

culture of
DISrespect

An ongoing discussion about African-Americans and the culture of disrespect

From *The Message* To The Conversation

WHY BLACK AMERICA'S SELF-EXAMINATION NEEDS TO GO BEYOND HIP-HOP AND GET REAL

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This whole thing started with three words.
“Nappy-Headed Hos.”

We were outraged when a 66-year-old White man used the public airwaves to carelessly hurl that insult at the women of Rutgers University's basketball team. America rose up, confronted his sponsors and his networks, and he was fired. And he should have been.

But, in the midst of the Imus storm, it was amazing how fast the conversations in the media shifted from the vile and awful things that came out of his mouth to the vile and awful things that sometimes come out of the mouths of rappers, entertainers and everyday people. “The rappers made me do it,” we were asked to believe.

But we know better.

We know that while there are elements of today's music that celebrate the deprecation of Black women, there are also elements that celebrate the beauty and power and grace of Black women.

We know that just as we see some young people on the streets or in the clubs or at the barbecues using words that drag us down, there are many other young people on the playground or the college quad or the coffee shop who embrace words that lift us up.

Nevertheless, we also know that, across Black America, we do have issues. We have allowed parts of our culture to go downhill. We have become numb to the words some use to describe our Brothers and Sisters. And some of us don't really care.

We in the media have been full participants, lulling our country into apathy and ignorance. The audience has become anesthetized to these insults, accepting of racist or sexist attacks for pure entertainment purposes. As we cross line after line—attacks on women, gays, fat people, and now even children—the increasingly insensitive public only wants more. They want us to provide them with more inanity, more rudeness, more vileness. We have to keep topping ourselves, all in the name of better ratings, increased circulation and constant attention.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

The origins of rap—and later hip-hop—were about confronting the roots of our experiences—poverty, racism, vio-

lence—without feeling like we had to verbally abuse our Sistahs.

Twenty-five years ago, “Melle Mel” Gordon of Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five—among the pioneers of hip-hop in the '80s who were recently inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame—could rap about the pain of the 'hood (“*It's like a jungle sometimes/it makes me wonder/how I keep from going under*”) without denigrating women by calling them b**** or h*. Nearly 15 years ago, it was Queen Latifah's *U.N.I.T.Y.*, a song that praised Black women with respect and rejected the hateful terms.

Today, hip-hoppers like Talib Kweli, India.Arie and Lupe Fiasco find ways to talk about positive and negative aspects of life without needing to disrespect themselves or their peers.

They all know better.

But before we start pointing fingers at others, we need to look at ourselves. What do we allow? What do we support?

What do we buy, watch, dance to? What is it inside ourselves that prompts us to use horrible language to put others down?

So over these next few pages of EBONY Magazine, you will be a part of an uncomfortable, frank, sometimes contradictory yet necessary conversation.

We will look at the roots of disrespect and why our own history has brought us to this point. We will explain why it is off-limits for Whites to use some of the same

language we toss around freely. And we will wrestle with how we can rise up to a higher level.

Also, you may see some of that uncomfortable language spelled out in front of you. If you remember, a few months ago we committed to avoiding the N-word and other disparaging language in the pages of this magazine, except in times of significant importance. This is one of those times. But I promise that the language will be used sparingly, not just for punctuation, but because it is critical to making a central point, amplifying a significant theme.

But, you be the judge.

We may all start this ongoing conversation with wildly varied opinions—“It's wrong to use such words” or “What's the big deal?” or “Don't let them turn this into an anti-rap crusade”—but, at least we are talking.

In the end, it is the conversation itself that matters. We can't be numb anymore. □

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