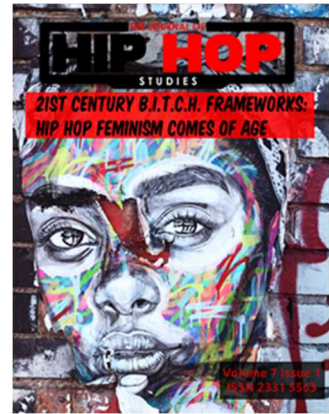


The Cardi B–Beyoncé Complex: Ratchet Respectability and Black Adolescent Girlhood

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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.

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.¹ 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.² 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.³ 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.⁴ This essay explores how after-school

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

² 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).

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

⁴ 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;⁵ 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

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.

⁵ 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.⁶ 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.”⁷

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.⁸ 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.”⁹

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.”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹

⁶ 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>.

⁷ Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration*, 1; see also 19.

⁸ Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration*; and Brown, *Hear Our Truths*.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Brown, *Hear Our Truths*, 3.

¹¹ 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.¹²

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

¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ 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,

¹³ 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).

¹⁴ Monique Morris, *Pushout*, 10.

¹⁵ Monique Morris, *Pushout*, 18.

¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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,

¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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."²¹ 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.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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

¹⁸ 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.

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

²⁰ Toliver, "Breaking Boundaries," 4.

²¹ 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.

²² Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, Chapter 4.

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

²⁴ 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.”²⁵ 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.”²⁶ 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.²⁷

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.”²⁸ 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).”²⁹ 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.³⁰ Brittney Cooper considers the definitions of the term ratchet and what it means for respectability politics, what it does, and what it can be.³¹ 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.”³² In essence, ratchetness redefines Black girl/womanhood in that it teaches us to dismiss the oppressiveness of respectability. As Black girls constantly battle stereotypes

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

²⁶ Brown and Young, “Ratchet Politics,” 46.

²⁷ 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).

²⁸ 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>.

²⁹ 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/>.

³⁰ Lewis, “Exhuming the Ratchet.”

³¹ 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.

³² 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*.³³

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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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."³⁶ 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.

³³ 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>.

³⁴ Cooper, "(Un)clutching My Mother's Pearls," 122.

³⁵ 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).

³⁶ 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!³⁷

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.³⁸ 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.”³⁹

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.⁴⁰ 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.”⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.⁴³ Critical

³⁷ 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.

³⁸ Pickens, “Shoving Aside the Politics of Respectability,” 44.

³⁹ Pickens, “Shoving Aside the Politics of Respectability,” 44.

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

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

⁴² hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*.

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

literacy scholars such as Detra Price-Dennis, Gholnesar 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.⁴⁴ 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?⁴⁵ 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

⁴⁴ See Detra Price-Dennis, Gholnesar 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.

⁴⁵ 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 analysis⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ On an individual level, the girls channeled artists such as Cardi B every

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

⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.”⁴⁹ 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.”⁵⁰ 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

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

⁴⁹ Mariah (participant), interview by author, 2017.

⁵⁰ 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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