Fatherhood, and its image, have an important bearing on hip-hop's identity. The process of naming confers identity and gives the rapper an aura of authenticity and authority. One has to conform to that name, actualize it, make it real. Just as R&B and blues performers have taken names that give them distinct identities and personalities, so too have rappers. Some rappers have taken the father/daddy title, indicative of lionized strength, virility, authority, and the ability to dispense discipline. "Old school" rappers such as Big Daddy Kane, Daddy O, and Kool Daddy Fresh immediately come to mind, and two of the newest and biggest stars in contemporary hiphop, Puff Daddy and Notorious B.I.G., a.k.a., Big Poppa, conform to that identity. Living up to one's name, as Biggie and Tupac Shakur did in life, gives them a respect that in death is unsurpassed.

Rap, since it is based on all previous musical forms and is rooted deeply in the cumulative African-American musical and verbal tradition, has made male/female relationships one of its foundations. The ways in which male and female artists have lyricized about relationships illustrate how sexual politics have been and still continue to be played out in hip-hop. As the "old school" princesses Salt-N-Pepa have illustrated in a number of their raps, sexuality and sexual expression exercise a profound impact on youth culture. For example in "Let's Talk About Sex" they call for open and frank dialogue:

Let's talk about sex for now to the people or in the crowd
It keeps coming up anyhow
Don't decoy, avoid, or make void the topic
Cuz that ain't gonna stop it
Now we talk about sex on the radio and video shows
Many will tell you anything goes
Let's tell it how it is, and how it could be
How it was, and of course, how it should be
Those who think it's dirty have a choice
Pick up the needle, press pause, or turn the radio off
Will that stop us, Pep. I doubt it
All right then, come on, Spin

And you wanna romance between another girl's sheets
Go ahead sweetheart, I expected that
Cuz you're nothing but a cheap, little, stuck up brat
Wherever you're at you want this and that
You dirty rat, I'm not a welcome mat
I got another lover, and I know he cares
So smile child, but keep your crocodile tears

This rap contextualizes how male/female relationships are explored and constructed within the larger framework of hip-hop, and Salt-N-Pepa have set the tone for many rappers to deal with this subject matter.

In “Tramp,” they turn the tables on men, posing the question to men who only want sex from a woman:

On the first date, he thought I was a dummy
He had the nerve to tell me he loved me
But of course, I knew it was a lie, y'all
He undressed me with his eyeballs
Trying to change the whole subject
Cuz everything he said pertained to sex
So I dissed him, I said, you're a sucker!
Get your dirty mind out of the gutter
You ain't gettin' paid, you ain't knockin' boots
You ain't treatin' me like no prostitute
When I walked away, he called me a teaser
You're on a mission, kid—yo, he's a TRAMP

The game, the chase, the conquest—Salt-N-Pepa provide a feminist reading of sex and sexuality as a substitute for courtship, all the while keeping the men on guard. They have established themselves on formerly male terrain (“Whatever game you play, I play the same way”) as a form of empowerment to neutralize men who play the game.

Female rappers like Salt-N-Pepa provide an antidote to the sometimes venemous lyrics written by men, and though some of the female rappers have played into the “bitch and ho” stereotype (most notably the now disbanded Hoes With An Attitude and Bitches With Problems), it is the women rappers who are now ascendant, providing a neutralization of hip-hop’s misogyny.

But Salt-N-Pepa possess a romantic side as well, showing that hip-hop is not all social commentary and ghetto reality. In “Whatta Man,” they show a little tenderness:

I wanna take a minute or two, and give respect
much due
To the man that’s made a difference in my world
And although most men are ho’s he flows on the down low
Cuz I never heard about him with another girl
But I don’t sweat it because it’s just pathetic
To let it get me involved in that he said/she said crowd
Fatherhood and Masculinity in Rap Lyrics

I know that ain't nobody perfect, I give props to those who deserve it. And believe me y'all, he's worth it. And here's to the future cuz we got through the past. I finally found somebody that can make me laugh. (Ha ha ha) You so crazy. I think I wanna have your baby.

In just one of her raps, Queen Latifah also demonstrates the anti-bitch and ho position:

tell me why when I walk past the guys i always hear, yo, baby? i mean like what's the big idea? I'm a queen, nuff respect treat me like a lady and, no, my name ain't yo and i ain't got your baby i'm looking for a guy who's sincere one with class and savoir faire I'm looking for someone who has to be perfect for the queen latifah, me (“Fly Girl”)

In a late 1998 release, I'm Bout It, the Ghetto Twinz admonish men for their lack of personal responsibility, opting for making it on their own, using the “rap game” to get paid:

Responsibility have you heard of it baby. I'm a strong chick and you will never worry me baby. I'm out here working it, writing them rhymes I'm twirkin’ it, makin’ that green deservin’ it. Homeboy I know you heard of it. Your baby son is growin’ up, baby’s momma blowin’ up. If I catch that tail I just might leave it swolled up.

Any boy can make a child takes a man to raise one Boy you just made one too stupid to raise one. And these youngsters thank you cold let them know you ain't shit, when it comes to this real shit. Responsibility he couldn't take, and that was one of those mean things that made him fake. You really think you's a man hey huster you's a lie. Strong women survive fake playas die (fake playas die).

and the chorus recants:

So many things to do, so many places to be it’s my responsibility, responsibility So many things to do, so many place to be It’s my responsibility, responsibility. (“Responsibility”)

This rap illustrates that these “ghetto princesses” will not wait or beg for their men to take responsibility. They will do it themselves, without hesitation. Male rappers maintain a more ambivalent pose in their relationships with women as reflected in hip-hop lyrics. Following are a selection of lyrics from a diverse group of male rappers showing their take on women and their own masculinity.

One of the pioneers in establishing the whole male bravado style of rap is the Seattle-based rapper Sir Mix-a-Lot, known for his flashy clothes and cars à la The Mack. In “A Rapper’s Reputation,” he paints a lyrical picture of conquering groupies:

I’m rollin’ in a Nine-Oh Van. California, that’s my plan.
Got memories Mixalot left in limbo, first stop
Sacramento
Here we go, hit a Club called Bentleys
Want a skirt to git wit me, hit me
There's a girl with a back like a Cadillac
I walked up and got pushed back
Her boyfriend tells her I'm a playa
Dropped salt on a dope rhyme saya
My reputation offends this man

As he continues his road tour, he manages to subdue and conquer a number of female admirers.

The late gangsta rapper Ezy-E was one of the most misogynistic of lyricists. In "My Baby'z Mama," Ezy gives us a portrait of a relationship (in real life, with his girlfriend Michele) that revolves around abuse and irresponsibility; but it is this arbitrary exercise of power from which he derives his manhood:
Fatherhood and Masculinity in Rap Lyrics

F*ck my bab'y z mama
The bitch got drama
And I'm not the one
I should just knock her punk ass out
While I'm in court payin' child support
But when I gotta deal with the father and the steel
And he's the type of nigga that a nigga's gotta kill
Make me kick up a grip, I don't like her
coz the bitch buyin' skirts instead of diapers
Beggin' so much to hold hands it's startin' to look like cuffs
I wish I never fucked

In this verse, we also get a glimpse of what the term “bitch” means in hip-hop: a woman who shuns what is considered to be her traditional responsibility. In turn, “bitch ass nigga” are men who are disloyal to the group, to the crew—those who have not earned respect. Feminizing the term “nigga” indicates that the men are weak, lacking strength and courage.

In “Ruthless Villain,” Eazy-E issues a boast on both his sexual prowess and his manipulation of the rap game:

It's Eazy-E in the crowd
But he's not in the 4
I tell his money flow
And he collects from his ho'
All expenses paid
For the rhymes that he made
Got the trophies in the house
For the girls that he laid
Not a wimp he's a pimp
Now of course he's the boss
So keep your bitch out his face
Or else she's gonna get tossed.

Daz continues:

Now I'm sittin' as she tries to get everything,
From my house and my cars to my gold rings.

And he concludes, bitterly:

I did so much, to get so little,
Paid more than the court asked of me.
But loving no more, not even a parlay? And you want me to pay?
It's not like it's for my baby, it's more like for you and your nigga.

Young black men is that child support is a woman's vengeance, a retaliation against a male for not committing himself to a woman. He praises himself for trying “to do right” but becomes bitter and angry when child support charges have been filed against him:

As I lay myself to sleep at night,
I pray the lord my soul to keep, so I can try to do it right.
There's no one else that I can turn to,
I'm askin' a favor, oh just once.
Oh Jesus Christ, Lord I'm askin' you.
Gave to this world a young baby, know one's life is crazy,
promise to live the righteous life of the path of my babies.
Watch the clouds spread, and it shades my heart.
The relationship fell apart.
Don't know where it ended, sure can tell you how it started,
she filed child support, and it's really cold hearted.
I've been taking care of you and your kid,
all of my life,
mad at me 'cause I wouldn't make you my wife.

In another verse by one of Death Row's last soldiers, Daz Dillinger provides a long soliloquy on having to deal with child support. One of the common perceptions by
Why you have to lie on me, and turn my child on me.
(Daz Dillinger and Tha Gang, “Baby Mama Drama”)

This rap summarized a set of dominant male attitudes that rotate around an aversion to accepting paternal responsibility—child support is revenge, it is being used by the mother to support another man, and the mother uses this to turn the children against the father. Though Dillinger is eloquent in his plea for understanding and forgiveness, he refuses to change his behavior and accept responsibility.

Houston’s Geto Boys have earned the ire of the establishment, being cited by both William Bennett and C. Dolores Tucker as instigators of violence toward women. In this verse, from “Gangster of Love,” one can see how these rappers fuse the hardcore street sensibility to romance, attempting to establish their own masculinity in the process:

Bitches look at me like I’m a faker
Knowing goddam well
I’m a muthafuckin’ heartbreaker!
I’ll have them crying for months
Cause I done fucked their best friends
and put a whipping on their cunts
They have their mothers to call
But if you done fucked one mom
Then you fucked them all

Consider also Snoop Dogg’s, “Pregnant Pussy,” in which Snoop summons a paternal commitment only to have it end up in deviant sex:

I guess you can call me a family man
Cause I kept the bitch’s baby every chance
that I can
I don’t buy them clothes or diapers and shit
But I like to feed their babies with my big black dick
Cause I’m a tell you if you didn’t know

You ain’t did shit till you fucked a pregnant ho

This objectification of women is a major concern in how hip-hop culture presents itself, and though these artists are extremely popular, we must recognize how hip-hop has designed its own internal regulatory mechanism, expressed in raps that represent another side of hip-hop, dealing with issues of sexuality, masculinity, and the relationships between men and women. These rappers, many of whom have a different consciousness, provide lyrical antidotes to the misogynistic lyrics of many so-called gangsta rappers. One of the groups, A Tribe Called Quest, illustrates how rappers can overcome the negative images of women portrayed in a sample of the lyrics I have examined. Their rap, “The Infamous Date Rape,” was very popular on college campuses during the late eighties and early nineties. This rhyme provides us with a perfect example of how hip-hop can deal with issues—the very real problem of the sexual abuse of women—the general public claims it refuses to deal with, and do it in an idiom and vernacular that appeals to its audience:

Listen to the rhyme, it’s a black date fact
Percentile rate of date rape is fat
This is all true to the reason of the skeesin
You got the right pickin but you’re in the wrong season
If you’re in the wrong season, that means you gotta break
Especially if a squad cries out date rape
You be all vexed cuz she got it goin’ on
You don’t wanna fight cuz you know that you’re wrong
But instead you rest your on the arm of the couch
Envision in your head a great sex bout
Worth opponent, all you wanna do is bone it
You ask can you kick it, she says you can’t stick

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Similarly, there are the philosophical twists and turns in Slick Rick’s melodic, “Hey Young World,” an old-school meditation on the perils of the street life, with an almost fatherly warning to the young:

We talk and say what’s right or wrong
Some way we was in’ time singin’ a song
You cannot count my Mama’s tears
It’s not the past but the future’s
What she fears

In yet another example of how rappers call on young men to accept responsibility for their children and parenting, Arrested Development penned a wonderful rap, “Mama’s Always on Stage.” Their repertoire posed a direct challenge to so-called reality rappers in that they summoned up a kind of “family values” restoration, calling on the ancestral past to provide a new cultural context for maturing young people. Though they enjoyed a short time span on the hip-hop scene, their first recording was considered a breakthrough. Notice how “Mama’s Always on Stage” issue a call for responsibility:

Hey, let me guess, you’re bored
Wanna get loose, attack the dance floor
Cool, I’ll hold her, you have a good time
I’ll keep your baby awake so baby sleeps after nine
This is reality, we need to turn our minds
Brothers talking revolution, but leave their babies behind
Well sister, he’s a sucker, just leave ’em be
The revolution is now up to brothers like me to step in cause your man stepped out
The goal: To raise the children, no doubt

Lead MC Speech raps about the “real” revolution, men acknowledging their responsibility.

Another challenge to that misogynistic and gangsta style was articulated by Paris, who in one of hip-hop’s midterm classics meditates on the importance of the past in his “Days of Old”:

Or maybe even more of us will blame the
white man
Fatherhood and Masculinity in Rap Lyrics

Before we understand now the problem's not him
What I'm tellin' ya is actual fact
I ain't pro-human cuz all humans ain't pro-black
Remember in your mind that there still exists a plan to bring down a black fist
See the struggle is uphill, life's at a standstill
Jack popped Jill now he don't act real
And every livin' moment got her singin' the blues
Her sole provider can't afford the baby's shoes
That's the cycle so many of us go through America's black holocaust continues and I just hope we wake up soon before we fold
I miss the days of old

Damn . . . I miss the days of old.

Moms had to entertain many men
didn't wanna do it but it's time to pay the rent again
I'm gettin' a bit older and starting to be a bother
moms can't stand me cause I'm lookin' like my father
Shall I stay or run away
tell me tha answer
moms ignores me and avoids me like cancer
Grow up rough and it's hard to understand stuff
moms was tough cause poppa wasn't man enough
Couldn't stand up to his own responsibilities instead of taking care of me
he'd rather live lavishly
That's why I'll never be a father
Unless you got the time it's a crime don't even bother

TuPac's equation of paternal irresponsibility with "living lavishly" reminds us of how the image of the floundering, pleasure-seeking African-American male wallowing in that pleasure has created the kind of immorality and instability producing Paris's "black holocaust." TuPac has issued a call for young men, especially, to stand up to their responsibilities and repudiate the glamour and excesses of "the life."

In his eloquent rhyme, "Dear Mama," an ode to Afeni Shakur, TuPac again rants on his father's desertion of him:

No ain't nobody tell us it was fair
No love from my daddy cause the crowd wasn't there
He passed away and I didn't cry, cause my anger wouldn't let me feel for a stranger
I was lookin' for a father he was gone
I hung around with thugs, and even though they sold drugs

Paris's remembrances of the "days of old" center on men accepting responsibility as the foundation of stability, and it is the lack of that responsibility that continues to reproduce that cycle of poverty, sexual abuse, and single motherhood.

Of all the rappers who have become role models, if you will, for young, African-American, inner-city males, none is more important than TuPac Shakur. Defiant rebel, anti-authoritarian outlaw, promoter of the thug life, image translated into reality, TuPac was and remains the essence of hip-hop. Many of his rhymes present listeners with an array of contradictions that have never been resolved, but these raps provide us with some of the most poignant commentary on masculinity and fatherhood ever to be presented to the hip-hop market. In "Papa's Song," TuPac weaves a tale about his absent father and chides him for placing the burden of raising him on his mother. It is well worth repeating for the message it contains:
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They showed a young brother love

TuPac reminds us how joining a posse or krew functions as a sort of surrogate father for many young black men, and that surrogate paternity in grounded in showing “a young brother love,” in a very masculine way, schooling him in the codes and rituals of the street, the cocaine game, and of course how to control and manipulate women.

In “Keep Ya Head Up,” a brilliant ode on teenage pregnancy and the young male’s role in it, TuPac offers a sagacious assessment of this peril afflicting inner-city African America:

Some say the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice
I say the darker the flesh then the deeper the roots
I give a holler to my sisters on welfare
TuPac cares, and don’t nobody else care
And uuh, I know they like to beat ya down a lot
But don’t cry, dry your eyes, never let up
Forgive but don’t forget, girl keep your head up
And when he tells you you ain’t nuffin don’t believe him
And if he can’t learn to love you should leave him
Cause sista you don’t need him
And I ain’t tryin’ to gas ya up, I just call em how I see em
You know it makes me unhappy (what’s that)
When brothas make babies, and leave a young mother
to be a pappy
And since we all came from a woman and our game from a woman
I wonder why we take from our women
Why we rape our women, do we hate our women?

I think it’s time to kill for our women
Time to heal our women, be real to our women
And if we don’t we’ll have a race of babies
That will hate the ladies, that make the babies
And since a man can’t make one
He has no right to tell a woman when and where to create one
So will the real men get up
I know you’re fed up ladies, but keep your head up

This is an astonishing lyrical melange, combining Malcolm’s warrior spirit with a kind of thug-life feminism, and it reveals how much TuPac was concerned with the future of male and female relationships and the responsibilities of fatherhood. It is but one more confirmation of the tremendous diversity in hip-hop, on the one hand, and its fierce contradictions, on the other, and how these contradictions can play themselves out within one artist.

TuPac’s sensitivity, eloquence, and quasi-feminist consciousness have been overshadowed by the “thug life” persona he created for himself; and his widespread popularity has been cultivated by this thug image. It is essential for us to show this other side of “Pac,” the side that has never been glamorized or the subject of extensive media commentary, but one that concerns the everyday reality of men and women in the ghettos of America.

Now, as hip-hop approaches its third decade, its elder statesman LL Cool J has shown how one can grow, mature, and accept responsibility, all the while remaining “true to the game.” His success and the price he has paid for the success are covered in his graphic and steamy autobiography, Make My Own Rules. As reported in The Source, LL’s life has come full circle:
Ladies Love Cool James. Big American corporations love Cool J. People trying to make a buck love Cool J. Video directors love Cool J. But nobody loves Cool J as much as he loves himself. He wouldn't say so, but he'd be all modest and self-effacing, telling you he's just a family man trying to feed his kids; he's just an ex-player trying to love his wife; he's just a former hoochie-banging, porn-lovin', Moet-sippin', cocky muthafucka trying to come correct and set an example for the young kids... "It's not an image. My shit is real. All I'm doing is trying to inspire young people hopefully in a positive direction by letting them know that family is important..." LL is, after all, the closest thing we have to an icon. A stellar example of how to endure, grow up and become an adult in the perpetually adolescent world of rap.

LL's ascent and continued success are reflective of the redemptive power of hip-hop. TuPac could not capture that redemption in life, but LL has accepted his role as elder statesman and as father, marrying his longtime "round-the-way-girl" Simone, the mother of his three children, while becoming an advocate for paternal responsibility in the hip-hop nation. Tapping that power should be one of the highest priorities we have in bringing hip-hop to a wider audience. Indeed, LL's appeal could rekindle young men's desire to accept personal responsibility and paternity...
as cornerstones of building stable relationships with women and children.

As hip-hop matures, so too do its artists. One of the most important lyricists writing today is Chicago’s own Common, who has elevated his lyrical style far beyond the outer reaches of the “reality rap” and “gangsta rap” that have been the most popular genres. In his “Retrospective for Life,” he offers a “real” assessment of what fatherhood is and introduces the possibility of a real dialogue taking place between the sexes:

Knowin' you the best part of life, do I have the right
to take yours
Cause I created you irresponsibly
Subconsciously knowin' the act I was a part of
The start of somethin', I'm not ready to bring into the world
Had myself believin' I was sterile
I look into a mother's stomach, wonder if you are a boy or girl
Turnin' this woman's womb into a tomb
But she and I agree, a seed we don't need
You would've been much more than a mouth to feed
But someone, I woulda fed this information I read
to someone, my life for you I woulda had to leave
Instead I lead you to death

I'm sorry for takin' your first breath, first step, and first cry
But I wasn't prepared mentally nor financially
Havin' a child shouldn't have to bring out the man in me
Plus I wanted you to be raised in a family
I don't wanna go through the drama of having a baby's mama
Weekend visits and buyin' jeans ain't gonna make me a fatha
For awhile bearing a child is somethin' I never wanted
to do
For me to live forever I can only do that through you
Never I got to talk about them niggaz with a gun
Must have really thought I was God to take the life of my son
I could have sacrificed goin' out
To think my homies who did it I used to joke about,
from now on
Ima use self control instead of birth control
Cause $315 ain't worth your soul
$315 ain't worth your soul
$315 ain't worth your soul

As the tale moves on, Common continues:

Seeing you as present and a gift in itself

There are more and more positive signs that the hip-hop generation is ready and willing to act in bringing issues of personal responsibility, fatherhood, and masculinity to the forefront.
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You had our child in you, I probably never felt what you felt
But you dealt with it like the strong black woman you are
Through our trials and tribulations, child’s elimination
An integration of thoughts I feel about the situation
Back and forth my feelings was pacin’
Happy deep down but not joyed enough to have it
But even that’s a lie in less than two weeks, we was back at it
Is this unprotected love or safe to say it’s just lust
Bustin’, more than the sweat in somebody you trust
Or is it we don’t trust each other enough
And believe, havin’ this child will make us have to stay together
Girl I want you in my life cause you have made it better
Thinkin’ we in love cause we can spend a day together
We talkin spendin the rest of our lives
It’s too many black women that can say they mothers
but can’t say that they wives
I wouldn’t choose any other to mother my understanding
But I want our parenthood to come from planning
It’s so much in my life undone
We gotta see eye to eye, about family, before we can have one
If you had decided to have it in the situation
I wouldn’t run from
But I’m walkin’, findin’ myself in my God
So I can discipline my son when I ride in
Not have a judge tellin me how and when to raise my seed

Though his death was at our greed, with no else to blame
I had a book of Afrikan names, case our minds changed
You say your period hasn’t come, and lately I’ve been sleepy
So quit smokin’ the weed and the beadies and let’s have this baby

Common’s lyrical painting of a young couple coming to grips with having a child contains the entire universe of what young black people must deal with—their sexuality, birth control, abortion, grappling with making a decision on having or not having a child, gender roles, the huge responsibility of parenting, bucking authority, and finally making the decision.

If there were to be a hip-hop anthem on fatherhood, it would no doubt have to be Ed O.G. and the Bulldogs’ “Be a Father to Your Child:"

Be a father, if not, why bother, son
A boy can make’ em, but a man can raise one
If you did it, admit it, and stick with it
Don’t say it ain’t yours ’cause all women are not whores
Ninety percent represent a woman that is faithful
Ladies, can I hear it? Thank You.
When a girl gets pregnant, her man is gonna run around
Dissin’ her for nine months, when it’s born he wants to come mourned
Talkin’ that I’m sorry for what I did
And all of a sudden he wants to see his kid
She had to bear it by herself and take care of it by herself
And giving her money for milk won’t really help

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Half of the fathers with sons and daughters don't
even wanna take 'em
But it's so easy for them to make 'em
It's true, if it weren't for you then the child wouldn't exist
After a sreeze, there's responsibilities so don't resist
Be a father to you child

This should be our call to arms, the message behind the madness, what we should use to summon our young men to the table.

In concluding, we would do well to heed the warning issued in the MEE Productions (Motivational Educational Entertainment) report Reaching the Hip-hop Generation. The authors found, after conducting a number of focus groups with hundreds of young people all over the country, that messages must be targeted to men, since they are the foundation of hip-hop culture:

... central to this audience is the centrality of male culture to set trends and influence behavior. Hip-hop culture is heavily male oriented. The music of rap, the characters portrayed as role models, fashion styles, and even interactive methods are heavily geared to males within the culture. As a result, dramatic themes that depict male-oriented scenarios were most accepted. Even when we pushed in our sample on sexist depictions of male dominance, they were not offended. More surprisingly, in many instances, they agreed with the depictions. As a result, messages targeted to males often had a much wider appeal.

There are more and more positive signs that the hip-hop generation is ready and willing to act in bringing issues of personal responsibility, fatherhood, and masculinity to the forefront. More and more signs abound. In the September 1998 issue of Sister-2-Sister magazine, the featured segment focused on hip-hop fathers. The headline read, “Don't Call Them Baby Daddies, They're Proud Fathers.” The segment shows how these men can be sensitive, loving, and compassionate fathers, without compromising their mass-market, masculine personae.

Notes
All lyrics have been taken from the web site, Original Hip-hop Lyrics at http://www.ohlal.com/