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STUDIES

**21ST CENTURY B.I.T.C.H. FRAMEWORKS:  
HIP HOP FEMINISM COMES OF AGE**



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## Foreword

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*Travis Harris*

**Content warning:** The first part of this Foreword mentions facts, but not details, about the murders of three Black people: Toyin Salau, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade.

“Toyin Salau was found dead,” Shanté Paradigm Smalls, Managing Editor of the *Journal of Hip Hop Studies*, told me on the morning of June 15, 2020, during one of our senior editorial meetings. When they first shared the news with me, I felt a plethora of emotions. Disbelief. Shock. Uncertainty. I desired to learn more details about the story and figure out why Oluwatoyin “Toyin” Salau, a 19-year-old young Black woman, was murdered. She went missing after protesting the police killing of Tony McDade, a trans man killed in Tallahassee, Florida on May 27, 2020. Further complicating this grief is the fact that Toyin was murdered, tortured, and assaulted by a Black man. Instead of supporting, following, and protecting Black women, Aaron Glee is charged with allegedly taking her life, after holding her captive and torturing her for days.

In addition to Toyin’s sexual assault and murder shaking me to the core, it compounded the shock about the killing of Breonna Taylor on March 13, which I first found out about in May. If I, a Black man, feel this way after these deaths, I can only imagine the depths of grief, rage, and confusion Black women, girls, and femmes feel and experience. It is within this context that the *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* is releasing this special issue on Hip Hop feminism entitled: “Twenty-First Century B.I.T.C.H. Frameworks: Hip Hop Feminism Comes of Age.” I am grateful this is the first 2020 issue *JHHS* is publishing.

In 2018, Halliday and Payne charted the plans for this special issue on Hip Hop feminism while interrogating the new direction and theories of Hip Hop feminism. While this scholarship has been growing, they recognized a specific need to further and deepen the conversations engaging Hip Hop feminism. There is a misconception by those who do not know the specific historiography of Hip Hop feminism that “Hip Hop feminism” is simply a mixture of feminism and Hip Hop, “Twenty-First Century B.I.T.C.H. Frameworks” nuances this definition, charts the course of the specific field of Hip Hop feminism, and provides a marking point for continuing this conversation. This special issue highlights the importance of all Black women and girls. Breonna and Toyin are well known because they are high-profile murder victims, but they are only the systemic tip of the iceberg of the many ways in which all Black women are dispossessed in this country and around the world. From sexual assault to being one of the highest-risk groups for pregnancy-related deaths to wage suppression and theft, Black women’s health, well-being, and lives are under attack from seemingly every side.

This special issue highlights the particular oppressions Black women who are Hip Hop feminists face and the ways in which they thrive. US society marginalizes Black women from the hood, who are not seen as respectable, who do not fit traditional gender norms, and who freely express their full identity. “Twenty-First Century B.I.T.C.H. Frameworks” not only celebrates Black women Hip Hop feminists but contends that the theoretical and methodological contributions shaped by them are used as a framework and epistemology in - and outside of the academy.

Aria S. Halliday and Ashley N. Payne lay out the framework of “Twenty-First Century B.I.T.C.H. Frameworks” in their introduction, “Savage and Savvy: Mapping Contemporary Hip Hop Feminism.” Additionally, M. Nicole Horsley contributes a “Hip Hop Feminism Starter Kit” that can be used in community centers or elsewhere by young Black girls, in high schools, or on college campuses. The mission of *JHHS* is to provide resources for Hip Hop and Black people to get free. While we #sayhername and proclaim justice for Black women, “Twenty-First Century B.I.T.C.H. Frameworks” reminds us that all Black women matter, from classy to bougie to ratchet to queer.

## Acknowledgements

*From Co-editors Aria S. Halliday and Ashley N. Payne*

Stating names or recounting how you were murdered by men and circumstances that didn't acknowledge your love and pain, your passion, labor, and hurdles, your joy and sorrow, your great depths and complexity feels cheap in this moment. But, here, we acknowledge and celebrate the Black women and girls who continue to show up for us, those we love through familial and social bonds and those we do not know the names of, that have made us who we are. We call to those on this side of humanity and beyond, by name and by spirit. Thank you for making space for us, while trying to make space for you. To quote the intro of India Arie's *Acoustic Soul* (2001): to “all that came before, you opened up a door. Because of you, change gon come.”

*From EIC*

The publication of any special issue requires numerous contributions. I first would like to thank and acknowledge the work of the co-editors Ashley Payne and Aria Halliday. They did the thing. Without their scholarship, hard work and dedication, this special issue would not have even been possible. I recognize the inability to name everyone but thank you to the team of reviewers who reviewed essays and provided excellent feedback. Shout out to *JHHS'* Managing Editor, Shanté Paradigm Smalls. Their expertise, scholarly wisdom, and diligence greatly contributed to the publication of this special issue. Thank you to *JHHS'* lead copy editor Sabine Kim. Their attention to detail is paramount to putting this special issue out. Thank you to those who assisted with copy editing, Alexander Edelstein and Patrice Miles. Everyone who contributed worked solely

for the love of Hip Hop and good scholarship. I also would like to shout out all the authors who contributed to this special issue Camea Davis, M. Nicole Horsley, Diana Khong, Kyra March, Corey Miles and Isis Kenney.



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## Introduction: Savage and Savvy: Mapping Contemporary Hip Hop Feminism

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Aria S. Halliday and Ashley N. Payne

### Introduction: This is For My Ratchet Bitches

This special issue is dedicated to the bad bitches. The ratchet women. The classy women. The hood feminists. The “feminism isn’t for everybody” feminists. Those women, femmes, and girls who continuously (re)present and (re)construct Black girl/womanhood. The creatives, the innovators, the women that are “often imitated, but never duplicated.” This issue is dedicated to you and the ways in which you challenge us to (re)define what it means to be Black girls/women in this world and what it means to reclaim power over your own representation and images. This issue is for you, defined by you, and inspired by you.

### The Hip Hop Feminist Journey

Fashioned from the work, tenacity, creativity, and strength of women in Hip Hop and the generation of women born from Hip Hop, Hip Hop feminism celebrates women’s love for the culture and their battle for identity, representation, and respect. While women have been continuously breaking barriers in Hip Hop since its inception in the 1970s, scholarship at the nexus of Hip Hop and feminism can be traced back to Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise* (1994) and Joan Morgan’s *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (1999), who both note the contradictory and complicated space Black women occupy within 1990’s Hip Hop culture.<sup>1</sup> While some scholars may differentiate between scholarship that studies Hip Hop through a feminist lens and Hip Hop feminism scholarship, we contend that both authors represent the foundations of what we call today, Hip Hop feminism. Both authors remarked on the influence of Black feminist foremothers on the changes in women’s relationships with themselves and the ever-changing culture, while pushing for the need to craft a feminism that represents the women of the Hip Hop generation. Rose began her examination of feminism in Hip Hop with a discussion of Black women rappers’ themes of sexual politics, racism, and sexism. Rose argues that Black women rappers revolutionized Black women’s representation by challenging white hegemonic and male-centered dominance in Hip Hop culture,

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as A Hip Hop Feminist* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999). Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).



Western beauty aesthetics, sexual objectification, and cultural invisibility. Through a visual and lyrical analysis of MC Lyte and Salt-N-Pepa music videos, Rose ultimately finds that “the presence of black female rappers and the urban, working-class, black hairstyles, clothes, expressions, and subject matter of their rhymes provide young black women with a small culturally reflective public space.”<sup>2</sup> Joan Morgan, often credited with the birth of Hip Hop feminism, discussed a more personal journey with Hip Hop and feminism. By chronicling the relationship between her feminist consciousness and Hip Hop, Morgan encouraged Black women like her to push beyond the feminism of their mothers and embrace the complexity of life and love in Hip Hop; for Morgan, her oft-cited phrase “fucking with the greys” challenged any continued identification with or usage of respectability politics that derided pleasure and sexual agency for Black women.<sup>3</sup> It also positioned feminism as a balm for the fissures occurring between Black men and women as a result of the growing misogyny in Hip Hop. As ideological foremothers to Hip Hop feminism and the privileging of the experiences of Black girls, women, and femmes in the hood, Tricia Rose and Joan Morgan’s words laid the fertile ground on which the field of Hip Hop feminism, as well as this special issue, have emerged.

In true *fucking with the greys* fashion, Cheryl Keyes fleshed out the core ideas and tenets of Hip Hop feminism.<sup>4</sup> Keyes centered female voices in Hip Hop music to identify and theorize the ways Black female rappers (and, in turn, listeners) maneuver through identity construction. Known for the four distinct Black female identities within Hip Hop, Keyes helped us cherish the fluidity of identity for Black women as the “Queen Mother,” the “Fly Girl,” the “Sista with Attitude,” and the “Lesbian,” celebrating how “Black female rappers can, however, shift between these categories or belong to more than one simultaneously.”<sup>5</sup>

Building from the foundational works of Rose and Morgan, Kyra Gaunt and Gwendolyn Pough denote the role of rhetorical practices and expressive culture in Black women’s resistance to dominant masculine discourses.<sup>6</sup> Gaunt discusses the expressive and musical phenomenon present within Black girls’ games and how their kinetic orality can inform Black women’s participation in Hip Hop culture. Gaunt argues, “Black girls’ musical games promote the skillful development of musical authority that reflects blackness, gender, individual expressive ability, and the very musical styles and approaches that later contribute to adult African American musical activity.”<sup>7</sup> Many of

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<sup>2</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 182.

<sup>3</sup> Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come to Roost*, 59.

<sup>4</sup> Cheryl L. Keyes, “Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performance,” *Journal of American Folklore* 449, no. 113 (2000): 255-269.

<sup>5</sup> Keyes, “Empowering Self,” 266.

<sup>6</sup> Kyra D. Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: NYU Press, 2006); Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Lebanon, NH: Northeastern University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play*, 251.

the popular Black male artists and musical traditions bearing financial success, Gaunt contends, are rooted in the singsong games of Black girls on the playground. Pough likewise encouraged us to understand Black women's struggle for representation in the public sphere by using Hip Hop as a counterspace. Pough discusses bringing wreck as "a rhetorical act that has close ties to various other speech acts that are often linked to Black womanhood: talking back, going off, turning it out, having a niggerbitchfit, or being a diva."<sup>8</sup> Pough connects *bringing wreck* to how Black women participants in Hip Hop have used these skills to *bring wreck* to stereotypes and marginalization that impact how they navigate and control their own identities and representations in both the public and Hip Hop spheres.

As Hip Hop continued to make waves in academic scholarship, Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, Gwendolyn Pough et. al, and Janell Hobson and R. Dianne Bartlow anthologized critical conversations surrounding Hip Hop feminism.<sup>9</sup> In *That's That Joint! The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, Forman and Neal devote a section titled "I'll Be Nina Simone Defecating on Your Microphone" to the works of notable Hip Hop feminists Rose, Morgan, Keyes, and Gaunt. Gwendolyn Pough, Elaine Richardson, Aisha Durham, and Rachel Raimist's *Home Girls Make Some Noise*, published in 2007, substantiates Hip Hop feminism in the academy and expands the Hip Hop feminism discussion to the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality in Hip Hop culture. In her essay, "More than Baby Mamas: Black Mothers and Hip-Hop Feminism," Marlo David notes that "hip-hop feminist critique makes space for the gray areas, the ironies, and contradictions that are part of hip-hop and life, but it should also provide a way out of the mire of postmodern detachment to invite women and men to get down to the business of bringing wreck against the social forces that control their lives."<sup>10</sup> In 2008, Janell Hobson and R. Dianne Bartlow created a special issue in *Meridians* dedicated to women, Hip Hop and popular culture. The special issue "address[ed] the debates and intergenerational tensions regarding the liberatory potential of hip-hop, the global significance and transnational expression of popular music, and the implications of hip-hop as both a hegemonic (successful corporate commodity) and counter-hegemonic ('street' subculture) phenomenon."<sup>11</sup> Within this special issue, Whitney Peoples traces the development of Hip Hop feminism in academia and the theoretical relationship Hip Hop feminism has with second-wave Black feminism. For Peoples, "hip-hop emerges as

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<sup>8</sup> Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Lebanon: Northeastern University Press 2004). 78

<sup>9</sup> Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, *That's the Joint!* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge. 2012); Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, 2004; Gwendolyn D. Pough, Elaine Richardson, Aisha Durham, and Rachel Raimist, *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology* (Mira Loma: Parker Publishing, 2007). Janell Hobson, and R. Dianne Bartlow, "Introduction: Representin': Women, Hip-Hop, and Popular Music," *Women, Hip-Hop, and Popular Music* 8, no. 1 (2008): 1-14.

<sup>10</sup> Marlo David, "More than Baby Mamas: Black Mothers and Hip-Hop Feminism," In *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology* eds. Gwendolyn Pough, Elaine Richardson, Aisha Durham, and Rachel Raimist, (Mira Loma: Parker Publishing, 2007). 352.

<sup>11</sup> Janell Hobson and R. Dianne Bartlow, "Introduction," 1.

. . . ‘the generational and culturally relevant vehicle’ through which hip-hop feminists can spread their message of critical analysis and empowerment.”<sup>12</sup> She notes that “hip-hop feminism argues for the right to self-define feminist identities and praxis, yet the right to self-define, without a larger systemic strategy, can become an isolated and individual solution.”<sup>13</sup>

In 2010, and later in *The Crunk Feminist Collection* in 2015, the Crunk Feminist Collective (co-founded by Brittney Cooper and Susana Morris) released their Hip Hop feminist manifesto, which situates Hip Hop feminism as a “next generation feminism,” that “ain’t ya mama’s feminism.” They proclaim for themselves and for us: “We love ourselves even when we get no love. We recognize that we are our own best thing, our own best argument, and patriarchy’s worst nightmare.”<sup>14</sup> This remix of Hip Hop feminism ushered in new scholarship related to the new generation’s feminist struggles through black girlhood studies, politics, sexual identity, respectability politics, and ratchet feminisms. In addition to the Crunk Feminist Collective’s work, Aisha Durham, Brittney Cooper, and Susana Morris surveyed the field of Hip Hop feminism from Morgan’s foundational work to the new ideologies curated by the next generation of Hip Hop feminists.<sup>15</sup> These scholars proclaimed Hip Hop feminism as a theoretical framework for those in the Hip Hop generation (those coming of age in the 1990s) to engage Black women in the contradictory spaces that encompass our lives; they constructed “hip-hop feminism as an umbrella term to encompass creative, intellectual work regarding girls and women in hip-hop culture and/or as part of the hip-hop generation.”<sup>16</sup> According to Durham, Cooper, and Morris, the future of Hip Hop feminism is based in exploring the connections between Hip Hop and traditional feminist epistemologies. Their Hip Hop feminism uses Hip Hop to understand and critique Black sexual politics, connecting Hip Hop feminism and second wave Black feminism more closely. Further, it expands the knowledge of new media and how Hip Hop feminists use it, reframes “urban fiction” within a Hip Hop feminist generation framework, connecting it to the blues and Afrofuturist literature, music, and art.

Hip Hop scholarship has continued to be discussed in various avenues and disciplines, spanning from discussions in music, culture, sociology, philosophy, and gender studies. In the mid-2000s, education scholarship discovered the educational possibilities of Hip Hop in K-12 teaching. While Hip Hop was being discussed as a global phenomenon aimed at providing culturally relevant pedagogy, Elaine Richardson, Ruth

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<sup>12</sup> Whitney A. Peoples, “‘Under Construction’: Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges between Black Second-Wave and Hip-Hop Feminisms,” *Meridians* 8, no. 1 (2008): 25.

<sup>13</sup> Peoples, “Under Construction,” 41.

<sup>14</sup> Morris, Susana M. “Hip Hop Generation Feminism: A Manifesto” *The Crunk Feminist Collection* (blog). March 1, 2010. <https://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2010/03/01/hip-hop-generation-feminism-a-manifesto/>

<sup>15</sup> Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris. “The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 3 (2013): 721-737.

<sup>16</sup> Cooper, Durham, and Morris 2013, 721

Nicole Brown, Bettina Love, and Treva Lindsey were pushing Hip Hop-based educational boundaries with the creation of Hip Hop feminist pedagogies and literacies.<sup>17</sup> They center the experiences of Black girls in education and push for pedagogies and literacies that (re)create and (re)define Black girlhood in education. In *Saving Our Lives, Hearing Our Truths* and *Black Girlhood Celebration*, Ruth Nicole Brown defines Hip Hop feminist pedagogy as “the practice of engaging young people using elements of Hip-hop culture and feminist methodology for the purpose of transforming oppressive institutions, policies, relationships, and beliefs.”<sup>18</sup> Ruth Nicole Brown’s Hip Hop feminist space *SOLHOT* acts as a transformative space where Black girls celebrate the spaces from which they emerged, who they are, and the ever-changing nature of who they will become. Bettina Love, in *Hip Hop Lil’ Sistas Speak*, chronicles Hip Hop’s influence on southern Black girls’ racial and gendered identity construction, as well as their lived experiences. Additionally, Bettina Love encourages researchers to navigate their own positionalities in relation to the Black girls they research, thereby shifting power dynamics and centering Black girls’ knowledge of their lives. Adding to Ruth Nicole Brown and Bettina Love, Treva Lindsey argues that Hip Hop feminism marks a feminist discourse that both embraces the lived experiences of Black women and girls while also not shying away from the politics of “desire, pleasure, and play” that structure those experiences. Through Hip Hop feminism, Lindsey reminds us that “inclusivity should be at the core of hip-hop-based education.”<sup>19</sup>

While current Hip Hop feminist conversations have been centered around the educational experiences of Black girls, current literature in Black girl/womanhood identity development is shifting the ways we consider Black feminist ideologies of respectability and reshape feminisms to be inclusive of ratchet and hood voices, as well as sexual liberation and freedom. L.H. Stallings, Therí Pickens, Nikki Lane, Robin Boylorn, Brittney Cooper, and Bettina Love all note the evolution of ratchet feminisms as Hip Hop feminist spaces of performativity and creativity, whilst dismantling heteropatriarchal standards of respectability. Brittney Cooper and Robin Boylorn each discuss the politics of ratchet respectability as a critique of how society has defined respectability for Black women and call for us to embrace ratchetness.<sup>20</sup> Brittney Cooper

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<sup>17</sup> Elaine Richardson, “Developing Critical Hip Hop Feminist Literacies: Centrality and Subversion of Sexuality in the Lives of Black Girls,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 46, no 3 (2013): 327-341; Ruth Nicole Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2009); Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Treva B. Lindsey, “Let Me Blow Your Mind: Hip Hop Feminist Futures in Theory and Praxis,” *Urban Education* 50, no. 1 (2015): 52-77; Bettina Love, *Hip Hop’s Li’l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Lindsey, “Let Me Blow Your Mind,” 74.

<sup>20</sup> Robin M. Boylorn, “Love, Hip Hop, and Ratchet Respectability (Something Like A Review).” *The Crunk Feminist Collection* (blog), September 10, 2015. <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2015/09/10/love-hip-hop-and-ratchet-respectability-something-like-a-review/>; Brittney Cooper, “UnClutching My Mother’s Pearls, or Ratchetness and the Residue of Respectability,” *The Crunk Feminist Collection* (blog), December 31, 2012.

notes that the “embrace of ratchetness is simultaneously a dismissal of respectability, a kind of intuitive understanding of all the ways that respectability as a political project has failed Black women and continues to disallow the access that we have been taught to think it will give.”<sup>21</sup> L.H. Stallings and Bettina Love discuss the performative possibilities of what Stallings called “the ratchet imaginary” and how it serves as a place for identity construction and critique.<sup>22</sup> Therí Pickens adds that the ratchet imaginary “articulates a desire for individuality regardless of the ideas and wants of a putative collective.”<sup>23</sup> Further, conversations surrounding ratchet respectability and black girlhood have also noted the complicated and messy nature of Black girlhood and sexuality. Our very own co-editor, Aria Halliday, notes that black girls are “believed to be sexually promiscuous or desirous of sexual relationships because of how their bodies have developed, Black girls are taught to be ashamed of their bodies and sexual potential.”<sup>24</sup> Hip Hop feminism rests at the center of this discussion as conversations surrounding sexual pleasure and identity are constructed and negotiated with(in) Hip Hop culture.

Within this past and present history, then, the articles in this special issue take seriously the rhymes, aesthetics, attitudes, and cultural knowledge of Black women, girls, and femmes. Framing Black women’s relationship to discourses of embodiment, respectability, sex and sexuality, democracy, capitalism, and contemporary movements, the authors in this issue argue collectively for liberation through the enacting of Hip Hop feminism as a framework and epistemology.

### Here and Now: Join the Cypher

We open this special issue with an open letter to City Girls. As a celebration of twerking and the sexual liberation Black women have been experiencing recently due to Black women rappers like City Girls, Megan thee Stallion, and Lizzo, Kyra March notes that the reclamation of the Black femme body is reliant on the discourse of sexual agency, autonomy, and power that City Girls flaunt effortlessly. March hails the pathways created for southern Black girls through their ability to reject respectability with these role models; she argues City Girls allows Black girls to now see “that conforming to society does not make you any more of a woman.”

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<sup>21</sup> Cooper, “Unclutching My Mother’s Pearls.”

<sup>22</sup> L.H. Stallings, “Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination,” *Palimpsest* 2, no 2 (2013): 135-139; Bettina Love, “A Ratchet Lens: Black Queer Youth, Agency, Hip Hop, and the Black Ratchet Imagination,” *Educational Researcher* 46, no. 9 (2017): 539-547.

<sup>23</sup> Theri Pickens, “Shoving Aside the Politics of Respectability: Black Women, Reality TV, and the Ratchet Performance,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 25, no. 1 (2015): 44.

<sup>24</sup> Aria S. Halliday, “Envisioning Black Girl Futures: Nicki Minaj’s Anaconda Feminism and New Understandings of Black Girl Sexuality in Popular Culture,” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 6, no. 3 (2017): 66.

Taking seriously the theorization of ratchet and hood feminisms as imaginative spaces for identity construction, Ashley Payne and Corey Miles consider the lessons Black girls, women, and femmes offer in educational and rural southern spaces. Payne argues that Black girls construct, celebrate, challenge, and critique Black girlhood and their own identities through negotiations of classy-ratchet dichotomies. Miles, similarly, centers Black women rappers in rural North Carolina and how they “situate their selves as historical and modern actors within the Hip Hop tradition and American society” through gendered performances of trap performativity. Together they push forward the contemporary discourses around ratchet and hood feminisms to embrace Black girls and Black women in the most rural Black communities.

Furthering previous scholarship on Black women rappers, art, and creativity, Camea Davis and Isis Kenney, and Diana Khong challenge readers to conceptualize how contemporary Black women rappers have renegotiated Black women’s role in feminist discourses of citizenship, power, privilege, and democracy in the U.S. As an artist collective, Davis and Kenney use poetry, fine art, and home decor to argue for the use of creativity in Hip Hop feminism as a way of changing how democracy is felt in the everyday. With the proliferation of global Hip Hop culture alongside the continued murder and assault of Black people in the United States., they encourage us all to take up art as freedom-making, the necessary act to accomplish “radical justice.” Diana Khong highlights Cardi B’s and City Girls’ “aesthetics of scamming” as a means of refashioning Black women’s access to power and privilege by claiming money and other material objects for themselves and their communities. This new distribution of wealth has the potential for a kind of justice that communities of color can find liberating, challenging hegemonic discourses of capitalism and ownership. Collectively, Davis and Kenney, and Khong, hasten the necessity of Black girls’, women’s, and femmes’ creativity in music and other artforms to liberate us and our communities now!

With the emergence of Hip Hop feminism and the countless scholars who have carried the mantel of Hip Hop feminism beyond Rose’s *Black Noise* and Morgan’s *Chickenheads*, we see Black women rappers at the nexus of feminism, Hip Hop, and Black femme sexual freedom. As arbiters of the possibilities and potentialities of Black femme futures, Black women rappers present musical soundtracks to the struggle, pain, love, and joy of Black womanhood and girlhood.

In this special issue, then, we pushed ourselves and our authors to think more concretely about the experience of Black girls, women, and femmes in an environment full of hope and despair. What lessons can be recovered from the advent of mainstream Black women rappers in the 1990s and 2000s? What experiences and knowledges exist from the rise of Black women rappers (femme, masc, and nonbinary) in the present moment? What futures of Hip Hop feminism can we see from both our academic and lived experiences? How can we combine our analytical frameworks with our love for Hip Hop and blackness to locate liberatory potential? The essays in this special issue

highlight our ever-developing answers to these questions and the multiplicitous ways you, dear reader, will be encouraged to answer them, too. PERIODT POOH!

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## Letter to Jatavia Johnson and Caresha Brownlee (The City Girls)

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*Kyra March*

### **Abstract**

This letter to Jatavia Johnson and Caresha Brownlee (the City Girls) argues that the rap duo's brand, music, and videos are prime examples of Hip Hop and percussive feminism. It also explains how their contributions to the rap industry as Black womxn have inspired other Black womxn to embrace their sexuality, live freely, and disregard politics of respectability. Personal experiences from the author are incorporated to display how the City Girls are empowering and inspiring a new generation of Black womxn and girls. Additionally, critiques from the media and double standards between white and Black womxn in the entertainment industry are also confronted.

Dear JT & Yung Miami (City Girls),

All of my life, I have been taught to be a respectable (or at least what society deems respectable) young Black womxn. Whether it was being instilled in me from Bible study leaders who exclaimed that twerking and glorifying God could not coexist or obliquely from my grandmother, who, watching Nicki Minaj performing at the BET Awards, shook her head with disdain, being respectable was something that was viewed as a necessity. I guess you can say that it's the Black Southern way. Black mothers, grandmothers, and aunts made sure that the young girls in their families governed themselves accordingly by prioritizing manners, proper attire, particular etiquette, and much more. From my childhood filled with slips, frilly socks, and "Yes, ma'am's" and "No, sir's" to my young adult days hearing other girls being labeled as "fast" for showing too much skin or twerking in the middle of the circles at parties, respectability was all that I knew.

In my eyes, the ultimate goal was to always be seen as a lady. It was my obligation to do the "right thing" and be respectable so that other young womxn could do the same. I had to consider how my family and every Black girl in Darlington, South Carolina would be perceived as a result of everything that I did. Any mistake that I made would be attributed to all Black girls, even though white girls never had to worry about their actions being analyzed in this manner. For me, being respectable was the only solution. As I matured and began to form my own opinions on respect and sexuality, I noticed that I was perpetuating the idea that Black womxn can't and shouldn't be sexual. This idea is a consequence of respectability politics.

Like the essay, "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built," says, "Black and brown bodies have been historically configured as excessive, with unrestrained desires ... [representing] women of color either as ladies and queens or as bitches and whores."<sup>1</sup>

To counter these stereotypes, politics of respectability have been stressed in marginalized communities. Under this ideology, I believed that I had to deny myself pleasure, excitement, authority, and, ultimately, *freedom* if I wanted to be seen as a queen; if the next womxn didn't do the same, she was in the category of the whores. By doing this, I was harming myself and abetting a set of politics that aimed to restrain Black womxn and treat womxn who ignore these politics negatively.

If she's twerking, wears a bonnet to the grocery store, or shows any kind of sensuality outside of the four walls of her home, she's on the side of the ghetto womxn and whores that Durham, Cooper, and Morris mention; however, if she's meek, quiet, classy, submissive, and wears her pearls, she's a queen. These assumptions are incredibly restrictive, but many of us were yielding to these ideas and rules because of respectability

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<sup>1</sup> Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris, "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay," *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 721-737, <http://doi.org/10.1086/668843>.

politics being taught to us all our lives. It wasn't until the end of my high school career that I realized that it's ok to shake your ass, demand pleasure, be sexual, and say what you want; the City Girls' music and videos are what helped me realize that. Whether you're aware of it or not, you two amazing womxn are percussion and Hip Hop feminists at their finest, who promote sexual positivity and destroy double standards. The City Girls are reversing the damage from respectability politics that has indoctrinated the hearts and minds of Black womxn from the 305 to the 843, including mine. This letter is my "thank you" to the both of you.

Percussive feminism is noted as "a term drawn from the definition of percussion, which is 'the striking of one body with or against another with some degree of force, so as to give a shock; impact; a stroke, blow, [or] knock.'"<sup>2</sup> In other words, it's loud as fuck. It's dynamic. It's bold and goes against all tradition. It's exactly what the City Girls do on a daily basis against the long-standing culture of respectability politics. We saw this kind of feminism in Hip Hop when Lil' Kim began "Big Momma Thang" by saying, "I used to be scared of the dick. Now I throw lips to the shit, handle it like a real bitch."<sup>3</sup> It was even portrayed by Da Baddest Bitch, Trina, who exclaimed, "You don't know nann ho that done tried all types of shit, who quick to deep throat the dick, and let another bitch straight lick the clit."<sup>4</sup> This branch of Hip Hop feminism has been practiced and has promoted sexual freedom for a long period of time. It has been bold and unapologetic, clashing with the ideas of other feminists in society; however, after the steady reigns of artists like Lil' Kim, Trina, and Khia, there was a slight lack in Black womxn artists who promoted this kind of agency.

In addition to this mainstream decline, people viewed and still see artists who attempt to mimic Trina and others through an extremely critical lens. Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris make an incredibly powerful statement in their essay saying, "the persistence of respectability politics often impedes hip-hop feminism's attempts to formulate an unapologetic pro-sex stance among Black and Latina women."<sup>5</sup> This is perpetually seen today. Black womxn are ridiculed for showing a sliver of sexuality in music, television, or anywhere we go, which is probably why less womxn try to do so. It's the end of the world for Beyoncé to show some skin, be inches away from her husband of twelve years, and dance in a chair at the Grammys; however, Britney Spears can wear beaded lingerie, be caressed by random stage dancers, and display a failed attempt to grind on an enormous guitar at the Billboard Music Awards with no problem. Oh, and let us not allow Nicki Minaj to twerk in "Anaconda" and "Good Form" or Cardi B to stick her tongue out and dance because it's too much for the children at

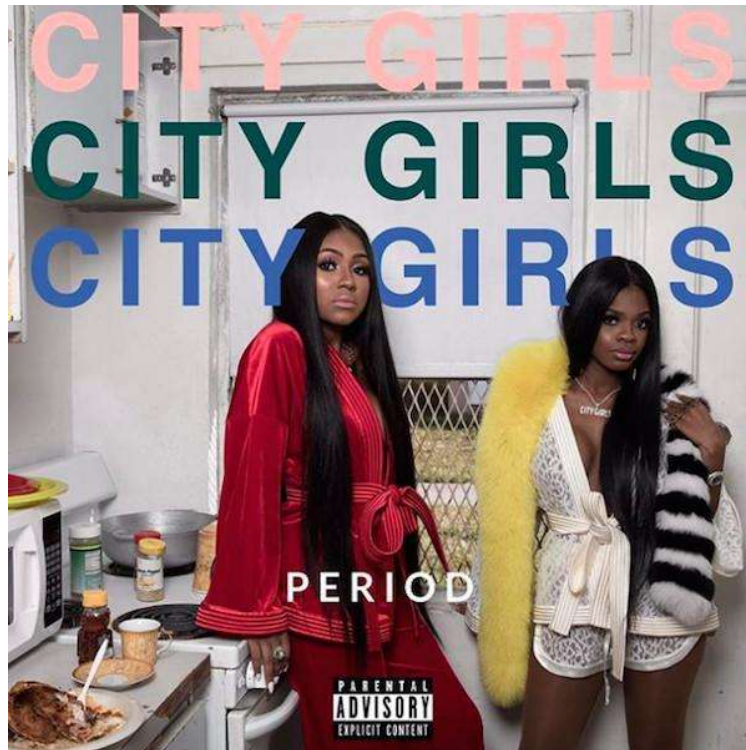
<sup>2</sup> Durham, Cooper, and Morris, "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built," 723-724.

<sup>3</sup> Lil' Kim, Jay Z, and Lil' Cease, "Big Momma Thang," recorded by Lil' Kim, Jay Z, and Lil' Cease, song credits Stretch Armstrong, Lil' Kim, JAY-Z, Harvey Fuqua, Lil' Cease, and Sylvester, on *Hard Core* (CD, New York: The Hit Factory, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Trick Daddy and Trina [M. Young, and K. Taylor], "Nann Nigga," recorded by Trick Daddy and Trina, on *www.thug.com* (CD, Miami, Florida: Slip-n-Slide Records, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Durham, Cooper, and Morris, "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built," 724.

home. On the other hand, Taylor Swift and Friends can *try* to shake their asses in “Shake It Off” and be seen as merely having a good time. These instances that display the policing of Black womxn’s lives and bodies make your music and lifestyles so important today. You’re both continuing a legacy of percussive feminism that refuses to be censored or silenced, despite double standards and criticism. It’s refreshing to see and hear the two of you live and *speak* your truths.



**Figure 1.** Album cover for *Period* by the City Girls. Esdras. T. Thelusma, cover art for *Period* (City Girls, Liberty City, Florida, 2018).

When I’m rapping along to “Sweet Tooth” off of your first album, *Period*, yelling, “I need a real nigga with his dick long. Come and give a City Girl something to sit on” or to “Take Yo Man” when JT says, “Touch me, taste me, fuck me, squeeze me. Once he do that, he’ll never leave me,” I’m throwing respectability politics out of the window.<sup>6</sup> Your lyrics aren’t focused on being ladies or catering to your men, even though “Cater 2 U” is a bop in its own right. You’re taking control. You’re expressing sexual agency and demanding that you “need a nigga who gon’ swipe them visas.”<sup>7</sup> The same percussive feminism is shown in your recent album, *Girl Code*. You make it clear that you’re too bad

<sup>6</sup> City Girls, “Sweet Tooth,” recorded by City Girls, song credits Kiddo Marv, Cyko, Ijah Cheatham-Stoute, Esdras T. Thelusma, and JT [Jatavia Johnson], on *Period* (Atlanta, GA: Quality Control Music, 2018); City Girls, “Take Yo Man,” recorded by City Girls, song credits Herby “Luvbug” Azor, Bootsy Collins, George Bernard Worrell, Jr., George Clinton, Steven Kubie, Cainon Lamb, Derrick L. Baker, JT [Jatavia Johnson] and Yung Miami [Caresha Brownlee], on *Period* (Atlanta, GA: Quality Control Music, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> City Girls, “Where the Bag At,” recorded by City Girls, song credits Greezy Cox, Kinta Bell, Yung Miami [Caresha Brownlee], and JT [Jatavia Johnson], on *Period* (Atlanta, GA: Quality Control Music, 2018).

for broke niggas. You're not afraid to shout, "Boy, I am not your bitch, so what the fuck is you sayin'?"<sup>8</sup> Even though it shocks many male and non-Black audiences, that's the point of percussive feminism.

Your lyrics clearly disrupt and clash with the way society expects womxn to behave, and you're doing it while going platinum. You even challenge respectability politics and display percussive feminism in your music videos. This reached an all-time high with the video for "Twerk" featuring Cardi B in 2019. Quoting newscasters who, like many people, referred to twerking as "sexual and inappropriate," the "Twerk" video was a masterpiece to many and an atrocity to those whose minds are cemented in the past.<sup>9</sup> On January 21st, at 12:52 PM to be exact, journalist and political commentator Stephanie Hamill took to Twitter to voice her opinion of the City Girls' video. She was an example of someone who viewed the video as the latter. Hamill tweeted, "In the Era of #meToo how exactly does this empower women? Leftists, @iamcardib, feel free to chime in. THX."<sup>10</sup> Unlike Hamill, many women stared in awe at Yung Miami, Cardi B, and other Black womxn simply because they were able to be free, dance, and simply have fun with no men around. Everyone had on thong bikinis, and Yung Miami and Cardi B wore adorned thongs and animal-print body paint. There were womxn left and right twerking in splits, handstands, and on stripper poles. The entire premise of the video was to show that Black womxn don't have to fit into respectable boxes anymore. We don't have to police our bodies and ourselves, when, in reality, people are going to critique us regardless. It's one thing to hear the City Girls, but watching "Twerk" was a bold, powerful reminder that Black womxn can *enjoy* ourselves and ignore what the world has to say about it. Hamill and the masses may critique it and disagree, but this disapproval may just indicate that something is being done correctly.

This generation of Black womxn are tired. We're exhausted by many things that have been constructed to detain, devalue, and, ultimately, destroy our self-image and self-worth. This includes politics of respectability, even though these rules were created to do the opposite. Being seen as a queen versus a whore doesn't matter to us anymore because the opinions of white people, Black men, and even other womxn no longer phase us. We've arrived at a moment in time where being able to be ourselves and live our lives the way that *WE* choose is a priority. Seeing womxn like Megan Thee Stallion, Cardi B, Lizzo, Nicki Minaj, and, of course, the City Girls, revive percussive feminism and flaunt

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<sup>8</sup> City Girls, "Broke Boy," recorded by City Girls, song credits Kiddo Marv, Diego Iborra, Esdras T. Thelusma, Yung Miami [Caresha Brownlee] and JT [Jatavia Johnson], on *GIRLCODE* (album, Atlanta, GA: Quality Control Music, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> City Girls, *City Girls – Twerk*, ft. Cardi B (Official Music Video), *YouTube*, January 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QryoOF5jEbc>.

<sup>10</sup> Stephanie Hamill [STEPHMHAMILL], tweet, January 21, 2019, In the Era of #meToo how exactly does this empower women? Leftists, @iamcardib, feel free to chime in. THX. [https://twitter.com/STEPHMHAMILL/status/1087407624826601472?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1087736074577670145&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fhiphopdx.com%2Feditorials%2Fid.4222%2Ftitle.tweets-is-watching-wale-defends-cardi-b-city-girls-twerk-video](https://twitter.com/STEPHMHAMILL/status/1087407624826601472?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1087736074577670145&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fhiphopdx.com%2Feditorials%2Fid.4222%2Ftitle.tweets-is-watching-wale-defends-cardi-b-city-girls-twerk-video).

their sexual agency, positivity, and freedom provides other young womxn and I with the courage to do the same.

The little girl who grew up in rural South Carolina can now twerk until her knees get weak unprompted. While she still says her “Yes, ma’am’s” and “No, sir’s” for the culture, she now sees that conforming to society does not make you any more of a womxn. In fact, she has neglected respectability in various ways and knows that no one can tell her what she can and cannot do with her body. You two are incredible examples of percussion and Hip Hop feminists who are paving the way for generations to come. I thank you both for allowing me to be able to soon liberate others because you two have liberated me. Periodt.

Love,

Kyra March



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## The Cardi B–Beyoncé Complex: Ratchet Respectability and Black Adolescent Girlhood

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Ashley N. Payne

### Abstract

The identity of Black girls is constantly subject to scrutiny in various spaces, particularly within Hip Hop and education. Previous scholarship has noted that, as Black girls are compelled to navigate the margins of respectability politics, the images and messages of Hip Hop culture have always created a complicated and complex space for Black girls' identity development. The purpose of this article is to explore how Black adolescent girls construct their identities, particularly as it relates to ratchet-respectability identity politics, a concept called the *Cardi B–Beyoncé complex*. In examining the Cardi B–Beyoncé complex, I look at the intersection of ratchetness and respectability in educational settings and the influence of Hip Hop artists and images on the construction of ratchet-respectability identities. Further, this theme informs the need for a transformative, ratchet educational space for Black girls where the multiplicity of the Black girlhood experience will be appreciated and not silenced.

*When I was 12 years old, Cash Money Records was taken over for the '99 and the 2000 and Gangsta Boo was asking where dem dollas at? At 12 years old, I was at a nexus of leaving my childhood self behind and discovering who I was and who I wanted to be. Hip Hop played a significant role in discovering my Black femininity; it dictated what I defined as Blackness, how I performed my femininity, and how I conceptualized sexuality. While the world told me who I was supposed to be, Hip Hop allowed me to be my free, unapologetic self; weaving through the complicated intersections of race, gender, region, and respectability politics to find myself and define myself. While the world told me to be a classy, silent Southern belle, Hip Hop allowed me to be unapologetically loud and ratchet, giving me space and voice to be loud and free to move/manipulate my body in ways that were not deemed respectable. While many believe that 12-year-olds are just children who do not know/understand the influence of media and cultural structures, at 12 years old, I was challenging and critiquing notions of Black femininity to curate an unapologetic femininity that I could call my own.*

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At 12 years old, youth are entering adolescence, a time developmental theorists discuss as a complicated time of puberty, cognitive dissonance, risk-taking, and identity development.<sup>1</sup> At 12 years old, youth are moving from their childhood perspective on the world to more complicated and complex perspectives, informed and (re)constructed by their social world. In particular, Black girls are encouraged to prepare for the role of Black women, who are expected to be “everything to everybody” and embody characteristics and expectations associated with Blackness and Black femininity while simultaneously abiding by dominant expectations of classiness, docility, and silence.

Current research has explored how Black culture, namely Hip Hop, has influenced the development of Black youth, but we often leave Black girls out of the conversation.<sup>2</sup> When discussing identity development as it relates to Black youth without paying attention to the specificity of gender identities, we ignore the complicatedness and multiplicity of Black girls’ experience.<sup>3</sup> This essay aims to address that gap and show that although Hip Hop has been a particularly contradictory space for Black girls, with displays of misogyny and hypermasculinity as well as empowerment, Black girls draw on the ratchet identities performed by Black female Hip Hop artists to create *home-places* free of the moral scrutiny of respectability politics.<sup>4</sup> This essay explores how after-school

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<sup>1</sup> Laura E. Levine and Joyce Munsch, *Child Development: An Active Learning Approach* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Los Angeles: Sage, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Greg Dimitriadis, *Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009); Bettina L. Love, *Hip Hop’s Li’l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Venus E. Evans-Winters and Jennifer Esposito, “Other People’s Daughters: Critical Race Feminism and Black Girls’ Education,” *Educational Foundations* 24 (2010): 11–24.

<sup>4</sup> I am drawing on bell hooks’ concept of “a homeplace” that, “however fragile and tenuous, had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one’s homeplace

programs for Black girls use Hip Hop as a cultural force that has played a huge role in making Black girlhood/womanhood visible and audible in mainstream society, allowing Black girls all over the world to hear and see various representations of Black girlhood and Black womanhood and allowing them the freedom and space to create their own identities.

Previous discussions surrounding Hip Hop feminism and the construction of girlhood have considered many aspects of Black girlhood identity development, including agency; the role of sexuality; how Hip Hop influences constructions of Blackness and gender; and the politics of Black girlhood. Scholars such as Brittney C. Cooper, Bettina L. Love, Ruth Nicole Brown, and Elaine Richardson (to name a few) have (re)constructed notions of Black and Hip Hop feminism to curate a Hip Hop feminism that is relevant to the millennial generation;<sup>5</sup> a generation that was born at the nexus of Hip Hop and the emergence of technology. These scholars have challenged and critiqued how Black girlhood is constructed within and through Hip Hop and have demonstrated the powerful force that Hip Hop continues to have on Black girlhood.

The bodies, identities, attitudes, thoughts, feelings, and emotions of Black girls are continuously policed within dominant and Black culture alike. By exploring identity development and education in relation to Black girlhood, Hip Hop feminists have transformed ideologies surrounding the representation of Black girlhood/womanhood in Hip Hop and the impact that these representations have on the sociocultural and sociopolitical climate around Black girls. As Black girls and Black women continue to push back against negative stereotypes and images within Hip Hop and reconstruct notions of Black womanhood, the next generation of Black women are battling new challenges and circumstances. Black women Hip Hop artists such as Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B are redefining Black womanhood through embracing being loud, ratchet, and unapologetically themselves, creating empowering images within Hip Hop culture, redefining sexuality on their terms, and signifyin' those performances on social media. The purpose of this essay is to discuss current conversations and tensions regarding respectability politics, Hip Hop, and Black adolescent girlhood, specifically as it relates to Black girls' personal and educational identities. This essay considers work from Hip Hop feminists and current women rappers in discussing how Black girls construct/celebrate/challenge/critique notions of class-y-ratchet Black girlhood and their own identities. Although my research focus in this essay is on Black girlhood, I

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was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist." bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 44.

<sup>5</sup> Brittney C. Cooper (blogging as "crunktastic"), "(Un)Clutching My Mother's Pearls, or Ratchetness and the Residue of Respectability," *The Crunk Feminist Collection* (blog), December 31, 2012; Bettina L. Love, *Hip Hop's Li'l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012); Ruth Nicole Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009); Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); and Elaine Richardson, "Developing Critical Hip Hop Feminist Literacies: Centrality and Subversion of Sexuality in the Lives of Black Girls," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 46, no. 3 (2013): 327-341, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2013.808095>.

discuss Black girlhood/womanhood as a single conceptual category because images of Black women influence Black girlhood and controlling images of “loud” Black girls and ratchet have an impact on both girls and women. In doing so, I am following scholars who emphasize the continuity of development from Black girlhood to Black womanhood.<sup>6</sup> The perspective of Ruth Nicole Brown, who speaks of the fluidity of their boundaries, is also relevant here: “I define Black girlhood as the representations, memories and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful. Black girlhood is not dependent, then, on age, physical maturity, or any essential category of identity.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Creating a Space for the Celebration of Black Girlhood: Revisiting Ruth Nicole Brown and Hip Hop Feminist Educational Spaces**

Ruth Nicole Brown has discussed the need for spaces that embrace Black girlhood in its many dimensions: the complicated, the ratchet, the strong, the carefree, and the classy.<sup>8</sup> Her transformative after-school space, *Saving Our Lives, Hearing Our Truths* (SOLHOT), combines the culture of Hip Hop with Black girlhood, and allows Black girls to just be within various spaces. Brown notes “SOLHOT is me being a bravebird en masse with other bag ladies and b-girls to make ourselves visible and heard, and to make our silence understood to each other and to the communities in which we live.”<sup>9</sup>

SOLHOT, though a celebratory space, also acts as a methodology of exploration of Black girlhood. Brown discusses SOLHOT as a framework to explore the “performative and creative methodology of a visionary Black-girlhood practice.”<sup>10</sup> SOLHOT allows Black girls space to effectively address how the creative practice of Black girlhood informs the knowledge production, media, and individual and collective artwork of young Black girls. Building from and within notable works by Hip Hop feminists, artists, and practitioners, Brown, along with the Black girls in SOLHOT, created a celebratory space that operates within the culture of Hip Hop. Research has shown that Hip Hop, Black, and Western culture has played a significant role in how we construct our racial, gender, and sexual identities. As Brown states, “[t]he girls with whom I work, the girl I used to be, and my daughter who I am raising cannot recall girlhood without Hip Hop.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gholnecsar E. Muhammad and Sherell A. McArthur, “‘Styled By Their Perceptions’: Black Adolescent Girls Interpret Reinterpretation of Black females in Popular Culture,” *Multicultural Perspectives* 17, no. 3 (2015): 133–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2015.1048340>.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration*, 1; see also 19.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration*; and Brown, *Hear Our Truths*.

<sup>9</sup> Detra Price-Dennis, Gholnecsar E. Muhammad, Erica Womack, Sherell A. McArthur, and Marcelle Haddix, “The Multiple Identities and Literacies of Black Girlhood: A Conversation about Creating Spaces for Black Girl Voices,” *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* 13, no. 3 (2017): 1.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, *Hear Our Truths*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, *Hear Our Truths*, 8.

Hip Hop has become a significant cultural influence in defining who we are and how we interpret the cultural messages that surround our experiences. As I recall my own experiences as a Black girl, I too cannot remember a girlhood without Hip Hop. Hip Hop dictated and still dictates every part of my identity, from my construction of Blackness to the complicatedness of Black girl/womanhood. Hip Hop was and continues to be a significant cultural vehicle for my development. In reflecting on the influence of Hip Hop and Brown's work, I wanted to create a similar space, a space that allowed Black girls to be who they are and celebrate themselves within the culture of Hip Hop. Further, I wanted to create a celebratory space that allowed Black girls to embrace their Southern identity and their contributions to Hip Hop. I wanted to create a space that challenged dominant ideologies of education, educational spaces, Blackness, and Black girlhood; a space that celebrated being Southern, being ratchet, being classy, and being Hip Hop. As a scholar, educator, and ratchet Black girl, I felt that Hip Hop theories and praxis left out the influence of Southern Hip Hop and the messiness of what it means to be Black, Southern, and woman/girl.<sup>12</sup>

To give back to my community and a culture that shaped me, I created a Hip Hop-based educational program called Grit, Grind, Rhythm & Rhyme, which aimed at connecting the elements of Hip Hop (dance, graffiti, and rap) to education through English/Language arts (E/LA). In collaboration with a local, predominately Black school, we invited Black youth to engage in this space, learning English/Language Arts concepts through a culture that has significantly shaped not only Black culture, but also the very community in which the program was taking place. The program was a community space, inviting Hip Hop graffiti, dance, and rap artists to work within this environment, while simultaneously crafting a mentoring space for local Black high school youth who volunteered to work. While the program was open to all, it became a haven for young Black girls, who were all 12 years old. While the number of girls in the program varied, six girls were there consistently. The girls used the space to be their ratchet selves: free from the outside world and politics of respectability. Loud in a setting that continuously wanted to silence them and able to move and feel the power of Hip Hop through their bodies, their language, their art, and their dance. The environment, thus, transformed itself into a celebratory space for Black girls as we worked within and through Hip Hop, challenging dominant ideologies and representations surrounding Blackness, girlhood/womanness, education, our community, and region. We worked through our conceptualizations of Blackness and femininity, curating and celebrating a ratchet Black girlhood that was *for* us and appreciated *by* us. While the space was a free space, we were not oblivious to the influences of the sociohistorical ideologies that continually police Black female bodies and that guide Black girl/womanhood; however, we were able to

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<sup>12</sup> Courtney Terry, Regina N. Bradley, and Stephanie Y. Evans, "More than Country Rap Tunes: Hip Hop's Impact on the Post-Civil Rights American South," *Phylon* 54, no. 2 (2017): 3-10, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90018658>.

create a celebratory, educational space that embraced our identities, including our ratchet Black girlhood.

Building from Brown's celebratory space and methodological framework, the Grit, Grind, Rhythm & Rhyme program was a space to explore the individual and collective knowledge production of Black adolescent girls as it relates to identity development, both individual and collective through our mutual exploration of Hip Hop culture and the systemic oppressions that continually shape our intersectional identity of Black girlhood.

### **The (Loud) Ratchet Black Girl: Tensions Surrounding Ratchetness in Hip Hop and Black Girlhood**

Loud. Angry. Attitudinal. Those words are often used to negatively describe the personas of Black girls within various spaces. Scholars such as Signithia Fordham, Patricia Hill Collins, and Monique W. Morris have all noted the stereotyping and silencing of loud Black girls in various spaces.<sup>13</sup> Morris notes the stigma of identity politics and the experiences of Black girls in the classroom as it relates to non-conformity of gender expectations.<sup>14</sup> Morris states that "Black girls are greatly affected by the stigma of having to participate in identity politics that marginalize them or place them into polarizing categories: they are either 'good' girls or 'ghetto' girls who behave in ways that exacerbate stereotypes about Black femininity, particularly those relating to socioeconomic status, crime, and punishment."<sup>15</sup> In essence, considering the policing of Black girls' behaviors and attitudes, Black girls are often placed in good-bad binaries; binaries that continue to guide their behavior as acceptable in some contexts and not acceptable in other contexts.

Signithia Fordham deconstructs the image of the loud Black girl by discussing the nuances of Black feminine identity development within and outside of the academy. Fordham notes that for many Black women to "pass" or become successful in the academy, they may disassociate themselves from the loud Black girl identity. Fordham states of these Black women that "silence and invisibility are the strategies they feel compelled to use to gain entry into the dominating patriarchy."<sup>16</sup> Following the publication of Fordham's study in 1993, research on loud Black girls as well of images associated with Black girlhood has investigated the criminalization of Black girls,

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<sup>13</sup> Signithia Fordham, "Those Loud Black Girls: (Black) Women, Silence, and Gender Passing in the Academy," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1993): 3–32, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.1993.24.1.05x1736t>; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2nd edition, New York: Routledge, 2008); and Monique W. Morris, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Monique Morris, *Pushout*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Monique Morris, *Pushout*, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Fordham, "Those Loud Black Girls," 23.

particularly those who are perceived as loud and outside of normative ideologies of girlhood.

The interdisciplinary field of Black girlhood studies seeks to challenge dominant and stereotypical images and representations of Black girlhood and center the experiences and realities of Black girls within their own context.<sup>17</sup> Since its inception in the early 1970s, Hip Hop has been a dominant force in the Black community, ushering in new cultural ideologies, fashion, activism, knowledge, and identities. Hip Hop has provided Black youth and Hip Hop consumers with images surrounding the identities of Black youth. The images and messages within Hip Hop have not always been positive, with negative and stereotypical images of Black men as violent and Black women as loud and hypersexual dominating the narratives. With Black women and girls navigating the margins of Hip Hop culture, Hip Hop has represented a complicated space where they are both underrepresented as female artists and have to constantly challenge stereotypes of Black women. At the same time, Black girls and women have little control over the hypersexualized images presented of them in Hip Hop.

Thus, multiple images of Black femininity are created which influence how they navigate within various spaces and how others interact with them in those same spaces. Dominant images of loud, ratchet Black girls/women further contribute to the silencing and stereotyping of Black girls/women in spaces outside of Hip Hop and have left Black girls/women out of the construction of their own images. As Black girls/women advocate for representation within Hip Hop, they are also taking ownership of the (re)definition of these identities and narratives, challenging the policing of their bodies and attitudes and the “good-bad” binaries of Black womanhood. Within this (re)definition, Black girls/women are continually navigating the muddiness of being respectable, yet loud and sexual in a phenomenon characterized as the classy-ratchet binary.

### **Reconceptualizing the Loud Black Girl: Ratchet Politics and the Classy-Ratchet Binary**

Conceptualizations of Blackness and femininity have evolved while simultaneously retaining previous ideologies of loud, ghetto, and angry. One iteration of those previous ideologies is the concept *ratchet*. The politics, tensions, and messiness of the term have been extensively discussed in multidisciplinary conversations, noting ratchet’s connection with respectability politics and the policing of Black women’s behavior. The politics of respectability, a term coined by Evelyn Higginbotham,

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<sup>17</sup> Erica B. Edwards, “Toward Being Nobody’s Darling: A Womanist Reframing of School Climate,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (2020): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2020.1753254>; and Edward W. Morris, “Ladies or Loudies? Perceptions and Experiences of Black Girls in Classrooms,” *Youth and Society* 38, no. 4 (2007): 490–515, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X06296778>.



references how Black women are expected to embody middle-class values, ideologies, behaviors, and dress. Black communities deem the assimilation into dominant ideologies and values necessary if Black women are to be respected by dominant society.<sup>18</sup> In essence, the Black community polices Black women's behaviors and the behaviors of collective Blackness, stripping away the individuality of Blackness and Black people.<sup>19</sup> Respectability politics, then, places Black people in a box, with those who are operating within the confines of those ideologies inside, and those who do not conform to normative expectations on the outside of the box.<sup>20</sup> Based on this ideology, ratchet politics reflects "policies, structures or institutions that promote and/or result in inequality, oppression, marginalization, and denies human beings his or her full humanity as a citizen or resident of a nation state."<sup>21</sup> Ratchet politics as a concept gives a name to the way the institution of respectability and notions of classiness continues to marginalize Black girls/women in various spaces.

Black girls and women have always been forced to navigate the narrow edges of respectability politics. Controlling images of Black girl/womanhood as loud, angry, jezebel, welfare queen, mammy, matriarch, and sapphire have dominated the way Black girlhood/womanhood has been framed and have fed into dominant ideologies regarding respectability.<sup>22</sup> Currently, the image of ratchet has emerged at the forefront of images of Black girlhood/womanhood, combining evolving images with the controlling images of Black womanhood as discussed by Patricia Hill Collins.<sup>23</sup> Hip Hop has been a significant cultural force within the Black community and has acted as a guide to racial and gender performances of Blackness.<sup>24</sup> While Hip Hop has been a space where the Black community could discuss and critique their environmental circumstances, Hip Hop has also been a male-dominated space, characterized by misogyny and the sexualized performance of Black womanhood. For Black women, Hip Hop has always been a complicated and messy space where respectability politics and misogyny can be challenged as Black women struggle to (re)construct an identity that pleases them and the collective Black community. The term "ratchet" originally emerged within Hip Hop through Anthony Mandigo's "Do the Ratchet," which Lil Boosie remixed in 2004, and went mainstream with Hurricane Chris's 2007 debut album *Ratchet* and tracks from later

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<sup>18</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994). Many studies noted in this essay also discuss the politics of respectability.

<sup>19</sup> S. R. Toliver, "Breaking Boundaries: #Blackgirlmagic and the Black Ratchet Imagination," *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* 15 (2019): 1-26.

<sup>20</sup> Toliver, "Breaking Boundaries," 4.

<sup>21</sup> Nadia E. Brown and Lisa Young, "Ratchet Politics: Moving Beyond Black Women's Bodies to Indict Institutions and Structures," *National Political Science Review* 17 (2015): 45-56.

<sup>22</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, Chapter 4.

<sup>23</sup> Heidi R. Lewis, "Exhuming the Ratchet before it's Buried," *The Feminist Wire*, <https://thefeministwire.com/2013/01/exhuming-the-ratchet-before-its-buried/>.

<sup>24</sup> Anthony Mandigo, "Do the Ratchet," *Ratchet Fight in the Ghetto* (Lava House Records, 1999); Hurricane Chris, *Ratchet* (Polo Grounds/J Records, 2007); Hurricane Chris, "Halle Berry (She's Fine)," *Unleashed* (Polo Grounds/J Records, 2009).

albums, including the song “Halle Berry.”<sup>25</sup> Ratchet has continued to be popularized by both men and women within Hip Hop such as Nicki Minaj, LL Cool J, and Megan thee Stallion with her song “Ratchet.”<sup>26</sup> Further, women who are presented as loud, outspoken, or expressive, particularly within Hip Hop culture and other popular media sources, are deemed as ratchet and serve as the blueprint for ratchet attitudes and behaviors.<sup>27</sup>

Current conversations about defining the term “ratchet” and Black girl/womanhood involve challenges regarding those who identify as ratchet. Bettina Love contends that ratchet describes “Black people, particularly Black women, as loud, hot tempered, and promiscuous.”<sup>28</sup> The term “ratchet,” is often deemed as negative and follows similar characterizations of the loud Black girl in that she is often *othered* in relation to traditional ideologies surrounding femininity. Robin Boylorn notes that there is a certain respectability surrounding the idea of ratchetness: “ratchet respectability as ‘a hybrid characterization of hegemonic, racist, sexist, and classist notions of Black womanhood,’ allows Black women to combine ratchet behaviors (generally linked to race) to the politics of respectability (generally linked to class).”<sup>29</sup> Heidi R. Lewis describes the tensions associated with the term, noting the binary that some have created within discussions of the term ratchet. She further notes the tensions when dominant culture *and* our culture are both policing the behaviors of Black women.<sup>30</sup> Brittney Cooper considers the definitions of the term ratchet and what it means for respectability politics, what it does, and what it can be.<sup>31</sup> Cooper states, “we have to think about how the embrace of ratchetness is simultaneously a dismissal of respectability, a kind of intuitive understanding of all the ways that respectability as a political project has failed Black women and continues to disallow the access that we have been taught to think it will give.”<sup>32</sup> In essence, ratchetness redefines Black girl/womanhood in that it teaches us to dismiss the oppressiveness of respectability. As Black girls constantly battle stereotypes

<sup>25</sup> Megan Thee Stallion, “Ratchet,” *Fever* (300 Entertainment, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Brown and Young, “Ratchet Politics,” 46.

<sup>27</sup> Bettina L. Love, *Hip Hop’s Li’l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Bettina L. Love, “A Ratchet Lens: Black Queer Youth, Agency, Hip Hop, and the Black Ratchet Imagination,” *Educational Researcher* 46, no. 9 (2017): 539, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17736520>.

<sup>29</sup> Robin M. Boylorn, “Love, Hip Hop, and Ratchet Respectability (Something Like A Review),” *Crunk Feminist Collective*, The Crunk Feminist Collection (blog), September 10, 2015, <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2015/09/10/love-hip-hop-and-ratchet-respectability-something-like-a-review/>.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, “Exhuming the Ratchet.”

<sup>31</sup> Brittney C. Cooper, “(Un)Clutching My Mother’s Pearls, or Ratchetness and the Residue of Respectability,” *Crunk Feminist Collective*, The Crunk Feminist Collection (blog). December 31, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Cooper, “(Un)Clutching My Mother’s Pearls,” 122.

of being loud, angry, and sassy, their truths and experiences are often misunderstood and silenced as they are dismissed and reframed as *ratchet*.<sup>33</sup>

The tensions surrounding the term *ratchet* have primarily surrounded the nuances between the term, Black feminine identity, and respectability politics. However, how Black girls and women construct notions of *ratchetness*, how being *ratchet* is mediated in various spaces, and how spaces such as the classroom can embrace Black girl ratchetness has often been left out of the conversation.<sup>34</sup> Discussions surrounding ratchetness have been primarily conversations involving reality tv, such as *Love and Hip Hop* and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, and artiste extraordinaire Beyoncé. Hip Hop feminists have deconstructed reality friendships/relationships and ratchetness, Beyoncé's sexuality and *Lemonade* album, and fashion, behavior, and vernacular as it relates to ratchetness.<sup>35</sup> As Black women continue to assert their presence within the culture, celebrate #BlackGirlMagic, and (re)construct notions of Black femininity within the culture, constructions of ratchetness continue to change. Women rap artists such as Cardi B have reconstructed notions of ratchet and respectability and embraced their loud, hot-tempered, aggressive and sexual selves. A rap artist from the Bronx, Belcalis Almanzar, professionally known as Cardi B, dominated the rap scene in 2018 with her album *Invasion of Privacy* that topped *Billboard* music charts, produced five singles, and has been certified triple platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America. Two of her singles, "I Like It" and "Bodak Yellow," reached number 1 on the *Billboard* music charts, making her the first woman rapper with multiple number 1 singles. A Black woman rapper whose fame and popularity arose from her role in VH1's *Love and Hip Hop* (2016–2017) and debut singles, Cardi B has become an anti-respectability icon. Amanda R. Matos argues that "Cardi rejects respectability politics by challenging the mainstream embodiment of womanhood with her fashion, cadence, and expression of her sexuality."<sup>36</sup> Cardi B's carefree demeanor coupled with her long nails, loud and outspoken voice, sexually provocative clothing, and open discussion and presentation of her sexuality challenges traditional respectability politics and characterizes her within the realms of ratchetness. While the ratchet figure is viewed as a negative persona, Cardi B has consistently advocated for her ratchet individuality, pushing for the world to accept her as she is and to dismantle sexism as it relates to women's behavior in Hip Hop.

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<sup>33</sup> Therí A. Pickens, "Shoving Aside the Politics of Respectability: Black Women, Reality TV, and the Ratchet Performance," *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory* 25, no. 1 (2015): 45, 49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2014.923172>.

<sup>34</sup> Cooper, "(Un)clutching My Mother's Pearls," 122.

<sup>35</sup> Kinitra D. Brooks and Kameela L. Martin, *The Lemonade Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2019); and Jervette R. Ward, Sheena Harris, LaToya Jefferson-James, Alison D. Ligon, and Cynthia Davis, *Real Sister: Stereotypes, Respectability, and Black Women in Reality TV* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> Amanda R. Matos, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Cardi B Jump through Hoops: Disrupting Respectability Politics When You Are from the Bronx and Wear Hoops," *Harvard Journal of Hispanic Policy* 31 (2019): 89.

Why is it that male rappers can speak how they want act how they want but people constantly bash me for it? Why do I feel like I have to apologize for being who I am? talking how I talk and being what ya call 'Ghetto' wtf. LEAVE ME ALONE!<sup>37</sup>

As these constructions are contested, negotiated, celebrated, and critiqued, the identities of Black women and girls become more complex, creating a multiple iteration of Black woman/girlhood. While the aforementioned research has increasingly investigated the changing dynamics for Black women, these studies have also noted the need for work engaging Black girls to embrace the multiplicity of the Black girl experience. Therí A. Pickens, for example, calls for a more nuanced definition of ratchet, one that includes ratchet performance as a maker (and unmaker) of both audience and performance.<sup>38</sup> Pickens notes “the ratchet imaginary has no desire to participate in narratives of racial progression or social uplift; instead it articulates a desire for individuality regardless of the ideas and wants of a putative collective.”<sup>39</sup>

### Ratchetness in Educational Spaces

In educational spaces, researchers are beginning to explore how to embrace *ratchetness*. In relation to Black queer youth, L. H. Stallings and Bettina Love have explored the *Black ratchet imagination*, a term that includes the creative and transformative practice of ratchetness within Hip Hop.<sup>40</sup> With ratchetness often explored within the confines of respectability politics, Love notes that the “Black ratchet imagination should not be viewed as a site where young people come to simply act out but a disruption of respectability politics, particularly for queer youth of color, reclaiming autonomy from middle- and upper-class White male heterosexuality and healing from normalized state-sanctioned violence toward Black and Brown bodies.”<sup>41</sup> Research integrating Hip Hop-based education, Hip Hop feminism, and ratchet politics is pushing the notion of creating *homeplaces* for Black girls and challenging them to question and critique how Black girls are represented within Hip Hop spaces. bell hooks and others note that Black girls are building/creating *homeplaces* or *homespaces* away from the oppositional gaze of others; spaces where they can be themselves and build learning communities where all aspects of the Black girl will be embraced.<sup>42</sup> Christopher Emdin advocates for the inclusion of being ratchet in education or providing spacing where Black youth can be their loud and outspoken selves while still being valued within their educational spaces.<sup>43</sup> Critical

<sup>37</sup> Cardi B, @iamcardib, Twitter, May 11, 2018. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/8455619/cardi-b-response-ghetto-hate-tweet>, May 11, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Pickens, “Shoving Aside the Politics of Respectability,” 44.

<sup>39</sup> Pickens, “Shoving Aside the Politics of Respectability,” 44.

<sup>40</sup> LaMonda H. Stallings, “Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination,” *Palimpsest* 2, no. 2 (2013): 135–139; and Love, “A Ratchet Lens,” 539–547.

<sup>41</sup> Love, “A Ratchet Lens,” 541 and Brown and Young, “Ratchet Politics,” 1–25.

<sup>42</sup> hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*.

<sup>43</sup> Christopher Emdin, “A Ratcheted Reality Pedagogy and/as Cultural Freedom in Urban Education.” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2019): 1–14.

literacy scholars such as Detra Price-Dennis, Gholnecar Muhammad, Erica Womack, Sherell McArthur and Marcelle Haddix note the need for a “Black Girls’ Literacies Framework” as a means to redefine traditional literacy as reading and writing skills to one that considers the multiplicity of beingness for Black girls.<sup>44</sup> Expounding upon the works of Emdin, Love, Brown, and Price-Dennis, Muhammad, Womack, McArthur and Haddix, future directions in Hip Hop feminism will discover new and creative ways that educators can embrace the ratchet Black girl in the classroom and allow space for her to exude her brilliance.

Building from the current work on ratchetness in educational spaces, this paper explores ratchetness and the Black ratchet imaginary as a space for educational possibility and healthy identity development. This space allows for Black girls to deviate from the hegemonic and misogynist views of Black femininity and allows Black girls to construct their own definitions of Black femininity. Further, the Black ratchet imaginary centers the experiences of the historically marginalized, allowing space for appreciation, individuality, and self-love without the constraints of respectability politics, particularly within educational settings.

### Data and Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to explore how Black adolescent girls construct their identities, particularly as it relates to ratchet-respectability identity politics. The data presented here is part of a larger research study that explored the role of Hip Hop-based educational programs in the way Black girls constructed identities and articulated personal epistemologies. The larger study took place at a low-income combined elementary and middle school in the Southern region of the United States. It used a Black Feminist/Hip Hop feminist narrative inquiry framework and sought to answer the following research questions: (1) What role does Hip Hop (i.e., rap, dance, and graffiti) play in the lives of Black girls? (2) How does Hip Hop inform racial and gendered identity for Black girls? (3) How do Black girls negotiate their racial and gender identities through Hip Hop? (4) How does Hip Hop inform Black girls’ personal epistemologies and worldviews?<sup>45</sup> This study emerged as a program titled Grit, Grind, Rhythm & Rhyme, a Hip Hop-based after-school program that brought together the elements of Hip Hop (rap music, graffiti art, and dance) with English/Language Arts tutoring. Participants for this study included six girls who were consistent participants in the program. The program ran for nine weeks, twice a week for two hours each day. Sources of data for the entire study included: (1) non-participant observations, (2) semi-structured interviews, and (3) researcher journals. Non-participant observation notes and researcher journals were

<sup>44</sup> See Detra Price-Dennis, Gholnecar E. Muhammad, Erica Womack, Sherell A. McArthur, and Marcelle Haddix, “The Multiple Identities and Literacies of Black Girlhood: A Conversation about Creating Spaces for Black Girl Voices,” *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* 13, no. 3 (2017): 1–18.

<sup>45</sup> Ashley N. Payne, “Can You Hear Me Now: The Role of Hip Hop in the Identity and Personal Epistemology of Black Girls,” PhD diss., University of Memphis, 2018, 12.

completed after each day and semi-structured interviews were completed during the program and after the completion of the program. Data was coded using a three-tier thematic analysis<sup>46</sup> starting with open coding (In Vivo, emotions, and values), categories (axial coding), and final themes. Each piece of data was triangulated with the others to ensure a reliable and clean analysis process. The overall study yielded four themes, but for the purposes of this article in the special issue on Hip Hop feminism, only one theme, the *Cardi B–Beyoncé complex*, is being discussed. The Cardi B–Beyoncé complex discusses the intersection of ratchetness and respectability in educational settings and the influence of Hip Hop artists and images on the construction of ratchet-respectability identities. Further, this theme informs the need for a transformative, ratchet educational space where Black girls and the multiplicity of the Black girlhood experience will be appreciated and not silenced.

### *Cardi B–Beyoncé Complex:* **Classy–Ratchet Binaries and Respectability in the Program**

The girls within the Hip Hop-based educational program challenged dominant ideologies of Black girl/womanhood by finding various representations of Black girlhood that they could connect with and find strength in. The girls recognized the existence of stereotypes surrounding Black women within Hip Hop, specifically referencing terms such as *angry, aggressive, thug, slut, classy, ratchet, and gold digger*. *Ratchet* and *classy* were the most-discussed identities surrounding Black woman/girlhood, which the girls discussed through references to Cardi B and Beyoncé. Though both artists are powerful representations of women in Hip Hop (Beyoncé is a multimillion-dollar recording artist who gained popularity in the 90s as part of the girl R&B group, Destiny’s Child, and was named most powerful female in entertainment in 2015 and 2017 by *Forbes* magazine), their personalities are opposites of each other. Aside from her music, Cardi became popular for being “real” or her loud, carefree, and ratchet self. She is viewed as relatable, as she continues to “be herself” no matter the context. She rose from a background in strip clubs, a background that many of my students found relatable. Fans and girls in the program fell in love with her loud, carefree, “no filter” attitude. Beyoncé, on the other hand, though a force on the stage and through her music, presents herself as a little more reserved outside of her music. As the girls described her, she chooses her words carefully in her interviews, she is not loud, and does not come from a strip club background.

Following Love’s and Stallings’s conceptualization of *Black ratchet imagination*, and bell hooks’ notion of *homeplaces*, the girls used the space as a homeplace to utilize the “creative and transformative practice of ratchetness” and to construct notions of Black girlhood.<sup>47</sup> On an individual level, the girls channeled artists such as Cardi B every

<sup>46</sup> See Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2015).

<sup>47</sup> See hooks *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*.

session, whether it was through her song *Bodak Yellow*, or her representation within various spaces. Through the course of the program, I observed how the girls watched her videos, rapped along with her music, emulated her actions, and expanded their own representations of Black girlhood through Hip Hop dance. Various notions of *ratchet* were exhibited within this space, free from judgment. “Say little trick, you can mess with me, if you wanted to,” the girls screamed (making sure to refrain from cursing in the classroom and presence of adults). Forming a circle, the girls produced various dance moves that ranged from twerking, buckin’ and jookin’ (both of which are Memphis-style dances and variations of gangsta walking), and Blocboy JB’s popular “shoot” dance, that emerged from his single of the same name.<sup>48</sup> On a group level, the girls co-created knowledge of Black girl/womanness as they looked to each other for approval, making sure they were representing Black girlhood in a way that the collective saw fit. This demonstrates that identity, and by extension ratchetness, is a co-constructed identity, built not only from media and Hip Hop images, but also from the interpretations of the larger peer group.

Beyoncé, in contrast, represents a classy perspective and a model for how the girls should act in public situations. In an interview, one of the girls mentioned “cause when Beyoncé is in public she don’t be all this and that (moves hands erratically) and be all ghetto like she be like oh hey (mimicking a soft voice) and stuff like that.”<sup>49</sup> Further, the girls discussed various instances where they were expected to be classy, whether it be within the classroom, at home, or within any public space. Each of the girls mentioned that they were reprimanded for “unclassy” behavior and had constant discussions with adult authority figures about their behavior. For example, one participant, who was on the cheerleading team along with three of the other girls, discussed how the principal consistently compared their behaviors to other cheerleading teams, making sure to stress that they must “be classy” and not act like those “other” girls. In addition, the girls discussed forming after-school groups with their female peers that aimed at learning proper behaviors and etiquette. Public vs. private ratchetness was also mentioned, with discussions surrounding public displays of classiness and private displays of ratchetness. One of the girls stated, “if you out in public that’s just gonna make you [look] worse like its gonna make you seem irritating they might put you out.”<sup>50</sup> In essence, ratchetness was reserved for private spaces or for their homes with other Black girls. They believed that they could not be their true selves with the world watching, thus, silencing them and their experiences.

School and educational spaces were mentioned by the girls as places where they were silenced, both physically and mentally, and were not allowed to speak, dance, or even talk in their own dialect. However, the after-school program, though educational, became a ratchet space where they could be loud and expressive and use their own

<sup>48</sup> Blocboy JB’s popular “shoot” dance, that emerged from his single “Shoot.”

<sup>49</sup> Mariah (participant), interview by author, 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Unique (participant), interview by author, 2017.

language and dialects to describe their experiences. Though the girls were able to be who they wanted to be, this did not impede on their education or on the construction of knowledge. The girls were able, in their own ratchet ways, to connect the lyrics and media presence of various artists to their English/Language Arts (E/LA) constructs. For example, throughout the program, I observed the girls create their own dance and rap storytelling cyphers, each representing different types and parts of a story. The girls were able to incorporate E/LA mechanics in both of these visual and verbal acts, while simultaneously engaging in loud, expressive behavior. Similar to ways in which loudness is often associated with being uneducated, ratchetness is also associated with being uneducated. However, being/acting ratchet, for these girls, was just another expressive and unconventional method of demonstrating their knowledge of the material.

### **Conclusion: Ratchet Hip Hop Feminism and Black Girlhood**

Many notable Hip Hop feminists have explored various aspects of Black girlhood, from identity and respectability politics to how Hip Hop feminism can be used within education. Hip Hop feminists challenge traditional developmental theories regarding identity development and carve out intersectional spaces that note the multiplicity of Black girls' experience; an experience that deviates from the monolith that has been traditionally used to describe the Black experience. This essay builds on but also challenges scholarship within Hip Hop feminism to continue to explore that multiplicity and create spaces where all aspects of the Black girl are accepted and appreciated, particularly in spaces where negative stereotypes of loud-ratchet Black girlhood continue to carry a negative connotation. During my ethnographic observation, the girls within this Black girlhood celebratory space continually worked within the nexus of Hip Hop and Blackness girlhood, challenging, critiquing, and (re)constructing notions of Black girlhood, particularly as it relates to ratchet-Black girlhood. They expressed a need for spaces where they can be themselves and transformed their educational space into a space that was just that: a place for them to be who they want to be, free from the gaze of others. The girls were able to participate in the transformative, creative practices of *Black ratchet imagination*, where they could escape from the respectability politics of being *classy* and were free to express themselves as they pleased, whilst learning in their normal educational space. Future scholarship exploring notions of Black girlhood will continue to challenge educators to create spaces that allow space for Black girls to be their Black-ratchet-selves, merging Hip Hop culture, Blackness, and girlhood into an educational space that is for them.



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## Black Rural Feminist Trap: Stylized and Gendered Performativity in Trap Music

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*Corey Miles*

### **Abstract**

Hip Hop, particularly trap music, has been conceptualized as male-centered, despite Black women's role in its inception. This paper engages with trap music as a structural template that is co-constructed and used as a site of articulation by Black women to engage in gendered performativity. Rather than engaging with trap lyrics as literal representations of artists' desires and politics, I examine the types of gender constructions that are enabled when the aesthetic structure of trap music performativity is centered. I analyze this through ethnographic research in northeast North Carolina, situating trap music within a Hip Hop feminist framework. I contend that rural Black women, being marginalized in both dominant institutions and in the Hip Hop realm, have used style to carve out spaces of visibility within the trap genre to position rural Black women's subjectivity as epistemologically important. Rural Black women have reclaimed their time by stylizing trap songs with a precise rap flow and gendered double entendres to situate themselves as historical and modern actors within the Hip Hop tradition and American society. Trap feminism is an intellectual framework, consciousness, and day-to-day way of being that speaks to a type of hustling that creates space, both physical and ideological, in response to a gendered racial capitalism that intends to keep us confined.

**Content warning:** This article utilizes the N word.

## Introduction

“In the 252 women rap like men. There isn’t anything wrong with rapping like men, we all the same. Women be spitting hard and I like hard rap. They be rapping about drugs and guns, but sometimes women may do a more girly rap,” Lisa explains to me after I asked about the sound of women’s rap in the in the 252 area code (pronounced two-five-two) in rural northeast North Carolina.<sup>1</sup> Lisa, a Black woman, has roots in New York, but moved to the 252 when she was 11 and has worked on-air with a major radio station in northeast North Carolina. Given the 252 is comprised of thirty small rural counties, Lisa’s radio station is widely heard within the region. In Lisa’s statement, she is operating from the notion that themes around violence and drugs are viewed as masculine, but she is also destabilizing it by suggesting that there is no inherent difference between men and women. Mainstream media invariably presents Hip Hop as male-dominated, but women have, from inception, constructed the organizational contours of Hip Hop.<sup>2</sup> The constant pairing of themes centered on drugs and guns as masculine is challenged by Hip Hop as a space that reimages Black women’s subjectivity. Donna Troka in “You Heard My Gun Cock,” documents how women artists such as Eve challenge the male-centered “master narrative” that women are passive contributors to society generally and have not played a role in constructing key themes within Hip Hop specifically.<sup>3</sup>

To engage with some of the ways in which Black women have used trap music to construct meaning, particularly a rural Black Southern identity, I view trap music as a structural subgenre of Southern rap music.<sup>4</sup> “Black Rural Feminist Trap” references the Southern Hip Hop tradition of trap music as it originated in Atlanta.<sup>5</sup> In its development, trap music was rap songs whose content centered on dealing drugs, which was accompanied by triple-time sub-divided hi-hats, heavy sub-bass, and layered kick drums.<sup>6</sup> This paper engages with trap music as a structural template that is used as a site

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<sup>1</sup> During my fieldwork Lisa worked for a major station in the 252. She spent most of her life in North Carolina, but her New York roots live with her. In our conversations about women artists in the 252 she often highlighted that the paths to success had gendered dynamics but made it clear that there is a lane open for women.

<sup>2</sup> Cheryl L. Keyes, “Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performance,” *Journal of American Folklore* 113, no. 449 (Summer 2000): 255, <https://doi.org/10.2307/542102>.

<sup>3</sup> Donna Troka, “You Heard My Gun Cock: Female Agency and Aggression in Contemporary Rap Music,” *African American Research Perspectives* 8, no. 2 (2002): 82-83, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155959>. Troka addresses the erasure of women in rap and how they have played a key role in shaping the genre and culture.

<sup>4</sup> Seneca Vaught, and Regina N. Bradley. “Of the Wings of Traplanta: (Re)Historicizing W.E.B. Du Bios’ Atlanta in the Hip Hop South.” *Phylon* 54, no. 2 (2017): 11-27. [www.jstor.org/stable/90018659](http://www.jstor.org/stable/90018659).

<sup>5</sup> Vaught and Bradley, “Of the Wings of Traplanta,” 11-27.

<sup>6</sup> Sam Friedman, “Trap Rap Has Been around for a Minute Now – So Why Does It Keep Working?,” *Flypaper*, September 22, 2017, <https://flypaper.soundfly.com/produce/why-does-trap-music-keep-working/>. Friedman describes the sonic qualities of trap music. In this interview, TI talks about starting Trap Music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fk2LS8bNMfw>. Trap music is not about drugs per se.

of articulation by Black women and men. I ask, What narratives can we tell when we view participation in trap music as not inherently masculine or as advocating on the behalf of gun and drug use? More specifically, in viewing trap music as a creative epistemological genre, how can we better understand the lived experiences of rural Black women who choose this structure to articulate Black women-centered sentiments? Through ethnographic research in northeast North Carolina, I want to engage with the types of gendered narratives that can be constructed by centering the aesthetic structure of trap music performativity, rather than engaging with trap lyrics as *literal* representations of artists' desires and politics. To this end, I am in part concerned with how artists creatively deliver their message. To engage with these narratives, I view the aesthetic choices made by rural Black women rappers from a Hip Hop feminist framework that is grounded in the intersectional approaches of the Black feminist tradition.

"You know you lied to me, said that you gone ride / I keep it on the side of me, I stay with that five," Redd raps on her song "Ride 4 Me" that I have blasting as I drive to my brother's house one Friday.<sup>7</sup> While I was home in the 252 in rural northeast North Carolina that Friday, hanging at my brother's house after he recently purchased a car for nine hundred dollars, he looks up from his phone and tells me,

*"That's my work car out there. I just drive it to work, but when it gets right, I might drive it on the weekend."*

*"Dang, what's wrong with it?" I ask.*

*"It run good. Just doesn't have a radio right now."*

*"You looking for a radio right now," I ask while he is looking at his phone. "Naw, seeing if anybody around here selling some rims. Need to fix her up."*

Driving around the city is a form of social performance.<sup>8</sup> The 252 is a non-urban community, thus "city" alludes to an urban imaginary that situates rural communities in modernity. For my brother, the car in its current state was only important for utility: to get him to work. The car in its current condition did not have the aesthetic and cultural attributes for him to be seen driving in a social setting.

Some may argue that it is more rational to buy a two-thousand-dollar car, rather than spend nine hundred on an extremely cheap car and a grand for it to meet aesthetic standards. While my ethnographic project was situated at the intersection of Hip Hop and incarceration, seeing this phenomenon through the eyes of a native researcher forced me to think back on growing up in the 252 and seeing Black women and men move through the world with flashy rims and heavy vibrations beaming through their

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<sup>7</sup> Redd is a 252 artist and she released a few projects during my fieldwork. During my fieldwork, my car rides was the time I used to listen to local artists music. Music hits different coming out of your car speakers.

<sup>8</sup> The spaces I am referencing are generally described as towns, given the small population sizes and their distance from urban spaces. However, I employ the term city because that is the term used by the community members.

subwoofers.<sup>9</sup> It forced me to reflect on the first few weeks of my senior year of high school when my best friend Zay bought a Toyota Camry for a thousand dollars and, because of his fast-food job, was able to put some rims on it. I am not sure how much the rims cost, but when I would ride around town with Zay I felt cool as we moved through the city, vibing like the adults we looked up to.

In thinking through how Hip Hop has allowed the Black community in the 252 to perform gender, I understand buying a nine-hundred-dollar car and putting expensive rims on it the same way that I argue we should read Hip Hop performance and lyrical content. Derek Iwamoto in his essay on Tupac Shakur contends that scholars, fans, and critics have often misunderstood rappers' importance because they engage with rap as merely a literal representation of current experiences and desires, which does not allow them to see that rappers such as Tupac work is a matter of style rather than simply substance.<sup>10</sup> My brother would rather invest in creating a car that would draw attention because of its aesthetic than to spend money on a car with a reliable engine and transmission. A car's aesthetic presentation has allowed him to perform a particular style of masculinity: reframing the substantive value of what's under the hood. To this end, in what ways does aesthetic presentation shape the societal function of material and lyrical culture?

Fred Moten situates Black performance in the Black radicalism tradition, suggesting it disrupts dominant discourses on Black subjectivity and is a form of resistance to objectification.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Paul Taylor suggests that Black aesthetic performance has allowed Black folk to resist objectification by serving as a site where the Black subject has asserted their personhood, not by not focusing on disproving white assumptions about Black subjectivity, but turning inward to use Black self-consciousness and practices as ways of being.<sup>12</sup> This tradition is seen in Toni Morrison's works, specifically *The Bluest Eye*, where the Black subject (specifically Black woman) has the ability to self-define her aesthetic and human value outside of the hegemonic ideology prescribed by modernity.<sup>13</sup> Similar to the way Travis Jackson has engaged with the aesthetic contours of the blues, I want to engage with the aesthetic and stylistic choices

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<sup>9</sup> Native researcher is conceptualized as it is in Kirin Narayan, "How Native is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (September 1993): 673, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/679656>. I am taking seriously the "many strands of identification" offered to me as being both a sociologist and born and raised in the 252.

<sup>10</sup> Derek Iwamoto, "Tupac Shakur: Understanding the Identity Formation of Hyper-Masculinity of a Popular Hip-Hop Artist," *The Black Scholar* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2003.11413215>.

<sup>11</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003), 251-54.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 16-17.

<sup>13</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Random House, 1999), xi.

made by Black women rappers in the 252 who use the trap music structure.<sup>14</sup> Style is the process in which objects and behaviors are made to mean, with Theresa White showing that the style of Black women artists not only impact the way they are perceived, but the extent in which they resist and/or submit to stereotypes about Black women.<sup>15</sup> Style is political and constructs meaning ascribed to words, bodies, and behaviors. My privileging of style is to not only think through what artists say in lyrics and share with me in ethnographic interactions, but to take seriously how they choose to aesthetically present their messages.

I contend that Black women being marginalized both in dominant institutions and in the Hip Hop realm have used style to carve out spaces of visibility to destabilize patriarchal structures. This essay argues that Black women in northeast North Carolina have made aesthetic choices while operating under the structural bounds of trap music to create a space of visibility for rural Black women. Trap feminism is a framework and consciousness that views the ways Black women have pulled from their lived experiences to challenge the material and ideological constraints placed on their existence. By stylizing trap songs with a precise rap flow and gendered double entendres, they have “reclaimed their time” in the same way Maxine Waters claimed hers at a House Financial Services committee meeting.<sup>16</sup> Reclaiming my time speaks to taking the rules of a male-centered structure and reworking them to respect and make visible the time Black women have invested in the continuous construction of the modern world and Hip Hop.

### Hip Hop Feminism

“The women artists round here are tough. They be spitting just as hard as the guys,” Mook yells from the kitchen when responding to my question about if there are any women rappers in the 252.<sup>17</sup> Mook is a 26-year-old music producer and rap artist in the 252. Because of his dual role, he is well-connected in the Hip Hop scene, given successful producers must be able to network with a wide array of artists to market their beats. I was in the field for a month or so and had not seen any Black women artist videos shared on social media, rarely heard any Black women artists come up in conversations, and I had not engaged with any Black women artists in a meaningful way. But Black women were doing their thing as Nicole, a 252 singer-rapper tells me. “The women artists

<sup>14</sup> Travis Jackson, “Jazz Performance as Ritual: The Blues Aesthetic and the African diaspora,” in *The African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective*, ed. Ingrid Monson (New York: Routledge, 2000), 24–25 and also see Jasmine Armstrong, “A Subaltern Black Woman Sings the Blues: A Blues Aesthetic Analysis of Sherley Anne Williams’ Poetry,” *Journal of Pan African Studies* 11, no. 6 (April 2018): 54–55.

<sup>15</sup> Theresa Renee White, “Missy ‘Misdemeanor’ Elliott and Nicki Minaj: Fashionist’ Black Female Sexuality in Hip-Hop Culture—Girl Power or Overpowered?” *Journal of Black Studies* 44, no. 6 (September 2013): 608, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934713497365>.

<sup>16</sup> Christine Emba, “‘Reclaiming My Time’ Is Bigger than Maxine Waters,” *The Washington Post*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2017/08/01/reclaiming-my-time-is-bigger-than-maxine-waters/>.

<sup>17</sup> Mook, interview by author, 2018.



have a lot of natural talent, but the guys are so ruthless and will blackball you if you don't do what they want, so girls just don't make it,"<sup>18</sup> she explains while documenting why women quit music or do not become well known. Nicole always spoke candidly about the gender relations in the 252.

While gender was not a primary focus of my research, noticing all my experiences were with a specific type of gendered body showed me that even though gender was not the focus, it was still at work. I had to actively insert Black women artists into conversations as I did with Mook, and through asking folks to consciously think about the women in the scene I was led to Lisa and eventually Nicole. During my first month physically in the field, my gender-neutral questioning about Southern trap music in practice produced responses on men and masculinity, erasing Black women from my purview.<sup>19</sup> Reiland Rabaka contends that Black women have contributed to Hip Hop since its inception, challenging the canonical position Black men hold in the genre.<sup>20</sup> Black women's invisibility in mainstream narratives about the construction of the political and cultural landscape of the South, generally never has anything to do with their inactivity, but highlights how the interlocking systems of gender, race, and class not only restrict participation in society but disarms us from seeing it even when it occurs.<sup>21</sup>

Mainstream commodified rap music has disseminated, in uncritical ways, misogynistic and homophobic images that have provided straight men with material and social benefits.<sup>22</sup> Within the context of White Supremacy and its propagation of patriarchy, rap music distributed through a globalized capitalism only aims to maintain these patriarchal standards. Too often it is women of color who are exploited within this structure and process.<sup>23</sup> This is not to suggest that Hip Hop has infected an otherwise sexism-free society, but rather that Hip Hop's sexism is indicative of larger patriarchal social processes engrained within the structure of society. Travis Harris, in his article "Can It Be Bigger Than Hip Hop?" positions Hip Hop as a flexible, adaptable, boundaryless global phenomenon, thus for me situating it as able to adequately engage

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<sup>18</sup> Nicole, interview by author, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> I spent twelve months in the 252 in total and made consistent visits the next twelve months. While the Hip Hop scene is primarily male, the spatial dynamics of rural localities exacerbates this. The Hip Hop scene in the 252 exists in home studios, at video shoots, and other locations that you need invites to. Concerts and performance typically take place in the closest urban city. In public spaces you can stumble upon new artists, but when those public spaces are limited you must be in someone's network to meet them.

<sup>20</sup> Reiland Rabaka, *Hip Hop's Amnesia: From Blues and the Black Women's Club Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Movement* (Lanham: Lexington, 2012), 27-28.

<sup>21</sup> Bernice Barnet, "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: The Triple Constraints of Gender, Race, and Class," *Gender and Society* 7, no. 1 (June 1993): 163, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/189576?seq=1>.

<sup>22</sup> Albert Oikelome, "Are Real Women Just Bad Porn? Women in Nigerian Hip-Hop Culture," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 5, no. 7 (March 2013): 85-86, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155959>.

<sup>23</sup> Raquel Rivera, "Butta Pecan Mamis: Tropicalized Mamis: Chocalte Caliente," in *That's That Joint: Hip Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (2nd ed., New York: Routledge, 2014), 420.

a range of contestations, contradictions, and negotiations.<sup>24</sup> Examining Hip Hop from a Black feminist perspective allows for us to engage with Hip Hop's fantastic sensibilities, while attuning to the ways it, at times, embraces misogynist and heteronormative discourse.<sup>25</sup>

My ethnography in the 252 has revealed that Hip Hop Studies and Hip Hop Feminism should focus more on trap music. It allows us to examine how, in the era of policing and surveillance, Black women have styled lyrics on guns and drugs in unique ways to flip society's understanding of criminality and womanhood on its head. This work builds on and operates in space with Brittany C. Cooper, Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn's *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, which fuses the hard-hitting beats and bass of Southern crunk music with feminism to make what they call a productive and compelling dissonance.<sup>26</sup> This pairing pulls from Black homes, the streets, and the academy to create a site to articulate sentiments about Black women that other spaces cannot conceptually produce. My notion of trap feminism similarly examines the way Black women have put together the heavy sub-bass and layered kick drums of trap music with Black women's sensibilities to create Black women-centered ideas while living metaphorically and literally in a trap. *The Crunk Feminist Collection* suggests that for the brothers who contend they are with them, it cannot just be in rhetoric, but it is about politics and a lifestyle.<sup>27</sup> To this end, trap feminism and my conceptualization of it are more than musical discourse, but an ideology and a way to life that is situated within the larger Hip Hop feminist tradition.

The Black aesthetic tradition broadly, and the Hip Hop feminist tradition specifically, have broken away from the logics of respectability to provide new frames of understanding Black performance. In Bettina L. Love's article, "A Ratchet Lens: Black Queer Youth, Agency, Hip Hop, and the Black Ratchet Imagination," she stakes out new terrain in understanding Black queer identity construction in New Orleans bounce culture.<sup>28</sup> She offers "Black ratchet imagination" as a methodological perspective that serves as a humanizing frame to engage the messy, fluid, imaginative, and localized lenses and practices Black queer youth use to construct identities that challenge one-

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<sup>24</sup> Travis Harris, "Can It Be Bigger Than Hip Hop? From Global Hip Hop Studies to Hip Hop," *If I Ruled the World: Putting Hip Hop on the Atlas*, special issue of *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 6, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 68–69, <https://doi.org/10.34718/x1pk-bb88>.

<sup>25</sup> Here fantastic is borrowed from Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16 where the Black fantastic is defined as the minor key sensibilities that define notions of being created from the experience of living socially positioned as black and operating from within, in conversation with, against, and outside the boundaries of the modern.

<sup>26</sup> Brittany C. Cooper, Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn, *The Crunk Feminist Collection* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2017), 1–2.

<sup>27</sup> Cooper, Morris, and Boylorn, *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, xxi–xxii.

<sup>28</sup> Bettina L. Love, "A Ratchet Lens: Black Queer Youth, Agency, Hip Hop, and the Black Ratchet Imagination," *Educational Researcher* 46, no. 9 (December 2017): 539–40, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17736520>.

dimensional narratives.<sup>29</sup> The term ratchet emerged in mainstream discourse to describe Black women, as loud, angry, and/or hoes, however Hip Hop feminism considers the agency of Black women in an epistemological shift that allows researchers to change the discursive rules that govern Black women.

Cardi B, a former stripper, Instagram model, and reality star has, in mainstream discourse, at best been thought of as authentic because she has not changed up who she is because of her fame, and at worst been dubbed a ratchet stripper who only raps about sex. Sherri Williams discusses how Cardi B's coming out as a feminist was met with racist and classist pushback because of how her feminism is packaged.<sup>30</sup> Williams cites Cardi B's response in a 2016 Instagram video message:

If you believe in equal rights for women, that makes you a feminist. I don't understand how you bitches feel like being a feminist is a woman that have an education, that have a degree. That is not being a feminist. You discouraging a certain type of woman, that certainly doesn't make you one. Some bitches wanna act like 'oh you have to read a book about feminists.'"<sup>31</sup>

Hip Hop feminism affirms Cardi B's feminist claims and provides a conceptual space to make sense of society's misreading of her. Aisha Durham, Brittney Cooper, and Susana Morris have suggested that we should not view feminism as adding intellectual validity to Hip Hop, but rather think through how Hip Hop feminism provides us with a new language and framework to ask new and different questions about representation and Black subjectivity.<sup>32</sup>

Montinique McEachern's discussion of ratchetness in her article "Respect My Ratchet: The Liberatory Consciousness of Ratchetness" provides a pliable framework for discussion of Cardi B.<sup>33</sup> McEachern contends that ratchet is cultural knowledge and performance that allow Black girls and femmes to evade the dejectedness of respectability by maneuvering through oppression via creativity in expression.<sup>34</sup> Of Cardi B, McEachern writes that "she is not only a master codeswitcher, but she also embodies ratchet action and empowers regular degular schmegular girls to accomplish things that society tells them they cannot."<sup>35</sup> As shown in the way Aisha Durham writes about Beyoncé in her article "Check on It," Hip Hop feminism provides a framework to engage

<sup>29</sup> Love, "A Ratchet Lens," 539–40.

<sup>30</sup> Sherri Williams, "Cardi B: Love & Hip Hop's Unlikely Feminist Hero," *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 6 (September 2017): 1115, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1380431>.

<sup>31</sup> Williams, "Cardi B," 1115.

<sup>32</sup> Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris, "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 722, <https://doi.org/10.1086/668843>.

<sup>33</sup> Montinique Denice McEachern, "Respect My Ratchet: The Liberatory Consciousness of Ratchetness," *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 6, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 79, <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2017.6.3.78>.

<sup>34</sup> McEachern, "Respect My Ratchet," 79.

<sup>35</sup> McEachern, "Respect My Ratchet," 80.

the range of femininities Black women can perform, thus being ratchet and feminist is a multidimensional phenomenon.<sup>36</sup>

It is within this context that I engage trap feminism. In what ways has trap added to and reshaped the range of Black femininities that Black women pull from? Do Black women who rap about “shooting and robbing niggas” offer new understandings of Black womanhood and feminism? To answer these questions, we must view Black women as embodying a broad range of creative and epistemological possibilities. One model is given by Marquita R. Smith in her book chapter “Hip Hop Feminism and the Embodiment of Black Femininity” when she calls us to look at a variety of aspects of Beyoncé’s identity to disrupt the practice of viewing women’s identity along the lines of oppressive binaries that lack intersectional perspective.<sup>37</sup> Hip Hop feminism is situated within intersectional approaches developed by Black feminists and negotiates the aesthetic, social, and political experiences of racialized bodies while attuning to interrelated structures of oppression. While oppressive structures are nuanced, we must be attuned to how Black women’s performances and critiques of these systems are just as complicated.

Within what is generally conceptualized as a male space, Black women have thrived within the Hip Hop tradition and challenged assumptions about their erasure, while using these spaces to make Black feminist statements.<sup>38</sup> Trap music is one of these sites. Trap feminism is an intellectual framework, consciousness, and day-to-day way of being that speaks to hustling to make a way out of those spaces, physical and ideological, organized around gendered racial capitalism that are intended to keep us confined. It is the admission that Black women’s aesthetic power cannot be limited to rigid American conceptions of respectability and legality.

### Black Aesthetic

Modernity is more than just a historical period organized around socio-cultural norms, but rather a racialized and gendered project predicated on the otherizing of Black people. Furthermore, if the European imperialist project moved the world from “primitive” to modern, then Blackness arose as antithetical to modernity.<sup>39</sup> Representations of Blackness and Black subjectivity as inhuman have been constructed within the societal imaginary to justify a global system of economic, political, social, and cultural degradation of Black people for neoliberal gains. Black aesthetics, the engagement of artistic endeavors centered on Black subjectivity, serves as an

<sup>36</sup> Aisha Durham, “Check on It: Beyoncé, Southern Booty, and Black Femininities in Music Video,” *Feminist Media Studies* 12, no. 1 (October 2011): 35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2011.558346>.

<sup>37</sup> Marquita R. Smith, “Beyoncé: Hip Hop Feminism and the Embodiment of Black Femininity,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Stan Hawkins (New York: Routledge, 2017), 232.

<sup>38</sup> Keyes, “Empowering Self, Making Choices,” 255–69.

<sup>39</sup> Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 10.

epistemological critique of aesthetics as being simply the contemplation of the beautiful. In contrast, Black aesthetics validates the ontological importance of understanding the Black body and Black subjectivity as instruments of knowing, perception, and feeling.<sup>40</sup> Black aesthetic performance is an intervention in the way white imagery has constructed Black subjectivity to recast Black people as historical and modern actors.

To center a Black aesthetic framework in examinations of Hip Hop is to understand Black artists as epistemological actors whose bodily and vocal performances serve as articulations of personhood that operate outside, alongside, and within structures of racial, gendered, and class oppression. Marvin Gladney has highlighted the ideological connections between the Black Arts movement and Hip Hop to view the ways in which Hip Hop is situated within the Black aesthetic tradition.<sup>41</sup> Situating Hip Hop, particularly rural Black women rappers, in the Black aesthetic conceptual framework is to view the ways in which Black women rappers' performativity critiques hegemonic western discourses and has provided more accurate epistemological and ontological understandings of Black lifeworlds. Within this framework Hip Hop is understood as an aesthetically political identity, used to self-define racial and gendered identity.

It does us little intellectual good to view Black women's art as a derivative version of a masculine norm, but rather if we engage Black women's work from a Black feminist perspective it changes what and how we come to understand histories, subjectivities, and aesthetics.<sup>42</sup> Hegemonic white supremacist ideologies centered on aesthetic (mis)representation have impacted Black women in ways that it has not impacted Black men. Dorothy Roberts documents how the aesthetic representation of Black women in America has always been linked to oppressive economic institutionalized decision-making, from using Black women's bodies to increase slave holdings to restricting Black women's fertility under the assumption Black women are undermining the welfare state.<sup>43</sup> There has always been a capitalist imperative to control how the contours of Black women's aesthetics are constructed within the political and cultural landscape of America to justify legal regulation of the ontological experience of Black womanhood. Janell Hobson in "The 'Batty' Politic" has argued that society's aesthetic understandings of Black women has been shaped around often contradictory tropes such as Black women as grotesque, deviant, hypersexual, undesirable, and a range of descriptors that

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<sup>40</sup> Works that conceptualize black aesthetics as an ontological and epistemological critique of white supremacy see: Addison Gayle, ed., *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday, 1971); specifically, Adam David Miller, "Some Observations on a Black Aesthetic," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle (Doubleday, 1971): 398–99.

<sup>41</sup> Marvin J. Gladney makes this connection, see Marvin J. Gladney, "The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop," *African American Review* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 291–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042308>.

<sup>42</sup> Marsha Meskimmon, *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 81–83. The author is not focusing specifically on Black women, but rather suggests that the way in which we engage and have conversations around women's art in part determines how we understand its historical, contemporary, and aesthetic significance.

<sup>43</sup> Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999): 26–27.

ideologically disempower us to have adequate understandings of Black women's subjectivity.<sup>44</sup> To explore the way in which Black women have created space within the aesthetic realm to critique systems of oppression is to view how new ways to imagine personhood derive when Black women take control of their aesthetic representation.

Dia Sekayi has documented how Black women have engaged in aesthetic resistance in the workplace and educational spaces to challenge hegemonic notions of being.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, I ask how Black women have aesthetically restructured the conceptual contours of trap to make intersectional critiques of both America and Hip Hop. I aim to open an intellectual space to engage the narratives that can be told if we think through the ways in which rap lyrics are aesthetically presented.

### Black Women in the 252

"Rap is the same as anything else. It's just like playing basketball, I guess. It is looked at as a predominately male thing so as a woman you have to be on your A1 at all times. Bring your best game because people constantly looking at you and judging you because you are a woman,"<sup>46</sup> Redd tells me as we are discussing how she felt being one of the few women artists in the 252. Redd was born and raised in the 252 and has long dreads, paired with what society would consider an urban aesthetic. In suggesting that rap is "like everything else," Redd is suggesting that society is a patriarchal structure and women's success is dependent upon performing better than men. Intercollegiate basketball is a site where men's performance has been used as a standard in which to make assessments of women's performances.<sup>47</sup> This is particularly important because Hip Hop and basketball are two popular cultural spaces where the spectacular performance of Black men receive economic, social, and cultural gain, but women have been pushed to the margins as sideshows.<sup>48</sup> Black women, to be seen as valid and legitimate, have had to master performativity in ways Black men have not.

In the 252 rappers range from folks who use their phones to record songs that will never be heard by the public to having Kendrick Lamar featured on their album (Rapsody). In my writing, "rapper" does not inherently refer to someone who makes

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<sup>44</sup> Janell Hobson, "The 'Batty' Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body," *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (Fall/Winter 2003): 52-53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2003.tb01414.x>.

<sup>45</sup> Dia Sekayi, "Aesthetic Resistance to Commercial Influences: The Impact of the Eurocentric Beauty Standard on Black College Women," *Journal of Negro Education* 72, no. 4 (November 2003): 468, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3211197>.

<sup>46</sup> Redd, interview by author, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Elaine M. Blinde, Susan L. Greendorfer, and Rebecca J. Shanker, "Differential Media Coverage of Men's and Women's Intercollegiate Basketball: Reflection of Gender Ideology," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 15, no. 2 (1991): 98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/019372359101500201>.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Hanson, "Asphalt Stages: Pickup Basketball and the Performance of Blackness," in *Routes of Passage: Rethinking the African Diaspora*, ed. Ruth Hamilton (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2006), 170-171.

music but someone who holds rapper as an identity. This conceptualization acknowledges the magnitude of rap in that most Black kids have spit some bars before and points to rap being more than about music, but an ideological and performative process. During my fieldwork, I had twenty-six formal interviews with male rappers and five with women rappers.<sup>49</sup> Because of the fluidity of my conceptualization, it is difficult to gauge how many rappers are in the 252 given the process of identification is constantly in flux. At the eighteen shows I attended, artists varied greatly on how much time, money, and identity they staked in their music.

“There aren’t a lot of us women artists. There really aren’t any Black women producers, engineers, or studio owners and the men always seem to want something from us women to work with us” Nicole exclaims.<sup>50</sup> Nicole is an artist and alopecia survivor and has dealt with negotiations of her aesthetic presentation because of her severe hair loss. Nicole describes the Hip Hop scene in the 252 as a “network of misogyny” where the entire structured experience of music-making, from the engineers to the male artists, is organized around misogynist behavior towards women that comes in the form of not promoting a woman’s music or providing her with top-level beats if she does not sleep with them.<sup>51</sup> In northeast North Carolina, while Hip Hop has served as a performative site of liberation for certain Black identities it has in other ways reproduced structures of oppression. Nicole and other women in the 252, despite the gendered oppression, cite Hip Hop as a space to communicate with women who may not have readily available representations of resilient Black women, which is exacerbated by living in rural spaces. I attend to the ways the 252 Hip Hop scene has at moments served to uphold structures of gendered oppression, while also engaging how Hip Hop has allowed Black women to engage with their fantastic sensibilities.

### Reclaiming My Time

On July 27, 2017, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin was testifying on the House floor when Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.), the committee’s ranking Democrat, asked why his office had not responded to a letter from her regarding President Trump’s financial ties to Russia.<sup>52</sup> Mnuchin, rather than answer her question, responded with platitudes and political rhetoric by speaking around her question and invalidated Waters as a political figure by essentially suggesting she was not worthy of an answer. Waters would

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<sup>49</sup> I had a lot more informal ethnographic interviews with artists than formal. Formal interviews were ones scheduled at a specific time and location with artists knowing beforehand they will be interviewed. Informal interviews were conversations at shows, parties, studios, or even through Facebook.

<sup>50</sup> Nicole, interview by author, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Sarah Banet-Wesiser and Kate Miltner, “#MasculinitySoFragile: Culture, Structure, and Networked Misogyny,” *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 1 (December 2015): 171, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1120490>.

<sup>52</sup> Eric R. Thomas, “It’s Maxine Waters’ Time; We’re Just Living in It,” *Elle*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/news/a47004/maxine-waters-reclaiming-my-time/>.

continuously interrupt Mnuchin's rambling by stating, "reclaiming my time": a way for a member who has yielded to another member to take the time back while on the House floor. Waters went viral on the internet because Mnuchin's attempt to invalidate her by wasting her time was reflective of a society organized around invalidating the voices, experiences, and humanity of Black women. Waters' suppressing of Mnuchin's attempted misdirection by utilizing long-established rules to her advantage allowed this incident to be read by many as a powerful overturning and reworking of a system generally used to keep Black women invisible and marginalized.<sup>53</sup>

I use *reclaiming my time* as a theoretical intervention to describe the ways in which Black women artists in the 252 use Hip Hop to contend with the invisibility of their subjectivity, desires, and humanity. As stated earlier, Nicole alludes to Hip Hop in the 252 as male-structured when she says, "[t]here aren't a lot of us women producers, engineers, or studio owners."<sup>54</sup> Reclaiming my time points to Black women taking the rules of a male-centered structure and reworking them to respect and make visible the time Black women have invested in the continuous construction of Hip Hop. This is not to suggest that Black male rappers in the 252 hold power and/or take up space in ways that white men on the House floor do. It is pointing to the ways the Black community in the 252 has used Hip Hop to contend with structural forms of exclusion and how gendered narratives do not always make it to the forefront. Black women in the 252 have created spaces of visibility to disseminate Black feminist interventions. This is not to suggest that all aspects of 252 Black women rapper's aesthetic presentation and lyrical content is Black feminist-oriented, but that they have carved out a conceptual space to make Black women-centered statements when needed.

### *Flow*

In the 252, Black women artists have restructured trap music with a rough gritty cadence to carve out spaces of identity formation for women. There is a long tradition in Hip Hop of singing rappers, currently with trap rapper Future being one of the most notable.<sup>55</sup> Rappers primarily do this using auto-tune: a studio technique that can take a vocal and move it to the proper note and pitch.<sup>56</sup> Local male rappers in the 252 have appropriated this rapping technique. "Singing doesn't make you soft. It just shows you have more to offer as an artist,"<sup>57</sup> Shell, a male 252 artist, tells me while we discussed how

<sup>53</sup> Emba, "'Reclaiming My Time' Is Bigger Than Maxine Waters."

<sup>54</sup> Nicole suggested that the 252 did not have a lot of women who controlled the music-making process. She continued to suggest that you would have to go to urban cities such as Raleigh or Greensboro to link up with women producers and studio owners. This seems to be a spatial divide and a gendered one. Larger cities by virtue of having more people and a larger Hip Hop culture provide for me gendered engagement. Rurality seems to exacerbate gendered issues.

<sup>55</sup> David Drake, "The 50 Best Future Songs," *Complex*, January 5, 2018, <https://www.complex.com/music/the-best-future-songs/>.

<sup>56</sup> Josh Tyrangiel, "Auto-Tune: Why Pop Music Sounds Perfect," *Time Magazine*, February 5, 2009, <http://apumusictech.com/courses/mus496/files/2014/02/pop-music-autotune.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> Shell, interview by author, 2018.



widespread the practice of rappers singing on their songs has become.<sup>58</sup> “Do you sing on a lot of your songs?” I ask in an inquisitive manner to suggest that I did not think singing was soft. Unapologetically he says, “Yes. I add some vocals to most tracks.”<sup>59</sup> Shell has a humble demeanor and his glasses add an eclectic feel to his Black urban style of dress that incorporates cut-up jeans and Timberland boots. We sat in his living room as Shell attempted to negotiate his masculinity, while situating singing as a way to make aesthetic choices.

Given their marginalized position in mainstream commercial rap music, women face different creative and aesthetic expectations for their music than male rappers.<sup>60</sup> We often read folks’ performances partly through the ways their status characteristics such as race, gender, and class position them to us. This is seen in the 252 with women investing time in perfecting their flow. “I have had to create my own wave and I became happy with my sound. I got that trap soul flow,” Redd tells me as she makes the case that a woman’s delivery must be on point for her to be recognized.<sup>61</sup> This is extremely important given words take shape and meaning through the way they are aesthetically presented.

In oral tradition, there is no definitive text; rather, the significance of the text/lyrics is partly constructed in the way ideas are vocalized.<sup>62</sup> Rappers add meaning to their songs through their flow. A rapper’s flow has been described as dealing with the nature and frequency of the words they rhyme, the length of their sentences, and the frequency with which they repeat or construct new rhymes in a song.<sup>63</sup> I do not contend that there is a set flow that concretely distinguishes men and women in the 252, as flow greatly fluctuates from artist to artist. In an attempt to understand Southern Hip Hop flow, Elaine Richardson views language as history, culture, and lived experience and asks, “How do rappers display, on the one hand, an orientation to their situated, public role as performing products, and, on the other, that their performance is connected to discourses

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<sup>58</sup> Shell was speaking about his experience as a Black man and how people assumed someone like him would not like country music because of his appearance. He suggests that his identity is multidimensional. While he has learned the sax and wants to incorporate that into his music, he argues that the quality of his music lies in part in being able to express all the different aspects of himself. This is done through the aesthetic choices he makes in his songs.

<sup>59</sup> Shell, interview by author, 2018.

<sup>60</sup> A. Harmony, “Why Do We Have Different Expectations for Female Rappers?,” *Aside*, April 25, 2018, <https://ontheaside.com/music/why-do-we-have-different-expectations-for-female-rappers/>.

<sup>61</sup> After our interview I sent Redd a message asking if she would describe her flow. I listened to one of her albums on iTunes and could not put a finger on the sound. She responded by sending me her song “Believe Meh.” I assumed that she felt no label could accurately capture her flow, but rather the experience of it meant more than its characterization. She says that trap soul is the best way to describe it.

<sup>62</sup> This is documented by Claudia May, “‘Nothing Powerful like Words Spoken’ Black British ‘Femcees’ and the Sampling of Hip-Hop as a Theoretical Trope,” *Cultural Studies* 27, no. 4 (2013): 617, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2012.725751>; and Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the “Vulgar” Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 22.

<sup>63</sup> Martin Conner, “The Rapper’s Flow Encyclopedia,” *Genius*, February 28, 2013, <https://genius.com/posts/1669-The-rapper-s-flow-encyclopedia>.

of authenticity and resistance?"<sup>64</sup> In some ways a rapper's flow is situated at the nexus of using and making localized and personal aesthetic performances feel relatable and sincere to broader spaces.

Atlanta battle rapper Chef Trez in a Rap Grid interview finishes a segment of the interview, describing the relationship between his flow and his region by saying, "It's just a little, I don't know if you call it swag or sauce, a little finesse we have. It's just something about niggas from here, people from here, like star quality."<sup>65</sup> Building on Chef Trez, I argue that regional or gendered flow doesn't point to the same sound, but to the way the essence of the cadence of the artist's delivery reflects particular localized and gendered realities (real and assumed). A rapper's accent, word choice, and speed of delivery often positions them within our real and imagined understanding of a particular locality and this sound is mixed and mastered with an artist's own individual subjectivity. In the shows I attended and the songs I analyzed; women artists were less likely to rely heavily on singing with auto-tune. Women artists do use auto-tune to sing and style their rap flow, but women were more likely than men to aggressively deliver their lyrics than to use auto-tune to hold specific notes.

While in the field, I would often travel to shows with artists or friends because most shows were located about an hour and a half outside of the 252. Given the 252 is home to small rural counties, there are few venues that host Hip Hop-related events, or any musical events. One Saturday night, I'm preparing to travel to Raleigh, North Carolina to attend a show that is advertised as hosting the top local artists in eastern North Carolina. I notice a woman artist named Ivy on the flyer.<sup>66</sup> This was ethnographically important because until this point, I had to actively seek out Black women artists. This is not only a gendered issue, but a spatial one. With small populations and limited venues, the rural Hip Hop scene often had to physically converge in urban areas, adding a layer of complexity to locating 252 rappers. Prior to Ebony "Ivy Monae" Young's set, I approached her at the event with a warm greeting and she smiled and greeted me back politely, but her body language read uninterested in my conversation. My initial approach and interest in her music must have read as a generic pick-up line, which I assumed she got a lot because her responses seemed as if they were performed before. As I picked up on this, I slid more toward the research side of the native-researcher spectrum and started talking about my research project more specifically. "I'm completing my dissertation at Virginia Tech and I'm writing about Hip Hop in the 252. I would love to chat if you are free in the coming weeks," I say with an academic cadence

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<sup>64</sup> Elaine Richardson, *Hip Hop Literacies* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 1-2.

<sup>65</sup> *Rap Grid*, "The Story of Chef Trez: Changing Leagues, Health Issues and Remaining Humble," YouTube video, 19:19, May 31, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMimklRNevY>.

<sup>66</sup> Ivy's real name is Ebony Young

to ease the ideas that my interest was not sexual. “That’s dope. I would love to help,”<sup>67</sup> she says as she pulls out her phone so we can connect on Facebook.

Shortly after Ivy begins performing, the crowd becomes enchanted by her eloquently rhythmic structured bars and starts cheering. Her flow is difficult to capture in text, but it hit my soul the same as when I heard Biggie’s “Juicy” for the first time.<sup>68</sup> In a follow-up conversation weeks later, attempting to gauge how Ivy understood her flow, I ask: “How would you describe your rap delivery?” “My style as an artist is raw. My flow is more like the New York spitters,” Ivy says confidently.<sup>69</sup> In an interview on her YouTube channel advertising the Spoken Gunz Female Cypher, Ivy cites Fabolous and Biggie as two of her biggest influencers in developing her passion for Hip Hop culture and her flow.<sup>70</sup> Like a lot of artists, for Ivy poetry served as the genesis of their interest in rap. Bill, a 252 artist who is short in stature but has a big personality and undying love for his community, says, “I always wrote poems and stuff like that when I was younger. Something would happen like a death, I would write a poem to cheer the family up. Then it transitioned to music, but my grandma would tell me to write a book, because she wasn’t feeling the music.”<sup>71</sup> Rap is the way artists feel they could aesthetically speak their truth when other outlets did not vibe well with them. A lot of women artists, like Ivy, use a continuous free-flowing delivery style as this rhythm structures the vibe of the song around notions of seriousness and toughness. It is my contention that Black women artists in the 252 have relied less on singing their rhymes and harmonic adlibs, but instead have invested time in developing a precise rhythmic delivery that engages in an aggressive continuous flow as a way to highlight their mastery of rhyming to expand their aesthetic repertoire.

A few weeks after attending the event with Ivy, I rode with my friend James to support him at a Hip Hop showcase in Raleigh. A Hip Hop showcase is an open mic event where artists pay to perform. The winner receives a range of prizes that may include free studio time, appearances on local radio stations, songs being played on radio stations, cash prizes, and free marketing materials. As we walk into the venue, I noticed it is designed to have a basement vibe. The lights are dim, and it seems that on a Friday or Saturday night this would be a dope place to party. I am not sure if Hip Hop showcases

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<sup>67</sup> This was my first-time meeting Ivy in person, but I recognized her from her social media photos and her image was on the event flyer. Often in the field I did not consciously feel like a researcher, but when I approached women artists in dark venues filled with alcohol, I played more of the researcher role to make my intentions well known. This impacts the texture of data collected, where I am sure my formality shapes the way in which Ivy and other women artists engaged me.

<sup>68</sup> Notorious B.I.G., “Juicy,” *Ready to Die*, Bad Boy/Arista Records, 1994.

<sup>69</sup> When talking about flow, Ivy says that North Carolina’s flow is pulled from New York and Atlanta sounds. She contends that North Carolina artists use these flows as a template to construct their own regional sound. She positions herself as one of the artists who is on the New York side of the spectrum.

<sup>70</sup> Spoken Gunz Female Cypher is the first all-woman rap cypher in North Carolina. Ivy Monae, “@IvyMonae Takes You Behind the Scenes of the Spoken Gunz Female Cypher!,” YouTube video, 4:47, December 7, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqaFTq2jfOA&feature=youtu.be&a=>.

<sup>71</sup> Bill, interview by author, 2018.

are inherently social-networking events, but at the three I attended, for about an hour prior to the start of the event, artists and their supporters exchanged social media information, connected about upcoming shows, and shared drinks. While the audience was around forty people with about six women, there was only one woman performer. Kay, the sole woman performer, took the stage with blue braids and a versatile flow. She began her set with a heavy hitting delivery, similar to that of Ivy. However, on her second song she slowed it up with a more sensual vibe. As Lisa stated in a previous conversation, “women do more girly rap too.”<sup>72</sup> This is not me contending that to be sensual is inherently a feminine style, but rather working within and outside the assumptions of a gender binary that has socially labeled some behaviors masculine and other feminine. Kay started her performance with a precise, rhythmic, hard-hitting flow and it highlighted that she had mastered rap delivery. After solidifying her place as a “legitimate” artist, she engaged in other aesthetic presentations of her music.

Rashad Shabazz in “Masculinity and the Mic” documents how Black men have been prevented from adequately developing masculinity within public spaces, which has produced a compensatory form of masculinity in regards to control over the public domain within Black communal spaces.<sup>73</sup> Within this process of remaking public space, masculinity becomes linked to the mic, but Shabazz insists Black women have always disrupted the uneven geography of Hip Hop. Black women artists in the 252 have mastered the technical components of flow and used it to carve out spaces of visibility within trap music. They have *reclaimed their time* by learning the particularities of trap music’s structure and delivery to situate their selves not just as participants of trap music, but to make visible their mastery of it.

#### *Gendered Double Entendre*

The content of Black women’s songs is often similar to that of the men, however, their precise aggressive flow paired with gendered double entendres have been used as stylized tools to make their songs socially identifiable as a Black woman construction. While both Black women and men are continuously constructing the trap genre, it is in the way in which songs are styled that we see differently gendered approaches. Black women in the 252 within this co-construction of trap music with men have used gendered poetic tools within trap music to carve out spaces of visibility for rural Black women. Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs suggest the way language is aesthetically employed through formal patterning and symbolic content of texts plays a central role in

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<sup>72</sup> When talking to Lisa about the music women make, she was making the case women had a broader range. On one hand, women rapped about street life just like men and on the other women rapped about things particular to women. While men and women both rap, discuss, and enjoy themes of love and sensuality Lisa alludes to how these topics have been inaccurately positioned as feminine within society’s gender binary.

<sup>73</sup> Rashad Shabazz, “Masculinity and the Mic: Confronting the Uneven Geography of Hip-Hop,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 21, no. 3 (2014): 370–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.781016>.

constructing community's social reality.<sup>74</sup> The linguistic contours of Hip Hop and African American Vernacular English have provided Black women and men a conceptual space to deconstruct hegemonic sensibilities of the English language. Black women in the 252 use poetic devices, particularly gendered double entendres, to articulate Black women-centered sentiments. Centering Black women rappers' style in the 252 is to engage in what Gwendolyn Pough calls "bringing wreck."<sup>75</sup> Bringing wreck are those moments when Black women's discourses disrupt dominant masculine discourses and impact the way we understand women and/or Hip Hop in the public imaginary.

Reclaiming Black women's time and bringing wreck in the 252 have been met with pushback from local male artists and engineers. Speaking explicitly about women's issues has been seen as problematic and unmarketable by Black male artists and producers. The music-making process has been described as a network of misogyny and when Black women destabilize that oppression through lyrics it has drawn the ire of male artists. In a phone conversation I had with Nicole, she states:

A lot of guys don't like when you talk positive about women, and I don't understand that. Why wouldn't you want us to talk positive about ourselves or uplift each other? Because ya'll help each other all the time [said in a manner so I would know that I was included] or put out a positive message for males. But when it comes to a woman ya'll think that's crazy or too different. And ask us, 'Why would you do that? No one's going to listen to that.' I remember one guy told me, 'guys aren't going to listen to that or take that serious because you are talking too positive about women.' And I'm like 'what?' I'm like, 'that is ridiculous.' For you to say that to me and you are supposed to be one of these people that is in the music industry hard and well known. You would think they would like that women are helping each other, uplifting each other. Even though the song had a positive message too, it was a catchy song.<sup>76</sup>

Walter DeKeseredy has previously documented how men are equipped with and use powerful discursive moves to delegitimize the validity and reception of any form of feminist rhetoric.<sup>77</sup> Men in the 252 are not monolithic in the way they engage with women artists. Oak, a 252 rapper, actor, and painter, states, when I ask generally about women artists in the 252, "We have the Cardi B's and a few conscious women. We need more women to really tell how it is."<sup>78</sup> For Oak, the power of music comes from its ability to showcase the truth. Nicole speaks to her experience of having her pro-Black women lyrics met with rhetorical comments centered on taste and viability. However, Black

<sup>74</sup> Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs, "Poetics and Performances as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (1990): 60.

<sup>75</sup> Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>76</sup> Nicole believes that part of the power of Hip Hop is its ability to uplift communities. She talked about being inspired by women artists, one being Ivy Monae, and their ability to inspire their community. She continued to argue that she does not believe some men really rock with these songs. She believed men could not see their selves in songs she conceptualized as "speaking positive about women."

<sup>77</sup> Walter S. DeKeseredy, "Tactics of the Antifeminist Backlash against Canadian National Woman Abuse Surveys," *Violence Against Women* 5, no. 11 (November 1999): 1260, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778019922183363>.

<sup>78</sup> Oak, interview by author, 2018.

women artists also make gendered statements. Their lyrics are not generally always explicitly about women's liberation. But Black women artists transform masculine or gender-neutral statements with Black woman-centered analogies and metaphors to reclaim their space in Hip Hop and to bring wreck. To frame this conversation on women using style to carve out spaces of visibility, I turn to Ivy's song "Roll in Peace":

*I just want to roll in peace, but bitches be thinking I'm weak,  
Cuz I stay cooking in every kitchen I walk in, but I'm never in beef.*<sup>79</sup>

In this excerpt, Ivy is engaging in a rap scheme contending that she is tough or gangsta. She engages in this scheme in an extremely gendered manner. "Roll in peace" alludes to a double entendre from rapper Kodak Black suggesting she can't just chill in her city because everyone knows her or has something to say; and also alludes to not being able to comfortably roll a blunt because of police activity. "But, bitches be thinking I'm weak," refers to men and women assuming she is soft. The following line, "Cuz I stay cooking in every kitchen I walk in," is a gendered double entendre that is a play on the idea that a woman's place is the kitchen, but she is simultaneously referencing cooking crack. She finishes by stating "but I'm never in beef," which for her is a gendered double entendre letting us know I'm in the kitchen, but I'm not handling food; and, they think I'm weak because I don't engage in beef (prolonged arguments) with anyone. Many Black women artists in the 252 utilize musical content that is trap centered, but these artists destabilize the masculine undertones by styling the content with gendered aesthetics. The songs on the surface may be talking about drugs or guns, but by poetically styling the song with gendered references, the vibe of the song resonates with Black women sensibilities. In repositioning the importance of content and privileging the stylistic moves Black women make, we can see how they reclaim what has been socially defined as Black male spaces and themes.

Hip Hop is about keeping it real and women artists add gendered flava to this process. Jaz in her song "Rock" says:

*I was serving trying to stack, because my nigga he locked,  
Made sure he had some bread when he came up out the box,  
I was standing right there when the case got dropped,  
He was looking for all his homies off the block,  
They was suppose to be his brother, so why the love stop,  
Ain't nobody want him around, they said that nigga too hot,  
That ain't even matter because I was right there.*<sup>80</sup>

Jaz narrates how her boyfriend's homies, who were supposedly down for him, forgot about him when he was locked up. She documents how she made a way to help him financially, when no one else could or wanted to by the use of a gendered double

<sup>79</sup> Ebony "Ivy Monae" Young, "Roll in Peace (Remix)," <https://youtu.be/IBegdVFRXkw>.

<sup>80</sup> I was introduced to Jaz and her music through TDot, a local Hip Hop videographer. She has a heavy-hitting flow that reminds the listener of Lil' Kim.

entendre. She says, “Made sure he had some bread when he came up out the box,” alluding to the stability that comes with money and a home-cooked meal. She positions herself as real and genuine in comparison to the males from the block. Realness and authenticity are central organizing frames in the Hip Hop world.<sup>81</sup> In mainstream society and Hip Hop, a girlfriend is generally constructed as secondary in status to the boyfriend or thought of as a sidekick. In this rhetorical scheme, by appropriating Hip Hop’s huge emphasis on realness and staying true, Jaz positions the girlfriend as an active player in that process, even when male friends cannot.

V, a Black woman artist I became familiar with through 252 videographer TDot, has a precise and aggressive flow that places her among top up-and-coming Hip Hop artists in North Carolina. I extensively listened to her discography during my fieldwork. Her work frequently incorporates gendered double entendres, with her song “Roofie” stating:

*Touchdown nigga, like I’m about to run a play,  
Threw it back twice like I’m fucking Hardaway,  
Legend in my league, I watch him overdose,  
I put it on him so good that nigga comatose.*

Here she uses a sports scheme that is styled with double entendres and drug references to use her sexuality to position her as important in the trap world. In this football scheme “touchdown” is a reference to landing in a new city. “Threw it back twice like I’m f\*cking Hardaway” is a gendered double entendre alluding to rhythmically moving her butt during sex or a sexual encounter and slamming a dunk in a basketball game. “Legend in my league, I watch him overdose, I put it on him so good that nigga comatose,” pulls from the trap structure by organizing lyrical content around drug themes. V is suggesting that her sexual prowess is similar to that of drugs, where too much can leave you faded.

Travis Harris builds on the likes of KRS-One and Gwendolyn D. Pough in contending that Hip Hop is more than an aesthetic, being a phenomenon and way of living that extends beyond space and time and the music that is heard.<sup>82</sup> These artists are taking the contextual structure of trap and using it to live their truth in ways that cannot neatly be captured by normative American readings of Blackness and Hip Hop. Black women artists in the 252 are developing a localized identity through the gendered stylized choices they make in their participation in this global field of engagement.<sup>83</sup> The way they choose to stylize their music is more than the product that becomes created; it allows us to see how they actively position their selves within a global diasporic process. In reclaiming their time by creating spaces that uphold the visibility of Black women to position the importance of the time Black women put into the construction of trap music,

<sup>81</sup> Mickey Hess, “Hip-Hop Realness and the White Performer,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22, no. 5 (December 2005): 375, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180500342878>.

<sup>82</sup> Harris, “Can It Be Bigger Than Hip Hop?,” 20–21.

<sup>83</sup> Viewing participating in Hip Hop as participation in global phenomenon.

identity is constantly constructed through the negotiation of a particular kind of experience. I am not contending that taking what are generally conceptualized as masculine themes and styling them with an aggressive flow and gendered language is the only or the best way for Black women in the 252 to assert womanhood. There is a historical legacy in Hip Hop where Black women become popular because of how close they stay to dominant masculine discourses.<sup>84</sup> However, I am suggesting that: (1) notions of realness, authenticity, and drugs may be socially viewed as masculine themes in commercial Hip Hop, but are co-constructed by Black women; and (2) stylized references that incorporate experiences of Black womanhood create a vibe that allows us to know Black women in a different way. The content of a song can be centered on drugs, guns, or any other street-culture theme, but when Black women incorporate gendered stylized forms of presentation, songs are experienced differently.

### Conclusion

Rural Black American women have been rendered invisible within Hip Hop scholarship, and to center their Hip Hop aesthetic social processes is to develop a broader view of Hip Hop and Black woman subjectivity. Engaging with Black women trap music from a Black feminist framework that views Black women as epistemological agents allows us to think through the larger structural critiques and identity negotiations occurring within the music.<sup>85</sup> Trap feminism embodies the trap spirit, one that recognizes making a way within structures that are organized to produce your oppression oftentimes requires us to think beyond traditional standards of American legality, and to deconstruct gender hierarchies. With this tradition in mind, I aimed to view trap music beyond its structural content engaging with drugs and violence, and instead take seriously the aesthetic negotiations that occur within the genre.

Black women Hip Hop artists are not a monolithic group in the 252 and possess different styles, desires, and subjectivities. This research does not aim to tell *the* story about Black women Hip Hop in northeast North Carolina, but rather to tell one of the many narratives that can come from a culturally vibrant community when we view artists as creative epistemological agents. Precise structured flow and gendered double entendres are positioned as two aesthetic techniques to contend with the misogynistic organization of Hip Hop. While Hip Hop is viewed as inherently masculine, women have developed a more precise rhythmic flow to make visible their rapping contributions. This is similar to the way Waters understood the floor procedure in more nuanced ways than Mnuchin. Black women in the 252 have stylized their flow with gendered double entendres to reclaim their time and space within the trap music tradition.

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<sup>84</sup> Andreana Clay, "Keepin' it Real: Black Youth, Hip-Hop Culture, and Black Identity," *American Behavioral Scientist* 46, no. 10 (June 2003): 1349, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764203046010005>.

<sup>85</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 269.



While these Black women are creating a space for their selves within contemporary Hip Hop discourse, they are also constructing rural Black women identity. These women are providing new representations and modes of identification for rural Black women. Black Hip Hop aesthetic representation in the mainstream is connected with the urban Black experience, but these women are providing young rural Black people with new frames of reference to discover themselves. They provide new possibilities for Black women subjectivity.

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## **It's Complicated: Black Hip Hop Feminist Art Commentary on US Democracy**

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*Camea Davis and Isis Kenney*

### **Abstract**

Part narrative reflection, part artistic installation, this work contemplates the tensions and the possibilities of Hip Hop culture, Black womanhood, and American democracy in the United States. The significance of this work is twofold: (1) The authors use Hip Hop feminism to develop a framework for Hip Hop activism as a public pedagogy on US politics, and (2) they provide commentary on US democracy from a Black Hip Hop feminist perspective through art. This article contributes an argument for a creative ontological space from which Black women can reimagine a justice-centered US democracy.



**Women Warriors**

Figure 1. Isis Kenney, *Women Warriors*, digital art, New York, 2014.

Dear US Democracy,  
I am searching for liberty in you  
like hunting for gray hair at age 30  
You are dye, death, massacre,  
mascara, smoky-eyed romance  
Something alluring about your  
promises and proposals  
I want to love you  
But  
You a cheater

- Camea Davis, "Open Letter to  
Democracy"

Traditionally, US democracy does not speak to, for, or about Black women, but somehow US democracy has always been about Black women; hence, it is complicated. In the age of digital profiles where relationship statuses are a type of social currency, "it's complicated" characterizes a relationship riddled with contradictions. We use the metaphor of a complicated romantic relationship to argue for an abundant ontological space that holds the tensions and the possibilities of Black women's existence within the US democracy. Hip Hop feminism theoretically grounds our use of Hip Hop arts activism as an analytic to explore themes of Black womanhood and US democracy. Hip Hop feminism allows us to make sense of the atrocities carried out under the guise of democracy alongside the liberating potential of a justice-driven US democracy. Hip Hop feminism grants us permission to exist in multiplicities as artists, citizens, activists, scholars, and Black women that resist injustice while imagining the empowering potential of US democracy.

### **Allow Us to Introduce Ourselves**

We are two artists, a poet and a visual artist, collaborating to offer an artistic analysis that argues for a creative, ontological space, where Black women can create paths toward liberation in the often-oppressive US democratic system. I, Camea Davis, employ spoken word as an analytic tool to read the world and to teach the world how to



understand my communities and my identity. As a qualitative researcher, I apply spoken word poetry as a culturally relevant, interpretive research tool. I, Isis Kenney, am a Hip Hop visual artist who promotes the value and beauty of Hip Hop while telling stories. As two Black women of African American descent living in the United States, we use poetry and visual art to explore the tensions and possibilities of our tangled relationships with democracy.

### **Artivism (Art as Activism) Analytic**

Art is a sense-making tool by which artists reimage, interpret, and challenge the world as they experience it. Hip Hop arts, such as spoken word poetry and collage art, are artivism in the sense used by artist-activists to describe diverse forms of art that are socially engaged, political, and intended to effect change.<sup>1</sup> Artists and arts-based researchers propose that artivism makes unique and valid contributions to civic discourse and can have political consequences.<sup>2</sup>

Black people in the US have a long history of engaging in art-making specifically designed to catalyze sociopolitical change. Enslaved people used art-making for daily survival. They created and sung Negro Spirituals. The enslaved also intricately produced textiles using African artistic symbols to communicate complex messages in the stitches and patterns of quilts.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, there are numerous Black arts movements that coincide with protest movements including Antebellum and Abolition art-making, the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, and Hip Hop Arts, to name a few. Many protest movements use art as a tool of social persuasion to broadcast the experiences and critiques held by the oppressed. Topics often reflect social and political tensions relevant to local and global society.

For example, in the poster “Only on the Bones of the Oppressors” (1969), Emory Douglas, American graphic designer and former Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party, portrayed Black militancy and self-defense to amplify the message of the Black Panther Party’s 1966 Ten-Point Program (see Figure 2).

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Felshin, ed. *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Leavy, *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999).

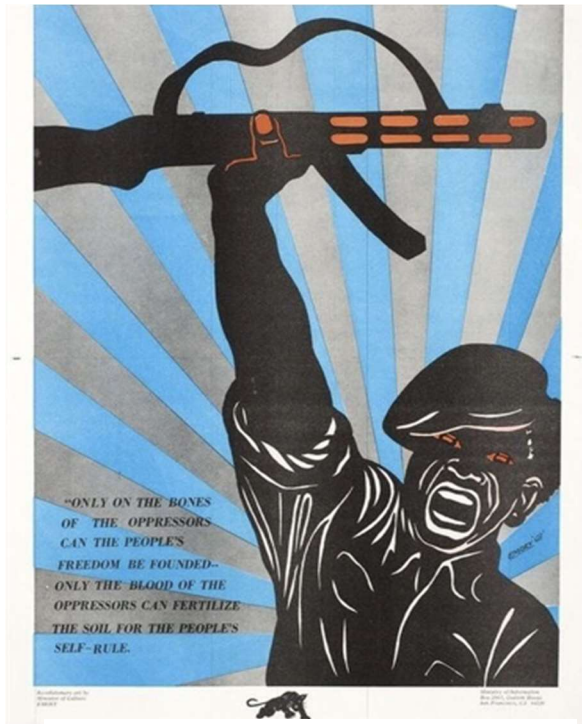


Figure 2. Emory Douglas, "Only on the Bones of the Oppressors." Poster, 1969. Collection of Oakland Museum of



Figure 3. Elizabeth Catlett, *Phillis Wheatley*, bronze and wood, New York, 1973. Collection of National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Similarly, in the sculpture *Phillis Wheatley*, Mexican American graphic artist and sculptor Elizabeth Catlett portrayed an idealized image of Black intellect and feminism (see Figure 3). The rendering of Phillis Wheatley, the first African American woman to publish a book of poetry, counters the degradation of Wheatley's literary achievement. During Wheatley's life, White elites found it unfathomable that an enslaved African woman could actually write literature.

Hip Hop activism similarly participates in a democratic urge by amplifying the voices and images of Black and Brown communities who are often denied the benefits promised by US democracy. Nina Felshin, editor of *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Arts Activism*, argues activism is a response to "the democratic urge to give voice and visibility to the disenfranchised."<sup>4</sup> Likewise, youth create Hip Hop to amplify and center their voices and visibility through language and images they have created themselves. As activist and social justice educator Bettina Love notes that urban youth utilize Hip Hop arts as tools to engage with their sociopolitical contexts, respond to social injustices, and thereby join democratic discourse about living while urban and Black in America.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Hip Hop feminist and critical race scholar Whitney A. Peoples has articulated, "[f]rom its inception, hip-hop has represented resistance to social

<sup>4</sup> Felshin, *But Is It Art?*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Bettina L. Love, "Urban Storytelling: How Storyboarding, Moviemaking, and Hip-Hop-Based Education can Promote Students' Critical Voice," *English Journal* 103, no. 5 (2014): 58.

marginalization, and later, resistance to and commentary on the political and economic oppression that makes social marginalization possible.”<sup>6</sup> By centering urban living and Blackness as pivotal to the discourse of US democracy, Hip Hop art exemplifies activism.

### **Hip Hop Feminism: Activism as Public Pedagogy**

In 1999, cultural critic and journalist Joan Morgan coined the term Hip Hop feminism to theorize a feminism that could allow Black women to explore the grays between the presumed Black and white dichotomy of sexism and feminism.<sup>7</sup> Hip Hop feminism contemplates how Black women can resist the detriment of misogyny yet still find joy and pleasure in rap music that can be misogynistic. Since Morgan’s demand for a feminism not restricted to binaries, scholars have applied Hip Hop feminism to a variety of subjects.<sup>8</sup>

Important for this analysis is Peoples’ argument that a central goal of Hip Hop feminism is the uplift of women through the dissemination of political education. Political education and institution-building include activism and artivism. Gwendolyn D. Pough, professor of Women’s and Gender Studies, defines public pedagogy as a mechanism that brings issues into the public sphere combined with political education and organization.<sup>9</sup> Peoples expands this definition by arguing, “[p]ublic pedagogy is a means of knowledge production and transmission that draws its resources from both inside and outside of traditional sites of knowledge production and dispersal.”<sup>10</sup> In this expanded definition, the lives and locations of Black women become educational sites that generate vital personal and political knowledge. We use this aspect of Hip Hop feminism to imagine Hip Hop artivism as public pedagogy.

Art activism serves as public pedagogy in three key ways:

1. *Action - Art-making as activist*

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<sup>6</sup> Whitney A. Peoples, “‘Under Construction’: Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges between Black Second-Wave and Hip-Hop Feminisms.” *Meridians* 8, no. 1 (2008): 23.

<sup>7</sup> Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Together with Morgan, Gwendolyn D. Pough and shani jamila have postulated a Hip Hop feminism as a response to second-wave Black feminism. Hip Hop feminism intervenes in the debates on misogyny and Hip Hop by arguing that Hip Hop can also provide a space for empowering Black women and girls that they can then use to critique racism and negative stereotypes of Black female artists and Black women and girls more generally. See Gwendolyn D. Pough, “Love Feminism, But Where’s my Hip Hop?,” in *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Feminism*; and shani jamila, “Can I Get a Witness? Testimony from a Hip Hop Feminist,” in *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Feminism*, ed. Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman (New York: Seal Press, 2002), 382–94.

<sup>9</sup> Gwendolyn D. Pough, “‘Do the Ladies Run This...?’ Some Thoughts on Hip Hop Feminism,” in *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, ed. Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 232–42.

<sup>10</sup> Peoples, “Under Construction,” 32.

2. *Becoming - Art-making as a process of*
3. *Tool - Art as a tool to read the world; in this case, a way to make sense of US democracy's entanglement with Black womanhood.*

### **Elements of the Framework Defined**

We have come to understand activism operating in three ways.

1. Action - Art-making as activist

Art-making is an activist action when art making instigates political/change oriented discourse, evokes deeper thinking about an issue, or alters the affective. Activism provides counter-narratives to dominate worldviews by prioritizing minoritized perspectives. It often puts these perspectives in conversation with broader themes and allows the creator and the audience to engage in affective experiences that can instigate other types of movement building actions. Art-making as activist action centers the work the artist does as one that progresses social justice.

2. Becoming - Art-making as a process of

Art-making for the artist is an introspective process that we understand as becoming. The various types of art-making processes allow artists to engage in creation processes that foster deeper self-clarity and the generation of ideas. Furthermore, a Black Hip Hop feminist perspective acknowledges that for Black women being is political, thus art as a tool of becoming can assist Black women in doing the political work of resisting all that seeks to shrink us small. Audre Lorde famously explained, "Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity for our existence. It forms the quality of light from which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action."<sup>11</sup> Thus, the art-making process aids Black women in fortifying our spirits and clarifying our thinking to then go and do other actions.

3. Tool - Art as a tool to read the world; in this case, a way to make sense of US democracy's entanglement with Black womanhood.

The products of art-making (the collage, painting, sculpture, or poem) are tools of interpretation for audiences to analyze the themes of the artwork and how it engages its subject matter. Artwork offers a perspective from which audiences can analyze for their own sense-making. Art as a tool is different from art making as activist action and art making as becoming because it centers the audiences' uses of the art, not the artist's. The audiences determine the extent to which the artwork functions as a tool.

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<sup>11</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 36.

## Artwork Samples

### *Visual Art Example: Hip Hop Collage*

I, Isis Kenny, do not have a systematic creative process. I watch the news. I read. I see the Black community does not have many platforms for honest discussions that move us forward. I get mad, sad, and motivated. Then I make art. I make art that presents new artistic styles through Black feminist perspectives on Hip Hop as fine art. My work is an examination of Hip Hop culture, politics, and the thinking behind it. I use contemporary issues as the common denominator of the US national landscape. Altering them is a way of questioning the attitudes, fears, and unwritten rules.

My early work included collage on canvas using my extensive Source Magazine collection to tell rarely told stories of triumph, reflection, and bravery within the Hip Hop artist community. I transitioned to doing digital, comic book, and collage art that merged US politics and Hip Hop culture. When I trademarked Hip Hop Fine Art, my attorney told me she thought the term was an oxymoron. While this racist comment did hurt, I did not allow it to stop me. Hip Hop has always been fine art to me.



Figure 4. Isis Kenney, *Women Warriors*, digital art, New York, 2014.

The significance of this piece is Black women are liberating themselves. This artwork depicts a woman with a key freeing a shackled woman countering the traditional damsel in distress narrative. This image depicts Black women saving each other. This art also contradicts the typical troupes of competition between women and men as saviors by showing women sharing kindness, love, and liberation. This artwork functions as a tool to help others see the importance of highlighting Black women supporting and empowering each other. Through sisterly love and acceptance, Black women can develop individual and collective power.



Isis Kenney, *Me Too*. Digital art, Atlanta, Georgia, 2018.

Black Women have pioneered cultural movements fighting for women’s rights, prison reform, and community services among many others. Yet, Black women go unrecognized until White women co-opt their efforts. The “Me Too” Movement was pioneered by Tarana Burke. The foundation she built paved the way for women across the globe to speak their truth on abuse and injustice. I created this artwork to celebrate Tarana Burke. In this portrayal, she is a force taking down misogynistic mentalities. Her strength is so powerful even galactic systems cannot take her down. This artwork functions as a tool to help others see the power of Black woman leadership facilitate others finding their place and voice.

The imagery of Abrams as a single, educated Black woman, with natural hair and African physical features, defies the traditional standards of what has been deemed acceptable for Black women in politics. Stacey Abrams is a US American politician, lawyer, and author who served in the Georgia House of Representatives. She is rebellious by her mere existence, refusing the European standards of what is acceptable for Black women to be seen as beautiful or taken seriously. I created *Reflection of Excellence* to show the powerful impact of Representative Abrams staying true to Black womanhood. This artwork functions as a tool to help others see the importance of Black culture and



Isis Kenney, *Reflections of Excellence*  
Stacey Abrams. Digital art, Atlanta,  
Georgia, 2019.

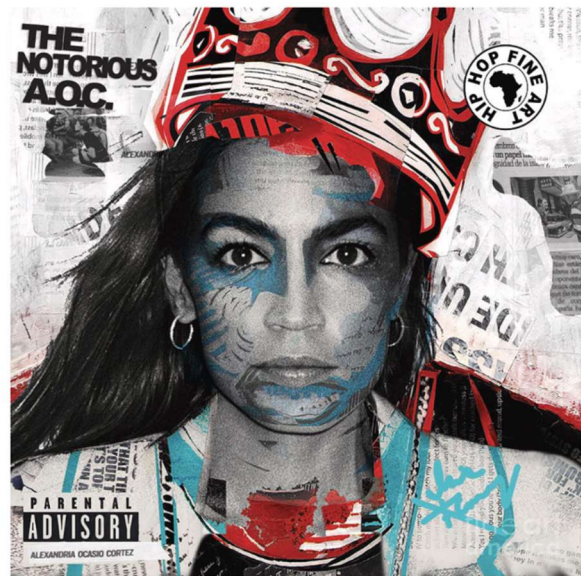
self-acceptance. The rebellious act of staying true to self is an act of self-love, love for God, and the true embodiment of excellence.



Isis Kenney, *The Ankh*. Digital art, Atlanta, Georgia, 2018.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is a rising young star and a member of the US House of Representatives from New York City. Her youth, passion, ambition, and voice have caused much controversy. The concepts derived from The Notorious B.I.G. – Duets: The Final Chapter album cover. I highlight Representative Ocasio-Cortez's strength using an iconic Hip Hop album cover from a feminist perspective. I visually made the King of New York (B.I.G.) into the Queen of New York. The news articles collaged in this art show her interactions with young people of color. This artwork functions as a tool to help others see the importance of valuing the strength of women of color without intimidation. Women of color in power can be notorious, righteous, and work within the system to make a change.

This art is a combination of comic art and Egyptian culture. The ankh is a symbol, traditionally used to symbolize women and life, yet there are no women as the key figures of this piece. It shows the fight of the Black man to save the ankh, to protect the vital life force, and all the obstacles keeping him from it. This artwork functions as a tool to help others see that Black men must also fight for the freedom of Black Women. It shows that Black women are needed but not seen. To have true women's rights, men must value women and fight on behalf of women.



Isis Kenney, *The Notorious A.O.C.* Digital art, Atlanta, Georgia, 2019.

## Visual Artwork Analysis

I interpret this collection by considering: How is this artwork an example of an activist action? What does this artwork do as a performative? What was worthwhile about the art-making process? These images of Hip Hop Fine Art, by documenting contemporary issues and constructing imaginative portraits, are examples of activism. By using digital art, I collage imagery that captures icons, themes, and stories familiar to the Black Hip Hop community. My art invokes dialogue that can instigate movement-building action.

Making political art that speaks on contemporary issues has helped me as an artist fully understand the pattern and the hamster wheel Black people in the US continue to run on in an attempt to create a democracy that serves us. The art-making process has shown me that Black portraits are valued, but Black issues in art are still misunderstood and questioned. Too often, the Black body is framed as iconic and gallery-worthy, but only if the images are void of the stories of oppression the Black body endures. It is imperative to document Black people's struggles and history, not just Black bodies.

This artwork forced me to engage more deeply with digital art-making tools capable of keeping pace with the fast-changing current trends in US politics and Hip Hop culture. I battle with public opinions of my artwork and question if it is too educational, too Black, too feminine, or too powerful. Additionally, this work revealed to me that I am optimistic about US democracy. The art-making process is an evolutionary process in which I evolve as a woman. The more I continue to create, the more I can see, I am a Black woman with a love affair for democracy.

This artwork serves as a type of public pedagogy that teaches Black history, contemporary Black culture, and Black permanence. This artwork exists between archival visual representation and mythic futures of what could be for Black people in the US and our complicated relationship with democracy. These recurring themes of fighting with democracy, fighting for democracy, and fighting to be included in a democracy deserve representation on gallery walls. By visually documenting Black women's strength and perseverance, I urge audiences to investigate themselves and imagine new futures.

### *Poetry*

I build on the work of poetic inquiry scholars who use poetry as a qualitative research tool. This means seeing poetry as research that responds to critical inquiries that seek alternate ways of knowing and accessing subjugated voices. Furthermore, the history of poetic inquiry allows us to understand it as a methodology developed by feminists and multiculturalists to include the voices of narrators, participants, and diverse researchers in the US during the 1990s. Poetic inquiry consists of a rigorous inductive research process characterized by constructing poetry. Leading poetic methodologist, Monica Prendergast, has grouped research poetry into three categories:



researcher-voiced, participant-voiced, or literature-voiced.<sup>12</sup> The voice of the poem indicates where the ideas in the poem originated and the poet-researcher employs extensive thematic coding of the data collected to uncover the poem in the existing data set.

The research findings are presented in poetic form, which helps readers access the subtexts that shape human experience and democratize the use and understanding of the findings.<sup>13</sup> I expand traditional poetic inquiry by drawing on critical race theory, Black performance aesthetics, and African American Vernacular English.<sup>14</sup> The poem presented next is a literature-voiced poem based on a review of literature about the Black American experience with democracy and my unresolved desire to see democracy enacted justly. Following the aforementioned elements of activism as an analytic, I interpret this poem by considering: How is this poem an example of an activist action? What does this poem do as a performative? What was worthwhile about the writing process?

*Open Letter to Democracy*

Searching for architect words to sculpt you into my theory of being  
 Putting too much effort into discovering you  
 Wanting to unearth the lies of your myth  
 You are monarchy  
 I want to be a mother; you a bastard  
 The worst kind  
 like my daddy says, "A thief with no one to call home, can't even sleep on the kitchen  
 floor" of the sins you've committed  
 A hoarder and a whore  
 Trading what's sacred for commodity  
 Blind and unsure, disregard what's holy and worthy  
 You are grave, yet truth

Mirror too

Rated R history ancestors were murdered for remembering  
 You are dis-embodiment our memories  
 Carving lies that echo our experiences but speak nothing of us  
 Coded language and blackout dates forgotten and forged for government position  
 "HOPE" a bowtie noose around our necks  
 Looks good, sales well, flies off the memory easy as moniker for a future that erases us

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<sup>12</sup> Monica Prendergast, Carl Leggo, and Pauline Sameshima, eds., *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences* (Rotterdam, Netherlands/Boston: Sense, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Leavy, *Method Meets Art*.

<sup>14</sup> Camea Davis, "Sampling Poetry, Pedagogy, and Protest to Build Methodology: Critical Poetic Inquiry as Culturally Relevant Method," *Qualitative Inquiry* (November 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419884978>.

We be graphite  
Smear and smudge  
You mirage us some multicultural multiplicity type of beautiful  
Then leave us antiquated and stuck on the sink of our emotions

You shiny dollar, coin cool to the undamaged fruit  
The manufactured project of us that got out  
Designed then picked for display  
Minds lacking conviction of the seed or root  
We all GMO  
Less organic, less shit and stink, more manure  
But shit makes things grow  
Provocative and imperialist  
Dominant and dangerous  
I am searching for liberty in you like hunting for gray hair at age 30  
You are dye, death, massacre, mascara, smoky-eyed romance  
Something alluring about your proposals and promises

### **I want to love you**

But you a cheater  
A one-night stand  
With no forewarning or apology  
Not text next morning  
Just empty bed and open wound  
You are no solution  
Just a castle of possibilities the tide will come and wash away  
As always  
Still,

### **I want to love you**

I want to love you like every dump girl too smart for her own lust  
I want you  
Want you to need me the way I was taught to need you

But

My momma and 'nem fore-mother-scholars done told me to let you leave  
To build no temple in your honor  
To let you go and use all this dust and dirt you leave behind to momma my own  
masterpiece  
Not as bone of your bone but because it has ALWAYS been MINE  
Everything you stole and made residue of was MINE from the beginning

You Houdini-ed me into believing I was the prop  
When I have always been the magic!

Signed,

*Black Tomorrow*

This poem is an example of activism because it evokes deeper thinking about the historic racial and economic disparities that impact the contemporary enactment of US democracy. The poem uses metaphor to name poverty, revisionist histories that mute or erase racial terror against Black people, economic and educational experiments designed to serve a select set of exceptional Black people, and political campaigns full of false promises targeted at Black communities. For example, the line “rated R history ancestors were murdered for remembering” refers to the ways domestic terrorism against Black people has been intentionally written out of the US imagination to uphold the mantra of freedom and justice for all.<sup>15</sup> This stanza continues with a description of how anti-Blackness in American history and politics continues to erase racial terror pivotal to the Black US experience by “carving lies that echo our experiences but speaking nothing of us” and using “coded language” that “flies off the memory easy as moniker for a future that erases us.” These lines reference Eddie Glaude’s argument in his book *Democracy in Black* that even Black US politicians, like the beloved President Barack Obama, signify a performative Blackness but ultimately do little to advance the tangible access to the promises of democratic living for poor Black people in the US.

Even so, the poem’s speaker admits, “you are ... truth / Mirror too.” This line suggests a flawed democracy reflects something about Black America as well. The enactment of legal, health, and educational policies that suggest some White rich lives are more worthy than poor Black lives is a mirror for all persons living in the nation to see what we have permitted and helped create. The poem continues, “I am searching for liberty in you” and “I want to love you like every girl too smart for her own lust / I want you.” These lines refer to Black American’s desire to access governing that respect and love Black life. The poet evokes the troupe of a naive young woman coming of age and longing for a love interest that women kinfolk warn her to let alone. Still she pursues the love interest to her own detriment. The mention of “the way I was taught to need you” points to the ways in which respect for and faith in US democracy is taught to Black people in the US through nationalism in schooling, media, and popular culture.

The writing process for this provided clarity on my own entangled thoughts and feelings of frustration, hope, and disappointment about democracy. Through writing, I named a desire to see US democracy live up to its creed. Writing this poem also helped me name the agony resulting from hopefulness rooted in disillusionment. For example,

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<sup>15</sup> Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Broadway Books, 2017), 9.

it was painful reading Glaude's analysis of President Barack Obama's legislation and the coded language in his speeches where he repeatedly made clear he had no Black agenda, but instead all his policies were for the broad landscape of multicultural America. In my experience, Black America embraced, loved, and supported President Barack Obama as *our Black President*. Therefore, his rejection of the Black community mirrors the continual theme of anti-Blackness in US politics and democracy as a system.

This open love-hate letter to democracy ends with the speaker's embrace of the historic wisdom offered to her by "fore-mother-scholars" that encouraged her to leave democracy as a concept, a way to govern, and a way to enact justice for Black people alone. This references Black liberationists who resist the imperialism in US democracy and suggest searching for alternative tools for governing.<sup>16</sup> The speaker embraces the advice to let democracy alone but not without reclaiming all that was originally hers. The speaker explains "everything you stole and made residue of was MINE from the beginning." This line points the audience toward considering how Black people and Black women specifically are irrevocably linked to democracy and thus the Black woman cannot abandon all that she built.<sup>17</sup> Instead, she can embrace the magic of her own existence in this system as power. Thus, *Black Tomorrow* can imagine radical empowering possibilities.

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<sup>16</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Abolitionist Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture: Interviews with Angela Y. Davis* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 91.

<sup>17</sup> See Glaude, *Democracy in Black*.

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## **“Yeah, I’m in My Bag, but I’m in His Too”: How Scamming Aesthetics Utilized by Black Women Rappers Undermine Existing Institutions of Gender**

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*Diana Khong*

### **Abstract**

2018 was the year of the “scammer,” in which many Black women rappers took on “scamming” aesthetics in their lyrics and music video imagery. Typified by rappers such as City Girls and Cardi B, the scammer archetype is characterized by the desire for financial gain and material possessions and the emotional disregard of men. This paper investigates how Black women rappers, in employing these themes in their music, subvert existing expectations of gender by using the identity of the scammer as a restorative figure. The objectification of men in their music works in counterpoint to the dominant gender system and reasserts a new identity for women – one in absolute financial and sexual control, not only “taking” but “taking back.” Through the imagined scamming of men, Black “scammer” artists introduce new radical modes of womanhood that go beyond the male gaze. These artists profess a rhetoric of empowerment and autonomy towards the women who consume their music and in doing so reimagine power and authority in ways that leave a long-lasting cultural impact.

## Introduction

In January 2018, Jatavia Johnson was convicted of felony identity theft. Prosecutors claimed that Johnson, known more familiarly as JT of the rapper duo City Girls, had amassed a collective debt of more than one thousand dollars from illegal transactions made on stolen credit cards. After accepting a plea deal, Johnson was sentenced to twenty-four months in prison with a release date slated for March 21, 2020.<sup>1</sup>

For an up-and-coming music artist, a conviction could have nipped Johnson's career in the bud; however, it in fact did the opposite. In the midst of signing City Girls' joint record deal with Quality Control Music and Capitol Records, the revelation that Johnson was facing up to ten years in prison did not deter Quality Control's COO Kevin "Coach K" Lee from signing Johnson and Caresha "Yung Miami" Brownlee. In fact, it gave all the more reason to sign them. In an interview with *Vulture*, Brownlee comments on the record deal, saying "[Coach K] was like, 'These girls are authentic. This is real what they're rapping about. This is a story.' And they always say people love when you have a story to tell. They feel like they can relate to you."<sup>2</sup> Along with a record deal, the documentary *City Girls: Point Blank Period* was put into production, following Brownlee in the last few days before her BET performance and the beginning of her sentence.<sup>3</sup>

Sure enough, their success followed soon after. On November 16, 2018, just months after Johnson had begun serving her time in Miami's Federal Detention Center, City Girls' first studio album *GIRLCODE* dropped. Critics praised the album, calling it a collection of "how-to pointers for scheming on rich men" and "boss bitch sermon[s]."<sup>4</sup> When played on repeat, certain themes coalesce out of the music; they are, 1) men are reduced to only their wealth, and 2) in this universe, women are in control of that wealth, gaming men and leaving their pockets bare. As Johnson proclaims on "Where the Bag At," "Bad bitch, cute face, yeah you like that / Don't be surprised if I ask where the bag at."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Saponara, "City Girls Member JT Begins Serving Jail Sentence for Fraud Charges," *Billboard*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/8463594/city-girls-jt-begins-jail-sentence-fraud>.

<sup>2</sup> Caresha Brownlee in an interview by Dee Lockett, "City Girls Are Our Greatest Scammers," *Vulture*, November 29, 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/11/city-girls-on-scamming-drake-and-jt-going-to-prison.html>.

<sup>3</sup> *City Girls: Point Blank Period*, dir. Marcus A. Clarke, Quality Control Music and Mass Appeal, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQ4oglk\\_v7M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQ4oglk_v7M).

<sup>4</sup> Natelegé Whaley, "City Girls: *G I R L C O D E*," *Pitchfork*, November 28, 2018, accessed October 22, 2019, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/city-girls-g-i-r-l-c-o-d-e/>; Wandera Hussein, "Intro (#FreeJT)," *The Fader*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.thefader.com/2018/11/16/the-best-songs-on-city-girls-girl-code-review>.

<sup>5</sup> City Girls, "Where the Bag At," *Period* (Caroline Distribution and Quality Control Music, 2018). Lyrics, "Where the Bag At by City Girls," *Genius*, 2018, <https://genius.com/City-girls-where-the-bag-at-lyrics>.



Thus, City Girls mythologize themselves, becoming Robin Hood-esque figures in this scheme-driven universe, not only taking money from men and funding their lavish lifestyle, but scaling power, privilege, and wealth. They have become “scammer” icons; Brownlee says this herself. In an interview with *Vulture*, she muses, “We be like, ‘We scammed our way into the music industry.’ We’re the biggest scammers of all time.”<sup>6</sup>

The influence City Girls has had on popular culture in the last year is undisputable. Their collection of mantras and glitzy women-led music videos resonate heavily with the newest generation of women consumers in our capitalist society. And underneath the surface, there is a very intentional act of subversion that these women put forward that is not only captivating but enduring – allowing for “wreck” and the transformation of cultural norms.<sup>7</sup> City Girls presents a narrative that is more than simply wanting to receive economic gain from their relationships with men. In *GIRLCODE*, “over the course of the mixtape’s 16 tracks, [City Girls’] focus on gaming men for personal gain starts to sound like a complicated form of women’s justice.”<sup>8</sup> They rap about “gendered, financial exploitation”; however, this time it is women on the receiving end.<sup>9</sup>

In the age of the pro-hoe and #MeToo movements, the rise of Black women rappers and Black women scammers is not coincidental. The aesthetics of scamming as utilized by artists such as City Girls and Cardi B in their music allow for feminist reimaginings of power and privilege. This reinvention of norms is disruptive, turning up the edges of the public’s conception of womanhood, and particularly Black womanhood. Thus, this performance of scamming allows for the radical reinvention of existing thought systems and women’s positionality in not only Hip Hop, but society at-large.

**“Bad bitch, cute face, yeah you like that / Don’t be surprised if I ask where the bag at.”**

– City Girls, “Where the Bag at”

*Scam* (noun)

/skam/ –

*the manipulation of a mark for economic gain, which can manifest in both long-term schemes and high-stakes short-term actions*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Brownlee in Lockett, “How City Girls Are Our Greatest Scammers”.

<sup>7</sup> Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 76.

<sup>8</sup> Niela Orr, “Miami’s City Girls are the Perfect Rappers for Scammer Season,” *BuzzFeed News*, August 10, 2018, accessed October 22, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/nielaorr/drake-city-girls-summer-scammers-period>.

<sup>9</sup> Orr, “Miami’s City Girls.”

<sup>10</sup> Eddie Kim, “Con-Culture Experts On the History and Future of Scamming,” *MEL Magazine*, <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/con-culture-experts-on-the-history-and-future-of-scamming>.

*See Also: gendered modes of resistance*

In recent years, social media has been riddled with the iconography of well-known scam artists, hoax prophesiers, and frauds; this is seen in New York socialite Anna Delvey's (Anna Sorokin's) fall from grace, Ja Rule's failed Fyre Fest, etc. However, the social acceptability of taking on the label "scammer" was most widely sensationalized by the character of Joanne the Scammer, created by internet personality Branden Miller as he donned a blonde wig and played a transgender woman (though himself being a cis queer man). Despite being outwardly transphobic while in character as Joanne, he amassed a meteoric fanbase of upwards of 1.8 million followers.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, a generation of youth was captivated by Joanne and the act of scamming as a result. Pop culture journalist Eddie Kim imparts to us that scamming is "just the latest in a strong American tradition."<sup>12</sup> We now just see it manifest with ease (see: phishing scams, catfishing, and fraudulent products marketed through sponsored Instagram endorsements).

For artists such as City Girls, their rise to stardom is contextualized within society's current hyper fascination with scammers. Their music is a certain type of "raunchy rap" made popular by artists such as Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim, lyrics frequently outlining many scenarios where they "us[e] sex as a weapon to exploit men, [as] women making a way for themselves by attaining money and power."<sup>13</sup>

Similar aesthetics have been utilized by a slew of up-and-coming Black women rappers such as Megan Thee Stallion, Saweetie, Kash Doll, and Maliibu Miitch, all of whom come as drops in a new wave of femcees who continue to reinvent the game and disrupt oppressive gendered systems through their music.<sup>14</sup> Though Hip Hop remains a predominantly male-run genre, 2019 ushered in a myriad of new women rappers. With that comes the addition of new cultural motifs and mythos to the genre. A commonality between the above-mentioned women rappers is an adherence to financial optimization. Their lyrics offer no-nonsense narratives about their pursuit of cash and material possessions – and their consequent objectification and manipulation of financially endowed men. Maliibu Miitch raps in "Give Her Some Money," [he] "[t]ook me shoppin', I'm like, 'Eenie meenie money mo' / Now he askin' 'bout the road, bitch, I gotta go." Kash Doll muses in "Ice Me Out," "[s]ometimes I want marriage, sometimes I want karats."<sup>15</sup> Megan the Stallion delivers the line of the summer in her single "Cash Shit,"

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<sup>11</sup> Patrick D. McDermott, "Rise and Scam: Joanne the Scammer Lives for Drama: Branden Miller is Just Trying to Live," *The Fader* 105 (August/September 2016), <https://www.thefader.com/2016/08/09/joanne-the-scammer-branden-miller-messy-bitch-interview>.

<sup>12</sup> Kim, "Con-Culture Experts."

<sup>13</sup> Orr, "Miami's City Girls."

<sup>14</sup> Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, 77.

<sup>15</sup> Maliibu Miitch, "Give Her Some Money," from *If Dead Men Could Talk* (Atlantic Records, 2018); Kash Doll, "Ice Me Out," from *Stacked* (Republic Records, 2019).

where she remarks “[y]eah, I’m in my bag, but I’m in his too.”<sup>16</sup> In short, this new trend is subversive; it creates a world where men are commodified and reduced to surface traits instead of vice versa, making it antithetical to the objectification and hypersexualization of women by male rappers in their lyrics and music videos. The cultural implications of this are vast, considering the political history of Hip Hop.

**“I put my thing down, flip it, and reverse it/ Ti esrever dna ti pilf, nwod gniht ym tup.”**

– Missy Elliot, “Work It”

*wreck (noun)*

*/rek/ –*

*“moments when Black women’s discourses disrupt dominant masculine discourses, break into the public sphere, and in some way impact or influence the U.S. imaginary, even if that influence is fleeting”<sup>17</sup>*

Hip Hop is more than just a genre; historically, the art form has allowed for the generative changing and shaping of Black politics. Emily J. Lordi posits that Black music is “an agent of Black revolutionary thought” which can be visible in the political lyricism of artists such as Tupac Shakur.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Hip Hop, as utilized by Black women, has historically been utilized to push boundaries beyond existing racial and gender norms. Donyale Padgett, Cheryl D. Jenkins, and Dale Anderson comment that “Hip-hop’s historical roots provide an opportunity from which we can understand ... the myriad ways that [Black] women manifest resistance to oppression within and outside of their own communities.”<sup>19</sup>

Gwendolyn D. Pough remarks that Black women’s impact on Hip Hop can be understood through the concept of “bringing wreck.”<sup>20</sup> Through their music, Black women have opened up “new possibilities for the potential of Black women’s speech and action,” enacting Black feminist change in the process.<sup>21</sup> Queen Latifah implores us to “check it while I wreck it.”<sup>22</sup> By bringing “wreck,” Black woman emcees not only outshine their competition in music, but quite literally erode the “stereotypes and marginalization

<sup>16</sup> Megan thee Stallion, “Cash Shit,” from *Fever* (300 Entertainment, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, 77.

<sup>18</sup> Emily J. Lordi, *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 18.

<sup>19</sup> Donyale R. Griffith Padgett, Cheryl D. Jenkins, and Dale Anderson, “Imag[e]ining Hip-Hop Femininity: Contentions, Contradictions, and Contributions,” in *African American Females: Addressing Challenges and Nurturing the Future*, ed. Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher and Vernon C. Polite (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 273.

<sup>20</sup> See Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, esp. 77–83.

<sup>21</sup> Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, 75.

<sup>22</sup> Queen Latifah, “Black Hand Side,” from *Black Reign* (Motown, 1993).

that inhibit their interaction in the larger public sphere."<sup>23</sup> Black women in Hip Hop engage in active acts of resistance, eating away at institutions.

LaMonda H. Stallings echoes this sentiment, by borrowing from Robin D. G. Kelley's idea of the Black Radical Imagination and putting forth the concept of the Black Ratchet Imagination, which is grounded in "un-reality and the performance of failure."<sup>24</sup> Through acts of larger-than-life performance, Black Hip Hop artists allow for the creation of transitional spaces, "engender[ing] transformative understandings of history, community, and collective possibility."<sup>25</sup>

These themes are visible in the work of artists such as Lil' Kim and Missy Elliot in furthering the empowerment of Black women by being among the first to reclaim the word "bitch."<sup>26</sup> The term, frequently used to slander women, has been taken up by women to signal endearment, commonality, and even metastasized power. As Lil' Kim raps on "Queen Bitch," "I am a diamond cluster hustler / Queen bitch, supreme bitch."<sup>27</sup> Black women consistently grapple with the weight of the white heteropatriarchy, yet still find unorthodox modes of resistance.

Now, this social power is visible in the work of new Black women emcees, many of whom are directly inspired by the overt sexuality espoused by their predecessors Foxy Brown, Lil' Kim, etc. City Girls directly shouts out Lil' Kim on "Swerve," saying "Feel like Lil Kim, swerving in a jag."<sup>28</sup> Much of their work is building upon the foundation laid by Lil' Kim, as seen in their commanding control of both their lyrics and their sexualities.<sup>29</sup> City Girls' Brownlee said herself in an interview with *Billboard*, "I like to say that we speak for women who want to say certain things, but they don't say it. ... A lot of people like to maintain classiness and carry themselves in a way, so I feel like we're an alter ego for girls."<sup>30</sup> In that way, artists such as City Girls are becoming the voice of a new generation of women against the backdrop of the #MeToo movement.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, 87.

<sup>24</sup> LaMonda H. Stallings, "Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination," *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 2, no. 2 (2013): 137, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pal.2013.0026>.

<sup>25</sup> Lordi, *Black Resonance*, 211.

<sup>26</sup> Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, 204.

<sup>27</sup> Lil' Kim, "Queen Bitch," from *Hard Core* (Undeas Recordings, Big Beat Records, and Atlantic Records, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> City Girls, "Swerve," from *Girl Code* (Quality Control Records, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Trey Alston, "5 Takeaways from City Girls' 'Girl Code,'" *Revolt*, November 21, 2018, <https://www.revolt.tv/2018/11/21/20824905/5-takeaways-from-city-girls-girl-code>.

<sup>30</sup> Bianca Gracie, "City Girls, Rap's Raunchiest Newbies, on Their Plan to Outlast One Member's Prison Stint,"

*Billboard*, August 6, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/8468433/city-girls-interview-rap-raunchy-newbies>.

<sup>31</sup> Orr, "Miami's City Girls."

**“But I ain’t giving up the pussy cause the pussy is power.”**

– Cupcakke, “Sex on the First Day”

*sex (noun)*

*/seks/ –*

*intercourse*

*See Also: sells*

According to sex worker scholars Juno Mac and Molly Smith, the concept of sex positivity garnered increased attention during the early 2000s – mid-Bush administration – as “feminist bloggers became particularly invested in producing non-judgmental information about sex and sexual health, and defenses of pleasure.”<sup>32</sup> In effect, the sex positivity movement attempted and continues to attempt to abolish existing forms of sexual stigma in order to further the sexual liberation of women and gender non-conforming folk. This is mirrored in the “pro hoe” movement that has gained momentum on social media among young millennial women.<sup>33</sup> Prominent celebrities such as Amber Rose have become vocal pro-hoe icons, allowing for the normalization of sex and body positivity among a new generation of women. Furthermore, the #MeToo movement has made strides in the last three years to allow sexual assault survivors, primarily women, a forum to voice their experiences and have candid conversations on bodily autonomy. Tarana Burke, a Black community organizer, created the #MeToo movement in 2006 after years of advocacy on behalf of sexual assault and harassment survivors.

However, a clear shortcoming of all these respective movements is how the conversation falls short of extending itself towards the experiences of Black women, choosing instead to focus on the dominant narrative of womanhood centered on the needs of white women. This is exemplified by the popularization of the #MeToo hashtag by white actress Alyssa Milano without crediting Burke in the movement’s creation.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout the history of time, Black women’s sexuality has often been reduced to, as Evelyn M. Hammonds elaborates, “metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision; as a ‘void’ or empty space that is simultaneously ever-visible (exposed) and invisible, where black women’s bodies are always already colonized.”<sup>35</sup> As a result, Black women’s

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<sup>32</sup> Juno Mac and Molly Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers’ Rights* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2018), 61.

<sup>33</sup> Penda N’Diaye, “‘Pro Hoe’ Is My New Definition of Sexual Freedom,” *Vice*, May 2, 2019, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/j5wmy7/pro-hoe-sex-black-women-stereotypes-kink](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/j5wmy7/pro-hoe-sex-black-women-stereotypes-kink).

<sup>34</sup> Angela Onwuachi-Willig, “What About #UsToo? The Invisibility of Race in the #MeToo Movement,” *The Yale Law Journal* 128, vol. 105, (June 18, 2018): 107.

<sup>35</sup> Evelyn M. Hammonds, “Toward A Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence,” in *Feminist Theory and the Body*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 2017), 171, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315094106-11>.

sexuality is co-opted both at the interpersonal and state level. Patricia Hill Collins imparts to us that through modes of oppression such as “employment discrimination, maintaining images of Black women that construct them as mules or objects of pleasure, and encouraging or discouraging Black women’s reproduction via state intervention, Black women’s labor, sexuality, and fertility all have been exploited.”<sup>36</sup>

Collins further dissects this by elaborating on the racist stereotype of Jezebel, in which Black women are positioned as naturally hypersexual, and how it has been historically utilized as a tool to control the sexual visage of Black women, reinforcing their racial and sexual oppression, while also simultaneously uplifting “pure White womanhood.”<sup>37</sup> However, the “Scammer” differs from “Jezebel,” as it’s a reclamation of sex and narrative. Given the oppression of Black women and their bodies in a capitalist society, the very act of taking corporal ownership in an overt and unapologetic way has an enduring political impact.

Such is seen in the total act of ownership that artists such as Cardi B and City Girls have put forward, staking claim over their own sexuality and representation. This self-ownership of the body is incredibly culturally significant, given the amount of state control exerted, not only over women’s bodies, but Black women’s bodies. In “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” Kimberlé Crenshaw writes on how the oppression of Black women is compounded by racial subjugation and gender subjugation working in tandem; thus, the intersectionality of the two become a necessary lens to view Black women’s oppression through.<sup>38</sup> In the music industry, the intersecting “myths of song, race, and gender mean that to be a black female singer is to be coded as anti-intellectual,” hypersexual, and commodifiable.<sup>39</sup> Rana Emerson writes that, in response to “the coexistence of hypersexual images and the denigration and denial of the beauty of the Black female body,” Black women artists have reappropriated explicit Black female sexuality in the aesthetics of their own work as a means of reclamation.<sup>40</sup> It is undeniable that sex sells, but to be in the position of power in the transaction – the autonomous owner of the body – effectively alters the cultural dynamics.

Building upon the ideas of Imani Perry and Cheryl Keyes, who assert the following archetypes among female rappers: the “queen mother,” “fly girl,” “sista with attitude,” and “lesbian,” respectively, Regina N. Bradley acknowledges the existence of the Hip

<sup>36</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (2nd ed., Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 132.

<sup>37</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 132.

<sup>38</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 149.

<sup>39</sup> Lordi, *Black Resonance*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Rana A. Emerson, “‘Where My Girls At?’ Negotiating Black Womanhood in Music Videos,” *Gender & Society* 16, no. 1 (February 2002): 128, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243202016001007>.

Hop archetype of the “badwoman.”<sup>41</sup> Badwomen evoke rage, subverting the existing stereotype of the angry Black woman, and build out a “validated dimension” in which Black women are able to complicate the arena of Hip Hop, not just as one of mistreatment, but instead one of devictimization and rage over oppressive systems.<sup>42</sup> Thus, there is the potential for hypersexualized women to reinvent and renegotiate the terms of their personhood, especially in an industry where women are commodified, and to do so forcefully, unapologetically.<sup>43</sup> “Scammer” artists are a new manifestation of this work, overlapping with previous archetypes to fortify a new identity.

However, there are complications to reconcile with this branding, as many music artists are ultimately still entangled in strict contracts with record companies headed by music executives, who overwhelmingly are white wealthy males. As Gail Mitchell remarks, despite “[R&B/Hip Hop] edging out rock as music’s biggest genre in 2017,” there are rarely any Black people in these top executive positions that ultimately are pivotal in shaping what content gets produced in the market – and furthermore: even less Black women in these roles.<sup>44</sup> In this regard, music companies might capitalize off this particular cultural moment and push their artists into this archetype as a means of selling records, without any understanding of what the archetype brings. Thus, reductive stereotyping of young Black women can still be pervasive within the music industry and society as a whole, but in this era, it is more marketable. It is necessary to also be cognizant that despite the amount of autonomy that might be asserted by these women in their artistry, how much control they ultimately have over their work is scrutable, as seen in those artists wrestling with contract disputes.

Yet, the impact of this cultural imagery is still an enduring one, despite the entanglements of power that rest behind them. By being not only overtly sexual but presenting as women on a higher stratum of power in their imaginings of sex, Black “scammer” artists present radical modes of womanhood that push the boundaries of femhood to new polarities and shatter the male gaze. They present a narrative that effectively undermines all male power by utilizing the intentional act of seizure – of power, of privilege. The lens we are watching these artists through becomes rosy pynk<sup>45</sup> and fem-owned, at least in our imagining of them.

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<sup>41</sup> Regina N. Bradley, “Barbz and Kings: Explorations of Gender and Sexuality in Hip-Hop,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, ed. Justin A. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Keyes qtd. in Bradley, “Barbz and Kings,” 184; Bradley, “Barbz and Kings,” 188.

<sup>42</sup> Bradley, “Barbz and Kings,” 188.

<sup>43</sup> Bradley, “Barbz and Kings,” 189.

<sup>44</sup> Gail Mitchell, “Why Hasn’t the Hip-Hop Boom Pushed More Black Executives to the Top?” April 13, 2018, *Billboard*, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/8313035/hip-hop-boom-black-executives-music-business-labels>.

<sup>45</sup> Pynk refers to a single off Janelle Monáe’s critically acclaimed studio album *Dirty Computer* (Janelle Monáe, “Pynk,” from *Dirty Computer* [Bad Boy Entertainment, 2018]).

**“All a bad bitch need is the (money)”**

– Cardi B, “Money”

*scam (noun) revisited*

*/skam/ –*

*performance; reality; something in-between*

In March 2019, a three-year-old video of Belcalis “Cardi B” Almánzar resurfaced on the internet. In it, the artist talks about drugging and robbing men while struggling to make ends meet as a former sex worker. Almánzar later confirmed that the video was real, stating “I made the choices I did at the time because I had very limited options.”<sup>46</sup> The public backlash was particularly vicious; some began to equivocate Almánzar’s actions with the sexual assaults popular male celebrities have been accused of throughout the #MeToo movement. Some even threatened Almánzar with sexual violence and targeted her with slurs and verbal harassment – a cruel coalescence of misogyny and anti-Blackness, dubbed “misogynoir” by Moya Bailey and Trudy.<sup>47</sup>

Yet ultimately, Almánzar’s reputation did not take a major hit – her 2018 studio album, *Invasion of Privacy*, soared to triple platinum status and has amassed a slew of awards, including the first Grammy for Best Rap Album won by a solo female act.<sup>48</sup> Almánzar continues to grow as one of the biggest current names in Hip Hop.

However, the entire situation opens up a necessary conversation on what it means to not only portray scamming but to actually have the lived experience of scamming as a reality grounded in struggle. In both case studies, Johnson and Almánzar illustrate the truth of what they represent in their music. In effect, scamming is not only aestheticized financial opulence but a necessary means for life for these previously working-class women. Despite the resounding amount of agency that is funneled into this idea of scamming – in tandem with social media’s current trendy glorification of sex work – making it desirable, affirming, and even lucrative, in actuality, scamming can often be a matter of economic survival.

Needless to say, Johnson and Almánzar are no longer at the point where they need to scam for survival, after signing major record deals and booking sold-out tours; yet the performance of scamming continues to be visible in their music. Johnson and Almánzar’s previous positionalities as women from low-income backgrounds are necessary to consider, as it elucidates what the implications of aestheticizing scamming are. For them, scamming ultimately has its roots in reality and has been used to survive; the

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<sup>46</sup> Constance Grady, “Cardi B Says She Used to Rob Men: Her Image Was Built to Withstand Scandals like This,” *Vox*, March 17, 2019, <http://www.vox.com/culture/2019/3/27/18284220/cardi-b-drug-rob-controversy-scandal>.

<sup>47</sup> Moya Bailey and Trudy, “On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, and Plagiarism,” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 763, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395>.

<sup>48</sup> Cardi B, *Invasion of Privacy* (Atlantic Records, 2018).



performance of scamming thus mirrors the impact, though now through new imaginings of power and privilege. When performed by these artists, scamming becomes a vehicle for shifting narratives of gender, race, wealth, and space in very overt and intentional ways. In a capitalist society, aestheticizing and literally employing scams can be thought of as a means of imagining and furthering liberation whether that be sexual, financial, etc. — particularly for Black women and other women of color. Almánzar, Johnson, and other “scammer” artists have not merely romanticized materialism but have spun an entire cultural movement off of the lived experience of struggle.

### Conclusion

Megan Pete, known as the Houston rapper Megan Thee Stallion, frequently professes to her predominantly woman fanbase that women should not live for men, nor need them. She advances this message not only through her music, but through her social media presence on Twitter and Instagram. As a result, when Pete dropped her first studio album, *Fever*, on May 17, 2019, she effectively ushered in “Hot Girl Summer,” a professed cultural moment of women remaining untethered from men all in time for the season.<sup>49</sup> And while Pete has embodied the scammer in songs such as “Cash Shit,” her latest alter ego Suga, recently debuted in her eponymous 2020 EP, takes on a different rhetoric of independence.<sup>50</sup> Off that album on her single “B.I.T.C.H.,” she raps “I got my mind on gettin’ paid, we ain’t spoke in some days / He probably thinkin’ I’m in pain, but I’m really on game.”<sup>51</sup> Pete illustrates a multiplicity of states of control, not solely inhabiting the one-dimensional archetype of the “scammer” but going about professing women’s bodily autonomy through multiple different outlets. In this, Pete is preaching to a whole new generation of women who are eagerly listening and waiting to seize control of their own futures. Pete’s success comes along with Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion, the latest wave of these new Black women rappers, as well as Maliibu Miitch, Saweetie, and more in the last three years. Their come-up is situated perfectly in this particular socio-political moment as representation is demanded in media and music. The rise of these rappers results in a changing face of Hip Hop, and its subject matter, too.

On the coattails of the #MeToo, pro-hoe, and sex positivity movements, the common themes professed by many new Black women emcees are particularly salient. From Cardi to JT to their predecessor Lil’ Kim, there is a new adherence to the narrative of financial exploitation of men and the unrelenting power of women through scamming. In a young universe concocted by new femcees, women are minding their money and minding their business. In this sex-driven, materialism-driven, new dominant setting, there is no room for wasted time spent on men who do not have anything to offer. By

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<sup>49</sup> Megan Thee Stallion, *Fever* (300 Entertainment, 2019); “Hot Girl Summer,” feat. Nicki Minaj and Ty Dolla Sign (300 Entertainment, 2019).

<sup>50</sup> Megan Thee Stallion, *Suga* (1501 Certified Entertainment and 300 Entertainment, 2020).

<sup>51</sup> Megan Thee Stallion, “B.I.T.C.H.,” from *Suga*.

reducing men to their net worth – as City Girls implores us to do on their feature in Drake’s “In My Feelings” – Black women emcees are subverting gender norms by taking all the control into their own hands, objectifying men as men commonly do women in both society and in Hip Hop.<sup>52</sup> This is particularly important as systemic modes of oppression continuously attempt to police Black female sexuality. Through the imagined and actualized scamming of men, gain becomes not only financial but deeply cultural, uprooting gendered and racialized limitations placed on women. Existent systems of power and privilege are being reimagined, not only in the present for these artists, but in enduring ways as they impart rhetorics of empowerment and autonomy to their predominantly female fanbases. Ultimately, the performance – and sometimes lived experience – of scamming has become a means of resistance, survival, and societal uplift, both for Black women emcees and their audiences.

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<sup>52</sup> Drake, “In My Feelings,” *Scorpion* (Young Money, Cash Money, and Republic, 2018).

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## Hip Hop Feminism Starter Kit

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M. Nicole Horsley

The term Hip Hop Feminist first appears in *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* (1999).<sup>1</sup> The unlikely pairing of Hip Hop and Black feminist consciousness, Hip Hop Feminism initially emerged to address the everyday failures of representations of Black women in Hip Hop, evidenced by the misogynistic lyrics and the general exclusion of Black women Hip Hop artists and producers. Morgan writes Black women within Hip Hop culture “need a feminist consciousness that allows us to examine how representations and images can simultaneously empowering and problematic.”<sup>2</sup>

So, what is Hip Hop Feminism? It has been called a movement and worldview at the intersection of Black feminist with Womanist consciousness and Hip Hop sensibilities. Morgan has called it “a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays.”<sup>3</sup> Emerging as a critical response to provide Black girls and women with an alternative perspective and ways of engaging the culture, music, lyrics, knowledge and representation. In its emphasis on the personal as political, Hip Hop Feminism ruptures ideologies of universal womanhood, bodies, class and gender construction to center the Black identity as paramount to our experience. Seeking to develop a radical self-politic of love, empowerment, gendered perspective and social consciousness for the historically underrepresented, hyper visualized, erased, and marginalized. Demanding that we cultivate a Black woman and women of color-centered politics to navigate Hip Hop culture and rap music.

Twenty-one years later, the *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* returns to Hip Hop Feminism through a special issue to introduce for some and remind others of the potential (fullest), pleasure, and consciousness of self-identifying as a Hip Hop Feminist. You may still be wondering: What is Hip Hop Feminism? How does it operate? For whom does it provide a method and means for engaging with the contemporary Hip Hop culture and

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Shani Jamila, “Can I Get a Witness? Testimony from a Hip-Hop Feminist,” in *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism*, ed. Daisy Hernández and Bushra Rehman (New York: Seal Press, 2002), 392.

<sup>3</sup> Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, 59.

generation? This starter kit is for you. It is meant to introduce you to the understandings, promise, hopes, stakes, jeopardies, and possibilities of Hip Hop and Hip Hop Feminism.

This workbook is a companion to the issue as it introduces or reintroduces readers to the concept and essentially the work of Hip Hop Feminism even while there continues to be an ongoing debate if Hip Hop Feminism is a Black feminist perspective on Hip Hop or a feminism of its own sensibilities that originates from a bit of ladies first and the search for a real love. Hip Hop feminism allows the *Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* to hit differently. So, who can be a Hip Hop Feminist?

Arguably, contemporary Hip Hop Feminism is of the new grays that exist in earlier understandings to disrupt boundaries of gender, sexuality, and contradictions of respectability politics. The return to the concept is instructive in providing a lens from which to look and listen to the culture, music, videos, and lyrics, to consider gender, sexuality, class, bodies, and inclusivity in Hip Hop. It, however, should provide a safe space and a voice for poor and working-class Black girls and women, centering their everyday struggles – at home, in school, working (including those engaged in sex work), and in need of love.

The inspiration to develop a Hip Hop Feminist workbook developed from a college course I teach: Hip Hop Feminism: Queen B\*tch. An Introduction to the (im)Possibilities of Hip Hop Feminism. Using the syllabus, I have developed lessons and talks on college campuses that I have also delivered to community spaces with Black girls and women, secondary educators, parents, and student organizations. I teach resistance and anti-establishment readings of our bodies, lyrics, and live and mediated performances of Hoes With An Attitude (H.W.A.) Lil' Kim, Missy 'Misdemeanor' Elliott, Cardi B, The City Girls; as well as topics related to Hip Hop culture and sexual hygiene and wellness. I hope that you're inspired to see the fullness of your magic, humanity, and beauty while gaining a sense of consciousness and intersectional thinking that happens when listening, dancing, lip syncing, or simply feeling a song. I encourage each of you to explore the healing and transformative power and pleasure experienced throughout Hip Hop culture.

Similar to you, I am sitting at home practicing social distancing in response to Covid-19, while mourning the most recent vigilante and police killings of unarmed Black men and women: Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and George Floyd. The protesting, acts of resistance, and folx speaking truth to power are happening globally. About the second month, when the world shut down in an effort to slow the transmission of coronavirus, live performances in the form of house (rent) parties with DJ sets, MC rap battles, cyphers, and community discussions returned to the original elements of Hip Hop. A culture born from the creation of love and rebellion, the Hip Hop



feminist archive draws from cultural knowledge production to construct a site of inclusion, resistance, transformative possibilities, pleasure, and healing.

The creation of this workbook aimed at community centers and the children in the hood who wake up daily to dreaming about getting and being free. This workbook should inspire, inform, empower, and assist you with creating a vision to imagine our collective liberation.

### **Guide**

This workbook can be used in and outside of the classroom setting, ranging from middle school to college. I encourage parents, teachers, and community centers to use this workbook as a model to develop activities, discussions, teach-ins, and more, based on concepts and ideas related to Hip Hop Feminism. It provides a space to articulate and center the political and personal relationship of Hip Hop for the images, representations, and constructions of Black girlhood, messy femmes, transgender, non-binary and all types of Black womanhood throughout the African diaspora; addressing the impact and relationship of antiblackness; and the intersections of blackness, sexuality, economics, geography, age, and other identities.

### **Outline**

**Section I. Pre-Reflection: Leading Discussion**

**Section II. Concepts/Terms**

**Section III. Lessons**

**Section IV. Case Studies**

**Section V. Exercises**

**Section VI. Black Women in Hip Hop**

### **Hip Hop Feminism Starter Kit**

**Section I. Pre-Reflection: Leading Discussion**

Take a moment to reflect on the purpose of creating programming based on Hip Hop Feminism. Let's talk about why, and about how the two connect. Take a few moments to answer the following questions.

1. Describe the students/people who will foster the discussion. How will you facilitate programming or lessons? Why you will present the values and beliefs of Hip Hop Feminism this way.
2. What is most important to you in teaching/facilitating a discussion on Hip Hop Feminism?
3. How do you believe your students/people will respond?

4. How do your values and beliefs align with your approach?
5. Return to Hip Hop Feminism and the Combahee River statements. Refine your core beliefs and values to develop topics and themes related.
6. List possible learning objectives/outcomes--what will they know after the lesson or program, i.e.--They will know the definition of key terms and concepts.

## **Section II. Concepts/Terms**

**Define the following terms and concepts, what do they mean to you?**

Black girlhood:

Black Girl Magic:

Ratchet:

## **Readings**

Most readings are accessible online, others are available through your local library or may be purchased. Develop a relationship with your local libraries and cultural centers.

*When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks It Down*, Joan Morgan (available through the local library or purchase). Start with Morgan's book to develop a foundation on the history, meaning and intentions of Hip Hop feminism and how she defines Hip Hop feminist.

Accompanying articles:

\*Assignment readings used are all available online for non-academic or institutional affiliated users.

"20 Years Joan Morgan Revisits 'When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks It Down,'" by Simone Ameila Jordan, March 8, 2019 Vibe.com

<https://www.vibe.com/2019/03/joan-morgan-interview-when-chickenheads-come-home-to-roost>

“Joan Morgan, Hip-Hop Feminism, and The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill,” by Danielle A. Jackson, August 8, 2018 in the Paris Review

<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/08/08/joan-morgan-hip-hop-feminism-and-the-twenty-year-legacy-of-the-miseducation-of-lauryn-hill/>

“Interview: Feminists We Love: Joan Morgan, 2013 (video)” by Tamura Lomax:  
<https://thefeministwire.com/2013/03/feminists-we-love-joan-morgan/>

Joan Morgan’s articles: <https://muckrack.com/joan-morgan/articles>

Joan Morgan on *The Breakfast Club*: “Joan Morgan Talks Hip-Hop Feminism and The MisEducation of Lauryn Hill” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?=zeYRRzt2ikQ>

Joan Morgan - “Hip Hop and Feminism”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2R8NmNaEuk>

### Section III. Lessons

Have everyone read “A Black Feminist Statement.” Develop appropriate activities and questions to discuss Black Feminism and other themes. For example, list key terms and concepts from the statement such as politics, coalition, movements, oppression, women of color (woc), etc. Create an activity based on Black women activists, activism, and revolutionaries and organizations. Plan a lesson on Black feminism and feminist, Black Liberation, Black Girlhood, stereotypes, and so on. Discuss the importance of the Combahee River Collective’s statement. Use the work of artists such as Janelle Monae to construct and discuss interlocking systems of oppression, later introduce intersectionality and Hip Hop feminism.

**A Black Feminist Statement** by The Combahee River Collective (1977) appeared as a movement document in April 1977, the final version was published in Zillah Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (Monthly Review, 1979), 362-72:

[https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition\\_Readings.pdf](https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition_Readings.pdf)

Read the first chapter of *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah (1999). Develop discussion questions based on chapter 1. Discuss Sister Souljah 360 Degrees, begin with album cover. Relate to police killings, Black parents of slain victims. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abozq\\_aaBek&list=RDEMdCqgD8ASnTG3wAI-jQuQCg&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abozq_aaBek&list=RDEMdCqgD8ASnTG3wAI-jQuQCg&start_radio=1)

***The Coldest Winter Ever (Chapter 1)*** by Sister Souljah (1999):

<https://medium.com/@atriabooks/chapter-one-from-the-coldest-winter-ever-c02a05074ad0>

**Discussion guide:** [https://durhamcountylibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/coldest\\_winter\\_ever\\_DISCUSSION.pdf](https://durhamcountylibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/coldest_winter_ever_DISCUSSION.pdf)

**Lauryn Hill’s first solo album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*** (1998), Full album on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/eU0B49AyjXE>

Released in 1998, Lauryn Hill’s first solo album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, is considered by Hip Hop and Black feminism scholars as an intervention. It immediately

went to number one on the Billboard 200 and nearly went gold in its first week of sales. The song “Doo Wop (That Thing)” became the first number one single by a female Hip Hop artist. It was the first rap project to win the Grammy Award for Album of the Year.

*Article (locate magazine articles and interviews):*

What Lauryn Hill’s ‘Miseducation’ Iconic Album Means to Black Women, August 2018, *Vibe*, Candance McDuffie <https://www.vibe.com/2018/08/miseducation-of-lauryn-hill-black-women-importance>

## **Ratchet(ness)**

### **Readings on Ratchet(ness):**

“I Been On (Ratchet): Conceptualizing a Sonic Ratchet Aesthetic in Beyonce’s ‘Bow Down,’” by Regina Bradley (March 19, 2013):

<http://redclayscholar.blogspot.com/2013/03/i-been-on-ratchet-conceptualizing-sonic.html>

“Exhuming the Ratchet before it’s Buried,” by Heidi R. Lewis (January 7, 2013):

<https://thefeministwire.com/2013/01/exhuming-the-ratchet-before-its-buried/>

### **Lessons on Ratchet(ness):**

1. How do Bradley and Lewis describe and discuss the meaning and importance of ratchetness?
2. View the music video for “Party by Beyoncé” ft. J. Cole:  
[https://youtu.be/XWCwc1\\_sYMY](https://youtu.be/XWCwc1_sYMY)
3. Look at the sculptures of New York-based artist LaKela Brown: <http://lakelabrown.com/> How does she reference Hip Hop culture throughout her sculptures? Describe elements of LL Cool J’s “Around the Way Girl” that can be found in her work. How does she feature chickenheads in her work? Name a few of your 1990s Hip Hop artist inspirations.

### **Writing and Journaling, finding Audre Lorde, “the personal is political”:**

Divya Victor created, “The Audre Lorde Questionnaire To Oneself,”

(<https://divyavictor.com/the-audre-lorde-questionnaire-to-oneself/>) from an entry in Audre Lorde’s *Cancer Journals* (1980).

The Cancer Journals are comprised with entries in the personal diary, reflective commentary, a speech, and an essay of Black activist, writer, lesbian, warrior mother, and poet Audre Lorde documenting her battle against and myriad of fear and experiences of pain after a diagnosis and later mastectomy in 1978. Victor developed questions based on “The Transformation into Language and Action,” a speech delivered in 1977 at the Modern Language Association’s Lesbian and Literature panel in Chicago.

### Readings:

“Transformation into Language and Action”: <https://electricliterature.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/silenceintoaction.pdf>

or

<https://wgs10016.commons.gc.cuny.edu/lorde-poetry-is-not-a-luxury/>

- 1) When Lorde writes, “Some of what I experienced during that time has helped elucidate for me much of what I feel concerning the transformation of silence into language and action,” what do you think she means?
- 2) Think about a time when you have been silent about experiencing pain (bodily, emotional, stress, loss, hopelessness). Describe the pain.
- 3) Write a short story or poem about-facing your fears.
- 4) How does Lorde describe silence? Why is it important for women not to be silent about hurt and pain?
- 5) List three rap songs that tell someone something about you such as your personality. How are girls or women represented in each rap song? Explain how the song captures what you feel when you listen to it.

*Possible quotes to use in developing additional exercises based on Audre Lorde's work:*

- "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare," Lorde wrote in "A Burst of Light" and Other Essays.
  
- "The love expressed between women is particular and powerful because we have had to love in order to live; love has been our survival," Lorde wrote in Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.
  
- "When I dare to be powerful—to use my strength in the service of my vision—then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid," Lorde wrote in The Transformation of Silence into Language & Action.
  
- "I have a duty to speak the truth as I see it and share not just my triumphs, not just the things that felt good, but the pain. The intense, often unmitigated pain. It is important to share how I know survival is survival and not just a walk through the rain," Lorde wrote in The Transformation of Silence into Language & Action.
  
- "If I didn't define myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive," Lorde said during a speech at Harvard University in 1982.
  
- "Your silence will not protect you," Lorde wrote in The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.
  
- "I am deliberate and afraid of nothing," Lorde wrote in The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde.

## Section IV. Case Studies

### Dee Barnes

Interview with Dee Barnes, Dr. Dre:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpkcjzUm3os>

Dr. Dre finally apologizes for abusing Dee Barnes and says "I was out of my mind"

<https://youtu.be/4j4I07fOD8Y>

<https://rollingout.com/2019/04/19/did-dr-dre-sexually-assault-dee-barnes-during-vicious-attack/>

<https://www.vibe.com/2019/04/dee-barnes-silent-on-dr-dre-sexual-assault-question>

### Karrine Steffans

"Confessions of a Video Vixen" (2005) (local library or purchase)

The importance of Hip Hop journalist, intersectionality, and grassroots activism. A case study of #MuteRKelly movement: <https://www.muterkelly.org/>

### Hip Hop Journalists

Discuss the importance of pioneer Hip Hop journalism.

How have activists, journalists and cultural critics such as Michaela Angela Davis, Akiba Solomon, and Lynee Denise, Lala Anthony, and Tarana Burke (#metoomovement).

Dream Hampton: <https://www.dreamhampton.com/blog>

Kierna Mayo: <https://muckrack.com/kierna-mayo/articles>



## Section V. Exercises

Describe Hip Hop Feminism:

List the ways in which Hip Hop has impacted you.

- Personally
- Educationally
- Relationships

After reading the special issue and selected articles, read the lyrics, listen to songs, and watch music videos listed throughout the issue.

- Discuss
- Listen
- List
- Now that you have read about Hip Hop feminism as a point of view to consider the role of gender and sexuality.

Listen to a song and watch a video by:

Cardi B & Bruno Mars - Please Me

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGNmQwTvS2Y>

The City Girls - Take Yo Man--<https://youtu.be/P-ggA4V5WTo>

Salt-N-Pepa - I'll Take Your Man -- <https://youtu.be/dvoZ9KRJqfs>

Janelle Monae - Hell You Talmbout ft. Jidenna, Wonderland Records

<https://youtu.be/fumaCsQ9wKw>

Sammus - Weirdo (feat. Homeboy Sandman)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RADhBaAVsXQ>

Erykah Badu ft. Common - Love Of My Life (An Ode To Hip Hop)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNk3R23Tgw>

Queen Latifah - Ladies First (feat. Monie Love)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Qimg\\_q7LbQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Qimg_q7LbQ)

Write a review of the songs and music videos from a Hip Hop feminist perspective.

## Section VI. Black Women in Hip Hop

Here are some examples of Black women who may not call themselves feminist but are thriving in Hip Hop. These Black women show what is possible and reveal that you can still be Hip Hop, even if you aren't a rapper.

### Graffiti:

Soraya Marquez <https://www.indie184.com/>

Dieynaba Sidibe - <https://www.one.org/international/blog/meet-dieynaba-senegals-first-female-graffiti-artist/>

### Films:

*YouTube*

"Ladies of Hip-Hop from 1979 to 2000: Female Emcee 101," video by kristikrisislives

*Movies*

*The Players Club*

*Pimps Up, Hoes Down*

*Video Vixens*

*Shante--Netflix film*

*Blood and Water (Netflix)*

*Just Another Girl From the IRT*

*Documentaries*

DuVernay, A. (2010). *My Mic Sounds Nice: A Truth About Women and Hip Hop*. BET Docs.

Raimist, R., O. Asia, et al. (1999). *Nobody Knows My Name*. New York, NY, Women Make Movies distributor.

### **B-girls:**

“15 Black Female Dancers & Choreographers Who Are Killing the Game” -

<https://www.essence.com/lifestyle/black-girl-magic/15-black-female-dancers-who-are-killing-game/#91128>

Tara Anomolies - <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10155021265653657>

Bgirl Macca - <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAamAbFhaQQ/>

Bgirl Angel - [https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_i1AmujKg-/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_i1AmujKg-/)

Maku Gold || Triple Bond Crew -

<https://www.instagram.com/p/B3CNjyPjLRQ/>

B-Girl Terra B-Girl Eddie - [https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_sFfgPDI5f/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_sFfgPDI5f/)

### **Deejays:**

Tiff McFierce - [ESPN interviews Tiff McFierce 1st woman resident DJ at Madison Square Garden-NY Knicks/Liberty](#)

[10 Fierce Black Female DJs You Need to Know About](#)

[When These 5 Black Women Spin on The Beat, The Beat Gets Sicker Every Time](#)

Fox 2 9am Female DJ's I Am Hip Hop -

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmJNa\\_GrJaY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmJNa_GrJaY)

Latosha Duffey - [How French Montana's DJ, Duffey, Went from Car Rentals to Owning Homes & Blowing Checks | Blew A Bag](#)

### **A&Rs**

Andrea Castleberry “M\$. Blendz” - <https://twitter.com/blendzville?lang=en>,  
<https://www.facebook.com/Blendzville-Global-585531974875365/>

Amina Diop - <https://www.instagram.com/aminathediop/?hl=en>,  
<https://variety.com/2018/biz/news/republic-records-names-amina-diop-senior-vp-of-ar-1202839902/>

Latosha Duffey - [How French Montana's DJ, Duffey, Went from Car Rentals to Owning Homes & Blowing Checks | Blew A Bag](#)

Latoya Lee - <https://www.atlasmusicgroup.com/news/post/MjY0MjQtOTNkND>

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## Contributors

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*Aria S. Halliday, Ph.D*

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Aria S. Halliday, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor in the Department of Gender and Women's Studies and program in African American and Africana Studies at the University of Kentucky. Her research explores contemporary representations of Black women and girls in the U.S. and Caribbean, specializing in material, visual, and digital cultural production that engages ideas of race, gender, sexuality, and consumerism in popular culture. She is editor of *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection* (Women's Press, 2019) and a Woodrow Wilson Career Enhancement Fellow 2020-2021. Her work is featured in *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, *Girlhood Studies*, *Palimpsest*, and *SOULS*.



*Ashley N. Payne, Ph.D*

Psychology, Missouri State University

Ashley N. Payne, Ph.D is an Assistant Professor at Missouri State University. Her research agenda explores the role of culture, namely Hip Hop, on the construction of Black girlhood in education, social, and media spaces. Moreover, Ashley explores how these spaces can be (re)constructed to support the multiplicity of the Black girl/womanhood experience.

## Authors

### Camea Davis

Dr. Davis is a poet, educator and educational researcher with a heart for urban youth and communities. She earned her doctorate in educational policy studies with minors in curriculum and instruction and educational technology from Ball State University. She is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Georgia State University. Her research interests are minoritized youth civic action and social justice teacher education. Davis also serves as the national director of the Youth Poet Laureate Program.

### M. Nicole Horsley

Dr. Horsley is a pleasure seeking activist, visual artist, and scholar. Unapologetically, she is Black and sexually liberated. Horsley uses visual and sonic culture as tools of empowerment for Black girls and women to define and embrace their bodies, seek pleasure and heal themselves. The driving force behind my research is social justice and Black liberation. Her commitment to social justice for Black girls and women has led to exploring poor and working-class Black cis and transgender women's sexual economies of labor and pleasure (which at times can be one in the same). Through the figure/trope of the "freak" in pornography, popular and sonic culture, she investigates how Black women resist sexual oppression through reclaiming fatness, queer identities and gendered non-conforming bodies.

### Isis Kenney

Isis Kenney is a Hip Hop visual artist best known for creating Hip Hop Fine Art. Hip Hop Fine Art is a creative brand that specializes in fine art and home decor. Born in Poughkeepsie, New York. Isis' mother and father, both educator's and artist, cultivated her interest in the arts by providing art supplies and creative expression at an early age. After graduating from high school, Kenney attended Dutchess Community College and received a Degree in Visual Communications. It was while at Dutchess she discovered her interest in art and took her first art class. Isis has studied at the School of Visual Arts and later received her bachelor's degree from SUNY Empire State College. Isis Kenney's work has been featured in numerous galleries, museums, and private collections.

### **Diana Khong**

Diana Khong is a Vietnamese poet, diasporic ghost, and artist of color. She is on staff at *Noble / Gas Qtrly*, *Ascend Magazine*, and *Red Queen Literary Magazine*. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *PANK*, *Third Point Press*, *Lockjaw Magazine*, and elsewhere. Her writing has been recognized by *Button Poetry*, *The Adroit Journal*, the *Scholastic Art & Writing Awards*, *Brightly Press*, and the *Hollins' Nancy Thorp Poetry Contest*.

### **Kyra March**

Kyra March research focuses on African American Studies and Women and Gender Studies. March is also a Research Assistant at the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University and has served as a Hometown Recruiter for the Undergraduate Minority Recruitment Program. She has worked as a Voter Registration Intern with the Black Voters Matter Fund in Atlanta, Georgia where she assisted with voter registration drives, coordinated with community organizations in several counties, and more. Her aim is to work in the South to bring change at the local level and serve Black communities.

### **Corey Miles**

Dr. Miles is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Morgan State University in Baltimore, MD. His research situates Black aesthetics as a mechanism to transform structures of oppression, particularly the criminal justice system. He is the recipient of a 2018-2019 American Sociological Association Minority Fellowship and the 2018-2019 Diversity Fellowship at Augustana College. Additionally, his authored work in scholarly journals ranges from examinations of Black feminist subjectivity in trap music to empirical explorations of the intersections of media and state violence towards Black bodies. As an engaged activist for All Black Lives, Corey does collaborative community organizing and speaks at campus and community events in an ongoing effort to humanize the structural conditions of Black people.