap music is fairly short, there is a good deal of discourse circulating in popular culture about the treatment of women by men within this genre. I hope that indexing these widely circulating discourses and providing a single example will be sufficient to frame my own discussion of the more recent counterhegemonic discourses performed by the female gangsta rappers.

One of the best examples of male discourse about femininity within gangsta rap comes from the song “This Dick Is for You,” by the Geto Boys. Here, Mike D raps about the well-known categories:

1 Ho’s, will straight-up do ho shit, bitches even mo’ shit—
2 And ladies’ll give you no shit.

He goes on to clarify what he means by “ho shit,” which basically entails the idea that many women (according to the song, 80 percent) “ain’t shit but money bandits.” They try to take advantage of the economic success that a man has gained, either through the kinds of activities that he raps about, “gangsta shit,” or in his success at rapping. In thinking that they can manipulate him for their own benefit, these women do things, sexual and otherwise, that he does not respect, and he does not allow them to take advantage of him. Ladies (or, homosemously, women), on the other hand, do not lower themselves to these levels to try to take what is his, and he does not call them bitches or hoes—although, admittedly, he would still like to have sex with them.¹³

This is the kind of discourse that has led to accusations of the objectification of women by male rappers. Interestingly, the tactic taken by female gangsta rappers is not overtly one of refusal to participate in the discourse, as may have previously been the case with earlier women rappers, discussed by Berry, or occasionally with women performing on the albums of male rappers. One example of the latter is the female on Ice Cube and Too Short’s song “Bitch Ain’t Nuthin’ but a Word to Me,” who interjects before she is quite literally silenced: “Why I gotta be called ‘bitch’?” Rather, the tactic of female gangsta rappers is often to turn the tables on the men. If having the opposite sex at one’s bidding for sexual pleasure is a measure of power, as many would have it, then it should be as much a position of power for women who have men do their bidding as it is the other way around, and this is a stance often taken by some female gangsta rappers.¹⁴

This can be seen in Mia X’s “I’ll Take Ya Man ’97.” By stealing a man from the target addressee, Mia X is not only illustrating power over the addressee by asserting that her qualities are more desirable to the man than those of the enemy. She also demonstrates power over the man because she can make him do things that the target addressee does not have the charm or power to make him do, and that he would not otherwise, outside the scope of Mia X’s power, do. She asserts that she will “make him do shit [for Mia X] that he never did [for the enemy].” She will “pussy-whip” him, and then, demonstrating her power over both of them, send the man back to the enemy after she is done. She will “fuck him right . . . just for spite,” implying that the other woman has been performing inadequately or incorrectly sexually. In fact, Mia X is so sexually superior that she’ll “handle him like a rookie,” which denotes that his own sexual prowess is not sufficient or is unpracticed. She will make him spend his own money and buy things for her. And finally, she will make him perform the most masculinity-threatening of (hetero)sexual acts, according to the dominant ideology of masculinity within this genre: oral sex.
The idea that there is an aversion by many males within this genre, and perhaps elsewhere, towards performing oral sex is multifaceted, and I will not dwell here on all the possible causes or implications. It is implied in the narratives employed by Mia X and Lil’ Kim, and is overtly indexed in the following excerpt, which is taken from a male rapper at the end of Lil’ Kim’s song “We Don’t Need It.” Here, Lil’ Kim has just rapped about how men who have sex with her must first “go down on” her, and, after one particular male finishes his verse in this song, he admonishes other males (who laugh when he says this): “Don’t ask Kim for a date: she want her pussy licked!” Again, the conditionality of this position—“if you won’t do X for me then I won’t do Y for you”—is a measure of power. To be in a position to set limits and conditions on one’s own actions is indicative of the ability to make one’s own decisions and act on them.

Conclusions

In this article, I hope to have shown that the flouting of hegemonic norms highlights those norms, and can create new ones. Although I noted that conformity to the American mainstream norms of “ladylike” behavior would be impossible given the genre of gangsta rap, the other way of framing this position is that the genre of gangsta rap has imposed its own hegemony on the ways that women can profess and behave within the genre. These may require certain ways of using language, including the use of profanity, and the use of images (guns, sex, drugs, violence, etc.) that themselves construct the genre, in addition to more ideological aspects of gangsta rap performance: street credibility, normative heterosexuality, etc. The latter issue is particularly interesting to scholars of language and gender. Researchers of women entering other traditionally masculine domains, such as police work and the US Marine Corps, have discussed the issue of the stigmatization of women in these roles, and the common assumption that these women are, or fear by these women that they might be perceived as, lesbians (see, e.g., McElhinney; and Hicks Kennard). This is one possible source of the highly heterosexualized lyric-making in much of female gangsta rap. Not only are these women reaffirming that they are “down with” men, their femininity is such that they are actually in some cases (as in the excerpt from Mia X) even in sexual control of them. However, it must be pointed out that gangsta rappers have always had a history of overtly displaying heterosexuality in their rap lyrics, and the appearance of this in the raps of women can be seen as an extension of this aspect of the genre. It would be interesting to see what reverberations more gender-ambiguous rappers might have in gangsta rap, or if they could even be taken seriously in this genre at all.  

To conclude, gangsta rap was not created as an outlet for women’s creative lyrical energy, and it has been only recently that certain women (e.g., Mia X, the Lady of Rage, and Lil’ Kim) have found their “voices” in this genre, successfully competing in a market that has traditionally been dominated by men. All of these women’s raps illustrate that they can do what they are doing, and by this I intend for both readings of the modal can to be in effect. They have the power to say the things that they say, but they also have the ability to say these things in the highly stylized and skillful ways that they do say them. That these rappers choose to be, and can be, so audacious and skillful is indicative of their verbal and, in the many diverse communities where this verbal art is valued, social power. This verbal
power is only one aspect of the renegotiated femininity expressible and expressed by female gangsta rappers.

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Notes

*I should note from the outset that my title is a bit of a misnomer: “the Unladylike diva” is a verbal tag that is used by Mia X alone, i.e. Mia X is the “Unladylike Diva.” No other artist uses it, or would have the authority to use it. It is Mia X’s creation and self-appellation. I use this phrase here only because of its evocativeness and ability to capture perfectly the issues that I would like to address in this paper. As is often the case in the genre under study, I am appropriating the art of another for my own purposes, and in so doing I acknowledge fully that I am doing so.

1. Other studies about women entering traditionally male occupations or social roles include: McElhinney on female police officers; Moll on female bikers; and Hicks Kennard on female Marine Corps drill instructors. Carby discusses the sexual politics of female blues singers in the 1920s.

2. My primary reasons for choosing these particular three artists has more to do with my exposure to them and their work through my social networks, rather than any assumption that they may be more representative of the genre than the work of other artists whom I could have chosen to examine. For lack of space, this paper will not consider the lyrics of other interesting artists who fit into this genre, such as Foxy Brown, Tori, etc.

3. Most of the lyrics that these women rap are of their own creation. Where (or if) there is a coauthor or even a ghostwriter, I will still assume that each woman constructs a personal narrative identity through the songs that she chooses to perform.

4. R. Lakoff’s discussion (and that of the majority of other work on “mainstream American culture”) primarily focuses on white, middle-class women of a particular age range; the audience and the source of the discourses that I will be discussing are different. However, it is still the case that the language styles of the white middle class are to some extent normative in American society, and I think that it would be incorrect to claim that these younger women are not aware of these hegemonic styles, even if these are not the only styles that their discourse rejects. See work by Berry, and also by Rose, for further discussion of other discourses with which women rappers engage.

5. In particular, these narratives often focus on the use of marijuana and the making and selling of crack cocaine. It is certainly clear that not all “drugs” maintain equal status in this discourse, or in the society at large.

6. See Appendix for explanations of symbols and other transcription conventions used for the lyrics quoted in this article.

7. This song was originally written and recorded by Salt ‘n’ Pepa (who are listed as coauthors), and in the introduction to the song Mia X gives them credit for inspiring her to enter the rap business. In Mia X’s rendition, the structure and some of the
words, and of course the overall theme of the song, are the same, but Mia X has changed a lot of the words to include more explicit language than was present in the original.

8. This focus on originality and verbal skill is, not coincidentally, related to the well-known traditions of “signifying” and “playing the dozens” in African-American communities.

9. This is not to say that there is no appreciation for old music styles. There is widespread appreciation for older music, what is referred to as “the old school,” and the discourses surrounding these are generally made with respect. The crucial difference between something being “played out” vs. being “old school” is that the “old school” was once fresh (metaphorically, as in new) and is still good. In fact, a common metaphor for good or cool things is “fresh.” Something that is now “played out” may have been fresh (as in new) at one time, but is no longer good.

10. This analysis of metaphor is informed by the work of Lakoff and Johnson.

11. Mia X also at times infantilizes her addressees, as in the line “...stay in your place when you hear Mama speakin’” in “Make ‘em Say Ugh.”

12. This conflicts with the commonly circulating metaphor discussed by Lakoff and Johnson, up is good, as do many other discourses in hip-hop. For example, being down with somebody reflects of feeling of positivity toward them, whereas being down on them does not. Similarly, fucking up reflects a negative performance, whereas getting fucked up can be either a positive or negative experience, depending on the speaker’s ideology of altered states of consciousness.

13. In light of this discussion, Mia X’s phrase “the unladylike diva” can be taken to be engaging multiple discourses of “ladyness” simultaneously: those of the mainstream culture and those of hip-hop culture. Since she never addresses the Geto Boys specifically (as she does other rap artists, such as Salt ‘n’ Pepa), I take it that she is primarily engaging the mainstream ideas, but a historical look at discourses of “ladyness” circulating in hip-hop history would be a fruitful endeavor. What is clear, however, is that the definition of “lady” in hip-hop culture differs from that given by Smitherman of “a male’s female lover/girlfriend/partner” (151), which would seem to be more closely related to the notion of “old lady,” which can mean either “mother” or “female lover/girlfriend/partner,” depending on the speech community.

14. I say “some” because the Lady of Rage, for one, does not spend as much lyrical energy on sexual matters as do Mia X and Lil’ Kim.

15. Lil’ Kim herself has recently said in an interview that a male rapper coming out of the closet would be a “big thing” which would lead to “chaos” in the rap community (Galtney 68, emphasis in original).

Works cited


Discography


Appendix. Transcription conventions

Conventional “vernacular” orthography used throughout: e.g., nuthin’, mo’, etc. Transcription lines = intonation units, in traditional poetry/song transcription style.

— truncated intonation unit
.
?
,
, flat intonation at end of intonation unit
no mark no break from one line of text to the next

<?H H> high pitch (relative to normal pitch levels)
“ ” quotation quality

iiii long vowel

italics word receives high stress, e.g., ten

bold word receives high stress, e.g., years

… break in continuity

[author’s commentaries within a transcript are made in brackets]

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