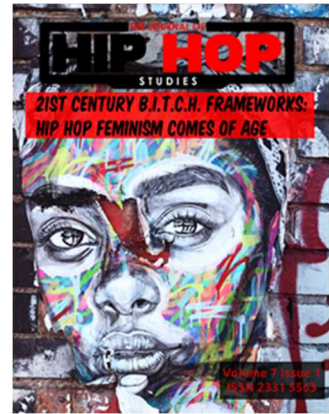


## Letter to Jatavia Johnson and Caresha Brownlee (The City Girls)

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### **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

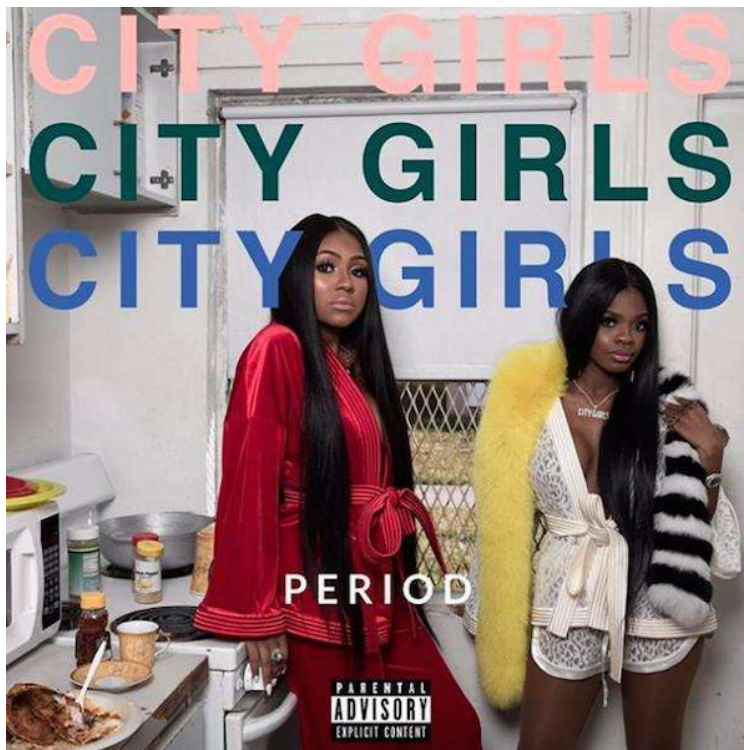
<sup>2</sup> Durham, Cooper, and Morris, "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built," 723-724.

<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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