PROLOGUE

Sex, Power, and Punanny

So listen up all the ladies, nubian queens,
black princesses, african goddesses, choir girls,
young girls, models,
skeezas, bitches, hos, playettes, dykes, divas,
house wives, gold diggers,
sac chasers, cum guzzlers, chicken heads, crack
heads, baller bitches,
shake dancers and boosters.
Say what you want, we're all one in the same.
No matter what they call you, or you call your-
self.
There's only 3 rules in this game:
keep your nappy-ass hair done, do your mother
fucking sit-ups,
and whenever you lay on your back, make sure
your paper is stacked.

—"Intro" by Sommore, Trina's *Diamond Princess*

In mid-December 1992, Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* dropped. Snoop Dogg with his southern drawl reminded me of home—St. Louis—before names like Nellyville and The Lou caught on. St. Louis has a markedly southern-derived black culture thanks to the black migration from the rural South to cities up north in search of better lives and jobs. My maternal side of the family was living

proof of that migration: they were formerly tenant farmers on a plantation in Aberdeen, Mississippi. However, raised by my ambitious single black father with the help of his practical midwestern mother and grandmother, I only heard those southern inflections in the neighborhood alleyways where I played kickball and "cork"—tomboy that I was—with other kids, or when visiting my mother's family.

Though my father speaks in that highly sought-after news-anchor-style regional-accent-free diction, by the time I reached college in the Northeast, several friends called me "Twang." Words like hair, chair, and care came out flat and with a "u" where the "ai" should have been and double "r's" replaced words ending in "re": *churr, hurr, curr.* Over the years I had worked to shed the accent as I continued my education in the Northeast (though it still naturally reasserts itself in the company of those closest to me). But as I strolled into the Rites and Reasons Theatre one Tuesday morning in March 1993, I was doing my best impression of Snoop's "One, two, three and to the fo' " from "Nuthin' But a G-Thang."

I was one of three graduate teaching assistants for Professor Michael Eric Dyson's Introduction to African American Studies class at Brown University and it was my day to lecture before the class of sixty plus students. We were reading and discussing bell hooks's provocative essay "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace." It was one of those rare moments where my contradictions were laid bare—humming such a salacious, sexist tune after immersing myself in the brilliance of hooks. But of course, that (and my accent-repressing acrobatics) was just the beginning of my contradictions.

Perhaps I was too implicated in the essay. hooks's bit about modeling sent me into a tailspin. In my lecture, I waxed on about the modeling profession—explaining the strides black models had made and commenting on the continued color and size biases of the industry as well as the practice of calling women "girls." The students were chomping at the bit. Phrases such as "oppressive beauty standards," "anorexia," and "bulimia," came rushing toward me at the podium. The Brown undergraduates were sharp. This was the era before the popularity of Tyra Banks's *America's Next Top Model,* the height of Naomi Wolf's exciting *The Beauty Myth,* and so the debate began. Dyson sat bemused in the audience, listening. The quick-witted womanist thinker Marcia Dyson was also there. Together we engaged the students in a lively back and forth on beauty culture, black women, and their own refusal to undertake that same rigorous critique of sexism in rap music and videos. Who was I to talk about "rigorous critique"? I slinked out of the classroom at noon and hopped into my car with *The Chronic* blasting. I was on my way to Boston to model in a mid-afternoon runway show at Saks Fifth Avenue.

In hindsight, I realize that models, like the strip club dancers and "video vixens" (disparagingly referred to as "video-ho's") that I discuss in this book, and even female rappers such as Trina, Lil' Kim, and Foxy Brown, occupy a peculiar place of cultural antipathy. We are all in the business of selling illusions, as we move various products—including our own sexuality—but we often stand accused of selling out. Blamed for participating in the exploitation of women, these women and their stories, like mine, are always much more complicated. Nothing—be it modeling,

stripping, or rapping about punanny power, and the motivations behind such choices—is ever so clear cut.

My turn as a print and runway model primarily involved a desire to live above the poverty line as a graduate student. While the four-year Dorothy Danforth Compton fellowship at Brown was generous, the monthly stipend was wanting. I had won out on some counts in the genetic roll of the die, and so modeling seemed a viable alternative.

Like erotic dancers, I assumed the money would be fast and easy. Like my fellow Brown alum Heidi Mattson, whose book *Ivy League Stripper* describes her tenure at Brown as a student by day, Providence Foxy Lady stripper by night (or dayshift), I did not necessarily see modeling as conspiring with the multibillion-dollar beauty and sex entertainment industries. Many of my graduate student colleagues found my choice of pick-up work anti-intellectual. Some even attributed my success in graduate school to high heels, long legs, and short skirts. I, on the other hand, had come to fully appreciate the meaning of the Ph.D.—Player Hating Degree.

With my feet in both worlds, I felt quite grounded. When I overheard models obsess about their imperfections, breast jobs, "go-sees" (castings), photographers, and comp cards, I envisioned a career as an intellectual. When my academic colleagues took themselves way too seriously, I turned to the less-lofty world of modeling. It is not that models are stick-figured pinheads; they just don't get worked up about Hegelian dialectics. If an academic job didn't materialize, I informed my dissertation advisor that I would return to Paris (I had an agency—Specimen) to work on my "book" (modeling portfolio) and seriously pursue modeling, instead of

tracking down obscure documents in the libraries and archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and the Musée de l'Homme.

It was the perfect mind-body split. Like Kimberly Jones, who professes in a 2000 interview in *The Washington Post* with Kristal Brent Zook that "Lil' Kim is what I use to get money . . . a character I use to sell my records," I too was whatever the client, photographer, or my agent wanted me to be—lingerie runway model, African American girl next door, high-fashion print model. I didn't anticipate the hours on the Stairmaster and the verbal blows delivered with precision to the body or face by an agent, photographer, client, or even a make-up artist. I remember doing a freebie runway show for the high-end salon Safar on Newberry Street in Boston, which netted me a year and a half of cuts, coloring, and styling by a skillful Czechoslovakian stylist. When I sat in the make-up artist's chair with my hair teased about wildly, he frowned but went to work. Afterwards, he remarked how fabulous I looked; he had wondered what was so special when I first sat down. And he was so sincere. These were also pre-Beyoncé and Jennifer Lopez days. And my hankerings for sweet potato pie, hot chocolate, and peach cobbler easily moved my 5'10", 118 lb. frame from a size six to an eight—plus-size model territory.

Despite the hoo-hah in the Brown classroom that day, I was a card-carrying member of the Rhode Island chapter of NOW (National Organization for Women). My progressive politics were unwavering. They had been shaped by uncles who flirted with Marxist-Humanism and "Free Angela Davis" campaigns and parents who gnashed their teeth

about Reaganomics. In the mid- to late 1980s, I had plunged into four years of intense study and dialogue on race, sex, gender, class, and politics at an elite, private coeducational university in upstate New York. I found Paula Giddings's *When I and Where I Enter* inspiring and Barbara Smith's *All the Women Are White, All the Men Are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* all that and then some. My first encounter with Gloria Watkins (bell hooks) was at a forum sponsored by a multiracial women's student organization that myself and another student co-founded. With her seeming affection for titles with the word "pussy" in them, she discussed her essay "Whose Pussy Is It?"—a critique of Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It,* black sexual politics, and feminism. Belatedly recognizing that unforgettable scene between Nola Darling and her paramour, Jamie Overstreet, as one of rape, Spike Lee now wishes that it had been left on the cutting room floor. In a 1998 interview, "[He Got] Game Plan," with Gary Dauphin of *The Village Voice,* Lee reflects on his breakout film:

> I would take the rape scene out of *She's Gotta Have It.* . . . Rape is obviously a very violent act, and I just wish I hadn't put the scene in. It brought a lot of things into the picture that didn't belong there, and it just wasn't necessary. It was my ignorance at the time that I put it there. . . . [N]obody TOLD me. I'm 41 now. I was 24 when I wrote that script. It just didn't belong in the movie. You grow and you learn.

We had all seen Lee's film when it debuted, stunned into silence by the "whose pussy is it" scene. And yet, we were not quite audacious enough to muster the word "rape"—though rape it was.

We were students galvanized by apartheid, steeped in rap music, and committed to extracurricular reading groups, black studies courses, and faculty-supervised independent study on black women's literature and history, so much so that by the time I reached Brown University as a graduate student, French feminist theory had had its shot at me and black women's studies were squarely on my radar, with hip hop always somewhere blaring in the background. We were part of a new black youth culture, "the hip hop generation" as MBA Wharton school graduate Ivan Juzang first put it in a 1992 market-research piece released by Motivational Educational Entertainment, "Reaching the Hip-Hop Generation." This term defines those born in the post-movement era—post–civil rights, black power, and women's movements—yet profoundly influenced by those movements. It is a term that transcends geography in that it refers to those coming from urban epicenters and suburban outposts. And in the context of this book, it refers specifically to blacks born between approximately 1965 and 1984.[1]

Despite my fellowship with hip hop, the relationship between young women and hip hop, even in those late 1980s college days, proved knotty in places. When the late Scott La Rock had "had 'em all" being a "super ho" with his "super sperm," I often wondered just how many "fly girls, shy girls, black girls, white girls" he had run up in and then kicked to the curb. An undeniably unflattering depiction of male boarishness, La Rock's reference to himself as a "super ho" nonetheless reflected the universal use of the term "ho," quite unlike its exclusive use for women in post-1980s hip hop.

Even Sir Mix A Lot's booty anthems, a precursor to 2 Live Crew, and the friendly fire battles of "Roxanne, Roxanne," Roxanne Shante, and "The Real Roxanne," left us all standing intact. The seemingly endless parade of Roxannes—part of the first wave of female rappers—Salt-N-Pepa, MC Lyte, Latifah, and Monie Love (the second wave), presented young women with an alternative worldview, a female perspective on the underclass, urban youth, and sexual politics. However, these progressive counterpoints were often overshadowed by women's footnoted status in hip hop.

As the grind and ravages of the Reagan-Bush eras whirred along thrashing urban communities, youth unemployment rose unchecked along with crack-cocaine addiction, and dealing became a full-time job. Gangsta rap emerged to hold it down for the West Coast and the South with Scarface and others. That genre of rap music provided insights similar to Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message," as it described the depressed and violent environs of the mostly black and Latino Los Angeles and the Deep South, but it was a mixed one as far as gender. The war on drugs led to prison culture and black youth culture meeting somewhere in the middle. Scores of black and brown men, fresh from juvenile detention centers or prison stints, defined a new masculinity in which the unique sexual hierarchies formed in those spaces were transferred to heterosexual relations. Outside these institutional walls, men became the proverbial "punks in prisons"—those incarcerated men described as "bitches" and "ho's," used to satisfy sexual needs, tasked with prison clean-up, cooking, laundry duties, etc., and oftentimes exploited brutally to assert manhood and masculinity.

From the late 1980s onwards, the gender-bending term "ho" was exclusively used to describe women or "unmanly" men, and "bitch" could be heard ad nauseam. The "g's up, ho's down" mentality of late 1980s hip hop laid the groundwork for the "pimp-playa-bitch-ho" nexus that has come to dominate hip hop culture. A third wave of stalwart female rappers—Lauryn Hill, Missy Elliot, Eve—emerged that nonetheless also included artists who many accused of pandering to the nexus, thus representing a marked departure from first- and second-wave female hip hop artists. For some, this pandering ran parallel to a new wave in feminism of the sex-power-punanny variety. Lil' Kim, Shawnna, Jacki-O, Remy Ma, Trina, and Foxy Brown were pushing the envelope with respect to gender relations, sexuality, and beauty culture. Alternately called "feminist glamazons" or rainmakers of a "new" or "post" feminist era (seems folks can't make up their minds whether feminism is indeed passé), they fearlessly exemplified punanny politics, status consumption, and the ever-provocative word "bitch." And so while this bitchy hip hop sextuplet rapped about sex as part of a young woman's arsenal to be deployed when necessary (and definitely for money), and frequently reclined at the altar of beauty culture as enabling rather than oppressive, their more egg-headed counterparts founded the magazine *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* in 1996.

While the editors of *Bitch* surprisingly tiptoe around the issue of hip hop and the "bitchy sextuplet," their pitch regarding the magazine's name rings a strikingly familiar tone. In the same way that hip hop embraced and redefined the "n-word," the magazine's mission statement suggests that "bitch" describes "all at once who we are when we speak

up, what it is we're too worked up over to be quiet about, and the act of making ourselves heard."

Though *Bitch* "refuses to ignore the contradictory and sometimes uncomfortable details that constitute the realities of women's lives," I don't think the "Queen Bee" Lil' Kim (who identifies herself as a feminist), "Da Baddest Bitch" Trina, or "That Beeyatch" Remy Ma will be gracing the magazine's covers or interiors anytime soon. Perhaps those "bitches'" contradictions are too uncomfortable and raw for *Bitch*; but what their exclusion aptly points to is the fork in the road between hip hop and feminism—mainstream, black, or otherwise.

It is in this in-between space where I would like to dwell. I believe we have reached a fascinating, and predictably retrogressive, moment in American pop culture regarding class, gender, and race. As a member of the hip hop generation, I am continually intrigued by the ways in which hip hop sets the tone for how women—myself included—think and act. I have written this book as a way to explore how and why we women do the things we do, what hip hop has to say about it all, and what we have to say back.