

Reclaiming Critical Analysis: The Social Harms of “Bitch”

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Abstract

The increasing use of “bitch” among women makes it harder to see links between the word and patriarchy. In pop culture and in everyday life, men and women use “bitch” as an epithet against women (and non-conventional men) as well as a means of expressing dominance over a person or object. Women who “reclaim” the term – by declaring themselves “bitches,” calling other women “bitches” in a friendly way, or using the term as a female-based generic – unwittingly reinforce sexism. Unlike the term “feminist,” which is tied to a movement for social change, “bitch” provides women only with false power, challenging neither men nor patriarchy.

WE USED TO BELIEVE that feminists found the term “bitch” unacceptable. Years ago, when one of us analyzed terms that make women invisible and men the norm – “freshman,” “chairman,” and “you guys” – she wrote, perhaps naively: “I’m not referring [in the case of sexist language] to such words as ‘bitch,’ ‘whore,’ and ‘slut.’ What I focus on instead are words that students consider just fine: male (so-called) generics” (Kleinman 2000: 6). Unlike “you guys,” “bitch” is a slur; and there’s no doubt that the word has a female referent, and a non-human one at that.¹

Feminists knew that women could act in mean-spirited ways, but we also knew that using “bitch” to describe them reinforced sexism. If women liked the feel of

¹ We will focus on “bitch” in this paper, and make only passing references to “sluts” and “hos.” Some of our analysis could be applied to these terms as well.

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“bitch” in their mouths more than “jerk,” feminists analyzed that preference as internalized oppression, whereby members of an oppressed group learn to enjoy using the dominant group’s term for them. And the pleasure of saying “bitch” keeps women from building solidarity, dividing them, as so many other words do, into good women and bad women. Yet, in the last several years, we’ve heard “bitch” used increasingly among college students, including women who affectionately greet one another with “Hey, bitches, how’re you doing?” And this includes women who call themselves feminists.

The word feminist is used in a variety of ways, so we’ll spell out what we mean by it. As feminists, we (a) give credence to the enormous amount of data showing that sexism still exists; (b) understand sexism, heterosexism, class inequality, and racism (among other systems), as connected; and (c) are invested in ending all forms of inequality. We agree with Allan Johnson (2005) and others (Bennett 2006; Walby 1990) that U.S. society is patriarchal: male-dominated, male-centered, and male-identified. By male-dominated, Johnson means that “positions of authority are...generally reserved for men” (Johnson 2005: 5). Our society is male-identified in that “core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are associated with how we think about men and masculinity” (*ibid.*: 5-6). Finally male-centeredness means that “the focus [in a society] is primarily on men and what they do” (*ibid.*: 10).

As feminist sociologists, we analyze “bitch,” including who uses it, with whom, and in what ways, in the context of systematic inequalities in the U.S., especially sexism. We argue that “bitch,” even when used by women in a friendly way, or by women and men as a so-called generic (e.g., “That test was a bitch!” or “Stop bitching!”) reinforces sexism, and thus hurts all women.

DO WORDS MATTER?

As symbolic interactionists (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934) and feminists, we assume that words matter. As we’ve often said to students, “Try thinking without words for 5 minutes, and let us know how that goes.” Students are more likely to believe that images matter, as if one set of symbols has more weight than the other, and as if words and images don’t work in tandem. But words are our tools of thought, reflecting social reality as well as shaping it. In common parlance the word “symbolic” is often preceded by “mere.” But, sociologically, symbols (words) are conventional—common to a group or community—and evoke conscious and unconscious responses. We use words, although not only words, to communicate with others, or to miscommunicate—itsself a form of communication.

What we say to others, and to ourselves, has consequences. It matters whether white people use “Negro,” “black,” or “African American” to refer to people of African ancestry who live in the United States. It also matters whether people who

have dark skin or African features think of themselves as Negro, black, or African American. The slogan "Black is Beautiful," for example, went along with anti-racist movements for social change in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Those words spoke as boldly as "naturals" or dreadlocks; the terms and images worked together.

It is also common—at least in U.S. society—to assume that actions are separate from, and more important than, words. Various clichés capture that idea: "Actions speak louder than words"; "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me"; "Walk the walk, don't just talk the talk." Perhaps these clichés evolved from the cynicism generated by politicians. They often speak in generalities so that the rest of us will have trouble pinning them down. Or politicians tell citizens that a vote for them is a vote for change, but, after the election, act a lot like the people they replaced.

Words can elevate or deflate us, as children learn when they receive praise or blame from parents, teachers, and peers. Central to our analysis are the indirect effects of language. For example, despite people's intentions, the telling of sexist and racist jokes can "sustain an environment in which people use sticks, stones, guns, or bombs against others" (Kleinman 2007: 13). Any terms that dehumanize others can make it easier for us to harm them (Schwalbe 2008).

And words often precede action. Harsh words are exchanged and a fight breaks out. A speaker's words move others to organize against injustice, or stop them from doing so. In addition, words are action: "With words as our daily tools, we can't help but do things with them" (Kleinman 2007: 13). As these examples suggest, commonly used words can signify hierarchy. Words tell us, empirically, about: increases or decreases in inequality; old inequalities in new guises; false power among members of an oppressed group (more on that, later); unconscious sexism, racism, or other forms of inequality; subordinates' resistance to injustice.

Like Douglas Hofstadter's (1985; see also Kleinman 2002) analysis of the pervasiveness of sexism in the English language (e.g., Mr. as compared to Miss and Mrs.; Mrs. His Last Name), we look at a word, or term, in relation to other common words. For example, "you guys" is currently used by many to refer to a group of women and men as well as to a group of women. If that were the only male-based generic, we would not conclude that women are made invisible in generics and that men remain the norm.

But as Hofstadter (see also Richardson 2004) points out in detail, women are systematically made invisible in so-called generics, and there are hundreds more pejorative terms in English for women than for men, most of them sexual (Richardson 2004). So it makes sense to conclude that men are systematically privileged, and women disadvantaged, in the English language. As Hofstadter illustrates so well in "A Person Paper on Purity in Language"—in which he substitutes race for sex, and creates such terms as "freshwhite" and "you whiteys" in the place of "freshman" and "you guys"—the pattern of sexism is clear.

Why did Hofstadter write his article as a satire? Doing so, he risked being seen

as a racist by those who failed to understand it. He used terms with “white” and “black” in order to make sexist language, and other sexist practices, visible. Terms that regularly make women invisible are largely acceptable not only to men and boys, but also to women and girls. Readers will know from the context of this article that “girls” refers to female children. But “girls” is used increasingly in everyday speech to refer to women of just about any age. That female and male college students use “girls” to refer to college-aged women—and dislike the term “woman”—is yet another indicator of sexism.

“Bitch” cannot be analyzed sociologically, then, without understanding its place in the English language—in which adult women are infantilized through the term “girls” or are erased through male-based generics. And “bitch” cannot be understood apart from its place in a society in which girls and women of all ages are members of a sex class that is subordinate to men. We recognize that many men are members of other subordinated categories (being of color, poor, queer, having disabilities), but they are not subordinated as men (Frye 1983). Similarly, women are subordinated as women, but can enjoy the privileges of being white, rich, heterosexual, or able-bodied. As Marilyn Frye (1992: 70) put it, women share a “common—but not homogeneous—oppression.” Oppression and privilege are two sides of the same coin; privileged groups benefit at the expense of those who are oppressed. Even in the case of war, where men, sometimes against their will, make up the vast majority of soldiers, men are not oppressed *as men* because:

There is no system in which a group of non-men subordinates men and enforces and benefits from their suffering. The systems that control the machinery of war are themselves patriarchal, which makes it impossible for them to oppress men as men. Warfare does oppress people of color and the lower classes, who are often served up as cannon fodder by privileged classes whose interests war most often serves....An estimated nine out of ten wartime casualties are civilians, not soldiers, and these include a huge proportion of children and women....[T]here are no great national cemeteries devoted to them. War, after all, is a man’s thing (Johnson 2005: 24-25).

Even our language patterns surrounding war hide who kills whom, for what purposes, and with what results. We hear or read in the news that bombs “were dropped,” or shots “were fired,” as if no people did the killing. And the civilians killed are “collateral damage,” not human beings (Cohn 2000). Yes, language matters.

THE PROBLEMS WITH “BITCH”

A “bitch,” as most English speakers know, is a female dog. Where does the association between female dogs and female humans come from? The use of the word “bitch” to refer to women dates back to the 1400s (Hodgson 2008). Similar to contemporary usage, calling a woman a bitch was an insult. Like the use of “slut” or “ho”

today, it carried a connotation of sexual libel: "The idea was that a woman being called a bitch was being accused of being worse than a prostitute because at least a prostitute stood to gain financially from the broad distribution of her sexual favors" (para 8). As Jane Caputi (2004) and Barbara Walker (1983) point out, the use of the word "bitch" as an insult also occurred through its association with the Greek/Roman goddess Artemis-Diana, the goddess of the hunt. Understanding the divine as linked to nature, Artemis-Diana was often portrayed in the company of dogs, and sometimes as an animal herself. In an attempt to suppress the sacred feminine and to impose Christian rule and ideology on non-Christians and pagans, the expression "son of a bitch" was used in Christian Europe to impugn those who were the spiritual followers of the goddess. The etymology of "bitch," as applied to women, teaches us that the word was linked to suppressing images of women as powerful and divine and equating them with sexually depraved beasts.

We still hear "She's a bitch," and there is no mistaking the negative connotation, whether used by a female or male speaker. Yet, in classrooms and on college campuses, we have frequently heard students use bitch as a generic noun. "Life is a bitch, and then you die" has been around for a while, but more recently we have overheard students saying, for example, "That test was a real bitch!" The test, or any other object being described this way, is presumably difficult, or, at the very least, annoying. If the student believes that she or he has not done well, the expression distances the speaker from responsibility – it is not poor preparation on the part of the student, or that s/he isn't smart, but that the test (the "bitch") was unfair or more difficult than it should have been. If the student does well on the test, s/he can feel proud of having aced "a bitch of a test." The expression draws on the meaning of "bitch" as a pejorative term for women. Hypothetically, the pejoratives associated with men and masculinity – "dick" or "dickhead" – could be used in the same manner. But we have never heard a student say "That test was a real dick." Nor have we heard a student refer to a test by the generic "jerk" or "asshole."

Trying to control an object by the use of "bitch" can be seen in the second author's study of a collegiate female rugby team (see Ezzell 2009). He asked a player about a chemistry test she had taken earlier in the week. She smiled, saying, "I bent that test over and made it my bitch." The test may have presented some difficulty, but she controlled it. Yes, she felt she had done well on the test.

In these examples, the "bitch" is something (meant to be) dominated, conquered, and vanquished. This reflects larger patterns in English language usage. As Laurel Richardson (2004) points out:

...the small (e.g., kittens), the graceful (e.g., poetry), the unpredictable (e.g., the fates), the nurturant (e.g., the church, the school), and that which is owned and/or controlled by men (e.g., boats, cars, government, nations) represent the feminine, whereas that which is a controlling forceful power in and of itself (e.g., God, Satan, tiger) primarily represents the masculine (90, emphasis added).

The test that is a “bitch” is feminized, placed in a subordinate relationship with he (or she) who exerts control and, thus, is positioned as masculine. In that sense, the “bitch” is not a true generic, but equivalent to calling a woman “a bitch.” The rugby players in the study also used “bitch” in the old-fashioned sense, mostly when referring to their opponents. One story that players told over and over as a prime example of tough rugby play involved a team officer who had tackled another player. She stood over her opponent and screamed, “Get up, bitch, I’m not done with you yet!” In the world of sport, words like “bitch” are used to denigrate boys and men who do not play aggressively or who fail to perform masculinity successfully (Messner 2002). The rugby women, by using the word “bitch” to subordinate their opponents, drew on and reinforced these patriarchal ideas.

The domination of the other in these examples is similar to, and perhaps based on, the argot of prisoners. This can be seen in the expression “my bitch,” indicating that the individual is sexually dominated. The possessive “my” implies an ownership that is inclusive of—but also goes beyond—the sexual. The hierarchy in men’s prisons (Sabo *et al.* 2001) consists of “tough guys” who use violence to get what they want and reside at the top; “snitches,” “bitches,” and “punks” are the recipients of violence, and reside at the bottom:

“Snitches” are inmates who provide information to prison authorities. A “bitch” refers to an individual who is labeled weak, a snitch, homosexual, or feminine or who cannot defend himself or otherwise hold his own in the prison world of men. A “punk” is someone who has become the sexual slave for an inmate by force (Sabo *et al.* 2001: 9).

This hierarchy, and the use of the word “bitch” as a referent for a sexually controlled or dominated man, was dramatized and normalized in the HBO series, *Oz*.² Journalist Virginia Heffernan (2005) commented in the *New York Times*:

“Bitch” used for men appears to have come into currency on cable, chiefly on HBO’s “*Oz*,” which ran from 1997 to 2003. “*Oz*” was the first show to follow the relentless hints of prosecutors on network cop shows that the pain of prison was not in the work detail or in the bread crusts but in the *de facto* sexual torture practiced by the inmates. Suspects on those shows understood the intimations, though the word “bitch” was rarely used, and they knew, as viewers increasingly did too, that a bitch was what a vulnerable prisoner would surely become, the weaker partner in a prison-sex arrangement, a kind of sex slave (para 3).

Apart from cable shows like *Oz*, the problem of male inmates sexually assaulting other men is rarely addressed as a form of male dominance. Instead, intermale violence is often put forward as a joke that turns on symbolically placing men in the position of women (i.e., members of the sex category who are raped by men).

² Online source: <http://www.hbo.com/oz/>

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Laughing at men who become "a man's bitch" – or any men who are seen as being "like women" – only makes sense in the context of a culture in which women are deemed inferior. From a humane standpoint, the rape of male inmates by other men, like the rape of any human being by another, is not funny. But in a society in which male dominance is celebrated and normalized, men treating men like women by dominating them sexually becomes fodder for "humor."

As an example, some "humorous" websites today will generate your "prison bitch name."³ After entering your first and last name, the website will provide your new name: "fudge packer," "moustache girl," or "ass mangler." This is "humorous" because it positions men ("bitches") as feminized – failed men. Comic Rodney Carrington wrote a song called "Prison Bitch," featured on the syndicated radio broadcast "The Bob and Tom Show"⁴:

...cause you're my prison bitch, my prison bitch
and I have no regrets, I got you for a candy bar and a pack of cigarettes
at first you were resistant but now you are my friend
I knew that I would get you in the end (Carrington n.d.)

Former inmate "Steve J.B." (2003), who was incarcerated, raped, and gang-raped repeatedly, reported that prison guards played this song "nearly every day, often several times in a row" (para 1) during his incarceration. He notes that he was forced to become an "alternative woman" (para 5) in the prison system, ultimately shaving his legs, wearing makeup, and wearing women's clothes. This is about more than intermale violence; it is an expression of patriarchal power, broadly defined. Sabo (2001) comments:

Men's efforts to weave webs of domination through rape and physical intimidation in prison also reflect and reproduce men's domination of women in the social world beyond the walls. In the muscled, violent, and tattooed world of prison rape, woman is symbolically ever present. She resides in the pulpy, supple, and muted linguistic folds of the hardness/softness dichotomy. The prison phrase "make a woman out of you" means that you will be raped. Rape-based relationships between prisoners are often described as relationships between 'men' and 'girls' who are, in effect, thought of as 'master' and 'slave,' victor and vanquished (64).

Just as "bitch" can be used to denigrate men, putting their masculinity into question, it can be used to position powerful women as emasculating. During the 2008 primaries in the United States, Hillary Clinton was often positioned as "the bitch," and Sarah Palin as "the ditz" (Fortini 2008). But Palin (like any woman) was still open to being labeled a "bitch" (NowPublic 2008). Seen as unqualified (MSNBC

³ See, for example, <http://www.prisonbitchname.com/>; <http://www.slinkys.com/cellname.html>; or http://www.pasteeaters.com/funny_jokes/Prison_Name_Generator.asp

⁴ Online source: <http://www.bobandtom.com/gen3/index.htm>

2008) and as abusing power (Rood *et al.* 2008), Palin was also viewed as emasculating John McCain, who was then labeled a “bitch” in a comedic YouTube clip titled, “Is McCain Palin’s Bitch?” (LisaNova 2008). In addition to being feminized as someone’s “bitch,” McCain was mocked as a man dominated by a woman, an extra insult to his masculinity.

Without the reality of prison rape and men’s violence against women, such expressions as “I bent that test over and made it my bitch” would make no sense. They are based on acts of domination in the real world by men against women, and men against men. The clichéd or humorous usage at best trivializes these social harms, and, for the most part, keeps them invisible.

The trivializing of “bitch” can also be seen in the verb “bitching.” The term means “complaining,” which seems innocent enough. But it is female-based, and its common use conditions us to link “complaining” – of a particular kind – with women, not men. It’s impossible to measure how often the term is used, by women or men, to describe what men do, but we would expect it to be applied to women more of the time. Yet that is not the main social harm that follows from common usage of the term. Rather, referring to what someone says as “bitching,” when delivered by anyone, renders it trivial or illegitimate. “Bitching” is defined by the negative reaction of the audience (irritated, annoyed) rather than by the judgment of the speaker (angry, aggrieved). Someone who is described as nagging, whining, or bitching is not someone who is seen as making a good argument, pointing out an injustice, or saying something to which we should sit up and listen. Whining, in particular, is also applied by adults (female and male) to children. If others think of a person as “bitching” a lot – which might well happen, after all, s/he was not taken seriously the first time – the person will be seen as having a character flaw: “Bitch bitch bitch, that’s all s/he does.” Even if applied to a man – “He’s always bitching about something!” – we’d know that the content of the complaint doesn’t merit serious attention. One can almost hear “just” in front of “bitching.” Like nagging or whining, two female-associated terms, “bitching” is the kind of complaining that is not followed by action. What’s worse than someone who does not “walk the walk” is someone whose talk isn’t worth the walk. The negative connotation of “bitching” is clearest when applied to a man: his speech is demoted in part because he is doing what women (subordinates) presumably do – bitch.

BITCH IN POP CULTURE

Popular culture and mainstream media reflect social reality as well as shape it. Currently the word “bitch” abounds through our cultural landscape. From songs to headlines to verbal exchanges in prime time television, the word gets a lot of play. We can’t visit our local organic cooperative market without seeing the word splayed across magazine covers. Unlike words like “shit” and “fuck,” “bitch” is not covered

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by the Federal Communications Commission's guidelines on obscene, indecent, and profane language.⁵ Columnist Theresa Schneider (2006) comments on this:

Under the definition of indecent language I can print the word "bitch" as many times as I want, I but can't say s---. The so-called standards of indecent language protect children from poop but allow impressionable listeners and viewers to learn that calling a woman a bitch is not only socially acceptable, but normal and sometimes funny. Essentially, by allowing "bitch" and not "s---", the FCC exposes children to the idea that it is OK to degrade women (para 5).

Perhaps the most attention has been paid to the use of the word "bitch" in pop music. Predictably, these critiques by the white-dominated media have tended to focus on the use of sexism and violent themes in rap and hip hop music, largely African American genres. For example, the New York City Council's citywide "symbolic ban" on the words "bitch" and "ho" in 2007 was prompted by the use of the terms in hip-hop music, citing 10 rappers in the legislation (see Howze 2007).

Critiques have been levied, for example, on songs like N.W.A.'s 1989 song, "A Bitch Iz A Bitch" (Armstrong 2001). In the song, rapper Ice Cube sings:

Now, the title bitch don't apply to all women
But all women have a little bitch in 'em (yeah)
It's like a disease that's plagues their character
Takin' the women of America (yeah)
And it starts with a letter B
It makes a girl like that think she better than me (bitch)
See, some get mad and some just bury
But, yo, if the shoe fits wear it (wear it)
It makes 'em go deaf in the ear
That's why when you say 'hi' she won't say 'hi'
Are you the kind that think you're too damn fly?
Bitch eat shit 'n die (ha, ha)
Ice cube comin' at you at crazy pitch
(Why?) I think a bitch is a bitch (N.W.A. 1989).

The group uses the label "bitch" in this song to refer to women who step out of their place. Women deemed materialistic or manipulative are also vulnerable to the label: "Yo, you can tell a girl that's out for the money (How?) / She look good and the bitch won't phony." Hip hop artist and businessperson Jay-Z sampled the song in 2003 in "Bitches and Sisters," a song from his critically acclaimed album *The Blueprint 2.1*. In the song, Jay-Z acknowledges the critique of the word "bitch," and then spells out the differences between "sisters" and "bitches":

⁵ Online source: <http://www.fcc.gov/eb/oip/>, see Matthews (2006) for additional comments on this point.

Say Jay-Z, why you gotta go and disrespect the women for, huh?
Sisters get respect, Bitches get what they deserve,
Sisters work hard, Bitches work your nerves,
Sisters hold you down, Bitches hold you up,
Sisters help you progress, Bitches'll slow you up,
Sisters cook up a meal play they role with the kidz, Bitches in the street with they
nose in ya biz,
Sisters tell the truth, Bitches tell lies,
Sisters drive cars, Bitches wanna ride
Sisters give up the ass, Bitches give up the ass
Sisters do it slow, Bitches do it fast
Sisters do they dirt outside of where they live, Bitches have niggas all up in your crib.

As the lyrics above attest, the word “niggas,” or variations of it, also appears frequently in mainstream music. Yet popular white rapper Eminem refuses to conform to this trend. As Randall Kennedy (2000), author of *Nigger*, notes:

Eminem has assumed many of the distinctive mannerisms of his black rap colleagues, making himself into a “brother” in many ways – in his music, his diction, his gait, his clothes, his associations. He refuses to say, however, any version of a word that his black hip-hop colleagues employ constantly as a matter of course; the nonchalance with which he tosses around epithets such as bitch and faggot does not extend to nigger. “That word,” he insists, “is not even in my vocabulary” (51-52).

But, as Kendall remarks, the word “bitch” is in Eminem’s vocabulary. Consider these lyrics from his 2002 song “Superman”:

They call me superman
Leap tall hoes in a single bound,
I’m single now,
Got no ring on this finger now,
I’ll never let another chick bring me down,
In a relationship, save it bitch, babysit? you make me sick,
Superman aint savin shit, girl you can jump on shady’s dick,
Straight from the hip, cut to the chase,
I’ll tell a m’fuckin slut to her face...

The misogyny is clear. The lyrics paint a picture of women as manipulative and good only for sex, while reinforcing the Madonna/whore double-bind. Yet there is more to this story. Given the superficial coverage of men’s violence against women by the mainstream media, we suspect that the attention given to sexist lyrics and themes in rap music has more to do with demonizing black men than taking sexism seriously (Eminem, as a white man, being the exception to the rule). The harms pointed out in the critiques are real, but we agree with educator Jackson Katz (2006) when he argues that the relentless focus on rap music and artists shifts our attention

from the (mostly) white, rich, male entertainment and music executives who profit from the music. And it deflects from the fact that the primary consumers of rap and hip hop are young white men.

"Bitch" and other sexist slurs and subject matter can be found in a variety of genres, including white-dominated rock as well as pop and country music. Following personal and professional troubles, white pop star Britney Spears' 2007 comeback album, *Blackout*, was launched with the release of the single, "Gimme More." The song opens with Spears' voice announcing, as if in defiance of her detractors, "It's Britney, bitch," before the heavy dance-beat begins. But as in hip hop and rap, the use of the word "bitch" in other genres is not only a recent phenomenon.

Relying on the female-referent behind the term, heavy-metal band Metallica uses "bitch" as a metaphor for any sort of problem in their 1996 hit "Ain't My Bitch":

Dragging me down
While you were round
So useless
It ain't my fault
It ain't my call
It ain't my bitch
Ain't my bitch.

Making an association between women and a problem—particularly a problem that does not deserve attention—sustains a social climate in which women's opinions, women's work, and injustices done to women are not taken seriously. Metallica was not the only band to use "bitch" as a metaphor. When asked about their 1997 dance-club hit "Smack My Bitch Up," electronic music group The Prodigy claimed that their song referred to "doing anything intensely, like being on stage—going for extreme manic energy" (Phillips 1997: para 4). Although "smack" is a well-known euphemism for heroin, the suggestion of violence against women in the song is undeniable. The lyrics consist entirely of two lines repeated throughout the song: "Change My Pitch Up / Smack My Bitch Up." The video for the song was filmed from a first-person viewpoint. It shows the protagonist, among other things, dancing, groping women who are clearly not consenting to the action, taking large amounts of drugs, getting in physical fights with men, and picking up a woman at a strip bar and having sex with her. At the close of the video, the protagonist looks into a mirror and the viewer can see that she is a woman. Despite the "surprise" at the end, and despite the band members' assertions that the song refers to "doing anything intensely," the video glorifies the drunken sexual abuse and exploitation of women over the fast-paced beat of the song and continuously repeated line, "smack my bitch up."

During a joint concert in 1998, members of the hip hop group Beastie Boys called members of The Prodigy and asked them not to play the song in their set. Maxim, a frontperson for The Prodigy, lambasted the members of Beastie Boys for this on stage, telling the audience, "They didn't want us to play this fuckin' tune. But the

way things go, I do what the fuck I want" (Brainkiller n.d., para 4), before jumping into the song. Adam Horovitz, one of the members of Beastie Boys, later commented on this incident, saying, "You know, a woman in America gets murdered every 20 minutes every day, in domestic violence. So 'Smack My Bitch Up' isn't that funny" (Brainkiller n.d.: para 16). We agree with Horovitz. The expression "smack my bitch up," regardless of the stated intent of the Prodigy band members, relies on, desensitizes us to, and glorifies real world acts of men's violence against women. It isn't funny, even if it has been turned into profitable entertainment.

The word "bitch" can also be heard on current mainstream and cable-subscription service shows. On HBO's *Entourage*⁶, for example, actor Jeremy Piven's character, Ari Gold, plays a Hollywood agent who is well-known for saying "Let's hug it out, bitch." The same expression, with a nod to *Entourage*, was used in NBC's hit television show *The Office*.⁷ The expression is used between two people (usually men) to either end an argument in a friendly way (followed by a hug), or to stop an argument in a public space to be picked up at a later time in a less public setting. For example, after a verbal altercation, one man might say, "Hey, let's hug it out, bitch," before the two men embrace. It works as the equivalent of "no hard feelings," with a hug. Couldn't this be accomplished without the word "bitch"? We argue that this expression is more likely to be used between heterosexual men in the context of a disagreement. By invoking an insult, the man who says, "let's hug it out, bitch," can distance himself from any intimation of homoeroticism. Even as "bitch" may conjure an image of a sexual encounter between men (as in prisons), by applying the word to the other man, the hug-requestor places himself in a dominant position. Similarly, male athletes are more comfortable slapping each other on the butt or embracing after a good play than men in other settings; the hypermasculine context of sport distances them from an association with homosexuality. Neither type of interaction, however, would make sense outside a larger homophobic and heterosexist culture.

RECLAIMING "BITCH" AS FALSE POWER

We now come to the belief, held by many women, that they can "reclaim" bitch, using it among themselves in a positive way. To reclaim implies that one had an original claim, one that was taken away by others. But as we pointed out earlier, a "bitch" is a female dog, and the word has been used to dehumanize women for a long time. What is worth "reclaiming"? Significantly, young women who greet each other with a friendly "What's up, bitches?" admit that they also say "she's a bitch" in an unfriendly way.⁸ "Reclaiming" has not gone along with women giving

⁶ Online source: <http://www.hbo.com/entourage/>

⁷ Online source: http://www.nbc.com/The_Office/

⁸ We have also heard gay men use "What's up, bitch/es?" in a friendly way. Given the cultural association of gay men with femininity, this usage reinforces the idea that gay men are "like women," and that

up "bitch" to demean other women.

The sting of "she's a bitch" comes from the contemporary association of (white, middle-class, heterosexual) femininity with sensitivity. As Marilyn Frye (1983: 1) put it, "sensitivity is one of the few virtues that has been assigned to us [women]" under patriarchy. Being a bitch means that one has been "insensitive" to a man or a woman. Women can use "bitch" to describe a woman who does anything they don't like, or to describe a woman they envy ("skinny bitch") – and thus resent. The "us" in Frye's quotation is not about all women, though men's expectation of women as sensitive (and not only by white men) can be used to keep any woman in her place. For example, black women can be expected to take care of everything, including their families, though they may be seen as aggressive (i.e., bitches) by white men or black men. Put differently, the ideology behind women as sensitive and caring justifies men's absence from housework and child-care. And, it justifies labeling women who don't fit the norm as "bitches." The word, then, continues to be a means of social control of women, benefiting men, and policed by both women and men.

Feminists who "reclaim" bitch are well aware of the historically sexist use of the term. It's precisely the power of patriarchy behind the word, especially when used by men, that has inspired women's attempt to "subvert" it. As the editors of the U.S. magazine *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture*, put it:

While we're aware that our title [Bitch] is off-putting to some people, we think it's worth it. And here's why.

The writer Rebecca West, back in the day, said, "People call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat." We'd argue that the word "bitch" is usually deployed for the same purpose. When it's being used as an insult, "bitch" is an epithet hurled at women who speak their minds, who have opinions and don't shy away from expressing them, and who don't sit by and smile uncomfortably if they're bothered or offended. If being an outspoken feminist means being a bitch, we'll take that as a compliment, thanks. (*Bitch Magazine* n.d.).

One might conclude something else from the editors' words: Women should reclaim "feminist." After all, "feminist" was created by women, and most men have found it a threat in the way Rebecca West describes. Yet many women have come to reject the term, using it to show disgust for women who challenge the gender order, especially compulsory heterosexuality. As bell hooks (1989) has argued, sexism is the only form of oppression in which the oppressed are meant to love their oppressors. Women who are invested in the "boyfriend bottom line" worry about alienating men by calling themselves feminists. This is especially the case in an era in which the mass media portray feminism as evil or trivial, and boys as the ones in trouble (Hoff Sommers 2000).

women have something essential that makes them "bitches." We've also heard gay men use "bitch" as an insult to other men.

Unlike “bitch,” feminist/feminism has a philosophical underpinning, a movement, and an agenda for justice (Bartky 1990). Unsurprisingly, members of the privileged category deride the term. To reclaim feminism, even to argue among feminists about what it should mean and which practices should follow from it, would reclaim a commitment among women to work for social change and equality.

We don’t doubt that many men – and women – use “bitch” and “feminist” interchangeably, as the editors of *Bitch* argue. But to call the magazine “bitch” legitimates the term in the public eye, equating a patriarchal term (“bitch”) with one that challenges patriarchy (“feminist”). It is one thing to tell women that men may call them bitches if they don’t act in a subordinate way, but another to act as if using the word as the title of the magazine is a feminist act. One might ask, Why didn’t the authors call the magazine *Feminist: Challenges to Pop Culture*, and use space in the magazine to analyze “bitch”? This would have exposed its link to patriarchy.

We imagine our title would sell fewer copies of the magazine than theirs, especially to younger women. Women who address women as “bitches,” even with friendly intentions, find the term cool, we argue, because it is (a) a slang term, (b) used by men. Slang terms, such as “fuck” and “bitch,” are markers of young men’s masculinity. Young women may feel a cool toughness when they use “bitch,” along with “hos” and “sluts.” And young female feminists who like “bitch” equate acting feminist, at least when it comes to this term, with masculinizing – being like men, though often in a sexy way. In fact, the same female ruggers who used “bitch” to subordinate their opponents and to beat tests also claimed the word for themselves. One woman put it simply:

I think it’s weird, but it’s kind of neat that we’re unique, you know, because we have a reputation for kicking ass and looking good. So, that’s kind of fun. It’s like, “I’m a sexy bitch and I will kick your ass,” basically.

Here, instead of using the word to express a sense of superiority over an opponent, the player sexualizes physical toughness and assertiveness – and feels powerful in doing so. Although the rugby player claimed uniqueness, “sexy bitch” and “skinny bitch” are now widely acceptable. Just as “you guys” elevates women because of its male referent, saying “Hey, bitches” allows young women to believe they are honorary cool men. At the same time, they can still call themselves “girls,” and thus remain attractive to men. The rugby women never referred to the men in their dating pool (male rugby players) as “bitches.”

What are the costs of feeling cool? Women who feel good about throwing around “bitches” may have a hard time believing that sexism exists. If a woman doesn’t feel bothered by “bitch,” and likes it, how can she believe she is oppressed as a woman more generally? (Kleinman and Copp forthcoming). Throwing around “bitches,” a woman might even be accepted as “one of the guys,” or considered a “sexy bitch.” The former is a woman with high-status (i.e., male friends); the latter is a woman to date, even if not someone to marry.

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Unlike the threat implied by the editors of *Bitch*, the word is often used by women—and sometimes by men—to refer to women who are seen as “manipulative” or “catty,” perhaps a woman who “trashes” another woman behind her back. These terms imply that what a woman is doing is of no challenge to men, or to patriarchy—unlike the threat of feminists, lesbians, or lesbian feminists. Although “manipulative” or “catty” are terms that imply a lack of nice (white, middle-class, heterosexual) femininity, they also render women’s actions non-serious. Like “bitching,” “bitch” can be at once a pejorative for a girl or woman who fails to live up to feminine standards—which sounds like a real threat—but her grievances aren’t taken as seriously as a man’s (she’s just a bitch).

This brings us to the central problem with “reclaiming” “bitch.” The “bitch” has no real power; she can wear the word as an individual, but unlike the term feminist, it is not part of a movement. Rather, a woman referred to as “a bitch” by a man may become vulnerable to his power, including violence. She is, after all, perceived as misbehaving in some way. In short, a “bitch” is a woman whose anger can be dismissed because of her sex category. At the same time, a man may use it to justify hurting a woman for doing something—or nothing at all.

Despite anyone’s intentions, putting “bitches” into the atmosphere, over and over again, sends the message that it is acceptable for men to use the term. After all, members of the oppressed group are using it to describe themselves! Even in the case of “nigger,” a word considered so vile that jobs have been lost by white people who use it among themselves, there are some whites who have used it among black people (especially black men) after hearing blacks use it with each other in a friendly way (Kennedy 2002). Most white people know better than to do so, or at least fear the consequences of using it, especially if they are white men interacting with black men. Men calling each other on racist terms has the real threat of violence. “Bitch” is much more widely accepted—who uses euphemisms like the “B-word” or the “B-bomb”? And unlike the N-word, men don’t worry that women who get upset with them for using “bitches” will react violently, so there is less incentive for men to drop it. By and large, women accept men’s use of the term “bitch.” A woman who is the target of “bitch” by a man might reject the application of the word to her, but not to other women. The rare woman who sarcastically says “thank you” in response to a man who calls her a bitch, still makes the word acceptable. She might say instead, “No, I’m a feminist.”

We’re convinced that women feel good when they say “Hey, bitches!” to their friends, just as women accept saying “you guys” and “freshman.” But experiencing what we say or do as pleasurable does not make it harmless. As feminists taught us long ago, the personal is political; women who normalize “bitch” also normalize sexism. The pleasure they derive from using the term, whether as a female generic or as the old-fashioned putdown (“She’s a bitch!”) is an instance of false power (Kleinman *et al.* 2006). The person in the subordinate group may feel good about adopting an oppressive practice, but that feeling does not challenge an oppressive system. The

pleasure, after all, is about enjoying the feel of dominance, something that systematically belongs to the privileged group. (Other practices, like adult women's use of "girl," are tied to ageism and sexism, and sexual attractiveness.) These practices are supportive of patriarchy and therefore do not pose a threat to existing inequalities. It makes sense that feminists struggled to establish Women's Studies, not Bitch Studies (see Williams 2008), or for that matter, Girls' Studies.

An example of this false power can be seen in pop singer Meredith Brooks' 1997 international hit, "Bitch." In the chorus, Brooks sings:

I'm a bitch
I'm a lover
I'm a child
I'm a mother
I'm a sinner
I'm a saint
I do not feel ashamed
I'm your hell
I'm your dream
I'm nothing in between
You know you wouldn't want it any other way.

The young, white, conventionally attractive singer is presumably singing the song to a male partner. Some of the song is an apology of sorts: "Yesterday I cried / You must have been relieved to see the softer side / I can understand how you'd be so confused / I don't envy you / I'm a little bit of everything / All rolled into one."

The title of the song is belied by the sweetness of the melody and the appearance of the singer-songwriter. The strongest juxtaposition is between "bitch" and "mother," the latter implying nurturance and asexuality. The "bitch" of the song portrays herself as a woman that men (and women) in U.S. society would describe as "PMSing," or perhaps, just a woman—unpredictable—a member of the sex category whose members shouldn't be trusted. As Brooks sings: "Rest assured that when I start to make you nervous / And I'm going to extremes / Tomorrow I will change / And today won't mean a thing." This image of irrationality and fickleness is used in the wider culture to keep women out of powerful positions (Sattel 1976).

In the context of the song, "I'm a bitch" could be construed as a sexy side of the woman; it is not-mother, and not-child, akin to the "sexy bitches" of the female rugby players. Lest a listener think that the singer is proclaiming herself an out-and-out bitch, rather than a sexy one, s/he can rest assured that "bitch" is only one side out of many. The title of the song may be (a bit) risqué, but a mother singing about herself as unpredictable, and apologizing to her male partner for it, will not be mistaken for a woman who has a problem with patriarchy. The irony is that the song, while reinforcing an image of women as emotionally labile hides the fact that it is men who "unpredictably" erupt with anger, especially against their female partners,

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and commit 95 percent of violent crimes in the United States (Katz 2006). "Bitches" are not the people who make the society unsafe, and women who feel good about calling themselves "bitches" are not protecting themselves from men's harm.

Another example of false power is illustrated by Tina Fey, a white woman who writes for and stars in NBC's critically acclaimed sitcom *30 Rock*.⁹ She gave the following monologue on *Saturday Night Live*¹⁰ in 2008, commenting on the treatment of Hillary Clinton during the presidential primaries:

TINA FEY: Maybe what bothers me the most is that people say that Hillary is a bitch. Let me say something about that: Yeah, she is. So am I and so is this one. [Points to Amy Poehler].

AMY POEHLER: Yeah, deal with it.

TINA FEY: You know what, bitches get stuff done. That's why Catholic schools use nuns as teachers and not priests. Those nuns are mean old clams and they sleep on cots and they're allowed to hit you. And at the end of the school year you hated those bitches but you knew the capital of Vermont. So, I'm saying it's not too late Texas and Ohio, bitch is the new black! (Clark-Flory 2008).

Three weeks later, another star of *30 Rock*, black actor and comic Tracy Morgan, appeared on *Saturday Night Live* with a response to Fey and an endorsement of Barack Obama. He closed with the following: "You know I love you, Tina. You know you[re] my girl, but I have something to say. Bitch may be the new black, but black is the new president, bitch!" (Kurtzman 2008).

Tracy Morgan's response reveals that any attempt at "reclaiming" "bitch" can lead someone, most likely a man, to return the word as a slur. After all, Morgan could have ended his line after the word "president," with no reference to Fey as a bitch. This would have put the final emphasis on Barack Obama as a candidate for president, not on Fey as a "bitch." We can't know why Morgan reacted as he did, but it makes sense if he was angry about Fey saying "Bitch is the new black." The catch-phrase "the new black" has a wikipedia entry, and is commonly understood to express the sudden popularity of an idea, image, or product at the expense of a previously popular idea, image, or product.¹¹ Fey's expression works on this level, communicating "Being a bitch is cool now!" But with the democratic presidential primary coming down to a decision between Hillary Clinton, a white woman, and Barack Obama, a black man, and with Fey's monologue arguing for the celebration of Clinton's "bitch" persona, the racial implications of Fey's line, "bitch is the new black," are unavoidable. As J.L. Lazard (2008), a seminary student who maintains the blog *Uppity Negro Network*, commented:

⁹ Online source: http://www.nbc.com/30_Rock/

¹⁰ Online source: http://www.nbc.com/Saturday_Night_Live/

¹¹ Online source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_new_black

Now, my friend told me that this was said in the context of when Jay-Z says "30 is the new 20" and not making a reference to Black people. Well, to be quite honest, this particular Uppity Negro is NOT persuaded that this was the ultimate meaning (para 7).

When Fey said "bitch is the new black," the listener could hear those words as signifying a comparison of Clinton's "bitchiness" and Obama's "blackness," with a final assertion that "bitchiness" has more cultural, social, or political cachet. Regardless of Morgan's or Fey's intentions, this exchange highlights the ways that a woman who tries to "reclaim" "bitch" does not diminish its stigmatizing power in the hands of others, especially men. Fey (and Poehler) may have enjoyed saying they are bitches, but that power was ultimately false in its effect.

CONCLUSION

When we talk to people about sexist language, some of them tell us that we are being "rigid," even "conservative." Don't we know that words are flexible and can change in meaning over time? The implication is clear: male-based terms like "you guys" have become true generics, and terms like "bitch/bitches" are empowering to women. Yes, words are symbols that can be used in different ways by different groups, and their meanings can change. But language cannot be seen as standing apart from the macroscopic picture. Male-based generics have been around a long time, and an increase in the uses of "bitch" has not gone along with the lessening of patriarchy. Rather, "bitch" has become a flexible term of patriarchy, allowing women to feel good about using it, and thus masking its harms. Instead of asking, Has this word become harmless?, we might instead ask, Why has a female-based term ("bitch/bitching") become a negative generic; and why is just about every neutral or positive gender-based generic still male?

"Bitch" is everywhere, so people have become desensitized to its harms, some even enjoying its use. Our point is not that these words are offensive (though they may offend some), but that they unintentionally hurt women as a group. That most people aren't bothered by them is disturbing, indicating that sexism is the water we swim in, and we are the fish who cannot see it. How can people be motivated to make change if nothing seems to be the matter? As one of us wrote (Kleinman 2000: 7), "If we [women] aren't even deserving of our place in humanity in language, why should we expect to be treated as human beings otherwise?"

False power can provide feelings of empowerment among members of the oppressed group (in this case, women), the same feelings that make it difficult for oppressed people to see their lack of empowerment in society. "Bitch," when uttered by women and girls, masks inequality, deflects attention from its harm, or provides meager compensation for sexism. And if a woman believes that "some" sexism ex-

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ists, false power allows her to believe that other women might be dupes of sexism, but not her. After all, she can say "bitches" in a friendly way, or spit out "Bitch!" as well as a man. Sexist language, then, reinforces individual "solutions" (e.g., "sexy bitch") to social problems, which ultimately do not threaten the status quo.

The normalizing of bitch indicates the lack of imagination that results from living under conditions of entrenched inequalities. Why is "bitch" a preferred tool of women's empowerment? That women would rather call themselves or other women bitches—rather than feminists—suggests that domination and subordination have become the only legitimate options in U.S. society. Even if women who proclaim themselves "bitches" could be taken seriously, that would hardly be a feminist solution; we'd have women divided into the categories of "bitches" (honorary men) and "doormats" (all other women). Sound familiar?

A woman who enjoys the honorary status of man by using "bitch" may have fun with "the girls" or win temporary acceptance from "the guys." But this individual gain ultimately is part of a collective loss for women. That women use "bitch" reinforces the idea that women are essentially different from men, and in a negative way: men may act like jerks, but women are "bitches." And only men who act "like women" (members of the subordinate category) will be accused of "bitching." Women using men's pejoratives for women is flattering to men; at the same time, those terms legitimate sexist ideas about women.

We envision feminism as a movement in which women and male allies work together to end patriarchy. Our goal would be to replace it with a humane society in which "bitch"—and other terms that reproduce sexism, and every other inequality—would become relics of our patriarchal past.

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