It’s Complicated: Black Hip Hop Feminist Art Commentary on US Democracy

Camea Davis and Isis Kenney

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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.
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. Artists and arts-based researchers propose that artivism makes unique and valid contributions to civic discourse and can have political consequences.

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. 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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1 Nina Felshin, ed. *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).
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 artivism 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 artivism is a response to “the democratic urge to give voice and visibility to the disenfranchised.” 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. Furthermore, Hip Hop feminist and critical race scholar Whitney A. Peoples has articulated, “[f]rom its inception, hip-hop has represented resistance to social

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4 Felshin, *But Is It Art?*, 8.
marginalization, and later, resistance to and commentary on the political and economic oppression that makes social marginalization possible.” By centering urban living and Blackness as pivotal to the discourse of US democracy, Hip Hop art exemplifies artivism.

**Hip Hop Feminism: Artivism 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. 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.

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. 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.” 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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8 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.


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 artivism 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. Artivism 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 assists 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.”\(^{11}\) 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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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.

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 dame 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.

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

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.

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.
**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 artivism. 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.\textsuperscript{12} 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.\textsuperscript{13} I expand traditional poetic inquiry by drawing on critical race theory, Black performance aesthetics, and African American Vernacular English.\textsuperscript{14} 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 artivism 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-embodying 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

\textsuperscript{12} Monica Prendergast, Carl Leggo, and Pauline Sameshima, eds., *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences* (Rotterdam, Netherlands/Boston: Sense, 2009).
\textsuperscript{13} Leavy, *Method Meets Art*.
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 artivism 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. 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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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.16 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.17 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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17 See Glaude, Democracy in Black.
Bibliography


