AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Heidi R. Lewis, a professor of feminist and gender studies at Colorado College and author of the book *Make Rappers Rap Again: Interrogating the Mumble Rap "Crisis"*. So I'll be the first to admit that I don't listen to much rap. So what is Mumble Rap and why is it a "crisis"?

HRL: I personally and even professionally, I have not decided anyone is a mumble rapper. However, there is a discourse about mumble rap and about who is or isn't a mumble rapper that was of significant interest to me. And what I mean is a lot of artists who were being categorized as mumble rappers were artists that I was listening to back when that term started to pick up some steam in the mid-2010s and who I still sometimes listen to now, like 21 Savage and Future and Migos and so on and so forth. And so I became interested in the discourse because the discourse about mumble rap and so-called mumble rappers was disparaging in ways that wasn't aligned with my own experiences with them. And so then that really piqued my curiosity. I became even more curious when a lot of people decided these artists do not represent real hip hop. "This is not real hip hop." And what is or isn't real hip hop or real rock and roll or jazz isn't new. But it was happening in ways that were interesting to me because again, I wasn't experiencing those artists in those ways. And so I became curious enough to do a lot of research, which resulted in me writing this book. And so when people talk about mumble rappers, they're typically talking about artists who are illegible to some people, for reasons that I analyze in the book, because a lot of them aren't illegible to me. And I do think that illegibility, as I argue in the book, is a critical cornerstone of hip hop. We don't want to be legible to everybody, especially at a first listen, much like a very dense, complicated text, you wouldn't necessarily understand the first time you read it, right? So I don't see difficulty with legibility as an always already occasion to expel somebody from real hip hop. But they're not legible in a particular way. They rap about and claim to use certain kinds of drugs. People singled out those artists who wear locs, who they claim don't rap intelligently or about sophisticated, intellectual things, which I would argue most musicians don't do that. But yeah, so those are some of the things. Oh, and they've been accused of being too soft or too feminine. So those are some of the things that people have said when they're describing a so-called mumble rapper.

AT: Oh, we're going to come back to the feminine thing later. (laughter) Well, one of the things that it made me think about more broadly was kind of respectability politics. Like you're saying, they're kind of seen as not being intelligent. It also made me think of not having proper diction, which has often been levied against Black people. I wasn't sure if there might be ties to the stereotype of laziness, but it just made me think of all of the respectability politics stuff that we see going back for centuries in the U.S.

HRL: Yes. I take that up in the book to varying degrees, but a little bit in the introduction and a lot more in chapter three. So the introduction is primarily these notes to myself and notes to the reader. And in one of those notes, I have this aha moment where I start to make sense of the critiques of so-called mumble rap, because for the longest time, I could not understand. Rappers have always rapped differently. There's always been different styles, different subgenres. So I really didn't understand for a long time what all the hubbub was about. And so in one of those notes to self, I have this aha moment where I say, oh my gosh, these artists started to debut around the time that Barack Obama was such a powerful force in not only the U.S., but in the world. And even us as Black folks, largely, not entirely, a good amount of hip hop, not entirely, were sort of celebrating the fact that the U.S. had this Black man who was a president and he was handsome and he was ar-ti-cu-late. And so since mumble rap started rising around that time, what I argue is that part of the pushback comes from a lot of them not sort of falling in line. Jay-Z is in the White House now. Jay-Z is in the White House now. We're putting on suits and ties and we're going to the White House Correspondents Dinner and we've made it. We've arrived. And a lot of these artists are like, "I don't give a fuck about that. I'm going to do this. I'm going to do this hip hop thing the way it was taught to me in ways that are consistent with how I've come to love it." Of course, they're different. They have their own unique ways of being. But one of the things I

said that I appreciate about them is that they were showing us that hip hop still could be committed to a particular kind of disrespectability. Everybody else is sort of falling in line and we're getting all these degrees. We have more access to things now that we didn't before. There are hip hop art exhibits in museums and there are courses and there are professors who write books. And I think that mumble rap was scary for a lot of people because it posed this threat to that.

One of the ways that I explain the subjugation of mumble rap within so-called “real hip hop” is that it's, I argue, Southern. And while a lot of people who are fans of hip hop are just familiar with it, they know not to say anymore that Southern hip hop is a problem the way that they used to prior to OutKast sort of exploding and demanding that the South be taken seriously in a particular kind of way. Even though they weren't the first Southern artist, they weren't even the first hip hop artists to come out of Atlanta. But they were some of the first artists to sort of say, as Andre 3000 literally said, the South got something to say. And a lot of these artists are Southern. A lot of the producers are Southern. Even the ones who aren't Southern do a lot of collaborative work with Southern artists. And so when I saw so many memes and so many tweets and so many different things, calling them stupid and ignorant, and I'm knowing that so many of them are Southern, it was very triggering for me to see that we haven't come as far as we thought we did. We're just more sophisticated in the ways that we subjugate the South. It's not that we're no longer doing it. It's that we're more sophisticated. We're calling them mumble rappers now. We're saying we can't understand them now. But we've always said that about Southern artists. They rap too slow. They have that accent. And so that was hurtful for me to make that connection. I was like, oh my God, this is what I think is happening. But I definitely do think that respectability plays a part.

AT: So I feel like that North-South divide applies more broadly in terms of, regardless of race, I feel like there is that idea that Northerners think that they are more intelligent, intellectual, educated, etc. compared to Southerners. And whether or not that's true, like #NotAllNortherners, whatever. (HRL: I'm a Northerner.) But I'm guessing within an African-American context, you can also tie that to the Great Migration, where African-Americans who could leave the South would. And then the folks who were left behind were often forced into sharecropping and stuff like that. So I feel like that's maybe exacerbated when we factor in race.

HRL: Yeah. The first thing I'll say is there were Southerners who stayed that could leave. A lot of them had the foresight to see that the North wasn't going to be the promised land for us that it purported itself to be. And then we look at the writings of so many Black folks at the time of the Great Migration, but even prior to that, that proved that. People like Harriet Wilson who are saying, the North isn't all it's cracked up to be. I'm from the Midwest more specifically, but that was a narrative that was profound throughout my childhood because, as I write in the book, two of my grandparents are from the South. Their families migrated up. And what I'll also say is that what makes this particularly important for me is that the mythical narratives about the South that you pointed out that I also write about, where the South is often understood as, like, the bastion of regression. It's the most supposedly homophobic place in the country. It's the most sexist place in the country. Everything that's “wrong” with America can be located in the South per this narrative, right?

And the intelligence thing is, I think, really important for what I was writing about because, like I said earlier, there's this narrative that people from the South are stupid. They're unintelligent. And what makes that so important for my project is that that's a narrative that Black people face regardless of where we live. So if you're a white person from the East Coast or certain places, you don't come with a regional assumption about your intelligence unless you're from the South. If you're a white person from the South, then people assume that you're not as intelligent. Whereas if you're a Black person, most people assume you're unintelligent, whether you're from the East Coast, Midwest, North, South. So then when you complicate that with Black folks who are from the South, then they are often, not always, but often experiencing this pronounced assumption of ignorance, stupidity. And that is something that I'm certain that these artists called mumble rappers are experiencing, even if people aren't intentional about it, even if it's subconscious, even if it's implicit, I'm

confident that that's something that they're experiencing.

Listen to Dr Jessica Scott on queer activism in the US South and South Africa or read the transcript.

AT: I've actually got a separate episode with Dr. Jessica Scott on queer activism, where she's juxtaposing in the US South and South Africa. And we got into this idea of what the North is versus what the South is and how that's often not actually accurate. (HRL: Exactly.) But I want to bring it back to, with the South being perceived as ignorant. And I will acknowledge that statistically, we have the stats on education rates, we have the stats on politics. So it's not that this is 100% never true. But not everyone fits the demographic that you think of. But with mumble rap, I'm wondering if there's a tie here between, part of why I think Southerners might be perceived as less intelligent or less educated is because of the Southern drawl. And it feels like that would have overlap with mumble rap.

HRL: Yeah, when we're talking about a particular kind of formal education, especially when we're not being attentive to matters of class, then yes, the South is one of the most under-resourced parts of our country because it's the Blackest. So yeah, we're going to see a lot of public schools not having the resources that we see schools have in the North or on the East Coast because it's the Blackest region in the nation. Too often, our conversations about the South aren't attentive to the way that Southerners experience racism. So it's not just that by virtue of being located there, it's because of what happens to people that live there structurally. And it also has a lot to do with the way we measure intelligence because there are people that by any official measure would be deemed intelligent that I wouldn't take certain places with me because they'd be too stupid to make it. You know what I mean? Like, smart where? About what and how? My Southern elders used to say we might not have a lot of book smarts, but y'all ain't got no common sense.

AT: Oh yeah. I know plenty of people with doctorates who I consider to be idiots. (laughter)

HRL: Facts. And much love to my PhD, but honey, that was something I got so I could be a professor. I always say if I could have been a professor with a bachelor's degree, that's all I'd have. But yes, that accent. And then there, I'm glad you brought that up because there are a couple other things that it made me think of that I write about more substantially in chapter three. The accents and also Matt Gonzala, I believe it was, wrote a piece about drug use and how there's a relationship between drug use and region. At least there used to be. We'd have to look at it again now to see if there have been any changes. But for instance, in Miami, they're doing a lot of coke, speed. So it's a little faster. Whereas in Texas, they do a lot of lean, which slows you down. And so on top of the accent, if we're dealing with artists who partake in the use of narcotics, that also has a bearing on how they're understood and interpreted. And so therefore, it becomes easier to label them illegible and therefore not “real hip hop.” Because as we all, if we don't know, we've likely heard about how drug usage is raced and classed in a particular way. And I have a whole section on drug use and addiction in chapter four on masculinity. But I do think that also plays a part. Yeah, for sure. The accents. There's a way that a lot of people hear a particular kind of Southern accent and assign a particular kind of unintelligence already. And then you add drugs. And you can see why it's easy for people to just dismiss that whole group of people as a problem.

AT: So coming back to that idea of masculinity and femininity, obviously, there is a lot of toxic masculinity in rap as an industry. Again, not saying that that's every male artist or every female artist. I think there is a fair bit of misogyny in certain female artists’ work as well. But the artists who've most often been called mumble rappers are cisgender men, which I assume that's more to do with the demographics of rap artists in general. But you were saying that there's this accusation that ties mumble rap to being too feminine?

HRL: Mm hmm. Yeah. And as I make the case in the book. Hip hop is as invested in, maybe less, but in homophobia, transphobia and sexism as the place from which these artists come, where they were born. Hip hop is no more homophobic than country rock or any other form. But like many have argued before me, Black

people are just honest, transparent. I live in Colorado. One thing I'll say about the North and South that in the movie about Bessie Smith, Dee Rees's movie about Bessie Smith, she quotes Bessie saying, “white people in the North don't care how close you get as long as you don't get too big. White people in the South don't care how big you get as long as you don't get too close.” And as a Black person, I don't give a fuck about proximity to white people. I'd rather get big and you leave me alone. There are things we can appreciate about that sort of transparency, even if it reveals some painful, painful things like misogyny, homophobia. As a lot of Black folks have said, “at least I know what I'm dealing with.” But most of the music industry, hip hop too is male dominated in the front and in the back, meaning in front of the camera and behind it. When I've been asked, “are there any women mumble rappers?” I've said, not that I was aware of when I was writing the book. And then since the book has come out, a few people have given me the names of some artists, women who they think could be categorized as mumble rappers. And I've encouraged them to write about that if they feel so inclined. My project is about the discourse **about** mumble rap and no women show up in that. When I studied expansively the discourse about so-called mumble rap, there was not a woman to be found.

And I think one of the things about that, that relates to your point is that, not that it would be impossible. We see some things happening with Sexyy Red that could challenge this, but women, unless they want to take some big risks, as I think Sexyy Red is doing, women have to rap a certain way if they want to be accepted and taken seriously. So it's not to say that they have to, flat out. It's to say, if they want to be taken seriously as artists, then they have to rap a certain way that wouldn't be consistent with what we've seen with several mumble rappers. Even though a lot of the discourse about mumble rappers I've revealed in this book is inaccurate. So this idea that they can't rap, that they don't have flow, the whole book is like, “yes, they do. But you don't see that because you hate Southerners and you hate men who challenge masculinity in a particular way to get to your other questions.”

So yeah, too feminine in that several so-called mumble rappers have spent a lot of time rapping about particular kinds of vulnerabilities that hip hop didn't avoid entirely, but that they do more often and in more profound ways. So they're rapping a lot about mental health, emotional health, depression, sadness, anxiety, and a lot of things that hip hop as a whole didn't rap about to that same degree and in those same ways because, again, those things make one vulnerable. And a lot, not all, of hip hop was about resisting a particular kind of vulnerability, which is why in the book I say, we could call it hyper-masculine. I don't use the phrase toxic masculinity in the book, but when I'm writing about hyper-masculinity, that's what I'm writing about. And what we've learned about hip hop over the years from artists and commentators and scholars and so on is that hip hop isn't necessarily hyper-masculine for the sake of being hyper-masculine. Hip hop is often invested in hyper-masculinity because a lot of artists come from places where that kind of strength is required. It could be the difference between life and death. And so it's not just masculinity for the sake of being masculine. It's like respectability. It's a survival mechanism. It's like if I'm a drug dealer and I'm already a Black man in poverty and I'm dealing drugs and I'm vulnerable to the police and I'm vulnerable to my competition, you think I'm about to walk around here rapping about my depression? No. Would you? Yes, I'm armed. Wouldn't you be armed if you had to deal with a police force that aims to kill you and also competition in the drug trade that aims to kill you and you think I'm about to walk around here unarmed like you're nuts? You would say that from whatever position you're coming from. But at the same time, we've also acknowledged the harms that come with that for them and others. And here come these mumble rappers literally rapping about being depressed and being sad. And not only that, they're rapping about using drugs, but they're rapping about being **addicted** to “hard’ drugs that, again, that's a very vulnerable thing. Our society, not just hip hop, associates that with weakness. So a lot of people associate weakness with femininity. So they get called feminine for that too because of the way that several of them openly struggle with drug addiction.

But also on top of that, many of them have pushed back on traditional, or whatever you want to call it, hip hop masculinity norms. Young Thug is out there saying, “I don't think there's a such thing as gender.” 21 Savage is at a SlutWalk with a sign that says, “I'm a ho too.” Lil Uzi Vert said, “I'm not a man. My pronouns are they/them. Please don't call me he/him.” Young Thug and Rich Homie Quan, before they're falling out, they're calling each

other hubby and not because they were gay or in a romantic relationship, according to them. But just like, that's my friend, that's my hubby, that's my homeboy. And so many people were like, “what the fuck is that?” And they're wearing nail polish and Uzi's wearing a skort and Young Thug is wearing this garment that looks like a dress, even though on the one hand, he says, “yeah, it's a dress. Fuck you. I'm still a gangster and I'll shoot your ass and I have a dress on.” In other interviews, he's like, “that's not a dress.” So it's not perfect resistance. It's not pure resistance. None is. But it's resistive enough to have alarmed the quote “real hip hop” community about these young guys who are coming in here doing things that were making a lot of people really uncomfortable.

AT: I find it kind of hilarious that hip hop itself, as I understand it, was very much this form of resistance musically, right? It was saying, “we're going to tell you who we are. And I don't care if you like it because we're still going to do it anyway. And so the fact that as something evolves, it tends to become more conservative a lot of the time. (HRL: Yes.) Yeah. Including in the arts. And so now you've got people who are like, “well, that's not, we don't want you saying who you are. How dare you? That's not who you're supposed to be.” When it was founded on people being like, “we're not going to be who you tell us we need to be.”

HRL: And I really appreciate that. That's sort of the argument I make in the book where I'm like, now we have a lot more to lose because we've gained these books and courses and exhibits and we have awards now. What you're saying is resonating with me because of the take that I have on that. And also one of the things that I find myself teaching a lot about these days is we see in so many spaces that are decidedly committed to resistance, people struggling with other forms of subjugation and oppression. We see this in the feminist movement. Yes. These white women were so radical around gender, but they sucked on race and many still do. We see in the queer movement, all these people are radical about sexuality and “I'm non-binary” and still anti-Black as fuck. So again, hip hop is special, but it's very much this art form that was born primarily in the United States where you see so many people who get it on one thing, not get it on another. We saw this in the Chicano movement, in the Black power movement and in the yellow power movement where so many women in those spaces were like, gosh, damn, like you get it on race, but you suck on gender. So hip hop has sometimes, to differing degrees, it's been really radical on some things and really status quo on others. Paul Gilroy said something similar to what you said. I listened to him give a talk in Berlin in 2014 and he was joking. He said, “my generation is conservative now. You invited me to give this talk, but just so you know.” He said, “we're executive directors of nonprofits that came out of our radical work. We're full professors.” So I think that's a challenging, but also beautiful thing to see that hip hop has gotten to an age where it can experience that. It's 50 years old. It's only 50. It's still a baby when you think about other genres, but it's getting to that age where the intergenerational conflicts are getting more pronounced.
And too often in a society like ours, those tensions and conflicts are going to be anchored in so much of someone else's subjugation. And subjugated and oppressed people, as long as we're living in a hierarchy, most people are going to be inclined to climb it. And in order to climb the hierarchies that make North America, the US what it is, is anchored in racism, sexism, and so on. It almost insists that if you are going to “succeed” in a way that is legible to the kind of capitalism we do and so on and so forth, you must subjugate the next person. If you're Black and cishet, you subjugate queer and trans people. If you're white and a woman, you subjugate Black women. You have to work really hard not to do that. I often liken it to an alcoholic or drug addict, which my father was. This is a lifelong struggle. There's no finish line. None of us gets to this finish line of like, I am cured of my anti-Blackness. I am cured of my homophobia. But we can choose to be perpetually in recovery. And so this is my opportunity to remind hip hop that we've come a long way in certain areas and we've still got some, some ways to go.

AT: I think that as something becomes more mainstream, hopefully it's pushing the mainstream a bit, but it's also restricting the art form itself. So when it's like, “okay, well now we've got a Grammy. Oh, now we've got a

Pulitzer. We've got a hit Broadway musical" (HRL: Yup) and all these things are like that integration, but then integration (HRL: Yes) can also look like assimilation.

HRL: That was the whole reason I wrote this book as a full professor, as a 44 year old, I've got kids, I'm married. By all stretches, I should be like distant from hip hop. I should be like, I've outgrown it, but I won't. There will not come a day for me where I'm like, Oh, I don't listen to that anymore. I'm older now. It's like, what? This is the soundtrack of my life. I love hip hop forever. And so now that I'm older and I'm more accomplished, I've got some titles and some money, it gives me an occasion to resist exactly what you said. Like, hey y'all, I love the fact that, we've got access to some things. And also let's not forget who we were. And if these so-called mumble rappers are rebelling, that's what we do. We rebel. Maybe some of y'all aren't rebelling no more, but I think we can honor the fact that they are. And we don't have to romanticize them either. In that chapter on masculinity, I write about some of the ways that many of these artists have allegedly, some we know for a fact, have done some awful, horrible things. So I'm not romanticizing them, but I am asking us, meaning hip hop, to acknowledge the ways that they are trying to co-create a Black masculinity, because most of them are Black, a hip hop masculinity that is more attentive to their humanity. And they're not just focused on performing a particular kind of masculinity that means "I cannot be sad. I cannot be depressed. I cannot be hurt. I cannot have pain." And so, it's kind of like a both/and kind of book. It's reminding people that we resist all binaries, not just the gender one.

AT: So coming back to that question of having to have a facade of toughness and associating vulnerability with femininity, I'm now kind of wondering if criticisms within the Black community of women who speak out against men who harm them, which for anyone who's not aware, there's a specific term misogynoir for the combination of misogyny and racism that Black women experience. But so much of that comes from within the Black community, seeing all the criticism that Megan Thee Stallion got when she spoke out against a male rapper who literally shot her. And she's catching flack for that. And it really felt like echoes of the criticism that Anita Hill got, again, from within the Black community for speaking out about being victimized by Clarence Thomas. And so I'm wondering if this idea that these men have to be super tough is correlated to the idea that women should just accept abuse from the men in the community.

HRL: Yeah. And I'm glad you brought up misogynoir because it gives me the occasion to be a little bit more territorial than my colleague, Jennifer Nash, would want me to be. She's written some amazing work about Black feminists letting go of intersectionality now that it's become something else, instead of trying to cling. But one of the things I love about misogynoir, my good colleague, Moya Bailey coined the term to focus on media representations of misogyny directed at Black women in media. So the Megan Thee Stallion case is a great one because it does the work that I know that Moya wanted it to do. While not exceptional, Black men, Black people, because I think one of the important things to point out is that I haven't studied it extensively, but I bore witness to a lot of it. A lot of the criticism that I saw that Megan experience was from women as well. It is ingrained in every single one of us to hate Black women, even Black women. So what are we doing? Are we doing identity politics the way Combahee River Collective asked us? Or are we just looking at what people are and assuming there's a politic? No.
I'm thinking especially about something Charlotte Bunch said back in the day when she was writing some of the earliest texts that we have on a particular lesbian feminist politics. I'm paraphrasing. She writes, I'm not saying that lesbians always already, like we don't, it's not in our DNA to be resistant to heteronormativity, right? But we are more **primed** for it because of our experience as a lesbian. And I really appreciate that theory. And I think it applies in this case, right? Black people are **primed** for a particular kind of critique because of the experiences that we have in this country, but not only here, but that's my focus is the U.S. But we are also primed to invest in the status quo because like I said earlier, all of us are under the threat, but we are preoccupied with survival. And one of the ways to survive in this country is to invest in the status quo. So

Clarence Thomas doesn't surprise me. Condoleezza Rice doesn't surprise me. People that think Megan is to blame for her own victimization don't surprise me because that's the American way.
But I think to your question, there's just a hatred of women. I think that's why we have words like sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy. They're all meant to signal different things. They're not the same. Misogyny is the hatred. And I think you can make a case for that. But whether or not someone thinks they hate women or not, what I know is that we exist in a society that aims to oppress, subjugate, if not oppress women. And when you're Black, that's why intersectionality was termed, for us, to explain what happens to Black women who are subjugated, not only because of their gender, but because of their race. And I think that when it comes to mumble rap, I'm not sure if there's this direct correlation, but I'm sure that there's a relationship between the way that society and therefore hip hop to large degrees is invested in victim blaming. Victim blaming is a fascinating thing for me because I think that sometimes the conversations that I've seen happen around victim blaming aren't as nuanced as I would like.
So for instance, when we're talking about respectability, like my colleague Tanisha Ford writes in her book, *Liberated Threads*, it wasn't just that Black people were trying to be respectable because they were assimilating to the white man. These people were trying to save our lives. It wasn't just, don't talk back to the white man because we respect him and don't love you. It was because if you don't, you might die. And so even when we're talking about Black women, a lot of us have been taught that nobody was going to save us but us. So don't dress a certain way. Don't act a certain way. And that doesn't mean it's not harmful. That doesn't mean it's not traumatic. It just means that I think it's important to identify the catalyst of Black self-harm because a lot of the times it's due to racism. That racism doesn't just mean white people do something to us and we go, oh no, Black lives matter. Racism results in us doing harm to one another as well. And that doesn't mean I'm giving Black men a pass or Black women a pass. It's just to say I personally will not be participating in the gender wars in that way because that's what Black feminism taught me.
So I'm always going to be about the work of accountability, which I learned from people like my friend and colleague Aishah Shahidah Simmons, whose tremendous groundbreaking documentary *No*, the rape documentary. It was all about holding Black men accountable for their rape of Black women. It was all about that. Uncovering those secrets and speaking out against those silences that so many Black women victims are forced into, right? It's like, don't talk about it. Don't talk about it because we don't want the white people to come and do something to him. And at the same time, there's a significant part of that documentary that says to us, with the support of men who focused on working with perpetrators, and Aishah included that near the end of her documentary to say, if this is going to ever stop happening, we have got to have real sustained conversations with perpetrators about accountability. And that doesn't mean the victim herself. It doesn't mean that Megan has to go chat with Tory, but it means that if we're going to co-create a world where Torys don't do what Torys do, somebody better be talking to Tory. And as a Black woman, I often ask my students, I often say, or else where am I going to go? Who am I supposed to be in community with? White women? No. Who am I supposed to be in community with? Only Black women? What? So no matter where I, as a Black woman, exist, somebody is going to have to be doing work that is meant to help them not harm me. And so am I. Because if there are any trans women in my all Black women community, they better watch out for me because I'm cishet. I was born and raised and trained to be transphobic. Like I said, it's a daily struggle for me to make sure that I'm keeping my transphobia in check, my homophobia in check. I was taught to be this way, and there is no pill to take. I don't know a person who doesn't struggle with the ways that they are trained and still fight every day to harm someone else.
And so I think what I'm most interested in now is not pathologizing, and not to say that you're doing that, but not to pathologize the Black community. Because I don't know too many white women who get loved on and supported when they get beat up by white dudes. Please. Because we're talking about Megan Thee Stallion. Let's talk about Amber Heard, because white folks did her in. Megan's still getting endorsement deals. Megan was just on Broadway. We ain't heard from Amber. White people buried her. We still got love for Megan. We still making sure Megan get paid. What white folks are doing for Amber? Nothing. But guess who's still getting

paid? Johnny Depp. So I think we all have to have some conversations for the rest of our lives about women and the care of women. I don't want my feminism in that regard to start looking like the white feminism of the ‘80s and ‘90s, where it's like, “you know what the answer is? If we just get rid of all men.” Because if y'all do that, y'all can do that. I'm not coming. This is not new to me. I study too much. I teach too much. We'll go through these gender wars. Allison, you laughed. We go through these gender wars. Then they're gonna calm down. And in 10 years from now, they're gonna come again. But you know what? We always say Black people are not a monolith and da-da-da. This is what that means. It means that there's still work to do. My people have suffered for a really long time. And what I see is suffering. I see suffering masking as righteousness. “She shoulda never been with him. She shouldn't have never went to that partner. Why did she sleep with him? No, no, no, no, no. We got work to do. We got work to do. And I'm gonna do it.

AT: So there's a lot of echoes to a conversation I had with Lorana Bartels about victimization and criminality and talking about how pretty much, maybe not 100% of men who hurt women, but definitely probably more than 90% of men who hurt women were hurt themselves in the past and were not properly supported. And it's very much the “hurt people hurt people” argument. And one of the things that does really bug me is that it does seem like so much of that care work because our systems don't support people. So this is that whole, “I'm gonna blame this individual woman for being victimized because I don't want to acknowledge the broader systemic issues because then we'd actually have to do something about those and try to fix them.” And so then that support care work falls on the individual women in the community and especially on Black women.

HRL: Yeah. Speaking of my friend Aishah that I mentioned earlier, she and I were talking when the R. Kelly documentary came out and it's like one of those both/and things. Where on the one hand, we don't want to over-determine that, because I bet you that Dr. Bartels has some research that shows that most victims don't become perpetrators. See, that's the fascinating thing. Most perpetrators were victims, but most victims don't become perpetrators. I'm really interested in and excited by it, although it's all tragic and I hate that it isn't even happening. But since it is happening, I'm really motivated and inspired by the research that tries to figure that out. And I don't think there's one answer. And especially when you take what we now call an intersectional approach, when you're thinking about race and you're thinking about class and you're thinking about age and all these things that shape one's experience as a victim and or a perpetrator.

Listen to Dr Lorana Bartels on victimization and criminality or read the transcript.

But yeah, the care work falling on Black women is so exhausting and tiring. It's unfair. It's sexist and racist when we think about race and we see that so many women of color, especially Black women, Latinas, Indigenous women are like care work, care work. But we see that across race when it comes to gender. This idea that women are nurturers and so therefore are innately attuned to care work, because we're supposed to have this innate nurture gene that we all know is bullshit. Even though we understand why like the radical feminists back in the day leaned into that because they were like, “shit, if they're going to call us nurturers, let's be the best nurturers there fucking is.” Like I get that. But nowadays, we're more often than not rejecting that as this way of marking women. So, then we get thrown into the care work because of that. And like I said, you think about race and class and all that. And then we just even more so, it happens more acutely for some of us. What I tell my students is I always tease and say, “until y'all dismantle whatever the fuck y'all going to dismantle, this is the world we in.” And I'm always saying, “dismantle it! Please! Today!” I'm not saying I don't want to dismantle. I'm just saying it isn't. And so, as a Black woman, I'm critical of that. I resist that when necessary. And also, I just care. I do care. And I want to do that.

I just think it's a problem when people don't and then they get subjugated. Because they don't want to participate in that. I want us to be healthy and happy. And I know we won't always be, but I want somebody like Megan to have a community that is there with her, supporting her. And I think she does to varying degrees. I hope she isn't spending all her time on social media because we don't know her. I hope she has people in real life that love her and care about her and support her. And I hope Tory, I don't think he does. I don't know him,

but I don't think he does. I just hope, I wish there was somebody in his life saying, “you hurt that woman, you need to get in some healing work, some restorative justice work that helps you figure out why you did it and how to be better.” Cause a lot of my students are all about restorative justice until it's a person they don't want to restore. And I'm like, well, you don't get to pick and choose. Restorative justice, that's, that's hard business. And I don't mean to call it a business in a capitalist way. I'm saying that like Black, it's hard business. They're going to be sexual predators. It's not just going to be the person who said a racist thing. It's going to be the person who had held a gun to your mama's head and say, give me all your money or you dead. Like I'm thinking about the real world is Tory Lanez. And so I don't want it. And it's probably idealistic and unrealistic and whatever, whatever. And I don't care. I don't care.
I always say one thing feminism taught me is that it is going to be my job for the rest of my life to not only exist in, but to keep co-creating the realm of what other people would think is impossible. Like that's where I want to be is, when people say that's never going to happen. That's impossible. That's where I want to be. Cause people said that about slavery. They're never going to abolish that. People said that about women getting the right to vote. They're never going to get that Black people getting the right to vote. We're never going to get that. But it is absolutely sexist. And it's my job to be thinking about ways of understanding and then addressing said sexism, especially because I am a person and I'm not saying this is how anyone else should be, but I'm a person who doesn't think any form of oppression that exists now is going to end in my lifetime. So I have to stay motivated, even if I don't get the benefit of seeing it eradicated in my lifetime. And so it's a struggle for me. On the one hand, I'm like, let's keep thinking about what's possible, even if it seems impossible. But on the other hand, I'm thinking about the fact that I probably won't get to see it end of my lifetime. So I always say to my students, I have a radical imagination, but I'm a beast with reality. And reality is Tory Lanez, R. Kelly, Bill Cosby, Diddy, meaning in the Black community. We got demons and we got to deal with them.

AT: Bringing it back to emotional vulnerability, because you were saying, it's hard business doing things like restorative justice. And I think that vulnerability fundamentally scares a lot of misogynists. And one of the theories that I've heard around like the manosphere, for example, is that because men don't think they can be emotionally vulnerable and they don't feel like they can have those kinds of relationships with other men, the only people that they can get physical intimacy from, like just a hug, not necessarily like sex, just a hug. The only people that they can be vulnerable with are women. And so a lot of these guys who feel that way, because toxic masculinity has seeped into their brain, they hate women for that, because they feel like that is the only person they can go to for something that everybody needs. And that I think is part of why emotional vulnerability scares these men. And part of why they hate women, but also why they need to objectify women, because a lot of hip hop is about making women sexual objects, demeaning them. And I feel like those things are all connected.

HRL: I'm glad you brought that up. So yeah, I think that makes a lot of sense, to keep thinking more about the way that young boys who become men are taught that a lot of their ability to be a good man, a strong man is to conquer, control, use. I don't study this in detail, but I teach some work in my intro classes and stuff around how we can see that in play, the ways that little boys are encouraged to play, and little girls. On that note, bell hooks said a powerful thing that she doesn't get enough credit for. She said, “America don't love boys either.” She said, “we talk a lot about the way that America hates women. America hates boys. America hates men. America hates itself. America is about hatred. And men are not spared because when you teach your little boy to be that way, you don't love him. That's not love.” It's something, but it ain't love. And I know she's right because I raised a boy. And those are not the tools that I use to raise him. He's 21 years old. My little boy cooks. He cleans. He's sweet. And we are not perfect. He played violent video games. I'm not trying to say we did parenting perfectly, but I understand what she means because I know there were ways that America taught me to raise boys that I chose not to because I didn't believe it was love. And what I'll say about hip hop is the one thing that complicates that though, for me with hip hop is that a lot of what many understand to be hip

hop's misogyny doesn't always read that way to me. Like making women into a sexual object. I think what bothers some people about hip hop is that Black women are the object. Some of that's just very Black ghetto love shit. And I think I knew from a young age that there were a good amount of rappers who did not like women, even though they said they were hetero. I could feel it, but – and I listened to other genres as well. I don't have to listen to rap – I listened to it in large part because as a young Black girl and now a Black woman, it is the only space where Black men are, majority of the time, not always, like, “you are so fucking beautiful. You are so fucking sexy. I don't give a fuck about them dimples. I don't care about them stretch marks. Baby got back.” Like let's not forget that Baby Got Back was a narrative that was meant to resist the way that America had said that only the skinny white woman could be beautiful. And then hip hop said, “bullshit. We like ass around here. And you know who got them? Our sisters got them.” And then at the same time, there are a lot of narratives that are like, only if you don't sleep around. Then the rules start coming in. But then there's also Lil Wayne, who's like, “I wouldn't care if you use a prostitute. I don't care if you don't shave down there. I just want it.” And so I think it's a both/and situation.

In some of my courses, my media class in particular, I haven't shown in a long time. I should. Sut Jhally, phenomenal scholar. He's made a few documentaries with the Media Education Foundation that you can find on Kanopy and stuff. And one of them, I think it might've been *Codes of Gender*. The documentary is about misogyny in media. And he gets to the music industry. And I love this moment where he shows white dudes, rock guys. And one of them was Kid Rock. This was when he sort of came out of hip hop and started going over there with the rock folks. And it was him. And I can't remember who else, might've been Limp Bizkit, I think was in it because this is older. And they were doing this thing that I knew about because I used to babysit for this white woman who was really active as a self-described groupie back when White Snake and them was popping. And so she told me about this, but many of my students were not aware. So what Kid Rock and them, what they would do is they would have these white women who came backstage, scantily clad. They would have them, hey're naked. They would have them stand on the wall with their hands on the wall and their feet on the ground, but like at a diagonal. And they would throw lunch meat at them, baloney and shit. And if it stuck, then something. If it didn't stick, then something. I can't remember the terms of the “game.” So of course my students are like, holy shit, because they've never seen anything like that. And then when Dr. Jhally gets to hip hop, it's money. It's all the rappers throwing money, throwing money and no student reacts. So when we get done, I asked them to think critically about that. And so what they say is like, “I just didn't know about the rock and roll guys doing that. And I already know that rappers throw money. I know that.”

And I was like, “so number one, it's not that any of those guys are doing anything more or less or worse or bad. It's just that you have been exposed to the “pathology” of one group, whereas the other one has been able to hide.” But I say number two, “since let's just say all those guys are misogynist. Let's just say that. Take that to be a truth. What would you rather be thrown at you? A piece of baloney or a hundred dollar bill?” I'll take the hundred for 200, Alex. That Black man gonna put some money on your rent. White boy just threw turkey meat at you. What the fuck you gonna do with that? You ain't finna eat it after it's been on your ass and then on the floor. So it's not to say Black men are better misogynist or whatever. It's just to say when we think about things from that intersectional lens, it forces us not to flatten the situation because yes, hip hop is sexist, just like the world, just like America. And also they're going to put some money in your pocket. And then there are some rappers who say, “I wouldn't piss on you if you was on fire, bitch.” We're not going to get romantic in here. But hip hop's not problem real, like problem in scare quotes. Hip hop's problem is it has a big mouth. Braggadocio and bravado and loud. And so our shit just be on display more than country’s. But country comes up in that documentary too. He'd be frying their ass. That's why I love Dr. Jhally because he takes a really comprehensive approach that asks us to make a decision about where we want to emphasize our work and do it because there's work to be done everywhere. And so that the students who tend to be like, “I want to write about misogyny and music and they pick hip hop” and they're white. I'm like, “why you don't pick country? All they do is tell you to get in the kitchen and shut up and make a sandwich and have babies.” We got perpetrators everywhere and we got to stay on them. If we're going to get free, we got to stay on them.

AT: Now, the last chapter, the conclusion of the book titled A Note to Old Heads does get into all of these incredible female rappers. And I just am curious, how far do you think women in rap have actually come? Because I remember Queen Latifah, Sult ‘n’ Peppa, Missy Elliott, I feel like was revolutionary for women in hip hop because she was wearing like track suits and stuff. Like not that she never wore anything revealing, but she was actually out here dressed like the guys. Lauryn Hill, obviously phenomenal. Lil' Kim, I still love *Can't Hold Us Down*, which she did with Christina Aguilera. It's on my like feminist girl power playlist to this day. But I'm just like, look, this is where things were at like 30 years ago. Have things actually gotten any better?

HRL: That's a great question. My hip hop feminism class and I go back to the mid-‘80s, late ‘80s, early ‘90s. I haven't taught that course in a while. Now students have a different reaction because there are so many more women artists. So it would be parallel in a way as I argue in the chapter, but there was a time when they were like, “wow, we were taught that hip hop has always been male dominated” and it was and is, but they just couldn't believe that I grew up in a time where there were a lot of women artists. Bahamadia, I named so many in the chapter, Conscious Daughters, MC Lyte, Foxy Brown, Rah Digga, Gangsta Boo, La Chat. But now I think they could relate because there are so many more now than back when I was teaching that class and there was still just Nicki Minaj. Cardi B hadn't even came out yet, let alone Megan. So, now, God, there's so many. And as I write in the chapter, what happens in the long term remains to be seen. We want more women in all aspects of hip hop, not just rapping, developing record labels so that they can do artist development in a particular way. Not that all women would do it in this radical way. Aya de Leon, love her, wrote a poem called If Women Ran Hip Hop. And I'm always chuckling, like, if women ran hip hop, it'd look a lot like it does now. Just like if women ran the world. I'm like, which women? All skin folk ain't kin folk. All women is not with the women. So we got to be a little careful with assuming that a gender equals a politic.

I'm not saying that if women ran hip hop, that it would be some radical change, but I do think there will be some differences. I do. And I believe that. And I think that's what Aya de Leon was trying to communicate in her poem. So it has to be more than this in order for me to be convinced that the changes will last and that they will shape what hip hop is. Instead of just parodying what it already is. One of the reasons I wrote the book is, I see myself as a woman in hip hop. But I'm a scholar. I'm not a rapper. And so I wrote a book to contribute to hip hop as a woman. And so I don't know if we're in a better time compared to even when I was a kid. But I just wanted to honor the moment and to ask us as in hip hop to think about how we are thinking about these women and narrating these women and all, “she's a gold digger. She's too ghetto. She's too ratchet. All she talk about is sex. She this, she that, she this, she that.” And it was relevant to the mumble rap conversation because it was like, here we go again. We refuse to see ourselves in our youth. And I think that's dangerous because I see ourselves in our youth. And then we're doing the same type of subjugative shit. Here we go again. Like, let these women alone. Especially Snoop. Because I'm like, damn it, I know you fucking lying. Not the man who had the women on the leashes at the MTV Awards talking about Megan and Cardi need to cover up. But throughout the book, he keeps coming up because he said this about the mumble rappers. “Oh, they all sound the same. They don't rap about nothing. They don't deserve.” So he's become, to your point earlier, about the relationship between aging and conservatism. You see that in him.

And so my message is to him and people like him to say, hold on. Stop exceptionalizing these youth. They're not pure. They're not perfect. But neither were we. And there are a lot of things about them that I find inspiring. I find entertaining. I find exciting. And that whole “hip-hop is dead. Hip-hop is dead.” I always say, “no, hip-hop is not dead. You are!” Like, why is Cardi B so alarming when we had Lil Kim? Nothing alarms me about these young women. They're their own selves and they make hip-hop their own. But they remind me so much of so many people. And when they talk about themselves and their art, because that's another thing people say about mumble rappers. They don't know hip-hop history. They don't respect their old heads. That's why the conclusion is a note to old heads. I'm like, y”es, they do. Yes, they do. If you listen to, if you read their interviews, yes, they do.” Cardi brought Lil' Kim out. Lil' Kim was like, “oh my gosh, she dressed me. She helped me pick out an outfit. And just to get that love from her and her audience, like, shout.” Because Nicki

Minaj and Lil' Kim have issues. And so for Kim, I think it's like a moment of, “I don't have to have issues with every young art. There are some young artists who love me, respect me, know my songs word for word.” So these young people, and I'm not that much older than Cardi, but I am. And so, maybe hip-hop won't radically change, but I just wanted to honor and celebrate the moment and just ask hip-hop to pause and just look around and say, “hey, I might not be into your music. I might not like your music, but I see you, and I'm happy that you're still here trying to keep this thing alive that we worked so hard for.” As opposed to going, “these kids today, get off my lawn.” I think that's a part of aging, but I don't like it. It's not my approach. And I'm aging. It's not the way I'm aging. I love the youth. What happened to, “I believe the children are the future, teach them well, and let them lead the way”? I thought that was our favorite song. We have to teach them well first and then let them lead the way. So if we're not teaching them well, then, but if we teach them well, then we should let them lead the way and not look at them and say, “well, you don't do it the way I do it. So you suck.” Like, come on. But such is life. (laughter)

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.