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## HOW “BITCH” BECAME A GOOD THING – OR, AT LEAST NOT THAT BAD

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Does the word “bitch” automatically represent a woman? And, if so, does it automatically indicate a woman who is mean, unlikable, whorish, and independent in an “obnoxious” way? Or, is it possible that when a woman is referred to as a “bitch” that it can be seen as a “good thing?” That is, instead of being harmful and degrading what if “bitch” indicated a strong, self-confident woman – a term of empowerment? This is the question observers of rap have asked over the past ten years as a result of more female rappers proclaiming that they are “bitches” and that “bitch” is an indication of the woman’s strength and independence rather than degradation (Skeggs, 1993). In this paper, I question if the term “bitch” actually comes to represent a strong, self-confident woman whose future is not dictated by men; and if so, what are the implications of such a definition reversal? That is to say, what does it mean for women to identify themselves as “bitches,” for empowerment, when the term continues to function as a tool to degrade?

This question comes out of a series of conversations in magazines, television programs, and movies that speak of the recent trend among female rappers to define themselves as “bitches” as though it was a powerful and non-derogatory term (Skeggs, 1993; Rose, 1994; Morgan, 1999). In response to this question there are two schools of thought. Quite simply, one school identifies the actions of these female artists as empowering and the other identifies them as debilitating. In essence, the perspective that views the music as empowering suggests that cultural products like media do not have a standard message, but instead can be interpreted in a myriad of ways for different ends (McLean, 1997). Conversely, the perspective that views the music as debilitating because it identifies women as “bitches” suggests that cultural products like media have standard messages, or if they do not, the messages function in a standard way – to either harm, help, or have no effect on consumers (See Adorno, 1954; See Tedesco, 1974).

Although she was writing about less commercially successful women like *HWA (Hoes with Attitude)* and *BWP (Bytches with Problems)*, Skeggs (1993) asserted that female rappers who identified themselves as “bitches” and spoke about their sexuality were subverting the tools used to dominate women by using the erotic as power and by re-appropriating the term “bitch.” Based on this premise of subversion and re-appropriation, the more successful female rappers like Da Brat, Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, Eve, and Missy Elliot who call themselves “bitches” may also be seen as re-appropriating “bitch.” Moreover, in re-appropriating the term these artists are seen

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by some as empowering themselves and potentially other women. Britton (2000) surmises that “sex is power; bitches do what they have to do to get paid. And even in these post-feminist times, when opportunities and black female role models are more plentiful than ever, many black women find Kim’s message empowering” (p. 112).

The alternative perspective suggests that “bitch” is not empowering, it is debilitating. This is primarily because the term is located in a society where sex and power are interrelated – men afford status and privilege over women because they are men, and women are relegated to a diminished status and restricted access to resources because they are women. Although not speaking about the use of “bitch,” Rose claims that in such a cultural setting, it is impossible to use the same tools, like one’s sexuality, which is used to oppress one’s self, to empower one’s self in a way that is not debilitating (Rose, 1994). In music, as is in life, “bitch” is used to distinguish between “good” and “bad” women (Rose, 1994; Kelley, 1996), which is used to distinguish “respectable” women from sexually promiscuous women.<sup>1</sup> The portrayal of sexually promiscuous black women, according to Collins (1990) and Crenshaw (1991), justifies sexual brutality against black women. And, as such, for female artists to identify themselves as sexually promiscuous “bitches” it would be debilitating, in that it justifies the offender’s sexual brutality against black women.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than fueling the debate as to whether or not the use of the word “bitch” *should* be empowering for women, the following will explain the manner in which the word “bitch” may in fact *be* empowering to some female consumers of this art form. I argue that these expressions may be empowering for three reasons: one, the act of naming or defining oneself is empowering; secondly, access to these representations and what these women represent make them empowering; and third, the perceived group identity of the consumer and the artists makes it possible for the definition of “bitch” to be viewed as benign and even empowering when used by individuals perceived to be members of the “same group.”

### **Power in the Naming Process**

In order to understand how a word such as “bitch” could be perceived as empowering, it is first necessary to recognize that language is not fixed. Rather, it is a battleground

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<sup>1</sup> The “good-bad” girl distinction may also justify sexual brutality against women.

<sup>2</sup> Speaking directly to the assertion put forth by Skeggs (1993), that all female hip hop artists are opposing misogyny, Rose (1994) asserts that the problem with anti-sexist portrayals of female hip hop artists is that they place women’s total position as oppositional to males and they do not account for the non-sexist men and non-feminist females. As such, simply being a female rapper is not indicative of being opposed to misogyny.

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where words and their meanings are the center of contestation. The “standard” or widely accepted definition of a word indicates which force is winning the battle at a given time. As such, words do not have fixed meanings, rather as Hall (1982) points out, “in order for one meaning to be regularly produced, it had to win a kind of credibility, legitimacy or taken for grantedness” (p. 67). At stake in the battle is social power, which is “the ability to define the rules of the game to which everyone” is required to ascribe (Hall, 1982, p. 63). From this perspective, to define a word in a way that deviates from the “standard” definition is to possess power over the naming and meaning making process.

This is the first reason why female consumers may feel empowered by other women who call themselves “bitches” – there is power in the naming process. One way is for the group seeking power to redefine or name themselves, which has been the case for African Americans changing from the imposed definitions of colored and Negro, to the self-defined identity of black and African American (Smith, 1992). According to Audre Lorde (1979), it was “axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment” (p. 45). As such, if people are defined by others, they are, in essence, relinquishing the power connected to naming oneself.

A second way to gain power through naming is for those seeking to reinforce their power and dominance over others to define/name the dominated group. This is what early British colonists in America did when they forced Native Americans to adopt the name of Indian in place of, or in addition to, their tribal names (Isaacs, 1976). Thus, in renaming the Native Americans, British colonists imposed their dominance in a similar way that a creator defines her dominance over the object of her creation – a chair, bugle, bottle et cetera.

A third and final way to gain power through naming is to redefine a negative term that is used against one’s group. For instance, terms like black and queer, once used to degrade African Americans and homosexuals, became the galvanizing force that defined and united the group to demand better treatment for themselves (see Butler, 1993).<sup>3</sup> Instead of rejecting the terms once used to demean them, some African Americans and homosexuals chanted “black is beautiful” and/or “we’re here we’re queer” in an effort to empower themselves through the renaming process. In conclusion, the first explanation as to why “bitch” may be empowering to certain female consumers is because there is power in the naming process.

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<sup>3</sup> Historical examples of this include: 1) the movement to switch black from a “derogatory” term to one symbolizing power and beauty; and, 2) the movement to switch queer from symbolizing shame to a reclamation of acceptance.

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## Access to and Representation of the Artists – “Success”

Female consumers may feel empowered by female artists who call themselves “bitches” because they have access to these women and because of what these women represent. For instance, because these women’s messages are readily available in the media it stands that consumers have access to the artists’ messages. Without such access the possibility of being influenced by the women would be quite unlikely. As such, the fact that the artists are selling millions of albums, are being played in heavy rotation on radio stations, music television channels, and are on major national tours means that consumers have greater accessibility to the messages and, as such, have an increased likelihood of being influenced and/or empowered by the messages.

Because these artists are representing wealth and fame in a society driven by capital gains it is more likely that the artists will be viewed as successful and, thus, empowering to consumers who have similar aspirations for wealth and fame. That is to say, if the same women were calling themselves “bitches” but appeared to be broke instead of flaunting their wealth, it is less likely that consumers would connect or identify with them, and see the female artists as successful or empowering. That is because to call oneself a “bitch” and be broke suggests that she is unsuccessful in a society that bases success on material acquisition. However, for the women to call themselves “bitches” while possessing a great deal of money and expensive material items suggests that these female artists are successful. Therefore, the image of “success” associated with the artists justifies the act of calling themselves “bitches” as something that is empowering (e.g., the artists call themselves “bitches” and represent the American dream of material acquisition; as such, they represent women who have successfully achieved the American dream). In total, female consumers may be empowered by female artists who call themselves “bitches” because they have access to the messages and because these artists represent success.

### Group Identity of Consumer and Artist

A third reason as to why the female consumers may be empowered by the female artists has to do with the perceived group identity of the speaker. In an examination of black women’s interpretation of messages in hip hop music, Celious (forthcoming) found that black women were able to see “bitch” as positive and negative when the speaker was a female, but only negative when the speaker was a male. These results point to the role that the speaker plays in the interpretive process such that a word traditionally viewed as something “negative” can be viewed as something “positive.” Celious (2000) calls this interpretive process *symbolic representation*, whereby the meaning of spoken words has to do with what is being said as well as who is saying it. In this manner, the gender of the artists (female or male) moderate how certain female consumers interpret “bitch” as empowering or debilitating (e.g., when

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males say “bitch” the interpretation is likely to be negative only, versus when females say “bitch” the interpretation may be neutral and positive, in addition to being negative).

As such, when a female artist calls herself a “bitch” it can be perceived as un-offensive and even empowering to women because she may be viewed as less threatening and because the word may have multiple meanings. Conversely, males who use the term are likely to be viewed only as offensive. This is largely because males that call women “bitches,” present a more direct threat to females as well as the fact that the word can only be used in a pejorative manner when men use it. This is why female consumers are not likely to feel empowered by male artists who call women “bitches,” even when the artists do so in an “affectionate” way. In closing, the perceived group identity of the artist significantly impacts the manner in which consumers interpret what is said, and whether or not a word like “bitch” will be empowering or debilitating to the consumer.

### Conclusion

As it was stated in the beginning, the purpose of this paper was to explore the potential reasons as to why “bitch,” when used by female rappers, may be perceived as empowering to female consumers. Based on the explanations put forth, it would seem that the word “bitch” is quite arbitrary. For instance, if the empowerment consumers feel from the artists who use the term is based on the act of naming and what the person doing the naming represents (e.g., successful women), then the female artists could be calling themselves sofas, chicken heads, bricks et cetera and the result would be the same. As such, attempting to argue for or against the possibility of being empowered by the artist’s use of “bitch” is of little worth, given that some consumers are empowered by these artists while others are not. Further, an argument for or against such a possibility serves only to support a subjective opinion, which is simultaneously true and false.

The premise of this paper suggests that what matters in the interpretive process has to do with what is said and who is saying it – successful women, men, unsuccessful women, strangers et cetera. This is based on a theory of *symbolic representation* (Celious, 2000), which suggests that what a person says is less important than the perceived group identities of the person speaking (e.g., we interpret things differently when the person speaking is a woman, man, black, white et cetera). This theory helps us understand how it is possible that female consumers might feel a sense of empowerment from female artists who call themselves and other women “bitches.” As it has been outlined, the meaning of a word may be altered depending on the circumstance surrounding its use – what it is used for (naming self or others), our access to the person using the term, and who and what the person using the term

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represents to the consumer (successful, unsuccessful, in-group member, out-group member, threatening, non-threatening et cetera). Ultimately, the meaning we attach to spoken words has to do with what is being said and who is doing the speaking.

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