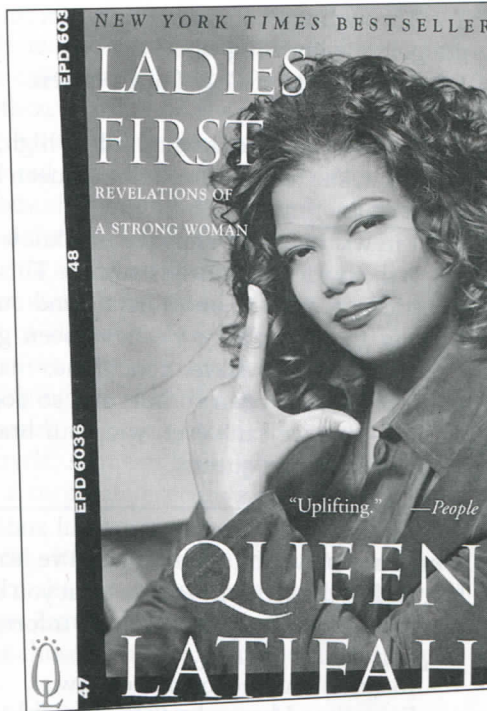


## Queen Latifah, "Who You Callin' a Bitch?"

Born Dana Elaine Owens in Newark, New Jersey, Queen Latifah has successfully worn many hats. Beginning her career as rap artist, Latifah successfully moved into other musical genres, starred in her own television show, and has starred or costarred in more than 20 films. While her music has earned her a Grammy Award, her acting has also garnered critical acclaim, earning her Emmy and Academy Award nominations. A talented performer, Latifah is also an outspoken activist for numerous social and political issues and a long-time advocate for women's self-esteem. In 1999, Latifah published *Ladies First: Revelations of a Strong Woman*, a memoir in which she draws from her life experiences to encourage women in developing confidence and strong identities. The following excerpt is from the introduction to that text.



### ► Mapping Your Reading

In the following essay, Latifah encourages the reader to recall the childhood rhyme "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Did you believe that rhyme as a child? Do you believe it now? As you read, identify the language that Latifah highlights as hurtful to women. Why does she believe these words are damaging? In contrast, how does the word "queen" become central to this essay?

Use of specifics

Intro

I am not a psychologist or a sociologist. I don't have any degrees, and I'm not an expert on life. What I am is a young black woman from the inner city who is making it, despite the odds, despite the obstacles I've had to face in the lifetimes that have come my way.

I have lived in housing projects and in fine homes. I have hung out with drug dealers and with presidents. I have had to clean bathrooms for a living. And

For another reading on gender, see Sullivan, page 38.—EDS.

I've had my own maid. I've sold millions of records and have won a Grammy. I've made movies that have bombed. I've had to bury my big brother, Winki. And I've also wanted to die myself. I've felt low, and I've felt on top of the world.

Through it all, though, I never forget who I am. The one thing that has kept me going is knowing who I am.

I am a child of God. I am a queen.

A queen is a queen when riding high, and when clouded in disgrace, shame, or sorrow, she has dignity. Being a queen has very little to do with exterior things. It is a state of mind.

I'm writing to let every woman know that she, too—no matter what her status or her place in life—is royalty. This is particularly important for African-American women to know inside and out, upside down, and right side up. For so long in this society, we have been given—and have allowed ourselves to take—the role of slave, concubine, mammy, second-class citizen, bitch, ho. Many of us have been so hurt and so dogged out by society—and by men and by life—that we can't even wrap our brains around the notion that we deserve better, that we are queens.

All things start inside your soul and work outward. Thoughts are powerful. Words are powerful. As a rapper, I've learned that what you put out in the spoken and in the written word is what you'll get back. That's why I keep my music positive. I want to uplift, I want to inform.

Instincts lead me to another flow  
Every time I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a ho.  
Trying to make a sister feel low,  
You know all of that's got to go.  
Now everybody knows there's exceptions to this rule.  
Now don't be getting mad  
When we're playing, it's cool.  
But don't you be callin' me out my name  
I bring wrath to those who disrespect me like a dame.  
—“U.N.I.T.Y.”

I won a Grammy, an NAACP Image Award, and a Soul Train Music Award in 1994 for this song. But I didn't write it to win awards. I wrote it because all around I saw women being verbally and physically assaulted, especially in rap music. Gangsta rap was ruling at the time, and with it came all this misogynistic bull—*bitch* this, *ho* that. And crazy as it sounds, I saw female rappers buying into it. There was even a group that called itself BWA—Bitches With Attitude.

**We have the power to set the men straight.**

Other groups were disrespecting *them* in their raps, and these ladies didn't even defend themselves in their music. They took it. What kind of message was that sending?

I had something to say to everybody in my music. But I decided to address the ladies first. We have the power to set the men straight. If you don't feel like

a bitch, no one can call you that. It's important to start building your own confidence to bash the fellas. It starts with you. You have any.

I learned at an early age. The first time some kid said something to my mother. She comforted me and went back out there. “Tell them I didn't go over too well with you on my point. I don't have to answer to them.” My mom planted a seed in me. am. My mom planted a seed in me.

What makes Dana Owens a queen? Does *anyone* have to call her a queen? One helluvan arrogant sister with a queen inside. She was placed in the womb. It's just a matter of time a woman puts you halfway through. It starts inside by feeling good about yourself. is proud of who she is, whether she's an athlete or not.

A queen, a woman who stands up when her world is crumbling. She put you through plenty of tests. If you pass those tests, how do you act as a queen.

Think of Jacqueline Kennedy. She was President Kennedy's funeral director. Just days before, she had a divorce from her husband. She could not handle the pressure. Yet there she was, representing a will to represent someone else. She was a woman who put something this country has ever known. Extreme wealth and jewels, but she was much a part of who she was. Her generosity and charity. And she was a queen.

A queen never sells out. She has the greater purpose of keeping her family together. Two kids when Daddy's money is gone.

That was my mother, a self-proclaimed queen. She was a woman who matter what the obstacles, she was smart, beautiful, and she couldn't do. When I wanted to be a queen. When I entered talent show.



a bitch, no one can call you that and make it stick. I realized it was more important to start building women up and making them look inside themselves than to bash the fellas. It starts with our own self-esteem, and too many women don't have any.

I learned at an early age that nobody has the right to call me out of my name. The first time some kid around my way called me a tomboy, I went home crying to my mother. She comforted me and then sent me on my way. She told me to go back out there. "Tell that boy you're *not* a tomboy; you're just athletic!" That didn't go over too well with the kids around my way, but it didn't matter. I made my point. I don't have to accept somebody else's moniker for me. I define who I am. My mom planted a seed in my head that day.

What makes Dana Owens a queen, you ask? And what right does *anyone* have to call herself a queen without sounding like one helluvan arrogant sista? Well, first of all, each of us has a queen inside. She was placed there before we were even formed, in the womb. It's just a matter of bringing her out. Being a woman puts you halfway there. But there's so much more. It starts inside by feeling good about yourself. A queen has high self-esteem. She is proud of who she is, whether she is a corporate executive or a cleaning lady, whether she's an athlete or a housewife.

**What right does anyone have to call herself a queen?**

A queen, a woman with self-esteem, handles adversity with grace. Even when her world is crumbling around her, she never lets her crown fall. Life will put you through plenty of tests and throw many obstacles your way, but it's how you pass those tests, how you overcome those obstacles, that distinguishes you as a queen.

Think of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Remember those pictures of her at President Kennedy's funeral, holding the little hands of Caroline and John-John? Just days before, she had witnessed the assassination of her children's father, her husband. She could not have felt anything but a pain too immense to put into words. Yet there she was, giving strength to the entire country. She had a pride and a will to represent something higher than herself. She was making a statement for others. She was a champion. And in many ways, she was the closest thing this country has ever had to a queen. She is remembered not for her extreme wealth and jewels, nor for her exquisite taste—although that was very much a part of who she was—but for her grace in the face of adversity, for her generosity and charity. And for always holding her head up high.

A queen never sells out. She will sacrifice quick money and material goods for the greater purpose of keeping her soul. She may take three jobs to take care of her two kids when Daddy's money ain't coming through, and she doesn't complain.

That was my mother, Rita Owens. She laid the foundation for me to become a self-proclaimed queen. She made the ground fertile for me to persevere, no matter what the obstacles, and to keep my head up. My mother always told me how smart, beautiful, and talented I was. In her mind, there was nothing I couldn't do. When I wanted to learn the drums and guitar, she paid for lessons. When I entered talent shows, she sat in the front row. When I played basketball,

she was there, cheering the loudest. And when I got into trouble and started running the streets, she talked with me, and she prayed for me. She never limited me. My mother believed in me before I even believed in myself. And because of that, no one can shake my confidence now.

I know there are many, many young women who don't have a solid picture of what a queen is because there isn't one in their lives. But even if you don't know a strong mother—or a grandmother, a tough aunt, a straight-talking teacher, or an encouraging neighbor who can be your champion—you can still be a queen.

It starts with you. You have to want to be a queen. You have to want it for yourself. You have to know yourself.

I know who I am. I am confident. I know God. I can take care of myself. I share my life with others, and I love—I am worthy of the title Queen.

So are you.

### Analyzing the Text

1. We may associate a queen with wealth and monarchy, but Latifah redefines the word “queen” in this essay. According to Latifah, what are the qualities of a queen? Who does Latifah offer as examples of queens? What makes them queens in her eyes?
2. What power do words—particularly names people might use to label us—have over our sense of identity? Latifah describes the pain she felt as a child when she was called a tomboy. How are words like “tomboy” or “sissy” hurtful? What are the underlying social attitudes regarding gender identity that are revealed by such name-calling?
3. Latifah is critical of popular music that popularizes “all this misogynistic bull” and particularly the female artists who are “buying into it.” According to Latifah, how have larger cultural and social attitudes made such name-calling acceptable as a way to get noticed?
4. How do you make sense of the contradictory messages in this essay? First, Latifah announces that she learned as a kid that “I don't have to accept somebody's else moniker for me. I define who I am.” Yet, much of the point of the essay is that the names society uses to label women are demeaning and damaging to them. How, in your opinion, can individuals define their own sense of identity in the face of larger cultural attitudes?
5. Throughout the essay, Latifah comments explicitly on the power of language to affect thought and action. She writes, “Thoughts are powerful. Words are powerful. As a rapper, I've learned that what you put out in the spoken and in the written word is what you'll get back.” In what ways do our spoken and written words affect our actions? Our identity? How do they affect the way others identify us?
6. **Connecting to Another Reading.** Both Queen Latifah and Andrew Sullivan (p. 38) discuss the importance of being confident in one's own gender identity, but they approach the topic very differently. While Sullivan focuses on biological predisposition, Latifah focuses on the power to change thoughts and actions.

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### Writing about Culture

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