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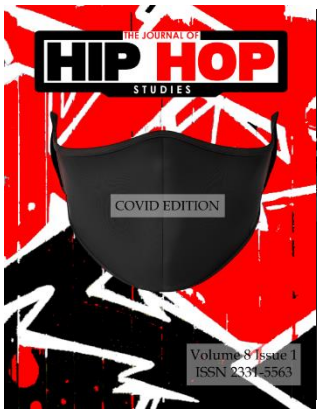

Journal of Hip Hop Studies,
Volume 8, Issue 1, Winter 2021, pp. 14 - 34
DOI: https://doi.org/10.34718/vxvw-4v75

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Shannon M. Cochran

Celebrity Queen Latifah's body is one of the most observable Black female bodies in contemporary United States culture. Using Black feminist theory, textual analysis, and Hip Hop theory, I examine Queen Latifah's Hip Hop corpulence bodily and narrative performativity. That is, I identify her usage of her body in different and varied spaces. Even though Queen Latifah's weight has fluctuated throughout her career, she has centered her body in spaces that have previously been hostile to corpulent, defined here as simply meaning larger and nonconforming, bodies; particularly, corpulent Black female bodies. I build on the work of Black feminist scholars, such as Leola A. Johnson (2003), who identify the black "queen" as an identity of some celebrity Black women, in suggesting that Queen Latifah has possessed a corpulent Africentric Queendom that has interrupted dominant and oppressive spaces in visual and narrative cultures. In doing so, she has performed a "mothering" subjectivity that is racialized and based in specific Black traditions that are contrary to the mythical construction of "mammy" that white supremacy is built on. It challenges the external Eurocentric constructions of the corpulent Black female body. Moreover, an examination of corpulence, or body size, demonstrates how Queen Latifah has claimed it as an intricate facet of her identity. Queen Latifah's body, artistry, and activism are what Andrea Shaw (2006) would call "disobedient" and "unruly" according to societal standards. Consequently, Queen Latifah has redressed the corpulent Black female body in multiple visual and narrative spaces. In doing so, Queen Latifah is an architect of Hip Hop culture and a matriarch of Hip Hop feminism.

> "For people who may be thicker, for people who may be darker and for people who may be female it is good to see someone like me in one of those magazines under 'beautiful' so that a girl out there can say, 'you know what? I'm beautiful! She's beautiful!"
> — Queen Latifah, qtd. in Rachel Raimist, "Lensing the Culture," 2010.

Hip Hop artist, actress, and businesswoman Dana Elaine Owens, better known as Queen Latifah, is one of the most visible Black entertainers to date. Her rise to superstardom has been characterized by her ability to appeal to multiple audiences. In doing so, Queen Latifah's is one of the most observable Black female bodies in contemporary United States culture. Using Black feminist (intersectional) theory and textual analysis, I examine Queen Latifah's corpulence and narrative performativity, focusing on her usage of her body in different and varied spaces. A tall woman whose weight fluctuates, Queen Latifah centers her body in spaces that have previously been hostile to corpulent, defined here as meaning larger and nonconforming, bodies that I call corpulent Black female bodies. Thus, building on the work of scholars such as Leola A. Johnson (2003), who identify the black "queen" as an identity of some celebrity women, I propose that Queen Latifah possesses a corpulent Africentric Queendom that

has disrupted dominant and oppressive spaces in visual and narrative cultures. Therefore, she has performed a "mothering" subjectivity that goes against the demeaning Eurocentric mammy construction. I use the term "mothering" in a way that reflects metaphorical matriarchy and nurturing. Queen Latifah's mothering is racialized and based in specific Black traditions that are contrary to the mythical construction of "mammy" that white supremacy is built on. For Queen Latifah's Hip Hop persona, this corpulent Africentric Queendom challenges the external Eurocentric constructions of the corpulent Black female body. Moreover, an examination of corpulence, or body size, is important to any assessment of Queen Latifah because she has claimed it as an intricate facet of her identity. Queen Latifah's body, artistry, and activism are what Andrea Shaw (2006) would call "disobedient" and "unruly" vis-à-vis societal standards. Consequently, Queen Latifah has redressed the corpulent Black female body in multiple visual and narrative spaces. In doing so, she has incorporated body positivity in her role as an architect of Hip Hop culture and a matriarch of Hip Hop feminism. I further borrow from Travis Harris' and other scholars' suggestion that Hip Hop is an African Diasporic Phenomenon,[1] by arguing that Queen Latifah brings Hip Hop to any text because of her strong roots in the culture. I argue that, in this case, Hip Hop is boundless, endless, and ever evolving because it is written on the bodies of some. Further, Queen Latifah's body size is part of her Hip Hop identity and being. Narratives inscribed on her body remain in any project that she is a part of. Therefore, a corpulent Black woman Hip Hopper comprises her identity.

Queen Latifah grew up as the only daughter of Lance and Rita Owens in Newark, New Jersey. Her parents divorced when she was young and she would later go on to say, "Before my parents separated, they complemented each other when it came to raising us kids …. Together my parents laid a solid foundation for both my brother and me."[2] Throughout her career, Queen Latifah has persistently paid homage to her parents and attributes her success and strength to them. Queen Latifah's mother especially serves as the foundation of her strength as a Black woman. Rita Owens observes, "As I look back, I realize that subconsciously I was building Dana's self-esteem from the day she was born."[3]

Queen Latifah's mother felt that it was vital to parent her daughter with the intention of building character and raising her to have confidence as a Black woman in a world that would continually produce adversity. Rita Owens's gender-specific outlook on raising her daughter is evident in Queen Latifah's view that women play a crucial

[1] Travis Harris, "Can it Be Bigger Than Hip Hop? From Global Hip Hop Studies to Hip Hop." *Journal of Hip Hop Studies*. v 6. Issue 2, Winter (2019): 4-6, accessed July 20, 2021, https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1110&context=jhhs.

[2] Queen Latifah with Karen Hunter, *Ladies First: Revelations of a Strong Woman*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 40.

[3] Latifah, xii-xxi.

role in strengthening the family, as Queen Latifah has said herself: "My mother, Rita Owens, …. laid the foundation for me to become a self-proclaimed queen. She made the ground fertile for me to persevere, no matter what obstacles, and to keep my head up."[4] Moreover, Queen Latifah learned early in her life that the Black woman is a fundament in the collective identity of African American people and should be revered as such.

From Princess to Queen

Dana Owens's choice of name for her public persona, Queen Latifah, which was first articulated in an award-winning rap career, reflects her interest in, and commitment to, a specific racialized gendered identity. Her decision to refer to herself as "Queen Latifah" reflects the way that she challenges Eurocentric standards and ideals. An analysis of the name "Queen Latifah" reveals how Dana Owens strategically embarked on a career journey that not only redefined traditional standards of beauty, but also redefined articulations of the corpulent Black female body and its mythical connections to mothering white patriarchy and supremacy.

Queen Latifah's contribution to Hip Hop politics cannot be overstated. She is considered a pioneer of the rap art form and Hip Hop culture and is one of the first female emcees to gain worldwide stardom. In Hip Hop culture, the process of naming is especially important for artists and most appropriate a name that defines their desired public persona and artistry in general. Historically, Hip hop and rap artists empower themselves with a title that speaks to their uniqueness and style in the game. Dana Owens's emergence on the rap scene occurred at a time when there were not many women practicing the art form and even fewer making a successful career out of it. Most of the women who were trying to break into Hip Hop as rap artists during the 1980s appropriated the styles and traditions of their male counterparts. For example, the legendary MC Lyte, who quickly rose to prominence in early Hip Hop circles, often adorned clothing in similar to successful male rap artists at the time, sporty tracksuits with sneakers.

Dana Owens decided on a very different path regarding her Hip Hop artistry, one that penetrated the male-dominated culture and stands as one of the most challenging paths to date. In addition to choosing a physical appearance that utilized African-inspired costumes and iconography, and after referring to herself as "Princess of the Posse," Owens settled on a name that affirmed the teachings of her mother and reflected a racialized gendered identity

[4] Latifah, 11.

> For me, *Latifah* was freedom. I loved the name my parents gave me, Dana Elaine Owens. But I knew then that something as simple as picking a new name for myself would be my first act of defining who I was—for myself and for the world.[5]

In becoming "Latifah," Dana Owens established her individuality through her public persona; however, it was the prefix "Queen" that further articulated a racialized gendered identity.

For Owens, the title "Queen" pays homage to an African past and present where women are centered in the community:

> My mother and I would get into deep discussions about the plight of South African women and talk about how segregation and racism were alive and kicking right here … Before there was a queen of England, there were Nefertiti and Numidia …. They are revered not only for their extraordinary beauty and power but also for their strength and for their ability to nurture and rule the continent that gave rise to the greatest civilizations of all time. These women are my foremothers. I wanted to pay homage to them. And I wanted, in my own way, to adopt their attributes. … "Queen" seemed appropriate. Queen Latifah. When I said it … I felt dominant.[6]

Dana Owens conceptualized her stage name, "Queen Latifah," as one that reflects, and is simultaneously bound by, ties to a collective African history and heritage. In her work on the Black Queen concept that is adopted by some women for their public personae and narratives, Leola A. Johnson argues that these Queens "speak to a politics born of necessity … the necessity of finding a space for a strong, sexually, and spiritually, unconventional black woman."[7] Queen Latifah's name allows her to perform an identity that prioritizes a Black female body. Moreover, her conceptualization of a *racialized* "Queen" as being the nurturer and ruler of civilization effectively articulates a "mothering" that is empowered. Thus, an African-defined Black matriarch counters one that is rooted in Eurocentrism. "Queen Latifah," as a persona, is rooted in a brand of Hip Hop nationalism that affirms Afrocentric cultural styles and traditions; however, it also complicates misogynic interpretations of Black Nationalist impulses by affirming the Black female body as an empowered matriarchal figure. Via Queen Latifah, this body is articulated and performed as one that is respected and revered. She states in an interview with Joe Clair, "You got to stay true to who you are … I'm changing what people think … whether it's my complexion, being a black

[5] Latifah, 16, 17.

[6] Latifah, 17, 18.

[7] Leola A. Jonson, "The Spirit Is Willing and So Is the Flesh: The Queen in Hip-Hop Culture," in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, ed. Anthony Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 154–70.

woman, my figure, being a full-figure woman … my body image alone makes for comfort for some girls … who don't have that marketable figure."[8]

By politicizing and positing her body in male-dominated Hip Hop culture early on, Queen Latifah performed corpulence in a way that anticipates her 21st-century public identity and the overall cultural movement to redefine how body size is perceived in American society and how it intersects with race and gender. Further, Latifah's performance of corpulent Africentric Queendom in Hip Hop culture demands attention to this body and challenges popular depictions of Eurocentric beauty ideals. Many scholars, including Robin Roberts, have analyzed Latifah's early work, such as the single "Ladies First," as an example of her feminist expression that emphasizes "female solidarity and sisterhood."[9] In one of the first studies on Hip Hop, Tricia Rose states that "'Ladies First' is a powerful rewriting of the contributions of black women in the history of black struggles."[10] I build on this scholarship by recognizing her work also as a disruption in the systematically oppressive spaces of whiteness as well as a nonconforming bodily interjection in traditional Western feminist expression, which rarely invests in progressive examinations of corpulence identity. My argument is that the corpulent Africentric Queendom articulated in her body of work and public persona is not only progressive in reading and assessing women's concerns, but it is also *communal* and Black nationalist in nature. Therefore, the corpulent Africentric Queendom challenges traditional European-inspired patriarchal standards while it maintains "watch" over a racialized community. This performance of identity is counter to the historical "mammy" construction of Black female bodies that sociologist K. Sue Jewell states, "is in American culture" and is typified by "characteristics … suggest[ing] submissiveness towards her owner (during slavery) or her employer (following emancipation)."[11] Therefore, it is a strategic display of Hip Hop nationalism that renders Black bodies as autonomous, beautiful, and worthy. Jeffrey Louis Decker describes nationalism in Hip Hop as "espousing a black nationalist sound, image, and message draw from both recent struggles that anticipate the coming of the black nation."[12] Further, in her work, *Pulse of the People: Political Rap Music and Black Politics*, Lakeyta M. Bonnette centers the notion of nationalism by arguing that "Black Nationalism promotes racial solidarity [because] … being a Black Nationalist makes one

[8] "Queen Latifah Gives Tips on How to Have a Versatile Music Career," *BET Networks*, March 18, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVB7D8HB-IM.

[9] Robin Roberts, *Ladies First: Women in Music Videos* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996), 58.

[10] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary Culture* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 163.

[11] K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 37–38.

[12] Jeffrey Louis Decker, "The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip Hop Nationalism," *Social Text*, no. 34 (1991): 54, https://doi.org/10.2307/466354.

more aware of issues that solely affect the Black community."[13] Queen Latifah sums up the role of music by saying "[m]usic has always been powerful for social change."

In addition to the power of naming herself, Queen Latifah's adorning herself with African-inspired and influenced clothing also affirms her racialized identity. One of the most striking African customs that Queen Latifah adopted was the headdress that is customary in many African societies. During the 1980s and 1990s, Queen Latifah consistently wore a headdress as an emblem of her Afrocentric Queendom. Further, Queen Latifah's performance of this custom challenges the demeaning nature of mammy's customary style. Images of the mammy have always represented her with a rag or bandana on her head. However, Jewell emphasizes the dignity associated with the practice of wearing a headscarf: "The fashioning of handkerchiefs into headscarves can be traced to Africa. The wearing of headgear arises from an African custom that necessitated the covering of the head, particularly in religious ceremonies but also on other occasions."[14] Thus, a tradition based on lived experiences is distorted to fit the mythology of the Black female body as inferior and emblem of difference based on deviancy.

Queen Latifah's appropriation of fancy African-centered headdress to complete her corpulent Africentric Queendom persona literally and figuratively redresses the nonconforming Black female body and forces its presence into white and male-dominated spaces such as the music industry. It adds to the imagery of her racialized gendered identity as it recoups this identity in a powerful and autonomous way. For example, the album covers for *All Hail the Queen* (1989) and *Nature of Sista'*, her second album released in 1991, show Queen Latifah in the headdress. On the cover of *All Hail the Queen*, she has a black headdress, which matches her black militaristic uniform. Standing with her head high and clutching the front of the blazer, Queen Latifah performs a challenge to the traditional mammy construction and male-dominated Black Nationalist imagery of cultural and revolutionary organizations of the past. Moreover, her presence is complemented by a black diagram of the African continent encircled with the name "Queen Latifah" in red and "All Hail the Queen" in green. This imagery suggests her investment in her racialized gendered identity as it simultaneously challenges traditional associations of the corpulent Black female body. As "mother" to an Africana community, her Black female body does not succumb to prioritizing whiteness.

The challenge to the mammy imagery recurs in Queen Latifah's early work and she worked it to accompany her lyrical artistry. In her first album, *All Hail the Queen,*

[13]Lakeyta M. Bonnette, *Pulse of the People: Political Rap Music and Black Politics* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 55.

[14]Jewell, 39.

Queen Latifah's agenda brings forth a message of empowerment to women. In her text, *Check It While I Wreck It*, Gwendolyn Pough argues that:

> Through Hip-Hop culture, a generation of Black women is coming to voice and bringing wreck. These women are attacking the stereotypes and misconceptions that influenced their lives and the lives of their foremothers.[15]

I would add that not only is Queen Latifah attacking misconceptions about Black women, but her corpulence performativity allows her to bring "wreck" to the traditional performance and intersection of weight, race, gender, class, and sexuality. Hence, Eurocentric and white supremacist constructions of mammy are challenged by the autonomy and empowerment of Queen Latifah's play on race and gender relations.

In the first hit single released from the *All Hail the Queen* album, Latifah quickly transitioned her name and celebrity persona from "Princess of the Posse." Roberts analyzes the hit single, "Ladies First," as a reflection of Queen Latifah's pro-woman concerns. Roberts argues that "[b]eing feminist does not mean abandoning her African heritage; instead, it becomes a source of strength and power."[16] This single also fully articulates Queen Latifah's womanist stance because in it she argues that not only have Black women been pivotal instruments in the formation of community and nation, but also that Black women must be a part of liberation efforts and concerns. She says in an interview for *Hip Hop: The Songs That Shook America*, "I felt like I had to speak for the Black community."[17] In another interview she extends this outlook to further include women: "You could talk about what was going on in your community … wherever there's a lack of female voices, there's a deficit … whenever a woman's voice is not heard, included, expected, you're going to lose. You will never be as great as you could be."[18]

An analysis of the video for the single further sheds light on the woman-centered imagery that Queen Latifah appropriated during this time in her career. The visibility of historical figures such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Angela Davis in the "Ladies First" video allows for a naming and redressing of the Black female body. Queen Latifah not only recognizes and names these three women as important figures in the fight for racial and gender equality, but she also redresses their bodies and identifies the Black female body as an agent for change rather than a passive instrument. In doing so, Queen Latifah emphasizes that her *own* body and shared identity should be taken seriously and is needed in the continued fight against racial discrimination.

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[15] Gwendolyn Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 87.

[16] Roberts, 166.

[17] "Queen Latifah: 'I Had to Speak for the Black Community,'" *Hip Hop: The Songs That Shook America*, May 17, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inWjLxB0QLQ.

[18] "Queen Latifah Dishes on Sexism in the Music Industry, R Kelly, and Feminism," *Yahoo*, March 13, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R24vhB4GSjw.

Her alignment with historical Black women figures is a reconfiguration of the symbolic matriarchal Black body. Moreover, the thickness that Latifah possesses adds to a dramatic change in how this body is performed and demands new and broader perceptions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and notions of motherhood. I argue that "Ladies First" is reflective of the concept of an African Diasporic Phenomenon that Harris proposes.[19] Her alignment and collaboration with the British artist Monie Love presents a narrative of Hip Hop as transatlantic. Thus, the argument that Hip Hop and Global Hip Hop are two separate entities would not allow for an analysis of the project. Further, by metaphorically tracing her roots to African queens, Latifah is rearticulating the strength, power, and leadership of Black women and corpulent Black female bodies.

In addition to *All Hail the Queen*, the albums *Nature of a Sista* (1991), *Black Reign* (1993), and *Order in the Court* (1998) articulate a mothering subjectivity founded on Queen Latifah's racialized gendered identity. In the single "Latifah's Law," she affirms the importance of her African heritage in the shaping of her identity. She stresses: "Peace to Africa … Can't forget my other land. I won't fulfill my heart unless I speak about the motherland … call me your Highness."[20] As a counter to historical requests for respectability by Black women, Queen Latifah's demands are not apologetic nor are they reflective of existing demands. In "Queen of Royal Badness," Latifah spells out her demand: "These are the words of a queen of a queendom … I'm the queen of royal badness! This is a queen speaking wise words … when you address me, address me as 'your Highness, one of hip hop's finest!'"[21] The song is an example of Queen Latifah's eloquent construction of her identity. She reveals an intricate conception of Black female motherhood, one that occupies a male-dominated and male-operated space: Hip Hop.

The 1989 hit "Mama Gave Birth to the Soul Children" is an interesting spin on kinship and it lyrically establishes Queen Latifah's place in Hip Hop history and architecture. Moreover, the song clearly lays out her self-constructed mother (Mama) identity in music and redefines the corpulent Black female body's societal "mothering" purpose. The twelve-inch album single cover contains an illustration of a curvaceous woman, assumed to be Queen Latifah, tending to three men-children in a fast sports car version of a stroller. Accompanying her large African-inspired headdress is form-fitting clothing to match. This illustrates the symbolism in this Africentric Hip Hop mothering. As Hip Hop artists who were part of the racially and socially conscious genre of rap music during this time, members of the hip hop group De La Soul act as pupils and offspring of Queen Latifah in the song, who posits herself as mother of this form of activism. In manipulating the assumptions regarding Black motherhood and implementing a Hip Hop symbolic definition with the song, she undermines the constructed mammy image of Black motherhood found in visual and narrative cultures.

[19] Harris, 5.
[20] Queen Latifah, "Latifah's Law," *All Hail the Queen*, Tommy Boy Records, 1989.
[21] Queen Latifah, "Queen of Royal Badness," *All Hail the Queen*, Tommy Boy Records, 1989.

Hence, she is viewed and portrayed as a figure of power whose mothering is not physical but psychological and cultural.

In the song, Queen Latifah insinuates that "Mama gave birth to the soul children!" to transfer knowledge and wisdom. The three members of De La Soul are known for their socially conscious lyrics, especially during this time of visibly racially conscious Hip Hop. Therefore, Queen Latifah establishes her "mothering" and nurturing of this consciousness by working with and mentoring De La Soul through her own socially conscious-infused Hip Hop lyrics and overall persona. More importantly, Queen Latifah does not simply maintain a role of actor in this school of Hip Hop consciousness but rather, she makes herself mother and architect. As the trio sing "go mommy" and "go 'head mama get down," she professes, "A Black Queen upon the scene … Prince Paul produces this … he's one of my sons … Check the sounds of Mama Zulu … as I relay the story untold and if you're wondering why I got kids so big … they weren't born from the body, they were born from the soul!"[22] She is the matriarch in the Native Tongues hip hop collective of racially conscious rappers during the time, which in addition to De La Soul included A Tribe Called Quest and Jungle Brothers and others.

"Mama Gave Birth to the Soul Children" was the beginning of Queen Latifah's cultural mothering, which she has continued throughout her rap career. She encourages her suitor in "Come into My House" to "come into" her "house" and she similarly invited audiences into her home where she was the queen and mother to a new form of parenting; one that involved racial, gender, and sexual communities. Dealing with racial and gender pride, domestic issues, and gender roles, Queen Latifah's music became not only her platform, but also an important soundtrack for the Black community during the time.

As she states in the popular song, "It's a house party I'm hosting … for those who dare to … come into my house … from the queen of royal badness … I move multitudes. The Afro-Asiatic Black women, hard core, beat drummin'...it's hard to keep a good woman so I keep coming … I symbolize wisdom!"[23] Queen Latifah's mothering was initially intended for her immediate Black community; however, I regard this community as a nation as Joseph D. Eure and James G. Spady identify in their work, *Nation Conscious Rap* (1991).[24] In the song, "Evil That Men Do," Queen Latifah tried to instill pride in both women and men through a critique of the United States' welfare system, drug use, homelessness, and intraracial violence. She claims, "Black on black crime only shackles and binds … stop! Bring about some type of peace not only in your

[22] Queen Latifah, "Mama Gave Birth to the Soul Children," *All Hail the Queen*, Tommy Boy Records, 1989.

[23] Queen Latifah, "Come into My House," *All Hail the Queen*, Tommy Boy Records, 1989.

[24] Joseph D. Eure and James G. Spady, *Nation Conscious Rap* (New York: PC International Press, 1993).

heart but also in your mind. It will benefit all mankind."[25] This intraracial violence theme has been a constant narrative in her work. In her fourth CD release, *Order in the Court*, she composed a song and flipped the term. "Black on Black Love" is a narrative about the possibilities of unity within the Black community. The song is an extension of the female empowerment theme found in the singles "U.N.I.T.Y" and "Ladies First." Going beyond the realm of domestic violence, "Black on Black Love" is a cry for the Black community to come together and spread love in order to survive and thrive. In addition to intraracial violence, drug abuse, domestic abuse, and homelessness, Latifah discusses the beauty in the community, articulating an Afrocentric perspective: "No need to fight. We stayed tight. We all loved our neighbor; had each other's back … the whole village chipped in and raised that one child."[26]

In addition to the many issues that Queen Latifah addresses in "Black on Black Love," she also returns to her Black and hip hop nationalist stance, saying "[w]e stood Black and strong … supported our Black-owned stores … We all stuck tight … as a people we lived right … We took control of our own fate." "Black on Black Love" reflects Queen Latifah's conscious mothering of community in her music. In addition to expressing Africentric and communal tropes, Queen Latifah's artistry reflects the idea of a global and Hip Hop subject through her incorporation of Jamaican dialect in her fourth album, *Black Reign*. The album, released in 1993, was a personal and communal project for Queen Latifah. She no longer adorned herself in a headdress and African-inspired clothing; however, the album was still rooted in Black tradition and discourse. Created around the time that her brother, Lance, died in a motorcycle accident, the album is an example of Queen Latifah's ability to incorporate jazz, dancehall and soul music elements in her rap. Confident in her flow, she comes harder than she did on her previous albums, but still maintains a softness that characterizes her Africentric nurturing spirit. She infuses song with rap as she continues to propose the idea of a Black community and what Eure and Spady would call "nation."[27] I argue that her music is based on and speaks to this nation. As exemplified in the title, *Black Reign*, Queen Latifah does not abandon her Africentric queendom. In addition to the female empowerment Grammy award-winning hit, "U.N.I.T.Y," the singles, "Black Hand Side" and "Listen to Me" were filled with the same empowering lyrics as her previous projects. As with her collaboration with Monie Love, Queen Latifah's collaborations with Jamaican-born artists, Tony Rebel and Heavy D. demonstrates how a study of such a project would blur lines of Hip Hop and Global Hip Hop. As Harris proposes, viewing Queen Latifah and her projects as African Diaspora Phenomena is in order.

Her dedication to disseminating and nurturing knowledge, wisdom, and pride in culture and heritage extends the realm of her music career. She not only promotes

[25] Queen Latifah, "Evil That Men Do," *All Hail the Queen*, Tommy Boy Records, 1989.
[26] Queen Latifah, "Black on Black Love," *Order in the Court*, Motown Records, 1998.
[27] Eure and Spady.

women's empowerment, but rather she is devoted to the survival and well-being of the entire community through her message of loving oneself first. Thus, her music is an extensive catalogue that addresses intersecting issues pertinent to multiple communities, such as racial pride, gender roles, intimate partner abuse, poverty, and child abuse. Queen Latifah's progressive communal depictions serve as intervention in misogynistic commercial hip hop spaces. Therefore, Queen Latifah's corpulent Black female body rearticulates Hip Hop expertise and legend as it centers itself in unfamiliar locales.

Hip Hop's First Lady of Television

The empowering Hip Hop mother narrative that Queen Latifah sketched out in music has followed her to a successful screen career. Moreover, Queen Latifah's "radical womanist persona"[28] has been the foundation for many of her television characters. I would like to highlight her television series projects, including one that coincided with her *Black Reign* album and remains a Hip Hop cultural artifact.

The sitcom, *Living Single* (1993–1998), exemplifies the fusion of Queen Latifah's Africentric mothering with the character she portrayed while affirming her identity in Hip Hop culture. I argue that Queen Latifah carries a Hip Hop narrative in the sitcom because of her similarities to her character, Khadijah James. The sitcom, based on the lives of four friends and housemates in Brooklyn, New York in the 1990s, was created by an African American woman, Yvette Bowser.[29] Kristal Brent Zook argues that "[b]ecause Bowser is a successful, independent woman, relatively sympathetic to feminist aims, her characters reflected this sensibility."[30] Zook contends that Queen Latifah's character, magazine CEO and entrepreneur, Khadijah James, posits a womanist presence in the show that refuses to align itself with traditional sexual and gender discourses.

I extend Zook's argument and suggest that the character Khadijah James "mothers" her sitcom friends and family as well as her audience in the same fashion that Queen Latifah does. Contrary to Eurocentric mammy characteristics such as asexuality and dependency on, and allegiance to, whiteness, Khadijah is a complex character who possesses agency due to her beauty, style, and business savvy that is rooted in Hip Hop culture. Zook's argument that "the radical womanist persona of Queen Latifah provided an implicit challenge to … the regressive politics of female desperation evident in so many episodes of *Living Single*,"[31] is the beginning of an analysis of the character Khadijah James. One can go beyond womanist politics to suggest that Khadijah's presence in the series challenges corporeal politics due to the

[28] Kristal Brent Zook, *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 66.

[29] Yvette Lee Bowser, creator, *Living Single*, Fox Network, 1993–1998.

[30] Zook, 68.

[31] Zook, 68.

complex presentation and performativity of Black women's bodies on the show during this time. Black womanhood is multidimensional, which is an important factor in humanizing and centering the Black female body. The four characters played by Queen Latifah, Kim Fields, Kim Coles, and Erika Alexander, all deviated from traditional European standards of beauty. Queen Latifah and Kim Coles' weight fluctuated throughout the tenure of the series, and, with braided hair, Erika Alexander possessed darker brown skin.

Also, the show was dedicated to centering, uplifting, and affirming the Black community though its portrayal of Black males. The women's closest friends were two racially conscious African American males, Kyle and Overton, played by T. C. Carson and John Henton respectively. The Africentric performances along with tropes such as African art, clothing, and home decorations, all reflected a dedication to racialized communities and therefore, Queen Latifah's Hip Hop performance in the show was also communal. Because her involvement and engagement in the show was loosely based on her life, I argue that her performance was womanist. The show provided a Hip Hop space at a time when Hip Hop was emerging on mainstream mediums. Shows such as *Martin* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* incorporated Hip Hop themes, references, and iconography. Queen Latifah's Hip Hop theme song composition and performance also reflected the Hip Hop roots and space of *Living Single.* Khadijah's entrepreneurship and operation of a Hip Hop magazine in the show further affirmed it as a Hip Hop space where a nonconforming Black female body and her community were centered.

Furthermore, in addition to communal bonds, the construction of the Black female body was rearticulated even more due to the sexual ambiguity of Queen Latifah's persona. Zook argues:

> Latifah has been associated with nontraditional representations of femininity, sexuality, and power. Because of her own brand of "sexual liminality," she too has entered (whether willingly or not) into a discourse around both feminism and lesbianism … Latifah's public and private personas reveal an "ability to slide up and down the registers of masculine and feminine'"[32]

I concur with Zook's assessment and her argument that it is not important to "out" how Queen Latifah identifies sexually, as it is to identify the empowering narratives written on her public body. Thus, I maintain that this liminality aspect of Queen Latifah's celebrity persona extends to her corpulent Africentric Queendom and redefines the role of the corpulent Black female body and its mothering role in visual and narrative cultures. Thus, a reading of Queen Latifah's body as lesbian rearticulates corpulent Black female mothering in nontraditional ways and provides even more flexibility and fluidity to Hip Hop mothering in varied spaces.

[32] Zook, 69.

Queen Latifah's fluid body has continued to enter visual spaces where only males have dominated. As the lead character and star of the 2021 televised action show, *The Equalizer,* her character uses her skills to help people who feel they have nowhere to turn. The show is an extension of a series of action-packed productions with the same title that showcased males as lead warrior stars. The first *The Equalizer* starred a white male, Edward Woodward, and ran from 1985 to 1989 on CBS. The second was in the form of a feature film and starred a Black male. Denzel Washington starred in the 2014 and 2018 film adaptation of the TV series. Queen Latifah pushed boundaries and posited her Black female body in a space that males dominate. Traditionally, in American visual and narrative cultures, heroism is a space that males dominate and construct. Rarely are women portrayed as heroines in action-packed narratives. Further, Black women are still seldomly cast as main characters in television texts. Her role as one of the producers on the show, along with her business partner, Shakim Compere, is even more rare. As with other projects, she carries Hip Hop with her to this project. With *The Equalizer* production, Queen Latifah has centered the corpulent and weight-fluctuating Black female body in television for over twenty years.

Africentric Queen of the Scene

There are other important television, filmic, and cultural productions where Queen Latifah's involvement continues her television corpulent Africentric Queendom and directly speaks to her activism. Because her corpulent Africentric Queendom is a narrative written on her body, Queen Latifah carries it with her regardless of text. Her presence in films such as *Life Support* (2007) and *Flint* (2017) reflect Queen Latifah's mothering to racial and gendered communities. The HBO film *Life Support* stars Queen Latifah as a HIV positive grassroots activist.[33] The film, written by Hip Hop cultural critic Nelson George and based on a true story, is set in New York and portrays Ana as a woman who overcomes the hardships of drug addiction and low self-esteem to empower other women through her community activism. The drama presents a realistic story that is crucial when analyzing racialized and gendered communities because Black women are specifically vulnerable to HIV and other diseases.[34] Therefore, the film can be viewed as a form of activism. Like Queen Latifah, the character fights for the protection of, and love for, Black women's bodies as she educates others on safe sex. Because Ana's story is based on a true story, Queen Latifah's portrayal is critical when assessing her corpulence performativity. In this narrative, the corpulent Black female body is an activist and mothers' wisdom to the community about serious issues plaguing it. Her performance earned Queen Latifah a Screen Actors Guild Award, a Golden Globe, and an Image Award in 2008. Queen Latifah's dedication to fighting HIV is also reflected in her ongoing participation in events and performances that fund

[33] George Nelson, dir., *Life Support,* with Queen Latifah, HBO, 2007.

[34] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

AIDS research.[35] In *Flint*, she embodies a woman who is a part of the fight against the environmental racism via the water crisis that has taken place in the Michigan city.[36]

Queen Latifah has also been involved in other productions and activities that reflect her dedication to Black communities. She has created and authored literary texts that aim to uplift the esteem of Black girls and women. Her mothering in her memoir, *Ladies First: Revelations of a Strong Woman* (2000), her storybook, *Queen of the Scene* (2006), and *Put Your Crown On: Life-Changing Moments on the Path to Queendom* (2010), reflects her corpulent Africentric Queendom. In the texts, Queen Latifah espouses a narrative that seeks to uplift and center the Black female body as it undermines the gender and racial roles that have marginalized them in American society.

Ladies First: *Revelations of a Strong Woman* is categorized as "Inspiration/Biography," and thus it is not solely a biography but more of a testimony to Queen Latifah's lived experiences to uplift others. She states in the text:

> Being a queen has very little to do with exterior things. It is a state of mind … I'm writing this book to let every woman know that she, too—no matter what her status or her place in life—is royalty. This is particularly important for African American women to know inside and out, upside down, and right side up.[37]

Queen Latifah's Africentric Queendom, mothering, and other mothering presence in contemporary visual and narrative cultures counters and complicates dominant readings. She not only empowers Black women and girls to love themselves, but she also continues to disrupt traditional Eurocentric gender notions and restrictions.

Queen Latifah's corpulence performativity also intervenes in traditional spaces where constructions of femininity and masculinity are pronounced and rendered white. Queen Latifah is the spokesperson and face for multiple Procter and Gamble products and projects. A reading of her CoverGirl cosmetics promotions posits Queen Latifah as a redress of the corpulent Black female body due to the nature of the promotions and her place in them. She is not simply promoting cosmetics, but rather, bringing her Hip Hop corpulent Africentric Queendom to a space traditionally reserved for white female bodies. The narrative of "being comfortable in one's own skin" is prevalent in the promotion. Her "Queen Collection" advertises cosmetics that bring out the "natural hues" and colors of one's skin. Queen Latifah's presentation challenges gender expectations and blurs a blatant traditional performance of femininity. She complicates a dominant reading and definition of femininity.

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[35] Sara Bloom, *Queen Latifah* (Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2002).

[36] *Flint*, dir. Bruce Beresford, Sony Pictures Television, 2017.

[37] Latifah, 2.

On a CoverGirl commercial early in the campaign, she attests, "One size fits all? No Way!" The commercial espouses that women's identities and bodies are multi-dimensional and it borrows from Queen Latifah's personal and public motto of celebrating difference. On another commercial, Queen Latifah is shown in a black "after-five" gown with the paparazzi and thinner, model-like admirers watching her walk down a red carpet. She is the primary focus of the gaze as she smiles and strolls along the carpet to a waiting limousine. The centering of Queen Latifah in such a traditional Eurocentric and ultrafeminine space allows the viewer to witness corpulence intervening and performing in a locale where it is not usually present and revered. This interruption, via Queen Latifah's corpulent Black female body, poses a threat to traditional gender and racial narratives, thus, upsetting familiar body politics and presenting new ways of seeing and perceiving racialized and gendered bodies. One can read the CoverGirl promotion as not merely assimilation to European standards of beauty or white patriarchy, but rather, as pushing specific boundaries and forcing corpulent Black female bodies into spaces and locations that have historically refused them. In the productions, the corpulent Black female body is centered.

Another Procter and Gamble campaign that centers the body of Queen Latifah is the "My Black is Beautiful" promotion. The promotion attests on the company website that, Procter and Gamble's "extraordinary new initiative, My Black is Beautiful, celebrates the diverse collective beauty of African-American women and encourages black women to define and promote our own beauty standard." The promotion professes to instill pride in Black women and girls. The "My Black is Beautiful" campaign is a spin-off from the "Queen Collection" in that Queen Latifah is used in the promotion to inspire Black women and girls to embrace their identities.

The unity of race, gender, weight, (and sexuality) allows Queen Latifah the ability to redress and center a body that is marginalized and the promotions and Queen Latifah's dedication to Black communities elevate the corpulent Black female body to a status that it has not traditionally occupied in visual spaces. In addition, she has been involved in projects that are centered on body positivity and the full-figured woman, including promotions for Lane Bryant and Curvation, a lingerie company for the full-busted woman, where she launched her own collection of undergarments. Her visibility in visual and narrative cultures has positioned the corpulent Black female body in places and narratives that are generally closed to it.

"Call me Your Highness"

Most notably, Queen Latifah's role as Hip Hop businesswoman performs corpulence in new and innovative ways. It is this role that merges the many facets of her celebrity persona. As businesswoman and company CEO, she challenges traditional mammy notions because she is in charge and behind the scenes of not only many of her own projects and productions, but those of others as well. As a producer, she further affirms her corpulent Afrocentric Queendom mothering and centers the corpulent Black

female body in traditionally male-dominated spaces. Queen Latifah is one of the first Black women to own and operate a production and record company founded on Hip Hop. Flavor Unit Entertainment emerged from and promoted the advancements of other artists through recording contracts, management, and motion picture involvement. Her dedication to "'lifting' as she 'climbs'" is reflected in her endeavors. Managed by her partner, Shakim Compere, and herself, Flavor Unit Entertainment is responsible for the uplift and centering of Black bodies in narrative and visual cultures.

Flavor Unit Entertainment was also involved in the production of projects such as *Beauty Shop* (2005), *Just Wright* (2010), *Bessie* (2015), *The Real MVP: The Wanda Durant Story* (2016), as well as her own talk show, *The Queen Latifah Show* (1999–2001, 2013–2015). Queen Latifah has used her own career and status to employ women and people of color. She told *Ebony* magazine in 2005:

> Every time we do one of these films, we pay back our community with employment … Just doing the talk show, we employed 150 people. I had a mandate that African Americans be hired, so that went from me down the line. When I get in a position to do that, I can lay down the law like that. It's not that I'm excluding people, but I'm including people … including *my people*.[38]

She also stressed the importance of helping her community during the coronavirus pandemic. In a March 2021 issue of *People Magazine*, she stated,

> It's been great making *The Equalizer* here in New Jersey … It's just surreal, almost, shooting on the streets that I grew up on, places that are close to my heart … it's great to be able to employ people from here … so that some of our local folks can work despite COVID.[39]

This dedication to community is a large part of her personal commitment to the Black community and renders her an important twentieth-century *activist*. She is dedicated to giving back to the community from which she came. Treach, rap artist in the Grammy-nominated and New Jersey-based group Naughty by Nature, articulates Queen Latifah's Hip Hop mothering. The group was managed and given their break in the music industry by Queen Latifah. He once said, "La was always like a big sister … She represented the female empowerment. She turned a lot of adults on to Hip hop." Here, Treach elevates Queen Latifah to the important and vital pioneer of Hip Hop that she is. Another member of the group, Vinnie, added, "[s]he is naturally a Queen."

Racialized Corpulent Queenliness

Texts are viewed and perceived differently by different spectators and at different historical moments. Identities, shaped by personal and cultural histories, influence the consumption of Queen Latifah in any given text. She still maintains a

[38]Lynn Norment, "Queen Latifah Changes Her Shape and Her Tune," *Ebony*, January 2005, 130–35.

[39] Janine Rubenstein, "It's Good to Be Queen," *People Magazine*, March 1, 2021, 47.

strong following due to her personal activism, legacy, and historical roots in racialized and gendered communities.

Analyses and perceptions of Queen Latifah must routinely consider the early and current constructions of her body as an Africentric motherly queen. These constructions have been staples in her career and are still very important parts of her public celebrity persona. They are born from her Hip Hop roots and should be noted in the discourse surrounding her. Queen Latifah is emblematic of the possibilities of Hip Hop. Bonnette argues that political rap positively influences the youth and incorporates issues that are pertinent to assessing the plight of the Black community, stating that "[p]olitical rap … follows the model of uniting African Americans through music by discussing issues relevant to the Black community."[40] Many communities, such as Black women, have come to negotiate their readings of Queen Latifah in cinema and television with her overall legacy and corpulent Africentric Queendom and she remains one of the most revered Black women in American culture. One of her most recent projects is an initiative that creates and fosters cinematic narratives by, and about, women. The Queen Collective is a "push to opening doors for women through mentoring, production support, and creating distribution opportunities content for the next generation of multicultural female directors."[41] At the time of this study, there have been two cinematic releases by the Queen Collective and both deal with and center Black girls and women.

This study is not meant to be exhaustive, as Queen Latifah's work is broad and ongoing. However, her overall presence in visual and narrative cultures has been specifically thematic in ways that disrupt traditional constructions of the Black female body as she continues to inspire and center racial and gender communities. She has carried her Hip Hop identity throughout her career. As the first Hip Hop artist to have a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, her role as matriarch to contemporary Hip Hop feminism(s) is evident. Latifah should be viewed as a Hip Hop pioneer in the same way that male emcees are. She is a foremother to women Hip Hop emcees who came after her. Her style and approach make her an architect of the genre as well as of specific imagery in Hip Hop. Thus, her performative identity reflects her mothering of a specific narrative that interrelates race, gender, and sexual orientation. Unlike classic rock music artists, Hip Hop artists, particularly women artists, are not revered in United States society. In her critique of producer and music critic Nelson George's insinuation that women have contributed fairly little to the field of Hip Hop, Rachel Raimist argues that "George attempted to wipe out our contribution to the culture beyond tokenizing,

[40] Bonnette, 8.

[41] Paulana Lamonier, "Queen Latifah Continues to Shatter the Glass Ceiling with the Launch of the Queen Collective," *Forbes*, May 17, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/workday/2019/10/15/matching-customer-desire-to-make-a-positive-social-impact-with-their-talent-needs/#43b5b7ef2011

marginalizing, and compartmentalizing, saying that we haven't had a real or significant impact on a culture that we have participated in as writers, rappers, artists, managers, publicists, filmmakers, supporters, journalists, photographers, b-girls, graf girls, and every other capacity you could think of since the beginning of hip hop."[42] Such treatment of the Hip Hop artistry of women must end. Queen Latifah should be revered as the innovator that she is. Not simply for feminist sentiments, but for her contribution to the genre and culture. From her Hip Hop musical roots sprang her Afrocentric Queendom that is reflected in her activism as well. She is the first female Hip Hop rapper to successfully cross the Hip Hop genre and she remains a visibly global figure.

Further, her articulation of the corpulent and nonconforming Black female body disrupts narratives that marginalize it. Queen Latifah posits the corpulent Black woman as mother of knowledge, wisdom, history, and culture. She said on *60 Minutes*,

> I think for people who may be thicker, you know, or people who may be darker, and people who may be female, it's good to see someone like me in one of the magazines under 'beautiful,' so that a girl out there can say, 'You know what? I'm beautiful. She's beautiful. That must make me beautiful.[43]

Even as her body size fluctuates, Queen Latifah's celebrity persona reimagines and grants subjectivity to the mothering possibilities of the corpulent Black female body. She has never publicly embraced a thin body as the standard of beauty, stating "I love this body of mine … I also love my curves, my muscles, my hips.… I may be a big girl, but I am damn proud of my shape."[44] She has successfully redressed this body through her activism and, in 2019, the Associated Press announced that she was awarded the W. E. B. Du Bois Medal by Harvard University for her "contributions to black history and culture."[45] She said in an interview with *People Magazine* in 2021:

> Every time somebody backs me into a corner, I move in a different direction … Life is a journey. It takes you where it takes you. Did I want to act in movies? Yes. Did I want to be the first CoverGirl [brand ambassador] who looked like me? Yeah, I did. Did I want to rap? Yeah. A TV show? Yes. A jazz album? For sure. All these things would come cross my mind and my friend's

[42] Rachel Raimist, "Lensing the Culture: (Hip Hop) Women Behind the Camera," in *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, ed. Brittney Cooper, Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn (New York: Feminist Press, 2017), 174–78.

[43] Rebecca Leung, "From Music Queen to Movie Star," *60 Minutes*, October 7, 2004, CBS, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/from-music-queen-to-movie-star/.

[44] Queen Latifah, *Put on Your Crown: Life Changing Moments on the Path to Queendom* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2010), 54–55.

[45]. "Queen Latifah to receive Harvard Black Cultural Award Named for W.E.B. Du Bois." *USA TODAY*, Oct. 13, 2019. https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/music/2019/10/13/queen-latifah-receive-harvard-web-du-bois-black-culture-award/3972181002/.

> mind. Then we started building it. You don't just come up with these things and they happen. You've got to make them happen.[46]

All hail the Queen.

[46] Rubenstein, 42–47.

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