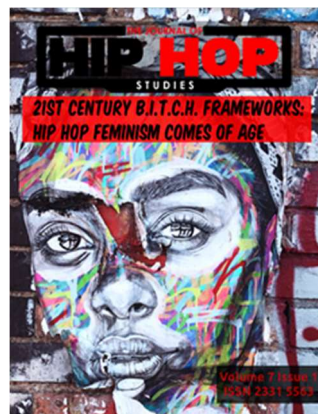


Introduction: Savage and Savvy: Mapping Contemporary Hip Hop Feminism

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Journal of Hip Hop Studies,
Special Issue *Twenty-First Century B.I.T.C.H. Frameworks:
Hip Hop Feminism Comes of Age*
Volume 7, Issue 1, Summer 2020, pp. 8 – 18
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34718/czd8-qj54>



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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.¹ 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,

¹ 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.”² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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.”⁵

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.⁶ 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.”⁷ Many of

² Rose, *Black Noise*, 182.

³ Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come to Roost*, 59.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Keyes, “Empowering Self,” 266.

⁶ 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).

⁷ 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."⁸ 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.⁹ 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."¹⁰ 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."¹¹ 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

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

⁹ Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, *That's the Joint!* 2nd 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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.”¹² 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.”¹³

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.”¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ 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

¹² 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.

¹³ Peoples, “Under Construction,” 41.

¹⁴ 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/>

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹

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.²⁰ Brittney Cooper

¹⁷ 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).

¹⁸ Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration*, 7.

¹⁹ Lindsey, “Let Me Blow Your Mind,” 74.

²⁰ 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.”²¹ 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.²² Therí Pickens adds that the ratchet imaginary “articulates a desire for individuality regardless of the ideas and wants of a putative collective.”²³ 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.”²⁴ 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.”

²¹ Cooper, “Unclutching My Mother’s Pearls.”

²² 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.

²³ 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.

²⁴ 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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