

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: "DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE": THE
POLEMICS OF HIP HOP AND THE POETICS
OF RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE IN
BLACK GIRLHOOD.

Chyann L. Oliver, PhD, 2009

Directed By: Associate Professor, Sheri L. Parks, Department of
American Studies

At a time when Hip Hop is mired in masculinity, and scholars are “struggling for the soul of this movement” through excavating legacies in a black nationalist past, black girls and women continue to be bombarded with incessant, one-dimensional, images of black women who are reduced solely to sum of their sexual parts. Without the presence of a counter narrative on black womanhood and femininity in Hip Hop, black girls who are growing up encountering Hip Hop are left to define and negotiate their identities as emerging black women within a sexualized context. This dissertation asks: how can black girls, and more specifically, working class black girls, who are faced with inequities because of their race, class, and gender find new ways to define themselves, and name their experiences, in their own words and on their own terms? How can black girls

develop ways of being resistant and resilient in the face of adversity, and in the midst of this Hip Hop “attack on black womanhood?”

Using myriad forms of writing and fusing genres of critical essay, poetry, prose, ethnography, and life history, this dissertation, as a feminist, artistic, cultural, and political Hip Hop intervention, seeks to address the aforementioned issues by demonstrating the importance of black women’s vocality in Hip Hop. It examines how black women in Hip Hop have negotiated race, class, gender, and sexuality from 1979 to the present. It addresses the disappearance or hiatus of the black female rapper and the subsequent rise and reign of the video vixen, and the implications this has for black girls coming of age during this hyper-commercialization of Hip Hop. It discusses how creative writing workshops, which teach black girls between the ages of 12-17 about the importance of vocality and feminist resistance through poetry/spoken word, can become a new method for investigating black girlhood and exploring issues of resistance and resilience.

“DON’T BELIEVE THE HYPE”: THE POLEMICS OF HIP HOP AND THE
POETICS OF RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE IN BLACK GIRLHOOD

By

Chyann L. Oliver

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2009

Advisory Committee:

Associate Professor Sheri L. Parks, Chair

John L. Caughey

Mary Corbin Sies

Christina Hanhardt

Barry Pearson

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Preface

1988 was a pivotal year in Hip Hop culture. Almost a decade after the release of Sugar Hill Gang's, "Rapper's Delight," commencing the commercialization of rap music and hip hop culture, the rap group Public Enemy released, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back*, which demonstrated rap music's roots in radical, political, and oppositional cultural legacies. The album, which featured "Don't Believe the Hype," performed by lead emcee, Chuck D, and crowd enticer Flavor Flav--before he was searching for real ghetto love on VH1--used rap music as an intellectual forum and political device to address the issues plaguing urban black people. On this particular track, Chuck D informed listeners to disregard the hype, or propaganda, white supremacist capitalist patriarchal ideology, untruth, exaggerations, myths, and lies about Public Enemy being a threat or menace to society because of their personification and posthumous embodiment of black militancy. Espousing the rhetoric of black literary, cultural, religious, political/revolutionary nationalisms of the late 1960s and 1970s, "Don't Believe the Hype," was a way of reaching the masses of disenfranchised and dispossessed black people. It urged them to reject the hype that they had no hope, that poverty and their plight was self-induced, that white people and the government would change and recognize black people as equal and full citizens, and that being radical would counter and impede the progress towards freedom. In this song, and throughout the album, Public Enemy encouraged urban black people to become agents of change and create their own destiny through the truth and "by any means necessary" as laid out in the historical, Black Nationalist blueprints for a black utopia.

In addition to the emergence of Public Enemy, 1988 also witnessed the emergence of Niggaz With Attitude (NWA), Luther Campbell with 2 Live Crew, De La Soul, and KRS-One, and Queen Latifah, and thus ushered in the multiplicity of masculinist, afrocentric, sexist, misogynistic, and few female-ist voices, which created a great deal of cacophony in the industry. NWA, whose music was dubbed “gangsta rap,” or “reality rap,” and 2 Live Crew, whose music was deemed “pornographic rap,” gained notoriety for its inflammatory, blatant and glorified misogyny, sexism, violence, and illicit drug activity. But, these artists’ transgressive acts of insolence and irreverence for America and white American family values, ironically, became a profitable and palatable form of “pathological” blackness. Not only did this genre justify the law and order politics and policies of the 1980s, but also reflected and rationalized the anger of black men who were victimized by such policies. Twenty years later, these former sub-genres, namely “porno rap” and “gangsta rap” coalesced, roared over and made inaudible the variety of female-ist voices and pro-black and black love messages in rap music and hip hop, and formed a consumerist movement that has created the commercial, monolithic, self-loathing, self-fearing, and self-aggrandizing music that continues to reign supreme.

At present, rap music and the culture, Hip Hop, which gave birth to it, is over 30 years old, all grown up, and dysfunctional. Rebellious, and in “its second childhood,” but urged to “get its grown man on” and become responsible and personally accountable, rap music is portrayed as being filled with conspicuously consuming, blinged-out, drunk, crunk, blunt smoking, *Cristal* toasting, haute-couture wearing, uneducated, hyper-sexed, bitches and hos, niggas and P.I.M.Ps, and their illegitimate, aberrant offspring who shun

education and other Black middle class values. Consequently, some “conscious rappers” argue that Hip Hop is dead, while some scholars say that we are at a post-hip hop moment, but then there are those idealists among the two camps who are left with a shining thread of hope who believe that hip hop can reform itself and become what civil rights and black literary, cultural, religious, and political/revolutionary nationalisms could have been for the “underclass.” With an air of nostalgia, they lament and reminisce, “if only Hip Hop could wake up from this daze and revert back to its nascent oppositional golden age in 1988, it can fulfill the ‘seeds and legacies’ sown by black men 40 years prior.”

Although critics and fans—male and female—wage a war over the legitimacy of hip hop culture and rap music, its social significance, who controls it, its content, its intentions, and its future, both *believe the hype* about black women serving limited, one-dimensional roles, offering no significant contribution to rap music and hip hop culture. They *believe the hype* that because black women are currently portrayed as performing non-intellectual, non-creative, non-political, sexualized—and thus devalued—labor in rap music and hip hop culture, that black men are better suited to be cultural producers while black women are expected to be cultural bearers in this potential hip hop movement. They *believe the hype* that all black girls are victims of hip hop’s “attack on black womanhood,” and thus are powerless and unable to resist or overcome such assaults and exploitations.

“Don’t Believe the Hype”: *The Polemics of Hip Hop and the Poetics of Resistance and Resilience in Black Girlhood* is a political, cultural, artistic, and feminist

intervention that examines the gender relationships in rap music and hip hop culture. It will investigate the roles that black women have played through the inception and evolution of rap music and Hip Hop culture, and the importance and necessity of black women's intellectual and artistic contributions to the sustenance of rap music and hip hop culture. It will interrogate the ways black women have negotiated race, class, gender, and sexuality in a male dominated space. It also will explore the role feminism will play in the future of Hip Hop culture and the envisioned Hip Hop movement. Finally, it will propose and illustrate the myriad ways that black women and girls, whose voices are absent from or rendered inaudible in the mainstream music, culture, movement, and discourse, through the medium of poetry, exert and theorize resistance and resiliency growing up during the hyper-commercialization and hyper-sexualization of Hip Hop culture.

Dedication

& this is

for

the 15 year old colored girl

who sacrificed her childhood

to create me

and raise me

and through the struggle and hard times

we both emerged

resistant

and

resilient

black women

who love each other

fiercely

Acknowledgements

13 years ago when I was going through my real black/reel black hip hop identity crisis, my middle school guidance counselor told me that I would never make anything of myself, I would only be a whore, and therefore, I should just kill myself. As I reflect on what she said, I am not sure if she offered me these words to scare me straight because she recognized the potential that I had, or if she really believed that I was nothing more than another ghetto, fatherless, black girl who would become another statistic because she emulated the style and aesthetics of Black womanhood on MTV. Regardless of her intentions, her words have always haunted me, yet motivated me to become something more than her racist, classist, and sexist comments. While I should not be acknowledging someone who clearly was in the wrong vocation of helping children, her words helped me truly understand the meaning of resistance and resilience. Thirteen years later, at the ripe old age of 26, I am using my narrative and dedicating my life to acknowledging the black girls who are misrepresented, misunderstood, misguided, and muted, and I have many people to seriously thank for helping me go from the ‘hood to getting’ hooded.

While I have already dedicated this project to you, I have to acknowledge you again for your unwavering support and for showing me how to be resilient. Every moment that I doubted my ability to pursue this degree, you would say, “muff you’re an innovator, you can do anything you set your mind to.” And after going through this process, you were right, so Charlene Oliver, this is a big thank you. We did it!

I would be remiss if I did not also thank Dennis Maynard for providing me with the same unwavering love, nurturance and support. You may not have been in my life

from the very beginning, but when you entered, at the time when I was going through my Hip Hop identity crisis, your words helped me recognize the potential that I had to transcend not just my social world, but help other girls like me transcend theirs. You might truly be the visionary behind this project.

I must give much love and gratitude to my two other mothers: granny and Aunt Cindy who also made sure that they went without so I could have. You two prove that it really does take a village to raise a child, and I am forever grateful for your help in making it possible to be here. And to my brother, Channing, thank you for always believing in me.

With the sincerest gratitude, I have to thank the teachers and mentors who saw something shining brightly within, starting from John Hope Settlement House Day Care to the University of Maryland. To Ms. Joanne McDowall, Mr. Cartier and Ms. Neidz, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Cedric Bryant, Pamela Thoma, Margaret McFadden, Lyn Brown, and Mark Tappan--you helped me recognize my voice, the power of the written and spoken word, scholarly and artistic, poetry and prose, and the balancing and tempering of them all--thank you.

To the other wonderful Virgo woman in my life who made this dream possible, Sheri Parks, thank you again for helping me get through this exhausting process quickly and not too fragmented. Through the tears, long talks, frustrations, fears, and the few happy moments in the end, you have stood by me even when other people doubted me, and even when I doubted myself. As an unconventional teacher, you have taught me my greatest life lesson thus far: to trust myself and have faith in my abilities. People say that

imitation is the sincerest form of flattery so maybe one day when I grow up and figure out my vocation, I hope to teach the way that you do.

To John Caughey and Mary Corbin Sies, the other two comrades helping me navigate and negotiate what it means to become a PhD, I thank you for your kind words, care, and support, which has meant the world to me and has helped propel me this far. And I also have to give many thanks to Christina Hanhardt and Barry Pearson for taking a chance on my unconventional project. By believing in this project you both have also made this dream come true. And before I forget, Ms. Valerie Brown, thank you for all the little things that mean big things on the hardest of days: the hugs, the funny conversations, and the words of encouragement, yes, you too helped get me through these arduous five years.

To Candace Ford, the Virgo L.O.M.L., although you have come in my life at the end of this process, it feels like you have been here with me forever. For the past two and half years, and the last two and a half weeks, of extreme exhaustion, trepidation, melancholy, and crying fits, you have been the biggest source of support, love, nurturance, and motivation as my friend and partner to walk with me towards the end of this journey and the dawn of a new one, and I am grateful for your understanding and compassion.

To my wonderfully amazing friends, Donte Tates, Lee Rankin, Amina McIntyre, you are always there when I need you and I love you for making me laugh on days when I just wanted to cry--and did just that. To the Black women mafia plus a few more: Dr. Kristen Hodge, Kache Boyd, Ebony Bowden, Johonna McCants, Bettina Judd, and Dr.

Wendy Thompson, you've made this journey fun, laughable, bearable, and possible--you are my sunshine on a rainy, cloudy, and stormy day, also known as graduate school! Also, Pat Davis, Cedric Frazier, Ariel Thomas, Beverly Hunt, and Sylvia Baffour, thank you for being you! Your friendship, prayers, and faith in me has gotten me through many a days.

To Cheryl Laroche, I do not have the words to demonstrate how grateful I am to have you in my life. You have given me the wonderful teachings of Buddhism, which have helped me grow spiritually and holistically as an intellectual and human being. I guess if I had the best words to express my gratitude, I would offer the words that you offered to me which changed my life for the better: Nam Myoho Renge kyo.

To Marcy Mistrett, Evelyn Lightfoot, Shannon Campbell, Amora, Kai, Sabrina, Ebony, Tantania, Karita, Donae, Charnita, Alicia, and Mary, this project would not be possible without you, thank you for sharing your stories, your time, and your spaces.

I also have to give special thanks to the numerous doctors who have helped keep me alive during this physically and psychologically traumatic and transformational process. To Dr. Horace Greene, as your "fourth child," it is an honor to have you in my life. Every time that I wanted to quit you would not give me that option, especially if it was on your watch. To Pamela Gandy, who knew having someone prick you with needles would be so comforting and getting my qi flowing. And, to Dr. Acquanetta Frazier and Dr. Andrea Sullivan, your stories and lives give me hope for my new beginning in the world of healing and teaching holistically.

Last, I have to thank the Ford Foundation for the financial support, because without that paper, I would not be getting mine! It is an honor to be part of the Ford family and to be able to pursue this dream that is now a reality.

And to all those whom I did not mention personally, with love, respect, and gratitude, I am grateful to you all.

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Chapter 1: “Beyond Beats and Rhymes”: American Studies, Black Feminism, Ethnography, and the Future of Hip Hop/ an Intro

My Feminist Self-ethno-retro-spective of a Hip Hop Black Girlhood

Unlike many journalists, cultural critics, and historiographers of Hip Hop, I cannot tell you where I was in 1979 when the Sugar Hill Gang’s, “Rapper’s Delight” was playing on the radio. I cannot indulge you in similar recollections of how the DJ saved my life. I cannot offer you a coming of age narrative during the post-civil rights and post-black power/black pride movements, which places the emergence of this fresh new type of music at the center of the discourse. It is not because I was mourning the death of disco and soul music, but simply because I was not born yet.

In what often seems to be a way for many writers to relate, “keep it real,” or swear their allegiance to Hip Hop by illustrating how they were part of the culture from the very beginning, or in what appears to be a clever rhetorical strategy to validate or legitimize their commentary on or defense of Hip Hop, actually demonstrates how significant and pivotal rap music and Hip Hop culture--the bricolage youth culture of reclamation and reappropriation of space, place, racial and ethnic identity--is in the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of identities. Whether we like the comparisons or not, the emergence of the Sugar Hill Gang with “Rapper’s Delight,” much like the emergence of Marcus Garvey, the Blues, Malcolm X, Jazz, or the Black Panthers, are defining moments or paradigmatic shifts which will forever shape the identities of the generations of youth in which the phenomenon and iconography appear. And for many writers who reminisce about their early encounters with Hip Hop culture,

they are sharing their tales about the impact this music and culture have had on not who they are, but who they be. Whether they are be-ing or be-coming, they are constantly in a state of transience: forever changing, evolving, and altering their identities and consciousnesses.

For me, my first encounter with rap music and Hip Hop culture was ten years later, in 1989 when I was watching The Box, the pay-per-view video request music channel based out of Miami that was more risqué, gritty, and urban (black) than MTV, and a precursor to BET. I remember seeing the first video and song that would shape my identity: Salt-N-Pepa's, "Expression." I was only 7 at the time, in the third grade, and probably should not have been watching videos, but when you have a young single mother and family who serve as unpaid baby-sitters, you sometimes get exposed to "grown-folk's business," or adult content that is often present in music videos and rap music.

But, unlike the rap music and videos of 2009, laden with hyper-sexed hypo-clothed video vixens, I learned something "positive" from "Expression." This song and video, especially, taught me what it meant to be my true and authentic self, to embrace it, and affirm it. Maybe not quite the words a 7 year-old would use, but then again I have always been very articulate and insightful. Nevertheless, I remember feeling very uplifted, and empowered by this song whose lyrics were, "express yourself, it's gotta be you and only you babe/ express yourself let me be me/ express yourself, don't tell me what I cannot do baby/ go on and rock your body."

Now, I don't know what the rock your body meant for me at the time, I think I thought it was about dancing and being free to dance, but regardless of the last line, I loved that song and its overall message about enjoying who you were and having fun being you. The lyrics coupled with the video, in which Salt-N-Pepa had their daughters, and the different representations of black people and black women especially, it was a great feminist pedagogical tool for building self-esteem and instilling pride. While I would not go as far to say that this song, or rap music and Hip Hop culture in general defined who I was--as many "Hip Hop generationers" do--I would definitely say that it was a mantra and it provided me with a soundtrack to my life and impacted the way I have interpreted, negotiated, and articulated my identity.

However, as I got older in age so did rap music and Hip Hop culture, but the music that was shaping my identity and providing me with the soundtrack to my life was no longer professing or proffering positive messages, such as how to express my uniqueness and relish in it. Unlike the late 1980s and early 1990s, which had a variety of sub-genres of rap music to choose from, such as "party-rap," "gangsta rap," "afrocentric rap," "proto-black nationalist rap", "porno-rap," etc., rap music during my middle school years from 1994-1996, in which I was coming of age trying to define my emerging self while maturing as an awkward, insecure, adolescent girl, was also grappling with its identity. Hip Hop was developing into an industry and rap music was becoming a commercial monolith with incessant allusions to nihilistic tropes about glorified violence, prison culture, misogyny, and drug use; messages that were beginning to silence and eclipse rap and Hip Hop's early years of polyvocality and subversive potential.

School, which has often been my place of refuge, and rap music, the score to my life, were two very ideologically hostile and incongruous spaces for me during this time. My old mantra, of Salt-N-Pepa's "Expression" was replaced with L.L. Cool J's "Doin' It,"--a euphemism for sex. L.L.'s "Doin' It" was not my new tantric mantra because I was "doin' it," or even contemplating "doin' it," but it became the new mantra because I wanted to simulate the sex appeal and/or embody and embrace sexiness because it would make me seem mature, womanly, and more importantly, authentically black. As a result, I performed my awkward raced and classed adolescent sexuality just like the women in the video using the song as my guide. And, with this new persona or swagger, I gained cultural capital and access to acceptance and popularity and notoriety, but I lost myself and my individuality in the process.

During these two years of middle school and adolescent development, I learned to be "real black," or socially inscribed "reel" black, or "authentic" nihilistically "underclass" black, hyper-hetero-sexual black, anti-intellectual black, the hyper-black, minstrelsy black, the black that Hip Hop gets blamed for perpetuating. I learned to be this insincere yet authentically real black girl *that* found herself asking: "who am I?" and "whose am I?" because I was not in ownership of my identity and being, and ironically I was looking to Hip Hop, which was going through the same crisis, for self-definition. In retrospect, I was having a nervous breakdown and going through a quarter of a quarter-life crisis.

Exhausted, confused, distraught, and defeated by the turn my life was taking and the people I was disappointing because of how I was negotiating coming into my black

womanhood, and afraid of fulfilling legacies and inscriptions placed on me prior to my encounters with Hip Hop, I put down the script. Instead, I taught myself the meaning of resistance and resilience. I remade myself, altered my consciousness, and re-envisioned a progressive, multi-dimensional blackness and black womanhood that did not include Hip Hop as my primary frame of reference. I did exactly what many fans, critics, defenders, and writers of Hip Hop have been expecting the much older culture to do for the past 14 years. However, unlike my own personal maturation, I am not sure if this evolution is possible for Hip Hop an industry inextricably linked to global post-modern capitalism. But, for black girls coming of age during the rise and reign of Hip Hop, who are encountering all of the issues--and many more--as I did 13 years prior, feminist resistance and resilience is possible and a part of being and becoming fierce black women.

Dissertation Objective

This dissertation enters the discussion on the current status and future of rap music and Hip Hop culture, via revisiting its past through an examination of black women's negotiations of race, class, gender, and sexuality in Hip Hop from 1979 to the present, and what their current role in Hip Hop means for the future of Hip Hop and the future of Black girls. By Hip Hop I am referring to the commercialized, mass produced industry, not underground hip hop culture. I capitalize "Hip Hop" to denote the industry, and hip hop to denote the underground un-co-opted elements or rap, breaking, graph-art, and dee-jaying. Each chapter in this dissertation proposes and attempts to answer four overarching questions: (1) how have black women in Hip Hop encountered, negotiated,

and articulated race, class, gender, and sexuality, and how have such negotiations led to the current disappearance of black female rappers, and the disappearance of a multiplicity of black women's voices and perspectives on such negotiations, and contributed to a hyper-visibility of hyper-sexualized representations of women in Hip Hop, namely video vixens? (2) What effect do these ubiquitous hyper-sexualized images and messages of and about black women have on black girls growing up and defining their identities within a Hip Hop context? (3) Because Hip Hop, as a youth culture and a voice of a generation currently privileges the black male voice and denies or limits the black female voice, how can Black girls growing up during this cultural moment, and/or defining their identities in a Hip Hop context find and assert their vocality? (4) How can poetry, spoken word or slam, as a sub-genre in Hip Hop, serve as a qualitative method and a feminist praxis for exploring, developing, and nurturing, vocality imbedded in resistance and resilience in black girls?

Pioneering in form, content, and style, this dissertation aims to problematize and extend the current dialogue about black women's roles in Hip Hop and what their roles mean for a generation of black girls who look to Hip Hop to speak to or define their identities. I seek to move beyond the discussion of the effect "negative" (read: hyper-sexual) representations of women in Hip Hop have on black girls because it further victimizes black girls and offers them no concrete or proactive solutions to resist against a culture that represents, speaks to, or gives them a frame of reference for understanding their existence, as black, female, and working class, or simply as being black and female. Instead of contributing to the deficit model of studies on black girlhood, in this

dissertation, I will discuss how black girls can resist and be resilient by asserting their voices and be resistant and resilient in the midst of this “attack on black womanhood” through the medium of poetry and feminism. I will also discuss the implications such limited roles and the silence of Black women has for the future of girls and women in Hip Hop.

Because this dissertation seeks to place black women at the center of the conversation on Hip Hop, it will fall into the category of few books, which do so, Joan Morgan’s *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life As a Hip Hop Feminist* (1999), Gwendolyn Pough’s, *Check it While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (2004), Kyra D. Gaunt’s, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip Hop* (2006), Gwendolyn Pough, and Elaine Richardson’s, *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology* (2007), and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s *Pimps Up, Ho’s Down: Hip Hop’s Hold on Young Black Women* (2007). While there are Hip Hop texts or feminist anthologies that have a chapter or two that address black women in Hip Hop, or their relationships to Hip Hop, such as Tricia Rose’s seminal Hip Hop text, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994); Mark Anthony Neal and Murray Forman’s, *That’s the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (2004), Cheryl Keyes’, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (2004), and Imani Perry’s, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (2004), among a few others, the texts written and edited by Morgan, Pough, Gaunt, and Sharpley-Whiting are the only texts which focuses solely on black women, black girls and their roles in and relationships with Hip Hop culture, black men,

and/or feminism or acts of feminist resistance. In this dissertation, I aim to extend and elaborate on Hip Hop's relationship with black women, and black women in Hip Hop's relationship to feminism. This dissertation aims to discuss the role feminism or feminist resistance plays or will play in the way black girls resist or will resist against the one-dimensional depictions of a hyper-sexual black womanhood and black femininity in Hip Hop. Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to address the power of vocality as an oppositional, subversive, transgressive, feminist act, and the significance this has for black women, and black girls, especially at a time when they cannot afford to be silent about issues that are killing them.

American Studies/Anticipated Outcome/Contributions

In Tricia Rose's follow up text to *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—And Why It Matters* (2008), she notes that Hip Hop culture is significant because it is the “primary means by which we talk about race in the United States.” I would like to suggest that Hip Hop is not simply the primary means by which we discuss race in the United States, but the primary means by which we discuss the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and empire in America, and thus is a significant site for inquiry in American Studies. From its beginnings, Hip Hop has been a product of and a reaction to racism and classism, and its progenitors and practitioners have been responding to the major themes or areas of inquiry in American studies, namely space, place, and empire. Many scholars, albeit, opponents and defenders of Hip Hop's

controversial aspects, contend that Hip Hop culture is merely a reflection of America, in which all its crass ideals are reflected in a fun house mirror. I believe that Hip Hop, as a product of de-industrialization, urban slum removal, the Eisenhower Interstate Highway System, HOLC redlining, COINTELPRO, trickle down economics, the welfare reform act, the prison industrial complex, among other things, is the disconcerting narrative of American exceptionalism that places blackness at the center. As an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary field, American studies has often been the place of reinventing itself and creating new meanings of what it means to be American, and this dissertation will nuance the discussions on space, place, and empire, by situating not just blackness at the center, but specifically black working-class femaleness at the center. The anticipated outcome for this dissertation is simple yet ambitious: honest discussion about what it means to be young, black, working-class, and female in America, and offer a new way of conceptualizing and understanding how young, black, working class females can exert a feminist self and be resistant and resilient and save each other in the process, which is through poetry. Also, in a language and aesthetic of Hip Hop, poetry, vernacular and academic traditions, shifts in and out of various forms of writing styles and genres, such as poetry, prose, memoir, critical essay, ethnography, and self ethnography, this dissertation, as an American studies text, aims to transcend the confines of language, or the politics of containment which prevent black women from speaking, or really being heard, and having their words and existences validated. As a black woman with multiple cultural traditions, and languages to help me interpret and articulate my multiple identities simultaneously, I mediate these social worlds and become an alchemist with

this hybrid form of intertextual writing and story-telling.

Literature Review

It has often been thought that rap music and its bricolage street culture, hip hop, emerged fully grown circa 1967 in the South Bronx, New York, as an indigenous, oppositional, working-poor, predominately black and male culture and art form that is distinct from and independent of other genres of Black music, folk cultures, and literary or artistic traditions (Rose 1994; Fricke 2002). Often conceived of as a product of and a reaction to the social, political, and economic neglect and deliberate destruction of urban communities and construction of the “underclass” by the local and federal government (Rose 1994; Wilson 1996; Forman 2004; Chang 2005), rap music and hip hop culture, which is now conceptualized by academics as a reclamation of space, place, and race, was initially about having fun and coping with plaguing social conditions (Rose 1994; Forman 2004; Kitwana 2002). Although Tricia Rose, the pioneering Hip Hop intellectual, has noted that Hip Hop is solely a post-industrial culture, and rap music, which is a part of Hip Hop culture, and the social, economic, and political conditions in which it emerged, no matter the resemblance it has to other African American, African, and Afro-diasporic vernacular cultures and traditions (Rose 1994), scholars have continued to locate Hip Hop culture, and more specifically, rap music in African, African American, and Afro-diasporic folk music, oral , and literary traditions (Fricke 2002; Keyes 2004).

According to ethnomusicologist Cheryl Keyes, the contemporary rapper is part of a lineage of West African artisans known as bards or griots whose purpose was to

produce, preserve, and disseminate cultural traditions through orality with musical, and most often percussion accompaniment (Keyes 2004). The bard, as Keyes notes, is the transmitter of history and cultural traditions through orality and performance. In the Mande tribe, the griots or bards, were called “nyamakala” and it was assumed that the “nyama” or malevolent force transmitted through words and the act of vocality by the nyamakala would spark the actions of tribal members. It was presumed that the nyama, or energy inherent in and manifested through the act of speaking, was a powerful and transformative tool, and if wielded in the right way, could “transform chaos into peace” (Keyes 2004). However, rap music and Hip Hop culture (industry), at present, is neither acknowledging or embracing its African roots, nor resisting oppression or reappropriating identities that were ravaged by institutional or structural racism and classism. Instead, it is argued that rap music turns chaos into more chaos; it wields its power incorrectly because it relishes in its aberrant behavior; it perpetuates the notion of black immorality and inhumanity, and satisfies and satiates the white fantasy of black minstrelsy (hooks 1992, 1994; Collins 2004; Dyson 2004, 2007; Rose 2008).

The main contention about the political devolution of rap music and hip hop culture is that because of its commercialization in the 1990s, due to the MTV-ification of the music through visual dissemination, i.e. videos, television commercials or advertisements (Forman 2004), as well as the emergence of hip hop magazines, such as *Vibe* created by Quincy Jones, *The Source* created by two white males, Dave Mays, and John Shecter, and clothing lines, such as FUBU (For Us, By Us), which was marketed as being black owned and run, created a “Hip Hop nation,” as Nelson George notes (George

1998), but it also led to the demise of hip hop's artistic and cultural traditions. However, S. Craig Watkins contends that Hip Hop has always been commercialized since 1979 with the popularization of "Rapper's Delight," performed by the Sugar Hill Gang. 1979 marks the beginning and the end of what is theorized as an oppositional music and culture, free of commercial influence until the 1990s (Watkins 2005). Offering an alternative to the "Hip Hop became corrupted by white intentions" narrative, Watkins illustrates how Hip Hop has its roots in commercialization and as a result its intentions have always been to become more than solely a 'hood music or culture, or a political, subversive oppositional movement.

While Watkins contends that 1979 demarcates the beginning and the "end" of a black owned and operated, oppositional, political, non-commercial, organic, youth, and male music and culture, 1988 really marks the year of the shift in the thematic content, image, style, tone, and sound of rap music and hip hop culture. In John Leland's essay, "The Pinnacle: 1988," featured in Alan Light's, *The Vibe History of Hip-Hop*, he suggests that rap music evolved in 1988, because it featured a multiplicity of voices and messages from artists such as Public Enemy, Queen Latifah, De La Soul, NWA, and 2 Live Crew (1999). And, with the commercial appeal of NWA and 2 Live Crew, due to their widely publicized and chastised images and messages about black urban life, it created a niche market which made this type of "real" or "hyper-real" blackness and maleness the most viable and profitable form of rap music and Hip Hop culture. "Gangsta rap," "pornography rap," and/or "reality rap," ushered in a anti-woman culture (Collins 2000; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003; Keyes 2004), delineating hip hop as a male space, and if

women were to enter the cipher, they had to play by male rules. Often, these rules or scripts required black women to be hyper-sexualized objects of male fantasy (Morgan; 2002; Collins 2000, 2004; Pough 2004), or hyper-sexualized subjects who posture as black men all while “claiming jezebel” (Byrd 2004), who perpetuate, reify, and validate racist and sexist stereotypes about black female sexuality in order to be seen and heard. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, these “controlling images” that of the jezebel/hoochie mama, welfare queen (Collins 2000, 2004), or as Morgan notes, the “chickenhead” (1999), or this “bitch/ho nexus” (Dyson 2001) has served to further subjugate and contain and confine black women and black women’s sexuality. The problem with such “negative” or hyper-sexualized, one-dimensional, monolithic, objectified, and fetishized portrayals of black womanhood and female sexuality, as many black women, feminists, and womanists have argued, is that these representations have detrimental effects on the psyche of black women, and especially black girls. They presume to assert that the incessant and relentless portrayals and replications of black female hyper-sexuality makes such historical narratives about black sexual aberrancy seem normal and acceptable, as *Essence* magazine and many scholars have speculated (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003; Collins 2004; Steffans 2005). Much of the criticisms and critiques of the “negative” portrayals and representation of black womanhood and its effects on black girls, have been dominating the discourse on women in Hip Hop culture, and have served as the impetus for a surge in a creation of a Hip Hop Feminism, coined by journalist Joan Morgan, which aims to address to “fuck with the grays,” or a feminism that is practical, modern, chic, and sensible and allows space for the contradictions

inherent in being a black woman, feminist, and avowed fan of rap music and hip hop replete with sexism and misogyny (Morgan 1999; Pough 2004; Pough et. al 2007).

Currently, hip hop feminists and advocates of Hip Hop and feminism argue that as a result of the prevalence or hyper-visibility of the “video ho,” or “video vixen” a la Karrine “Superhead” Steffans coupled with the absence of the female rapper and the female political, feminist, or oppositional voice in rap music and hip hop culture (Collins 2004, 2006; Steffans 2005; Sharpley-Whitting 2007), this hyper-visibility, invisibility, and inaudibility correlates with the hyper-sexual behaviors, mores, and attitudes of black females between the ages of 13-19 who are currently the largest demographic of new HIV cases (Watkins 2005). Such contemporary discussions on the plight of black girls, have reached a climax as a result of the Don Imus “nappy-headed-ho” debacle, in which the old, white, male, radio shock jock, referred to the Rutgers women’s basketball team as a bunch of nappy headed hos. Imus who defended his position as poor mimicry of black masculinity is the straw that broke the proverbial camel’s back in this Hip Hop debate about the representations of black womanhood, black femininity, and black sexuality, and has aired the rest of the unmentionables in an ongoing dirty laundry conversation about “acceptable,” “appropriate,” “proper,” “respectable” or “real” blackness (Dyson 2007; Rose 2008).

Increasingly, there have been numerous assaults on Hip Hop and urban blackness by the civil rights generationers, namely Bill Cosby, Stanley Crouch, and Juan Williams who believe that the Hip Hop generation, those born during the years of 1967-1984 (Kitwana 2003) are a bastard generation that have disgraced the race and are the reasons

for their underclass status (Dyson 2005; Williams 2008). According to many civil rights generationers, if Hip Hop were to die, middle and upper class black people were to turn their backs on the underclass, urban black people were to stop naming their kids fake African names, black women were to stop being whores, black men were to take charge of their families, illegitimate, ignorant, offspring were to pull up their pants and wear clothes that cover their bodies, and were to go to school and get an education they can and will be cured of the behaviors that prevent them from being full agents and participants in American culture (Williams 2008). However, not all civil rights generationers share this view of urban or “underclass” pathology. Some scholars, who either missed the mark on being a civil rights generationer or a Hip Hop generationer, but nonetheless, use their neither-nor identity to market themselves as a true mediator and legitimate voice and intellectual voice on Hip Hop, and defend Hip Hop’s cultural viability and perceived aberrancy as a consequence of a long legacy of structural and interlocking oppressions (Dyson 2004, 2005, 2007).

However, despite cultural mediators like Dyson, who sometimes border on romanticizing the cultural relevance and artistic merits of Hip Hop culture and rap music by focusing solely on a defense of Hip Hop at the expense of truly critiquing Hip Hop’s involvement in perpetuating structures of domination, scholars of the Hip Hop generation, actually critique and attempt to offer ways for Hip Hop to help working-class Black people resist oppressions. In fact, an increasing number of these hip hop generation scholars who love hip hop, yet hate the turn it has taken believe that Hip Hop and rap music must change its self-destructive ways and recognize its potential to mobilize the

masses to eradicate social ills. These scholars, and journalists believe that the Hip Hop generation must recognize and reconcile its relationships with the civil rights/black power generationers by paying homage to the civil rights and black cultural and political nationalist movements from the 1950s-1970s (Kitwana 2003; Pough 2004). They strongly concur that if Hip Hop and its practitioners were able to realize its historical legacies of black and black working-class opposition and revolution it can actualize and harness its potential to continue the legacy of past movements and eradicate all of the issues plaguing black people in the United States (Kitwana 2003; Pough 2004; Watkins 2005).

A Hip Hop Interlude: Some Thoughts on a Hip Hop Movement

As a fixture in the global marketplace, Hip Hop culture undoubtedly and irrefutably wields a significant amount of economic power leading many Hip Hop moguls, aficionados, and scholars to believe that Hip Hop culture has the potential to exchange or cash in its economic capital for social and cultural capital to become the next contemporary social and/or political movement. Although black nationalisms: literary (Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement), cultural (Maulana Karenga and the U.S Organization), religious (Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X of the nation of Islam), and political/revolutionary (Black Panthers) picked up the Civil Rights dream deferred for urban Black people in the United States, by providing “bread, housing, and education,” as well as instilling pride and love for the community, and art for the people, by the people, and to liberate the people, Black nationalisms were unable to ameliorate all of the ills

plaguing black people residing in America because its potential was truncated and never actualized. Therefore, for the next generation of urban black people, Hip Hop, which emerges in the post-industrial and de-industrialized cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Compton etc., with issues such as joblessness, poor educational system, illicit drug trade, gang activity, which later result in a prison industrial complex and HIV/AIDS epidemic among other things, Hip Hop, as scholars and fans contend, can be for this generation of black youth born during the years of (1967-1984), Black Nationalism of the past. It is believed that they can use their intimate knowledge and experiences with oppressions, coupled with their artistic abilities, and abilities to mobilize masses of youth across lines of race, nationality, class, gender, and sexuality to combat these issues that continue to plague black people residing in such cities.

However, looking to Hip Hop culture, which has moments of oppositional and radical tendencies to serve as a movement for social change is erroneous. And to look to mainly black nationalists movements and leaders for a model of a new movement in which rappers, and mostly male rappers, to expect them to lead us to salvation is dangerous as it seeks to repeat the same mistakes of reducing women to mute sexual bearers who should make babies for the nation or stand behind their men. While I do not believe that Hip Hop as an industry and invested in capitalism can become a social movement, I think that activists and activist organizations can use elements of Hip Hop culture--rapping, writing/spitting poetry, graffitiing, break-dancing, deejaying with a truly oppositional and revolutionary ideology--not only to address social issues and mobilize youth, but also to eradicate all interlocking systems of oppression, which include gender,

and sexuality in addition to race and class. However, I will argue that if Hip Hop were to truly become a contemporary movement or catalyst for social change, it must develop new modes of resistance and opposition to deal with postmodern issues. Also, Hip Hop scholars and activists who conceive of a Hip Hop movement must look towards building a coalition movement across race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, and global lines, and encourage practitioners to develop an oppositional consciousness rooted in feminism. I contend that in order for the the Hip Hop generation to truly have a successful movement that is not rooted in postmodern global capitalism, they must develop or begin thinking about developing a model of what Chela Sandoval describes as “a differential form of consciousness and social movement,” which is best demonstrated by the activist activities of U.S. Third World Feminists of the 1970s-1980s during the emergence of Hip Hop and its oppositional origins and legacies.

In her essay, “Seeds and Legacies: Tapping the Potential in Hip-Hop,” Gwendolyn Pough contends that Hip Hop has the potential to become a successful contemporary social movement because it is rooted in the legacy of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, but it has not tapped into this potential, for reasons which she does not clearly define. However, the best example of the legacy and untapped potential in Hip Hop is the relationship between Black Nationalist revolutionary mother Afeni Shakur and her son Tupac Shakur. But, it happens to be that Tupac’s unstable identity, which had caused him to oscillate from the prophetic and prolific organic intellectual to the profane and pathological thug, which in turn had created an internal struggle that later resulted in

his untimely death, leaving another generation with a “martyr,” and questions of what could have been.¹

Pough continues to argue that many critics of Hip Hop dismiss Hip Hop because they reduce Hip Hop to commercialized rap focusing solely on the misogyny and violence within the music and thus its potential as a catalyst for a contemporary social movement. She insists that critics focus on the negative aspects of rap music because it distracts the audience from recognizing how powerful Hip Hop is. She further maintains that hip-hop is bigger than rap; it is a way of life, a mind-set, and if this culture can get people in the mood to party, it can motivate people to mobilize for change. Moreover, once this power for a transcultural, transnational, and trans-generational mobilization is recognizable to the generation and fans, a real movement can begin.² In sum, Pough is suggesting that once Hip Hop heads and critics recognize how potent the commercial appeal of Hip Hop is, and its role as a fixture in the global marketplace, which yields economic power, they can transform this economic power into political power and a major social movement can occur or commence to take shape.

Pough’s primary source for her essay, originally written in 2001, is an essay written in 1995 by Marvin Gladney entitled, “The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop.” In his essay, Gladney contends that Hip Hop culture and rap music did not emerge on its own but is an extension of the Black Arts Movement. He suggests that much like the Black Arts Movement, the art form rap, like BAM poetry, can serve as a political tool to

1 Gwendolyn Pough, “Seeds and Legacies: Tapping the Potential in Hip Hop” in *That’s the Joint!: Hip Hop Studies Reader*, eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 283-289.

2 Ibid.

ignite a movement for change. He asserts that rap music and Hip Hop culture is the “ideological progression” of the Black Arts Movement, and thus it has its artistic and political roots in a rich history of oppositional thinking and action.³ Moreover, rap music shares this tradition with the Black Arts Movement in three ways: the presence of anger and rage in the art, themes of Black nationalism and separatism in the art, and the desire to create a Black Aesthetic to assess the quality of the art. Gladney supports his three claims by doing the following: comparing the poetry of Amiri Baraka and rap lyrics of KRS-One and Tribe Called Quest to illustrate the trope of anger which is characteristic of much of Black Art poetry; comparing how artists in the Black Arts movement and in Hip-Hop are devalued as artists and their search for ways of creating separate spaces or companies to ensure that their work remains true, pure, and essentially Black; and establishing a Black aesthetic or yard stick to evaluate the quality of Black art including music.⁴

Similar to Pough and Gladney, Hip-Hop journalist, author, and lecturer Bakari Kitwana addresses the issues plaguing the Hip-Hop generation and argues that these issues plaguing working-class and working-poor black people are the very reasons Hip Hop must become a full-fledged contemporary political and social movement or catalyst for change. First, Kitwana who coined the term: the hip-hop generation, defines this generation as Blacks born between the years of 1967 and 1984, as the first generation to

3 Marvin Gladney, “The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop,” in *African American Review*, Vol. 29, No.2, Special Issues on The Music (Summer, 1995), 291-301.

4 Ibid.

grow up without a social movement and leaders.⁵ Although this generation is no longer plagued with the threat of lynching, state sanctioned segregation, legalized disenfranchisement, among other overt and egregiously violent forms of individual and institutional racism, the post-civil rights generation are growing up with a unique set of issues. As previously noted, the hip-hop generation are growing up with the plight of the disappearance of work; suburbanization which resulted in ghettoization of cities and the concentration of poverty in these areas; Reaganomics; attacks on Black womanhood; the prison industrial complex; crack cocaine; illiteracy and high drop out rates; HIV and AIDS; and advanced global capitalism, among a slew of social, political, and economic maladies.⁶ These issues, which are a progression or extension of racist social policies preceding the birth of the hip-hop generation and prevalent today, are a major cause of concern. Since rap is the voice of the hip-hop generation and those that succeed it, it seems logical that hip-hop would serve as a tool to motivate and mobilize the masses to alter the social and political climate. But the issue becomes: who would serve as the primary leader to mobilize the masses, and what will be the focus of this movement.

Kitwana attempts to address such issues. He notes how Hip Hop mogul Russell Simmons has taken an interest in the fate and revolutionary future of Hip-Hop. Already controlling the music and fashion industry, Simmons has set his sights on transforming the political sphere. The so-called God-father of Hip Hop has begun his quest for the democratic domain during the political campaign for the 2000 presidential election.

⁵ Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2002) 3-24.

⁶ Ibid.

During this election, Simmons had united with Civil Rights and religious leaders, such as Al Sharpton and Conrad Muhammad to figure out how to best utilize Hip-Hop as a means to mobilize a generation who could change the face of politics. With initiatives such as Rap the Vote in 2000, in conjunction with Rock the Vote sponsored by MTV, Simmons' goal was to mobilize Blacks between the ages of 18-24 to vote and take part of their civic duty that their ancestors shed blood for.⁷

However, some people are less enthusiastic about Simmons' new venture into politics; they view his interest as another attempt for his own self-aggrandizement by pushing the same old politics as usual, which is offering the black support and allegiance to the Democratic Party, which is ironic seeing that Simmons is a Republican.⁸ In contrast to these politics as usual, Kitwana notes that Hip-Hop artists and moguls, such as Lauryn Hill, P. Diddy, Master P, Nelly, Chuck D, Wyclef and a host of others, have established organizations and foundations which give back to "the community" by promoting education and literacy, anti-violence, and political education.⁹ Organizations and foundations such as LISTEN (Local Initiative, Support, Training, and Education Network Incorporation) headed by Lisa Sullivan, which is a DC based organization focusing on mobilizing youth of the hip-hop generation to lead a social movement, addresses and seeks to eradicate poverty, neglect, police brutality and other problems plaguing urban youth. Kitwana, also notes how other grassroots organizations similar to LISTEN, such

7 Ibid, 145-174.

8 Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 156.

9 Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2002), 195-215.

as the Center for Young Women’s Development (CYWD) in San Francisco, and Fighting Ignorance, Spreading Truth (FIST) in Rochester, New York, are committed to the struggle of eradicating the oppressions the hip-hop generation are facing.¹⁰ Instead of idealizing and idolizing social movements of the past as evidence of Hip Hop’s oppositional legacies, Kitwana demonstrates how Hip Hop generationers and organizations are using Hip Hop or elements of Hip Hop to reach out to the Hip Hop generation and work towards eradicating such issues.

Kitwana, unlike Pough, also includes possible agendas for Hip-Hop’s transformation from a cultural to political or social movement, which are education; worker’s rights; reparations; economic infrastructure in urban communities; youth poverty and disease; anti-youth legislation; and foreign policy. In order for these agendas to be met, a method of action must be established, and these methods are to be established by grassroots organizations such as those previously mentioned. But, grassroots organizations alone cannot foster the type of mobilization, exposure, and awareness that commercial culture can, he notes. And more importantly, grassroots organizations do not have the economic power to remedy many of these pressing issues on the agenda; hence, Hip-Hop moguls and artists can provide philanthropic support to grassroots organizations that do work on the front lines.¹¹

Furthermore, since Hip-Hop is a global phenomenon, it is essential to maximize, to the fullest extent, this advantage and expand a Black movement to a multicultural and multiethnic coalition movement to initiate change for Blacks enduring more intricate

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

forms of racism and classism. This last crucial component of Kitwana's vision for a hip-hop movement involves white youth. Because white youth have become part of Hip-Hop, embracing the music and art forms, he argues, they can also become educated about the least entertaining reality of Blackness in America. It is believed that once white youth are armed with the knowledge about inequities and injustices they too can act in solidarity as advocates and allies of this burgeoning political and social movement.¹²

Kitwana, similar to Pough and Gladney in their attempts to recognize the saliency and oppositional tendencies in Hip Hop through the art form rap, however, provides more thought and insight into what a Hip Hop movement is to look like, the agenda, and who is to take part in the movement. However, journalist and critic Yvonne Bynoe rejects any conceptualization of a future Hip Hop movement because:

While rap music and its related Hip Hop culture may espouse political viewpoints, the bulk of its political activism is limited to artists lending their support and talents to a particular protest record and its accompanying video or a live performance, rather than endeavors with real influence on policy. Hip Hop is primarily a cultural expression that is formed from the shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices of a subset of the [larger] African-American community. Where Hip Hop seeks to define a specific group reality within society, politics seeks to define society in general. In basic terms, raising awareness about police brutality through a song or performances is Hip Hop, but actually motivating the masses to force changes in police department procedures cannot adequately foster a political movement.¹³

This quote rejects both Pough and Kitwana's contentions that Hip Hop can be a movement for change. She notes that rap music has political elements, in that rappers have songs that stand out against social issues, but the primary role of rap music and

12 Ibid.

13 Yvonne Bynoe, *Stand and Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership, and Hip Hop Culture* (Brooklyn: Soft Skull, 2004), x-xi).

rappers is to entertain. She brings up the question, why are we looking to rappers to be politicians and political activists? Also, she makes another great point that Hip Hop culture is not African American or Black culture, and one cannot conflate or collapse both. Therefore, scholars, proponents of Hip Hop, and critics for that matter, must recognize that Hip Hop is part of a larger and more diverse culture and society, and cannot speak for the entire Black community. She concludes that Hip Hop cannot, no matter how tight the beat with an even tighter message or hook, do the job or be truly as efficacious as political grassroots organizing with people who are committed to that goal, not committed to making music and making money while doing so.

Throughout her text, Bynoe addresses issues of leadership, and examines the different types of leaders of Civil Rights past, the concept of community and the implications this has for the future Hip Hop movement. She notes that black leaders of the past have either been: charismatic leaders, or political hype men who would get the people riled up but had no knowledge about organizing and constructing a movement for social change; or citizen leaders who had rejected being in the lime light, had shared the same identity and background of the groups that his/her constituents were from, and had been personally invested in the future of the group or collective unit.¹⁴ She also problematizes this idea of community. She writes:

Community, is a powerful term. A community is not just a collection of people living in a common location--it is also a group of people with common interests, beliefs, religion, history, culture, lifestyle, ethnicity, or profession. Expanding the boundaries of a community, means that nearly everyone can find one or more groups of people whom they can work with in furtherance of an objective related

¹⁴ Ibid, 1-16.

to their interest of concern. The concept of community encourages citizens to seek out like minds, be they in their immediate neighborhood or across the country.¹⁵

For Bynoe, who in some ways is echoing Kitwana and his idea of the Hip Hop generation utilizing its marketability and ability to move across lines of race to form a collective group or coalition to help the Black community, albeit critical of his idea of a political Hip Hop movement, in this passage, she is articulating Miranda Joseph and this romanticization of community.

In *Against the Romance of Community*, Miranda Joseph writes on the problems with this idea of community and how the term is deployed,

Using the term community to refer to social practices that presume or attempt to enact and produce identity, unity, communion, and purity, and observing the use of the term community in such social practices, critics noted a diverse range of oppressions, including but not limited to genocidal violence, that seemed to follow from idealization and deployment of community. Many scholars and activists observed that communities seem inevitably to be constituted in relation to internal and external enemies and that these defining others are then elided, excluded, or actively repressed.¹⁶

While Bynoe is not asserting or suggesting that this discussion or romanticization of a Hip Hop community and a Hip Hop movement is going to result in genocidal violence or practices which could be detrimental to another “community,” she is getting at how community is more than unity based on sameness or likeness because of a shared history of oppressions. She does not go as far as Joseph to say that communities are dangerous, but she acknowledges the problems inherent in not recognizing the limitations of a

15 Ibid, 12.

16 Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xviii-xiv.

community by forging a unified identity based on external enemies, and instead urges for a broader definition of community, or coalition building of allies.

However, the foundations for arguments for a future Hip Hop movement are rooted in a discussion of Black nationalisms, which are not only problematic because of their romanticization of community, but their blatant sexism and homophobia. If Hip Hop is to be considered a movement of the future, why are scholars, journalists, and critics neglecting to acknowledge how looking to previous separatist and supremacist models for liberation, such as the Black Panther Party, fail to truly be emancipatory for Black people, especially women? In order for Hip Hop to be a social movement, or at least entertain this idea, it must look to feminism and include women as active participants in such a coalition movement, and this can be evidenced in the successful model or what Chela Sandoval defines as the “Differential Form of Consciousness and Social Movement.”

The ideologies of Black Nationalisms, whether it was the literary nationalisms of Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement, the cultural nationalism of Maulana Karenga and the US organization, the religious nationalism of Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, and the political and revolutionary nationalism of the Black Panther Party as separatist and supremacist forms of resistance and opposition, all had limited roles for black women as sexual bearers, and asserted a black masculinity that subjugated black women. Therefore, why do scholars, journalists, and proponents of Hip Hop, such as Pough who is a woman and a feminist, seek to look to this black nationalist past as a revolutionary and emancipatory Hip Hop future? When they argue

that rappers are the voice or the leaders of this new movement, rappers who are always male, what does this mean for the women in Hip Hop, that they are not qualified to lead, speak, and be political, just supporters, spectators, or spectacle of the male led show for Hip Hop revolution?

The answers to these questions will never be found looking to and longing for such an outdated mode of oppositional movement. But, if we look to Chela Sandoval's model for Differential Form of Oppositional Consciousness, which is rooted in the feminist coalitions of U.S. and third world feminists of color, serving as alchemists coalescing the contradictory and competing ideologies or "weaving between and among oppositional ideologies," ideologies such as the separatist, revolutionary, and supremacist forms of oppositional consciousness, which were strategic models utilized by many social movements, gender based and race based during the 1970s and 1980s, we begin to see how the Hip Hop generation can begin to stop romanticizing community and form a meaningful coalition for change for masses of people. Sandoval notes:

The differential mode of social movement and consciousness depends on the practitioner's ability to read the current situation of power and self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological stand best suited to push against its configurations, a survival skill well known to oppressed peoples. Differential consciousness requires grace, flexibility, and strength: enough strength to confidently commit to a well-defined structure of identity for one hour, day, week, month year; enough flexibility to self-consciously transform that identity according to the requisites of another oppositional ideological tactic if readings of power's formation require it; enough grace to recognize alliance with other committed to egalitarian social relations and race, gender, sex, class, and social justice, when these other readings of power call for alternative oppositional stands. Within the realm of differential social movement, ideological differences and their oppositional forms of consciousness, unlike their incarnations under hegemonic feminist comprehension, are understood as tactics--not as strategies.¹⁷

17 Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000) 59.

With this framework that allows for more than black people to be a part of a Hip Hop movement, or black males as leaders of this Hip Hop movement, and narrow conceptions of women's roles in such movements, recognizing people's multiple situated identities, but keeping the larger goal in mind of eradicating the simultaneity of oppressions--a movement using elements of Hip Hop, working with grassroots organizations that work with and on behalf of youth of color who identify with Hip Hop--is a way of collectively moving beyond the romance of community and developing a coalition to create revolutionary change.

Theoretical Frameworks

As academics who are in fields such as American Studies, we rarely use one framework or lens to look at our research. Our scholarship is always informed by a multiplicity of frameworks. In this dissertation, the dominant frameworks I will be using are: an intersectional analysis, as deployed by Lynn Weber whose conceptual framework analyzes the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality as systems of oppression, and specifically how these social constructions are negotiated by Black girls and women; and a Black feminist framework informed by Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks to examine the flawed gender dynamics in Hip Hop and the oppression of black girls and women.

Chapter Breakdown

Each chapter in the dissertation is designed to talk back, to, and, with the other chapters. In Chapter 2: “From Hip Hop Divas to Video Hos: Black Women Negotiating Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Hip Hop, examines the various ways black female rappers have negotiated race, class, gender, and sexuality in Hip Hop. Through revising Gwendolyn Pough’s and Cheryl Keyes’ frameworks for charting a feminist trajectory of women in Hip Hop, and creating archetypes of Black women in Hip Hop, respectively, I propose a new way of examining black women’s legacies in Hip Hop, through encounters, negotiations, and articulations of their race, class, gender, and sexual identities that have gone through four distinct phases. I examine the correlations between the evolution and corporatization of rap music and Hip Hop culture and the increasing invisibility of self-possessed and empowered vocal female rappers and the hyper-visibility of hyper-sexualized and expendable video-vixens, disparagingly referred to as video hos.

In chapter 3: *Ethnographic Adventures in Black Girlhood*, I compile a collection of three previously written and published monographs to demonstrate the many and varying ways Hip Hop and the representations of Black women as one-dimensional sexual objects have impacted the ways they view sexuality, body image, love, and virginity, and the myriad ways they negotiate race, class, gender, and sexuality. In a short self-ethnographic memoir-esque essay, an ethnography/composite of multiple hip hop life histories, formerly published in *Home Girls Make Some Noise!: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology*, and a life history, I aim to show the unique ways black girls, including myself,

grapple with what it means to be black and female while Hip Hop is a fixture in the global cultural marketplace.

In chapter 4: “Reconsidering *for colored girls*: Creative Writing as Exploring Resistance and Resilience in Black Girlhood,” I discuss the significance of Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, as a feminist text and transgressive act in which black women reflect on their girlhood and speak about the simultaneity of black women’s oppressions, and how poetry can be a way for black girls to learn vocality and be resistant and resilient since Hip Hop does not allow them that space to do so. I discuss ethnographic and life history methods, and the implications poetry has for doing ethnography and life history on black girlhood. And finally, I discuss my research project and findings from previous research on black girlhood and the poetry workshops I have conducted with black girls, specifically for this project.

In chapter 5: “Publicly Intellectual: A Collection of Words,” I show a progression of my selected poetry from the years I began writing in 1996 to 2009, to demonstrate the potential poetry has as a means for finding, developing, and exerting vocality, and also teaching girls how to be resistant and resilient. In these selected works, in which I discuss issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, empire, whiteness, consumption, etc., I also demonstrate the many ways poetry can be used to theorize and expand the way and means by which language is used to produce and disseminate knowledge to a large audience. This chapter is a culmination of the project.

In chapter 6: *It’s Bigger Than Hip Hop: Black Girls Matter Too/an Outro*, I

discuss all of the issues addressed in each of the chapters, as well as the limitations of research and recommendations for future work.

Also included in the appendices are selections from the poetry workshop portfolio I created for the poetry workshops, and an edited version of the chapbook I created for the girls, which contains selections of their poems.

Chapter 2: From Hip Hop Divas to Video Hos: Black Women Negotiating Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality in Hip Hop

In the twenty-plus years of hip hop history on record, a period that has produced black vocalists Chaka Khan, Whitney Houston, Anita Baker, Tracy Chapman, Mary J. Blige, and Erykah Badu, there are no women who have contributed profoundly to rap music's artistic growth. Aside from Latifah and Salt-N-Pepa, MC Lyte has recorded for over a decade and Yo-Yo has garnered some respect. So has longtime spinner and mix tape star DJ Jazzy Joyce. In the late '90s Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim have proved that raw language and sex sells, but no one is mistaking them for innovators. Old-school MCs like Sugar Hill's female trio Sequence and Sha-Rock of the Funky Four + 1 made a mark. (Missy 'Misdemeanor' Elliot, a rapper, singer, and writer, from Virginia, has emerged in the late '90s as the multifaceted female in the form and is becoming a seminal creative force). Yet I would argue that if none of these female artists had ever made a record, hip hop's development would have been no different.

--Nelson George, "Of Queens and Chickenheads" in *Hip Hop America*

Is Nelson George right, have Black women offered nothing to shape and sustain rap music and Hip Hop culture? In recent years, the heavily touted music critic, journalist, and hip hop purveyor has been critiqued and criticized for his sexism, dismissal, and erasure of Black women in Hip Hop and their significant roles as cultural producers and catalysts for social change. Excerpts of his essay "Of Queens and Chickenheads," which was written in 1998, often make cameos in new Hip Hop feminist excavation texts¹⁸, which identify Black feminist tropes in Black women's rap lyrics, or is

18 Hip Hop feminist excavation texts include: Gwendolyn Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern, 2004), and Gwendolyn Pough, et. al. *Home Girls Make Some Noise!: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology* (Mira Loma: Parker, 2007).

debunked in feminist revisionist Hip Hop historiographies¹⁹, which place Black women at the center of Hip Hop as participants integral to Hip Hop's artistic advancement. However, in some of these excavationist and revisionist narratives, which cite George for his blatant and unapologetic disregard of black women in Hip Hop, the reader never gets the entire context of his quote, only the sensationalistic sexist statement.

Ironically, "Of Queens and Chickenheads," is about the sexism in Hip Hop and how Black women have always been marginalized in the culture, have never truly been given the opportunity to be part of the "adolescent" androcentric atmosphere, have neither been recognized as equal to their male counterparts, nor fully embraced by this pro-homo-social, anti-female, phallogentric space unless they embrace and participate in their own sexual exploitation. As a result of this hostile, hyper-masculinist, misogynistic cipher, George concludes that black women have not been able to contribute to the music and culture in the same way that Black males have or have been afforded, or in such a meaningful way that Black women have contributed to the growth and sustenance of other traditional Black musical genres, such as the Blues, Soul, and R&B.²⁰ In his attempt to qualify his assertion, George reifies and legitimates Black women's exclusion, fails to thoroughly critique the androcentrism, misogyny, and sexism that Black males in Hip Hop perpetuate (and exerts his male authoritarian privilege in the process), neglects to acknowledge the meaningful ways that women have carved a space in Hip Hop, and

19 Feminist revisionist historiographies of Hip Hop include: Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University, 1994), Vibe Books, *Hip Hop Divas* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), Cheryl Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2004), Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double Dutch to Hip Hop* (New York: NYU, 2006).

20 Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 184-188.

while not appealing solely to Black men (Hip Hop's majority and intended, core audience) or garnering as much money as the boys, are speaking to the complexities of working-class black womanhood in the United States and, more importantly, to a generation of girls coming of age in this Hip Hop America. Also, George fails to note that many men, especially in the late '90s--and now for that matter--fail to offer anything to Hip Hop lyrically, intellectually, and creatively. Artistically, and not monetarily, how much can Hip Hop grow and sustain itself from sampling songs from the '80s, spitting about conspicuously consuming, and boasting and toasting about bitches and sexual prowess? But, for George, with his wit and acuity, Hip Hop has been, is, and always will be about a dick thing.

However, eleven years after *Hip Hop America* and 30 years into Hip Hop culture, is Nelson George prophetic, have black women's contributions to Hip Hop done nothing to change the face, the sound, and the movement of Hip Hop? If we look at the current visual landscape of Hip Hop filled with video vixens, the palatable eye candy showcasing their "dunks," "tig ole bitties" with legs akimbo, and pussy galore, and if we listen to the current audio landscape of a majority of male voices with women reciting the hooks of their supposedly clever lyrics about licking the (w)rapper's lollipop, or shaking laffy taffy, then the only thing black women have to offer to Hip Hop are cavities--the kind that can only be filled by a male presence. Black women who excavate a history of black feminism in Hip Hop, and highlight the significant roles black women have served in Hip Hop as cultural producers and not as cultural bearers/reproducers or as dominant cultural reproductions of the hyper-sexed and deviant Black woman, are finding it difficult to

disprove George's contention, and impossible to unleash white supremacist capitalist patriarchy's²¹ hold on Hip Hop. Through their scholarship, these Hip Hop heads and avowed black feminists/womanists are trying to get the video-hos "in search of their mothers' gardens."²² Because if pussy is the only thing that Black women have to contribute to Hip Hop, and there are incessant images and messages about the ample supply of the "power of the P-U-S-S-Y"--in the words of Jay-Z--then in the midst of this struggle for the soul of Hip Hop and the forward progression of this movement, women's sexual commodifiability and expendability cannot offer anything but lil' sexist soldiers for the revolution--and this simply is not enough.

Through an exploration of black women in Hip Hop's negotiations of race, class, gender, and sexuality via their articulations and gesticulations, this chapter charts the trajectory of black women's roles as cultural producers and cultural reproducers in the Hip Hop industry from 1979 to the present. It examines the the impact that rap and Hip Hop's growth and evolution as current fixtures in the global cultural marketplace have had on the evolution of black women's roles in Hip Hop, which have become increasingly hyper-sexualized and less intellectual, political, and creative. It looks at the correlations between rap and Hip Hop's carefully and intentionally designed corporatization and dissemination through radio, cable, print media, and the internet, and

21 In several of bell hooks' texts, she refers to white supremacist capitalist patriarchy as a nexus or interlocking system of oppressions that are rooted in capitalism. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. (Boston: South End, 2000).

22 In her essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Alice Walker addresses the creative spirit that black women, as mules of the world and sexualized spectacle have inherited from their foremothers, which can be conveyed in not just traditional conceptions of artistic forms such as writing, painting, singing, but in the everyday activities of gardening and quilting. The goal is to get women to recognize that they have so many more creative gifts to offer the world other than their sexuality. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (San Diego: HBJ, 1984).

the erasure and obsolescence of the female rapper and the rise of the video-vixen. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to ask and answer the following questions: what happened to the black female rapper and why and how has the disappearance of the black female rapper led to the supremacy of the “video-ho”? Was it simply missed opportunity or lack of lyrical prowess that led to the disappearance of the female rapper? Did sex really sell in rap music or did it sell out the futures of black female emcees? Did black female rappers squander their potential to be great emcees, or were they never given the same opportunity as their male counterparts to succeed to begin with?

Building on Angela Davis’ and Hazel Carby’s scholarship on black female Blues singers, ethnomusicologist Cheryl Keyes, in *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, argues that Black female rappers continue the legacy of Blues women in their music by addressing the complexities of being working class black women in the United States. Citing Carby, Keyes writes, black female rappers, like their Blues foremothers, “establish ‘a discourse that articulate[s] cultural and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order, but also tries to reclaim women’s bodies.’”²³ Through textual analysis of Black women’s rap lyrics, interviews, and observation of pop culture artifacts such as videos, Keyes identifies four distinct reoccurring archetypes of black female rappers: “Queen Mother,” “Fly Girl,” “Sista with an Attitude,” and “The Lesbian,” who, as “daughters of the Blues” articulate the myriad ways Black women of the Hip Hop generation negotiate race, class, gender, and sexuality, and in the process redefine black womanhood and black

23 Cheryl Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2004), 187.

femininity through their music and image.²⁴ Although Keyes notes that “black female rappers can shift between these categories, [...] or belong to more than one simultaneously,” she contends that “each category mirrors certain images, voices, and lifestyles of African American women in contemporary urban society.”²⁵

In the Queen Mother prototype, comprised of female rappers who associate their identities with African-centered icons, royalty, or deities, and portray and express a motherly, nurturing, pro-woman, or pro-black nationalism in their music or performances of black womanhood and femininity, Keyes, for obvious reasons, places Queen Kenya of the Zulu Nation, Queen Latifah, as well as, Sister Souljah, Nefertiti, Queen Mother Rage, Isis, and Yo-Yo in this category.²⁶ Next, the “Fly Girl,” or the chic, fashionable, stylish women, which include earlier and lesser known female rappers, such as Sha Rock of the Funky Four Plus One, Sequence, and Lady B, and more well known and successful artists such as Salt-N-Pepa, TLC, and Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliot,” represents the independent women who use “the erotic as power” instead of being an objectified sexual object.²⁷ Third, with their aggressive personalities and transgressive acts of challenging male authority, as well as conventional and conservative notions of black womanhood and black female sexuality, the “Sista with an Attitude” or “Sista with a ‘tude,” clearly reflects the black masculine posturing (i.e. rapping about violence, gang-banging, swearing, boasting about sex) however, with “feminine” reappropriations (i.e. wearing

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 189.

26 Ibid., 189-94.

27 Ibid., 194-99.

revealing or tight clothing, co-opting sexist words and turning them into something positive, or acknowledging a pro-woman stance). These sistas include: Roxanne Shante, MC Lyte, Bytches with Problems (BWP), Boss, Da Brat, Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, EVE, Trina, and Mia X.²⁸ Last--while not a reoccurring image of women in Hip Hop--the Lesbian, who expresses tropes of homosexuality in her music, disrupts the heteronormativity and homophobia in Hip Hop, and Keyes places Queen Pen, the only out lesbian in Hip Hop in this category.²⁹ With these four categories of reoccurring black female archetypes, Keyes attempts to demonstrate the multiplicity of women's voices in Hip Hop and their unique ways of shaping rap music and conceptions and definitions of contemporary working class black womanhood that is often attacked, unacknowledged, misunderstood, or misrepresented as one dimensional and stereotypical.

Similar to Keyes, yet critical of Keyes' categorization of Black female rappers, Gwendolyn Pough, in her seminal text, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, which charts the black feminist legacy in Hip Hop, argues that Black female rappers, through a "rhetoric of wreck," bridge black feminist legacies by refashioning black feminism for contemporary and urban purposes. "Wreck" or "brining wreck," Pough notes, is a term used in Hip Hop culture to define the skill and greatness of an emcee/rapper, can connote damage already done, or signify the intent to cause harm.³⁰ Although wreck can be used by anyone in Hip Hop, male and female, Pough employs it as a working class black feminist act, similar to other types of

28 Ibid., 199-206.

29 Ibid., 206-08.

30 Gwendolyn Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern, 2004), 78-80.

black women's expressive acts, that Black female rappers have used not only to carve a space in Hip Hop and legitimate their lyrical prowess as emcees, but also discuss issues that affect working class black women by giving voice to issues about black women's hetero-relations³¹ with black men, and "talking back" to dominant culture and black men about their everyday interactions with racism, classism, sexism, and patriarchy.³²

While both Keyes and Pough provide a much needed history of Hip Hop that includes the contributions of Black women and their significant roles as active participants helping shape the aesthetic and sound of Hip Hop, their models for examining Black women in Hip Hop and Black women's contributions to the music and the culture are limited. Keyes's archetypes of Black female rappers demonstrates the myriad voices of Black women in Hip Hop, despite being written out of the history, or considered insignificant because their music does not sell as much as their male counterparts, but this framework fails to show how Black female rappers, in their music and image, evolve over time, which results in why many black female rappers can be a "Queen Mother," "Fly Girl," and a "Sista with a 'Tude" simultaneously. While Keyes does address how Black women in Hip Hop negotiate intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality, through their music and persona, with this model, she is unable to illustrate

31 Lyn Phillips, *Flirting with Danger: Young Women's Reflections on Sexuality and Domination* (New York: NYU, 2000), x. In a qualitative research study of young women in the northeastern United States understandings of sexuality and violence and hetero-relational subjectivities, Phillips states, by 'hetero-relations' I mean the interactions, both sexual and seemingly nonsexual, that young women have with men and masculinities. Hetero-relations may include serious love relationships, sexual encounters, nonsexual/nonromantic interactions across genders that involve elements of domination, exploitation, or coercion based on gender, and interactions that one person intends to be nonsexual/nonromantic but into which others introduce elements of uninvited sexuality or romance. Hetero-relations include interactions that are explicitly sexualized as well as those that are more more ambiguous, such as interaction between women and men in which the goal is nonsexual [...]."

32 Ibid., 77-83.

how Black women's confrontations with their racialized, classed, and gendered sexualities has led to the evolution in their message and image, and a construction of a monolithic archetype of the hyper-sexual Black female rapper, which has precipitated the silencing of multiple female voices and representations in Hip Hop.

Likewise, Pough, with charting a black feminist genealogy in Hip Hop, and focusing on the ways Black women, through their expressive cultures, namely rap, have created a new working class feminism that addresses the ways women of the Hip Hop generation grapple with and articulate race, class, gender, and sexuality, also creates a limited model for looking at Black women in Hip Hop. Although Pough notes that Black women in Hip Hop often shy away from the moniker feminist, either for its connections with white feminism and the connotation of black male bashing, she does include black female rappers in this genealogy of Black feminism because through their music, she observes, womanist and Black feminist tropes are expressed. Citing songs, such as Queen Latifah's, "Ladies First," and songs with womanist tropes that brought wreck, and songs by recording artists Salt-N-Pepa, and Yo-Yo, as black working class feminist anthems of the Golden Age of Hip Hop, is problematic because these songs, while performed by Black women, were written by their black male label mates or svengali managers and producers who were looking to cash in on the new novelty of marketing an authentically black: i.e. strong, independent, yet feminine woman who would appeal to Black men as well as women.³³ By looking solely at the feminist/womanist contributions, or pro-black woman contributions of women in Hip Hop, Pough is unable to demonstrate how women

³³ Laura Jamison, "Ladies First" in *The Vibe History of Hip Hop*, ed. Alan Light (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 183.

such as Lil' Kim, who claims the title feminist, but exploits some of the gains of feminism, who embraces a femininity constructed by the white dominant gaze, and exerts a sexual subjectivity that appears to be deeply rooted in the historical legacies of black women as "jezebel," contributes to the disappearance of the multiplicity of black women's voices in Hip Hop. Although Lil' Kim gives voice to Black women's sexual desires--even if depicted as spectacle--and disrupts Black middle class notions of Black female respectability garnered by a "culture of dissemblance" or asexuality, as Pough notes, Lil' Kim's, Foxy Brown's, and Trina's intentions or actions reconstruct a new paradigm for acknowledgment and ownership of Black female sexuality.

While black female rappers such as Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina, as problematic as their images and messages are about explicit sexuality and sex for monetary compensation--as they appear to reify racist and sexist controlling stereotypes of black women's lasciviousness--are complicated and cannot be reduced to a virgin/whore dichotomy or jezebel/mammy dyad because their existence, good or bad, Pough argues, disrupts the silence and dissemblance surrounding Black women's sexuality. She contends that the presence of these three women offers a new way of viewing Black feminism, particularly a working-class black feminism that rejects or is in direct opposition to the Black middle class ideals of the Women's Club Era feminist movement, or Black feminist acts, such as the "culture of dissemblance" that Darlene Clark Hine addresses, which Pough argues, has silenced and constricted working class Black women. Similar to the Blues Women, Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina negotiate a sexual politics

that is particular to working-class black womanhood that allows Black women to be sexually free instead of victims of historical representations.

Although, I partially agree with Pough, however, I must note, that she erroneously simplifies Darlene Clark Hine's concept of the culture of dissemblance, which was more than Black women abstaining from speaking about their sexuality or asserting their asexuality because they were afraid of representing themselves as immoral to white people or trying to show a dignified middle-class Black womanhood, but was employed as a strategy of survival to protect against rape and murder that was often justified by the dominant misperception of the Black woman as a hyper-sexed jezebel.³⁴ Moreover, this "new black womanhood and black femininity" of Lil' Kim, Foxy, and Trina, that Pough heralds as transformative, is the reason for such a frenzied attempt to excavate a black feminist history, and a Hip Hop feminist collectivity, which is created by formally educated, rising black middle class women, who want to celebrate the intellectual and artistic contributions of Black women in Hip Hop, which can be seen as a contemporary way of perpetuating the same Black middle class feminist ideals of "defending the

34 For further readings on the culture of dissemblance, please see Darlene Clark Hine "Rape in the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance" in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 380-386.

name” and “lifting as they climb”³⁵ that Pough is critical of. By focusing on (re)writing/righting the wrongs of androcentric Hip Hop histories through locating a Black feminist past, Pough is unable to show how Black women’s roles in Hip Hop have evolved and have become rather limited and one-dimensional.

Instead of providing an exhaustive history of Hip Hop, which includes the evolution of Hip Hop and the contributions of great male emcees, which can be found in Jeff Chang’s, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation*, Murray Forman’s, *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, and Alan Light’s *The Vibe History of Hip Hop*, among other Hip Hop history texts; or following the lead of Pough and Keyes by charting a Black feminist legacy, or developing more archetypes to show the breadth of the women’s voices that have existed along a continuum, I will refocus the frameworks of Keyes and Pough, and contextualize them within a larger framework of rap and Hip Hop’s evolution and corporate expansion in order to demonstrate the evolution of black women’s roles in Hip Hop. With this framework, I propose that Black women rappers, along with and exacerbated by the commercialization and evolution of Hip Hop, have gone through four distinct phases in which they negotiate the politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality, which ultimately leads to the monolithic voice and message of a fetishized black feminine and the ensuing

35 “Defending the Name” and “Lifting as They Climb” are terms used to define the focus of Black women’s feminist resistance circa 1831-1957. During this period, and well beyond as it can be argued, Black women, especially middle class Black women, have fought to defend their womanhood that has often been attacked and questioned and through their commitment to the race, they worked in collectivity and solidarity with working class Black women to instill Christian morals and middle class values, which would prove that Black people were noble, upstanding, human, and worthy of human rights. Please see Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Perennial, 1984), and Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999) for a more in depth discussion on the origins and historical legacies of Black women’s feminist movement in the United States.

erasure of black female rappers who become silenced and eclipsed by the image of the hyper-sexualized video-vixen. These four phases include the following: The Female-ist Presence: Black Women Carving A Space (1979-1988); Afrocentricity, Ghetto-centricity, and Female-centricity: A Multiplicity of Messages (1989-1994); “Selling Hot Pussy”: Black Girls Rockin’ the Mic--in A Sexual Connotation (1995-2000); and Looking for Lauryn: The Disappearance of the Divas in Hip Hop and the Rise and Reign of the Video Vixen (2001-2009). Although there will be women in this framework whose music and image do not neatly fit within each phase, each phase represents a drastic shift in the ways black female rappers have negotiated race, class, gender, and sexuality, as articulated and gesticulated in their lyrics and representations of black womanhood and femininity, which are precipitated by changes in the larger rap and Hip Hop industries. Ultimately, this timeline shows how Black women have moved from being full vocal participants with a variety of perspectives on negotiating black working class womanhood in Hip Hop, to becoming highly sexualized and bartering body parts and marketing sex as authentic or “real” black womanhood and femininity in order to be heard and be prominent figures in a male dominated culture that has become a corporate controlled global industry.

The Female-ist Presence: Black Women Carving a Space in Hip Hop (1979-1988)

Although it is thoroughly documented and well argued that Hip Hop culture emerged circa 1967 in the South Bronx, New York, with rap music as the last art form of the post-industrial culture premiering in the early 1970s, the role that black women

played in pioneering the artistic movement is less well known. During the early years of rap music and hip hop, or the pre-commercialization phase from 1967-1979, women, albeit a minority, played an integral role as cultural producers. The original Hip Hop divas: The Mercedes Ladies, Lisa Tee, Paulette Tee, Sweet Tee, Lady B, and Sha Rock, were rockin' the mic' and paving the way for future female emcees.³⁶ These women were the predecessors to Roxanne Shante, Salt-N-Pepa, MC Lyte, TLC, Foxy Brown, Lil Kim, and EVE, negotiating all of the politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality in simultaneity. However, I begin my abridged trajectory of black women in rap music with 1979 and Sylvia Robinson, the foremother of rap music and Hip Hop, or the way we conceive of rap music and Hip Hop culture in its present commercialized form.

While Hip Hop histories have narrated the role of Sylvia Robinson as a Hip Hop insider who stumbled across rap music and Hip Hop culture in her neighborhood and used her power and prestige as a record executive to give black youth and this new music a chance, Robinson, a middle-aged, African American record executive whose music career was dwindling due to the death of disco and soul music, was an interloper and capitalized on this new music. Instead of being an true or real/authentic cultural insider who went to the 'hoods or New York where "real" rap music and Hip Hop was born and burgeoning, Robinson went to her local pizza hang out in suburban New Jersey to locate local rising talent, whom she named the Sugar Hill Gang. The Sugar Hill Gang, who were perceived by rappers from New York as impostors, were recognized as the first rap and

36 For a more extensive early history of female rappers in Hip Hop, including Latina rappers, please see Christina Veran, "fly females who rocked the mic in the '70s and '80s," Laura Jamison, "Ladies First," Nancy Guevara, "Women Writin' Rappin' Breakin' in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple, 1996), and Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, *Yes, Yes, Y'all: Oral History of Hip Hop's First Decade* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2002).

Hip Hop act to appear on the radio and on wax; however, they along with Robinson were responsible for making rap and Hip Hop the commercialized industry that it is today.³⁷

Despite Robinson's lack of sincerity in promoting actual pre-existing rap artists and groups from New York and sustaining the culture without co-opting the music in order to make a profit in the lagging music industry in search for new and fresh acts, from 1980 to 1984 Robinson later provided opportunities for not only men but women in Hip Hop, such as the all girl group Sequence and Sha Rock of the Funky Four Plus One More. Rap music during the 1980s was all about toasting and boasting and artists who premiered during this time, such as the Sugar Hill Gang, Sequence, and Sha Rock showcased their their illest skills as emcees all while looking stylish and well coifed.³⁸ Even in Hip Hop's early days, image was everything. During 1979 to 1988, Rap music was about the battle, and for many girls and women entering the cipher who wanted to make their presence as female emcees known and respected, they had to know how to verbally spar like the fellas.

While there were women who were known to battle with other females and males, the most infamous on radio and later on wax was by the Queen of Rox. In 1984, 14 year old, Lolita Shante Gooden, better known, Roxanne Shante, set the record straight: the "bitches" could battle too. Hailing from Queensbridge housing projects in Long Island City, this feisty femme fatale free-styled off the top of her dome³⁹ and delivered the ultimate dis' (disrespect) record to rap group UTFO. In "Roxanne's Revenge," Roxanne

37 Murray Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 106-118.

38 Veran, 6-11.

39 Street vernacular for head.

Shante's retort to UTFO's "Roxanne Roxanne," which was about a stuck-up girl who would not give the brothers the time of day, Shante, put these men to shame by assuming the identity of Roxanne and talking back. She spat:

Every time that I see him, he's sayin' somethin' new/
But let me explain to him what he should do:/
He should be like me, a fly MC/
Don't never have to bite, we're always right/
I have the freshest rhymes that I do recite/
And after that, and you know it's true/
Well, let me tell you somethin' else about the Doctor, too:/
He ain't really cute, and he ain't great/
He don't even know how to operate/
He came up to me with some bullshit rap/
But let me tell you somethin' 'cause you know it was wack/
So when he came up to me, I told him to step back

Shante, at 14 used her uncanny ability to rap or freestyle off of the top of her head to "talk back to UTFO and bruise their masculinity. This battle between Roxanne Shante and UTFO, which later included the Real Roxanne, a red headed Latina, named Joanne Martinez, created a phenomenon in rap music, and would launch the careers of many women.⁴⁰

The dis record, which has become recognized as a medium for black feminist transgressive speech acts, was the marketing tool used to ignite the careers of female emcees. In 1985, 18 and 19 year old Cheryl "Salt" James, Sandy "Pepa" Denton, and DJ, Deidre "Spinderella" Roper, with the business savvy of their song writer, manager, and producer, Herby "Lovebug" Azor, cashed in on this enterprise and created a dis' record in

40 Ibid, 12-13; Sacha Jenkins, "we used to do it out in the park" in *Hip Hop Divas* (New York: Three Rivers, 2001), 22-29.

response to Doug E. Fresh and Slick Rick's the Show, entitled "The Show Stoppa." S-N-P playfully asserted:

Sandy...What?...Sandy...What?/
Sandy, we'll be breaking hearts, ya know/
That's true, it's all about money though/
But Douglas and Richie won't like it (So?)/
Come on then, let's stop the show/

Yo, this beat is stupid fresh/
Huh, yeah, you know it, cold dissed Doug Fresh/
Top choice, of course, the rest is soft/
Set it off, do it Set it off, do it/
Set it off, do it Set it off, do it/

Like Shante, but not as powerful, S-N-P, dis' the famous male rappers: Doug Fresh and Slick Rick. While the dis record launched their careers, their sex appeal, stage presence, and ability to market themselves as the homegirls next door, who would go on to dabble in writing their own lyrics about sex, AIDS, female vocality, self-expression, and sexual subjectivity, gave them longevity in the industry, outlasting and outselling many of the other female acts to follow in this phase, such as MC Lyte.⁴¹

Tomboyish, androgynous, or masculine posing, deep, raspy voiced Brooklyn based Lana Moore, better known as MC Lyte, also rose to Hip Hop prominence in the early 1980s. With her song, "I Cram to Understand You (Sam)" written in 1986, about her relationship with a drug addicted boyfriend, Lyte, unlike Salt-N-Pepa, and many women to follow her in rap music, showed her talent as an emcee through writing her own rhymes. "Sam" would be the start of a multi-album career. In "I Cram to Understand you Sam" she noted:

41 Harry Allen, "the queens from queens," in *Hip Hop Divas* (New York: Three Rivers, 2001), 32-39.

Then my cousin said she saw you with this lady named C/
Well I'm clawin my thoughts, I wonder who she could be/
You're spending all your time with her and not a second with me/
They say you spend your money on her and you're with her night and day/
Her name starts with a C and it ends with a K/
I strain my brain lookin for a name to fit this spellin/
But I just couldn't do it cause my heart kept yellin/
Burning, begging for affection from you, Sam/
But just like a test I cram to understand you/
Thought I knew you well enough to call you a man/
But (Just like a test/
Ju-just like a test/
Ju-just like a test/
I cram to understand you)/

Commenting not only black women's troubled romantic and love relationships, Lyte uses personification to address the crack epidemic hitting major metropolises such as Brooklyn. Because of her talent, as evidenced by "I Cram to Understand," and possibly her androgynous look, Lyte garnered much respect from male emcees, such as Chuck D of Public Enemy, and has been revered as a serious and talented emcee, "in spite of her gender." However, Lyte has often been "gay-baited" by female rappers such as Roxanne Shante because of her androgyny, and never received the accolades or the platinum success that artists such as S-N-P received even after she dramatically altered her image to look and sound more like a female emcee in the early 1990s, or even after creating ten albums.⁴²

Women during this "golden age" of rap music carved a space for Black women in rap through dissing and dismissing fellow male rappers or their male love interests. Even though women were seen as novelty in this male dominated cipher that was also too new

42 Michael Gonzales, "kickin' 4 brooklyn" in *Hip Hop Divas* (New York: Three Rivers, 2001), 42-49.

to know that this bricolage culture would bring bank,⁴³ women such as MC Lyte proved that women could rhyme just like the boys, and Roxanne Shante proved that women could do it better. Salt-N-Pepa may have been the earliest female act to use their attractiveness to sell rhymes written by their manager and producer, which would give them lasting success and afforded them the opportunity to take chances in writing their own rhymes and remaking their image; however, in 1987 aesthetic fatigue set in in the industry, and toasting and boasting, and the fusion of rock and rap music, as Run D.M.C. and L.L. Cool J had done in their music during this time, and a change needed to be made in order for rap music to appeal to a larger audience.⁴⁴ Therefore, in 1988 while rap was undergoing a pivotal shift in its character and content with the emergence of regional rap that included “gangsta rap” in L.A., “porno rap” in Miami, and afrocentric and “proto-black nationalist rap” in the north-east-coast corridor to combat the aesthetic fatigue,⁴⁵ Black women had to use more than the dis’ record or their good looks to be heard. They had to be versatile enough to sell records in this rapidly commercializing culture.

Afrocentricity, Ghetto-centricity, and Female-centricity: A Multiplicity of Messages (1989-1994)

While rap music in 1989 was getting a new make over with its gangsta image in the West, afrocentricity and proto-black nationalism in the east, and obscenity charges in the South, all courtesy of the growing forces in the music industry, black women were

43 Street vernacular for lucrative.

44 Murray Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music and Hip Hop* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 165.

45 John Leland, “The Pinnacle: 1988” in *The Vibe History of Hip Hop*, ed. Alan Light (New York: Three River, 1999), 192-193.

still making strides in Hip Hop. Although, black women and Hip Hop did see the disappearance of Roxanne Shante--later re-emerging in 1994 for a brief moment and then exiting the scene for good, Sha Rock, and the pop-rap trio Sequence, black female rappers such as MC Lyte and Salt-N-Pepa were still making a name for themselves and redefining what it meant to be women in Hip Hop and Black women in the '90s. However, with this plethora of new rap artists and their discordant Hip Hop perspectives and depictions of real urban black life and the propagation and dissemination of such images and messages through MTV's new urban/black programming of Yo MTV Raps in September of 1988, Black women who emerged onto the scene during this time, also embraced the various messages of afrocentricity, gangsta-ism, and around the way girl pro-black womanhood message. During this time, Queen Latifah, Monie Love, Ms. Melodie, Yo-Yo, Bytches with Problems, Hoes With Attitude, Da Brat, and Lauryn Hill with the Fugees entered the rap scene. But, Latifah, Yo-Yo, Da Brat, and Lauryn Hill would be the most famous and materially successful of the bunch.

Putting "Ladies First," in Hip Hop, or at least making it known to the testosterone laden culture and industry that the female emcees were more than the bitches and horny hood rats from N.W.A's, L.A. and Luther Campbell's Dade County, M.I.A, Dana Owens, or Queen Latifah made a name for herself and ushered in a new brand of female-ism in Hip Hop. While she was no MC Lyte, who actually wrote her own rhymes, or free-styling prodigy Roxanne Shante, or budding sex symbols S-N-P, she represented a new type of Black womanhood in Hip Hop, which would embrace an afrocentricism that was not solely about the brothers, but about the black sisters who needed to hear about their self-

worth, dignity, uniqueness, power, and beauty as black women. Before the power of the pussy, which became synonymous with black girl power, Latifah's image and message gave Black women the space to be revered as strong-willed, resistant, attractive and sexy without revealing or tight clothing, sexually suggestive or sexually explicit lyrics, or a gangsta mentality. Though she never quite received the critical acclaim and success as an emcee, Queen, like many other women in Hip Hop with the business savvy, entered into other artistic mediums, such as television, movies, theatre, and propelled herself into a mainstream career and household name.⁴⁶

As the women on the east-coast had their taste of Black female Hip Hop royalty, the West side had theirs as well. Amidst the cop killing, blood/crips turf battle, bitch and ho hating, and narcotics distribution in the "City of Quartz," Yolanda Whitaker, better known as Yo-Yo, the female rap protege of Ice Cube, was holding it down for the females. Showing Ice Cube that it was a woman's world, or a girl's world--as she was about 16 at the time she appeared on his "It's A Man's World" track--the thick, light skinned, box braided, hazel-eyed beauty with fierce attitude and feminist tendencies, despite not knowing what a feminist or feminism was, became the first lady of West Coast rap. Premiering circa 1991, with her solo album, *Make Way for the Motherlode*, which featured her popular song, "You Can't Play With My Yo-Yo," Yo-Yo provided insight into the life of black girlhood and burgeoning womanhood. She rapped:

Its me, the brand new intelligent black woman Y-O-Y-O
Which is Yo-Yo, but I'm not to be played
Like I was made by Mattel
But this Yo-Yo is made by woman and male

46 Kierna Mayo, "the last good witch," in *Hip Hop Divas* (New York: Three Rivers, 2001), 52-61.

I rhyme about uprights upliftin the woman
For that are superior to handle by any male
Any time, any rhyme, any flow, and any show
And if you ask my producers that we fly and you know

Recognizing her status as a role model, Yo-Yo felt compelled to write songs that were socially responsible and addressed the issues of girls who “graduated ‘from Barbie dolls to straight sex.’” Even though she, like many Black girls and women had conflicting messages in her music, such as “You Can’t Play With My Yo-Yo,” which in one line mentions not being sexually available, and in the next it speaks of her stealing another girls man--part of the cultural schizophrenia that can occur when men write parts of your rhymes or when you are trying to grapple with growing into your womanhood, Yo Yo, was sincerely committed to female solidarity outside of the Hip Hop industry, and created the IBWC, or the Intelligent Black Women's' Coalition with some of her high school friends. Although Yo Yo went on to record a total of five albums, she never reached the success of women such as Da Brat and Lauryn Hill who also emerged during this era, due to her inability to be marketed because of her inability to fit into a mold of a sex symbol, as she has noted. She did, however, make an impact on the way Black girls were able to redefine a Black womanhood through her music, her image, and her Intelligent Black Women’s Coalition.⁴⁷

In 1991, Atlanta based twenty-something R&B/Hip Hop trio TLC emerged with their song, “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg” off of their debut album, “Ooh on the TLC Tip.” Tionne “T-Boz Watkins,” the late Lisa “Left Eye Lopez,” and Rozonda “Chilli” Thomas,

47 Michael Gonzales, “not for play” in *Hip Hop Divas* (New York, Three Rivers, 2001), 64-69.

revolutionized Hip Hop, by fusing the sensuality and sophistication of R&B crooning, and the young, hip, fresh, chaotic rhymes and beats of rap music. They also were mavericks with directly confronting the sexual politics of black women in the 1990s. With condoms attached to their clothes, and “Left Eye’s” trademark condom over her left eye, truly did what very few women in Hip Hop could do: boldly confront and acknowledge black women as sexual agents without becoming exploited or objectified in the process as some female rappers and artists to come after them would be. Left Eye, T-Boz, and Chilli in their early days of androgyny and bright baggy clothes, changed the politics of young black women’s sexuality. In “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg” (A song I used to sing all the time), Left remarked:

Ain’t too proud to beg/
Realize the realism of reality treats/
Us both the same/
Cause satisfaction is the name of this game/
So I choose to explain it's evident/
Left Eye don't mean the rest of my body is irrelevant/
In other words let's refresh your head/
About pullin' down curtains and breakin' da waterbed/
Yeah I like it when you (kiss)/
Both sets of lips/
Oooh on the TLC tip/

Clearly, Left Eye, and T-Boz and Chilli all discussed openly their sexual desires and were not going to be ashamed of saying how they wanted to be sexually gratified. What we see in Hip Hop during the early 1990s with TLC was reclaiming of black women’s sexuality in affirming ways. They did not use subtlety to discuss their negotiations of race, class, gender, and sexuality in Hip Hop and in society at large in the 1990s.

Despite the misconception that Hip Hop had met its female quota during the early '90s, Black girls and women continued to make moves to enter the ranks. Chi-town native, but Atlanta bred rap star gone gangsta, gone sex kitten, gone gangsta again, Shawntae Popsy Harris, a.k.a. Da Brat became the first lady of So So Def records and the first female emcee to sell one million albums, with her debut album *Funkdafied*. Da Brat flowed:

Open up, open up/
And let the funk flow in/
From this nigga name J and his new found friend/
I'm hittin switches like Eric on the solo creep/
For yo jeep it's the B.R.A.T./
Puttin the dip in your hip from right to left/
It's the ghetto west bitch and I'm So So Def/
Nigga that's my click/
Nigga that's who I rolls with/
And we kicks nothing but the fat (shhh)/

Maybe it was her hyper-black masculine swagger or her ability to write and flow better than some males that gave her the freedom to be a serious emcee and in control of her artistic destiny, which made her outsell longtime artists Salt-N-Pepa, Queen Latifah, and MC Lyte, her androgynous idol. However, this rugged and persistent, baggy clothed, blunt smokin,' frilly matching bra and panty set wearing woman made Jermaine Dupree change his mind about not wanting to work with "girl rappers." Her fluid performance of gender and sexuality allowed her to ghostwrite rhymes for male rappers who wanted to be considered hardcore, and helped her become more in control of her career as a writer and producer, and not a sex symbol. Despite her success of outselling the first phase of

divas in Hip Hop, Da Brat never received the post Hip Hop acclaim that Queen Latifah has.⁴⁸

The last and most notable female rapper, and emcee period, to emerge during the phase was L Boogie, Lauryn Hill--Ms. Hill to some these days. This Columbia University educated girl from New Jerusalem became famous, like most women in Hip Hop, with her male crew, but not for the same reasons. Unlike the ingenues before her, and after her, for that matter, Lauryn outshone her male comrades: Pras and Wyclef, the Haitian Sensations of the Fugees. Their first album in 1994, *Blunted on Reality* demonstrated Lauryn's ability to rhyme, and forced some to question why she was letting these two guys hold her career back. While with the Fugees, she was yet to truly talk about her life and experiences as a Black woman and on her own terms, collectively, Hill Pras, and Wyclef offered an intellectual element to Hip Hop that was beginning to lose its identity during the beginnings of hypercommercialization of the culture and transforming it into an industry.⁴⁹

During this short period, which saw female emcees as more than novelty or a female-ist answer to the dis record, Black women were doing more than carving a space for themselves. At a time when Black men in Hip Hop were going through a pubescent identity crisis, by trying to figure out if they were better suited as gangstas or black nationalist political figures, and were unsure of what to do with their growing sexual feelings and fantasies, Black women were experiencing similar feelings, and exploring

48 Andrea Duncan, "wild child," in *Hip Hop Divas* (New York: Three Rivers, 2001), 114-199.

49 Selwyn Seyfu Hinds, "the rationalization of lauryn hill," in *Hip Hop Divas* (New York: Three Rivers, 2001) 94-95.

some of these similar themes in their music and projecting them in their images. Some of their music reflected thug life, hints of sexuality, hatred and love of black men simultaneously, and a female solidarity despite the occasional “I’ll Take Your Man” anthems. Black girls and women were exploring their gendered identities and learning how to be women in the public eye while Black women were being depicted by the news and Black men on the streets and in Hip Hop as welfare-queens, baby-makers, bitches, hos, tricks, and skeezers. Black female rappers during this phase showed a variety of Black femininities that existed along a continuum that ranged from posturing a hyper black masculinity to demure modesty with hints of sexual desire or blatant fetishization. However, this period of female polyvocality would be short lived, as Hip Hop won the battle with MTV and became a salacious sensation that opened up new mediums to propagate the Bronx street culture with Wall Street aspirations. Once Hip Hop became about more than selling records, black women had to find new ways to garner the same success and desirability to be consumed by a mass audience, and despite the success of posturing like one of the hard niggas, it was getting old, and along with the Black unity, female solidarity, and black love talk it was not profitable or as palatable as the controversial violence and sexual lyrics. In this male dominated music and growing white industry due to the visibility from music videos, male consumers of any race did not want to see or hear women in drag, especially when they could see and hear from hos, bitches, and skeezers who gangsta rappers liked to talk about.

“Selling Hot Pussy”: Black Girls Rockin’ the Mic--but in a Sexual Connotation (1995-2000)

The women who make their way into the Hip Hop scene during this five year span, are the self-proclaimed, “Queen Bees,” “Ill Na Nas,” “Baddest Bitches,” Regular “Bitches” and “Pitbulls in Skirts,” who ushered in the power of the pussy era, or “eat me feminist” era as some women and men have referred to their way of representing black femininity and womanhood in Hip Hop. During this time Hip Hop was going through a major expansion with the growth of print media and rap magazines such as *The Source* (1990), *Vibe* (1993), and the new magazine *XXL* (1997), which would change the way Black women were to be perceived and received by hip hop audiences globally.⁵⁰ As rap music and Hip Hop was becoming bigger than the music, the women who were trying to gain the same success as the men had to find new ways to appeal to a predominately male audience, even if it meant alienating some female listeners.

Whereas women of the previous two phases were trying to figure out their place in Hip Hop, by attempting to avert the male sexualized gaze while they were trying to legitimate themselves as an emcee, either by assuming a black masculinity or carefully embracing their sexuality and sensuality, the so called “Bad Girls” of this Hip Hop era, looked back at the male gaze and decided to talk back and conjured up the old specters--or spectacles--of black female sexuality. Through a head on encounter of the legacy of the black female as “jezebel” or “mammy”--either to liberate black women from these stereotypes or keep them controlled and confined to the legacies--these black girls and

50 Murray Forman. *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music and Hip Hop* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002) 226-251.

women, namely, Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Lauryn Hill--as a solo artist, Trina, Missy Elliot, and EVE negotiated race, class, gender, and sexuality in Hip Hop, in a way that would forever change the future of female emcees in the industry.

Before bids in jail, and “dancing with the stars,” Little Kimberly Jones, or Lil' Kim, as she is affectionately called, changed the face and sound of Hip Hop. Outshining previous bad girl novelty acts: Bytches with Problems and Hoez with Attitude, this sixteen year old, barely five foot Brooklynite, showed that punany was an even more potent, plentiful, and profitable product to sell or rap about selling in Hip Hop. Known for her romantic and artistic relationship with the late Notorious B.I.G. who, along with her all male crew Junior M.A.F.I.A., helped launch her career, the little girl with low self-esteem, and feelings of inferiority, and lovelessness, would soon be loved and hated by many. Appearing on the cover of her debut album, *Hardcore* in 1996 which went certified platinum with her legs wide open offering her goodies, with graphic lyrics about her sexually preferences and escapades, desire for the finer and more expensive things for life, her skills as a hustla, and ability to use violence to protect herself if necessary, Kim's narrative of black girlhood/womanhood in the streets troubled many black feminists yet was celebrated by women, who for the first time heard their life story.⁵¹ In “Queen Bee,” she rapped:

If peter piper pecked em I betcha biggie bust em/
He probably tried to fuck him I told him not to trust him/
Lyrically I dust em off like Pledge/
Hit hard like sledge hammers bitch with that platinum grammar/
I am a diamond cluster hustler/

51 Rob Marriott, “what price queen bee?” in *Hip Hop Divas* (New York: Three Rivers, 2001), 132-139.; Akissi Briton, “Deconstructing Lil' Kim” in *Essence* 31, no. 6 (2001), 112, 115, 186.

Queen bitch supreme bitch/
Kill a nigga for my nigga by any means bitch/
Murder scene bitch/
Clean bitch disease free bitch/
Check it I write a rhyme, melt in your mouth like M&M's/

Kim blending a new type of femininity: hard core gangsta and sexually aggressive, bordering on loathing, ushered in a dirty girl moment in Hip Hop, and tarnished the image of what a female rapper was supposed to look like and supposed to say.

Similarly, Kim's Louise, to her Thelma, 15 year old, Brooklynite, Inga Marchand, also known as Foxy Brown, joined her childhood and neighborhood friend in the rap game. Foxy, taking her name from the blaxploitation film star, Pam Greir, sought to cash in on this new wave of the hypersexed black female rapper, and in 1996 released her debut album *Ill Na Na*, which is a euphemism for her vagina--though she now claims it stands for her childhood nickname, little girl--she would boast about doing exactly what the boys did. In her song, "Ill Na Na," she rified:

No more sexin me all night, thinkin it's alright/
While I'm lookin over your shoulder, watchin the hall light/
You hate when it's a ball right? Ladies this ain't handball/
Nigga hit these walls right before I call Mike/
In the morning when it's all bright, eggs over easy/
Hope you have my shit tight when I open my eyes/
While I'm eatin gettin dressed up, this ain't yo' pad/
I left some money on the dresser, find you a cab/
No more, sharin I pain, sharin I made/
It's time to outlick niggaz, ladies sharin our game/
Put it in high gear, flip the eye wear/
Nas Ruled the World but now it's my year/
And from, here on I solemnly swear/
To hold my own like Pee Wee in a movie theater (uh-huh)/
Yeah I don't need a man's wealth (yeah)/
But I can do bad (bad) by my damn self (self)/
And uhh.../

In what appeared to be an attempt at feminist reappropriation of black female sexuality and subjectivity through reversing roles of exploitation and domination, was actually a growing trend in how black women were coping with the pain of negotiating race, class, gender, and sexuality in larger culture. Instead of being victims of male infidelity and manipulation, women would guard themselves and turn the tables on the men. This reversal no matter how rewarding for the Fox and women such as Kim, was not rooted in feminism.

Although there was no quota on how many sex boasting female emcees there could be in Hip Hop, Foxy and Kim, former friends, ceased their sisterhood and began to battle with each other on the mic, in magazines, and in public, because money was more powerful than solidarity.⁵² Both with their, “whose got the best pussy on the planet antics” for the first time, and different from TLC, forced black women to truly confront and reconcile the legacies or “controlling stereotypes” of black female sexuality, which Patricia Hill Collins has referred to as the jezebel, mammy, and sapphire.

However, in 1997, 1998, and 1999 the Fox and Queen Bee had to make way for some new and old female emcees: Missy, Eve, Lauryn Hill, and Trina, who were not all about who could, quite bluntly and in words similar to theirs, “out-suck, out-fuck, out-drink, out-smoke, out-fight, and out-shop each other.” 1997 saw the “Supa Dupa Fly,” 20 something, Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliot enter the rap scene, making up nonsensical songs, and abstract, futuristic beats and music videos that would revolutionize the way

52 Danyel Smith, “she got game,” in *Hip Hop Divas* (New York: Three Rivers, 2001), 122-129.

the Hip Hop video is done. Missy, with her darker skin, and large body frame to match her large personality, was not in a position to market herself like Lil' Kim or Foxy Brown. Missy, whose songs also addressed issues of sex, money, and power, but not always, demonstrated how her encounters with the legacies of Black female sexuality, and negotiations of race, class, gender, and sexuality and rejected being categorized as asexual or a mammy because of her size by talking about sex, and sexual desire, and being a bitch, or powerful woman. Missy encountered the legacies of black female sexuality, and more specifically this dyad of jezebel/mammy in Hip Hop and attempted to shatter such a construction through her overt sexuality. In her song, "Sock it To Me," from her first album *Supa Dupa Fly*, she asserted:

I was lookin for affection
So I decided to go, swing that dick in my direction
I'll be out of control
Let's take it to perfection
Just you and me
Let's see if you can bring the bring the bring the nasty out of me
Nownownow now sock it

Missy, similar to Kim and Foxy openly discussed her sexual desires, regardless of how profane it may have appeared, especially since she was a large figured, darker skinned black woman. Often, Hip Hop scholars do not include Missy into the "bad girl"/"nasty girl" category with Kim and Foxy because of her larger frame, and more masculine attributes, such as short hair.

Three other women emerging during this time were Lauryn Hill, Eve, and Trina. Lauryn, already established as a bonafide emcee, decided to become a solo act, who like

TLC fused elements of R&B and rap--maybe this was the successful combination that allowed black women to be sexual agents. Lauryn, differing greatly from her other female rappers, with her natural hair in dreadlocks, “tasteful” displays of sexuality, and rejection of the vulgarity, possibly because of her new role as a mother, became the first female rapper to win 5 Grammy awards for her 7 times platinum, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. The solo album, fusing ballad and rap told the tale about black women negotiating race, class, gender, and sexuality in romantic relationships.

In one of my favorite songs, “Doo Wop That Thing” she sang and rapped:

It's been three weeks since you've been looking for your friend/
The one you let hit it and never called you again/
'Member when he told you he was 'bout the Benjamins/
You act like you ain't hear him then gave him a little trim/
To begin, how you think you really gon' pretend/
Like you wasn't down then you called him again/
Plus when you give it up so easy you ain't even fooling him/
If you did it then, then you probably fuck again/
Talking out your neck sayin' you're a Christian/
A Muslim sleeping with the gin/
Now that was the sin that did Jezebel in/
Who you gon' tell when the repercussions spin/
Showing off your ass 'cause you're thinking it's a trend/
Girlfriend, let me break it down for you again/
You know I only say it 'cause I'm truly genuine/
Don't be a hard rock when you're really a gem/
Baby-girl, respect is just a minimum/

In an attempt to reach out to other black girls and women of the “selling hot pussy era,” she discussed how such twisted sexual politics espoused by women such as Kim and Foxy were misleading and not truly about empowering young women. In a counter narrative to dominant messages of sexual commodification and remuneration, Lauryn gained critical acclaim as the refreshing and talented antithesis to such Hip Hop “harlots,”

as they have been called. By juxtaposing her sensual, moral, and “natural,” Afrocentric appeal, Hill clearly stood out and got a very powerful message out to black girls at a crucial time when Hip Hop and black women were becoming monoliths.

Unlike Lauryn, yet unlike Lil’ Kim, Foxy, and maybe a little like Missy because of her eclectic blend of raw, in your face sexuality, yet rationed out quite conservatively, Philadelphia’s own Eve Jihan Jeffers, premiering in 1999 with DMX and the Ruff Riders Crew, made it fashionable for young girls to be pit-bulls in skirts. This bitch, bold, assertive, aggressive, resistant, and resilient, with her trademark short blonde natural cut and paw prints on her breasts, showed girls from the ghetto that they too could be rough, rugged, assertive, cute, and sexy and be respected at the same time. Most popular for her song, “Love is Blind,” which was about domestic abuse, Eve, exclaimed:

Hey, yo I don't even know you and I hate you/
See all I know is that my girlfriend used to date you/
How would you feel if she held you down and raped you?/
Tried and tried, but she never could escape you/
She was in love and I'd ask her how? I mean why?/
What kind of love from a nigga would black your eye?/
What kind of love from a nigga every night make you cry?/
What kind of love from a nigga make you wish he would die?/

In a video, which complemented the song lyrics well, Eve addressed the plight of domestic violence women were facing. She rejected the idea that love was equated with violence, and tried to urge her friend to leave this abusive man. The fierce emcee pretended to kill the boyfriend of her dead female friend. In such a brave act of discussing real issues affecting black women, including black female artists such as Lil’

Kim, Eve used Hip Hop as a forum to discuss the politics of black women's romantic relationships.

The last woman to usher in this Hip Hop moment of hyper-sex and real ghetto black womanhood was 24 year old Katrina Taylor from Miami, which one could say was the original place for explicit sexual content in rap music. Just a decade earlier, Luther Campbell and Too Live Crew made famous the hyper-sexual hoodrat/hoochie-mama. Trina, who haphazardly become a rapper, after her job as a Stripper when she befriended her fellow sexual freak, Trick Daddy. On his song, "Nann Nigga," Trina offered lyrics that made Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown look tame. A year later, she premiered with her album, *Da Baddest Bitch*, which also contained the song "Da Baddest Bitch." With much shock value, Trina offered such advice to black girls:

I got game for young hoes /
Don't grow to be a dumb hoe, that's a no-no/
See if you off the chains/
Stay ahead of the game, save up buy a condo/
Sell the pussy by the grands/
And in months you own a Benz/
Another week a set of rims/
See if I had the chance to be a virgin again/
I'd be fucking by the time I'm ten/

Trina, putting her twist on "eat me feminism" told black girls of the 21st century to use their power of the "P" to make a career and build self-sufficiency. Why just "fuck" for the sake of "fucking" when guys would pay for it as Trina noted, just start planning at an early age. The way Trina negotiated race, class, gender, and sexuality, was very problematic as evidenced by this track, but unfortunate and as unsettling as it was to hear,

black women responded to her brand of female-ism because they wanted to take advantage of being exploited and look good while doing so.

With the increasing visibility of women in Hip Hop media, and in order for black women in Hip Hop to be heard and gain the same success and stature as black men in this growing globalized industry, black female rappers began to candidly discuss issues of sex and sexuality. Despite the need for sensationalism to sell records, for the first time, black female rappers were beginning to earn the same amount of respect and dollars as black males. While the dominant theme was about black women exploiting their own sexuality and legacies of black women as hyper-sexual and commodifiable, as demonstrated by Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina, women such as Missy, Lauryn Hill, and Eve complicated this idea of black women's hyper-sexuality, since they also discussed sexual desire, along with domestic violence, and self-respect when negotiating race, class, gender, and sexuality, and redefined what it meant to be black women not only in Hip Hop, but in mainstream society.

Looking for Lauryn: The Disappearance of the Divas of Hip Hop and the Rise and Reign of the Video Vixen (2001-2009)

Despite the plethora of female rappers who emerged during the "Selling Hot Pussy" era, who offered a few counter messages about the pervasive pussy free for all, such as Lauryn Hill, Eve, and Missy, the image of the hyper-sexual, sexually available Black woman became the primary way people wanted to consume black women and their music. Black women were never truly accepted in the male dominated culture and often had to prove themselves, and often using the age old trick of sex. Unfortunately, once the

curious little girls opened up Pandora's box of sex tropes, and directly engaged legacies of “controlling stereotypes” of the jezebel, black women in rap music and women in Hip Hop’s roles changed forever. Once black women began engaging the sexual politics of Black women’s sordid history of the sexualized spectacle in order to be heard and garner the same type of material success as black male rappers, they unfortunately changed the way black women could operate and navigate Hip Hop, and the way black women are perceived by and able to navigate society.

Women such as Lauryn Hill have disappeared, possibly from having the pressure of being the sole “good girl” resting on her lyrical laurels. Eve moved on to acting, modeling, and designing a clothing line along with other Hip Hop Divas: MC Lyte, Queen Latifah. Missy continues to be a superstar because as a full figured, darker skinned woman, whose sexual orientation is an ambiguous, she could never rest on exploiting her sexuality in the same ways that Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina could, and also controls her music as a writer, and producer; she is a business woman.

For women who have appeared in Hip Hop from 2001 to the present: Amil, Rah Digga, Shawna, and Remy Ma, they are left with the burden of trying to be sexy, yet rugged in order to appeal to a global audience at a time when the video-vixens Melyssa Ford, Karrine Steffans, Esther Baxter, Buffie the Body, Ki Toy, and more are able to attract more men and more Hip Hop consumers as they are “modeling” and “advertising” in Black men’s music videos, and Hip Hop magazines such as *XXL*. None of the female rappers lyrical skills or visage can compare to the sexiness and silence of Melyssa “Jessica Rabbit” Ford, and the hyper-visibility and audibility of Karrine “Superhead”

Steffans. As a result, Black female rappers, are no longer able to articulate what it means to be black female and working-class in the United States, and are almost forced to exploit racist, classist, and sexist stereotypes of the Black woman as hyper-sexual and deviant, and this encountering historical legacies of Black female sexuality is the only way Black women in Hip Hop are able to gesticulate their negotiations of race, class, gender, and sexuality in Hip Hop videos.

In sum, this chapter examined the way black women in Hip Hop culture, from 1979 to the present negotiated race, class, gender, and sexuality as articulated in their music and gesticulated in their images or representations of black womanhood and femininity during the commercialization and corporatization of Hip Hop. Through a revision of Gwendolyn Pough's and Cheryl Keyes' frameworks for examining black women's contributions to Hip Hop culture, and rap music in particular, I developed a new model/trajectory of black women's evolutionary roles in Hip Hop from vocal and visible female rappers to the silent yet ubiquitous video vixen. In four phases, which concurred with the commercialization of larger Hip Hop culture, which often does not include women, I charted the evolution of women in Hip Hop. These four phases I defined were: The Female-ist Presence: Black Women Carving A Space (1979-1988); Afrocentricity, Ghetto-centricity, and Female-centricity: A Multiplicity of Messages (1989-1994); "Selling Hot Pussy": Black Girls Rockin' the Mic--in A Sexual Connotation (1995-2000); and Looking for Lauryn: The Disappearance of the Divas in Hip Hop and the Rise and Reign of the Video Vixen (2001-2009).

Chapter 3: Ethnographic Adventures in Hip Hop and Black Girlhood

The days of MC Lyte, Yo-Yo, Sister Souljah, and Salt-n-Pepa have faded away. Our Queen, Latifah has broken new ground in another sector, but has left her place on the throne of hip hop empty, waiting to be filled. We live in a world where the only goals at the end of the day are profit and top-ten spots on the Billboard charts. Members of the industry are being rewarded for selling the most records, destroying in the process the most beautiful thing about us as a culture--our girls and young women. It was so easy to be drawn in and dominated by it all. Music videos occupied only a short year and a half of my life, but the picture and the purpose are much larger than that. Magazines, music videos, films, and television continuously fill the heads of young girls with visions of perfect bodies, sex, and money. Parents are often either absent or uneducated or both, rendering them largely unaware of what's going on right in their own living rooms. That little girl whose head was filled with those deceptive visions of wealth and fame is me, all grown up and ready to tell what I know.

--Karrine Steffans, *Confessions from a Video Vixen*

In her risqué tell all, the infamous, now black-listed Hip Hop diva and video-vixen, Steffans, kissed and told about her sexual escapades once the lights went out on the Hip Hop video shoot. Often berated for her salacious candor and her self-exploitative and self-aggrandizing whistle-blowing on the sexism and infidelity in the Hip Hop industry, Superhead, regardless of her method of and intentions for exposing the industry for its disdain and objectification of women, did what few women in Hip Hop will ever do; she disrupted and stopped protecting black masculinity and in the process of her transgressions also told what it was like to grow up as a black girl during the hyper-visibility of hyper-sexualization and hyper-commercialization of Hip Hop.

Karrine, as uncomfortable as she has made the Hip Hop industry, black women and men included, made an excellent point about the evolving role of women in Hip Hop, as they moved from being cultural producers to cultural reproducers, or sexualized

objects. By sharing her memoir about her individual role as part of a larger culture, Karrine demonstrated the impact the lack of powerful, vocal, female rappers with agency and the replication and representation of glamorized and deified video-vixen had on her psyche as a young black girl growing up in the Virgin Islands.

Taking a cue from Steffans, this chapter addresses the myriad ways black girls are negotiating what it means to be black and female during the rise and reign of Hip Hop. Beginning with a self-ethnography of my encounters with Hip Hop in the mid 1990s, and then following with an ethnography or composite of life histories about black girls negotiating issues of body-image, love, and sexuality ten years later, and then concluding with a life history about grappling with issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and spirituality at an age where Hip Hop is the dominate way black, working-class youth contextualize their experiences and define their identities.

“Meditations on Hip Hop and Feminism: a Self-Ethnography”

You couldn’t tell me shit, I was the flyest black girl, no, hold up, I was the flyest girl in the eighth grade. I was only twelve, but I looked about seventeen, and this meant I got a lot of attention from males of all ages. I could pull any guy because I had a cute face, which was framed by my T-boz hair cut—the one she rocked on the cover of the *Crazy, Sexy, Cool* album—a thin waist, and a fat ass, which made up for my membership in the itty bitty tittie committee. In fact, I embodied crazy, sexy, cool. I was the type of Black girl who didn’t take any shit from a male or female, which got me my reputation for being crazy. I flaunted my dope athletic body, which made me sexy. And, I was cool

enough to kick it with all groups of people unless they started talking shit, and then my crazy side would come out. However, the sexy part of the mantra was what I was more invested in, and being well aware of my sexuality and the effect it had on males of all ages signified a type of power. From all of the commotion about me exposing my body at school, such as being suspended for wearing provocative clothing, it showed me that sexuality is a very potent thing, and when wielded correctly, as illustrated in rap videos and songs during that time, it could be used to gain a plethora of things, such as money and other commodities. But for me, the power of black female (hyper-hetero)sexuality, was primarily used to garner acceptance and admiration from my black peers who often shunned me for being too invested in “whiteness,” or my desire for the acquisition of knowledge.

My body became all the rage during my last year of junior high: it was my pride and joy, and consequently, my self-esteem and self-worth became conflated with it. With my scantily clad body I could control the male and female gaze. Guys wanted me, and girls might have wanted me too, but mostly, they wanted to be like me. I didn’t have to fuck any guys to get the same attention that other black girls, who were not as “exposed” as I got. But just the illusion of sex, conjured up from my bare midriff and tight jeans or short skirts, gained me my popularity or notoriety, and as long as they were talking about me, that meant I was important.

However, my teachers and peers thought I was promiscuous because I “embraced my sexuality” like a modern ‘90s woman. But quiet as it’s kept, I was really a fraud because I was a prude and no guy would ever get the panties—I just liked the power of

being a tease. Fortunately, I never ended up in an uncompromising situation, which would have gotten me sexually assaulted--a reality, as I would later learn, for many of the girls my age. But, with the type of mother I had, my Hip Hop adventures into real/reel black womanhood was short lived. She beat my ass and reverted me back to my old genuine self: the eccentric, eclectic, athletic, intelligent, rebel (read as: white by my Black peers). And then I graduated middle school, and went to high school.

In high school, it took me a while to find my niche, and to find myself, my black feminine or womanly self in the midst of the power of the pussy politics of that era. Hip Hop culture, and rap music: the voice and the space for me to see and learn how to do blackness, was changing for the worse. Girls such as Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown replaced my beloved Salt-N-Pepa, and for a young girl trying to figure out what it means to be a black woman in the United States, a young girl who was just recovering from a mild case of self-sexual objectification, girl rappers such as 16 year old Lil' Kim, and 15 year old Foxy Brown, were going to bring the now dormant inner-ho out of remission. Luckily, I was introduced to poetry, and used that as a medium, instead of my body, as means of expressing my negotiations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. And, although it premiered near the end of my high school career, Lauryn Hill's album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* changed my life for the better.

The Miseducation, which espoused female self-empowerment, self-reliance, self-love, and a rejection of selling ourselves out for male attention, gave me a new framework for what it meant to be a black woman. Lauryn, and not my mother, grandmother, or any other black women could reach me (and this was true for many

black girls my age), to make me listen and realize that I no longer had to cover my insecurities and feelings of lovelessness with tons of make-up and tight clothing or escape with suicide. Instead, I learned to pride myself on my way with words and my deep thoughts. Lauryn Hill gave me hope that I could be an attractive, educated, and talented black woman, simultaneously without compromising my beliefs, self-respect, and integrity.

And while high school was coming to an end, and my identity crisis was averted, I would later find that Lauryn was departing for hiatus, which was devastating. Unfortunately, Lauryn's disappearance and the saturation of images of women dancing in rap videos, and female rappers talking about sex relentlessly meant that many of the girls who were enduring the same ghetto girl issues of trying to fit in through claiming a so-called authentic black femininity through Hip Hop were not as fortunate as I was to be able to re-claim and re-define myself when everyone thought they owned us because they had MTV and Lil' Kim ephemera. I, unlike some of my friends from middle school and high school was fortunate to "make it" out of the 'hood and onto the Hill, Mayflower Hill, to gain the tools to understand what my identity crisis was truly about.

At my predominately and historically white liberal arts institution, I was introduced to feminism, which was the only ideology that I learned about that could truly help me make meaning out of and find solutions to what I was going through during middle school and high school. Even though I entered a privileged space, I never forgot the stories of my childhood friends and peers who did not have the opportunity to be in such a privileged space. And, as a result, I became a feminist, a black feminist, or

womanist--to me it is all the same, just an issue of semantics, but a feminist nonetheless, with the goal of working towards eradicating all systems of oppression: race, class, gender, and sexual. I became a feminist with a particular interest in Hip Hop, and more specifically how Hip Hop's new image--as told in my new language--of objectification and fetishization of black women, gross conspicuous consumption, violence, and nihilism, all reactions and productions of post-industrial working conditions creating such 'hoods, was affecting black girls and women. Four years after my introductions to feminism, and five years into this PhD, I am still committed to the same people and working towards finding solutions.

“for sepia colored girls who have considered self/when hip hop is enuf”

In 1975, with her groundbreaking play/choreopoem: *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, Ntozake Shange brought to the stage the tale of the metaphysical dilemma: the colored female. Her lady in brown asked, are we ghoulish creatures, children of disgust, a specter, or spectacle? Are we phantasms disembodied and voiceless? Are we so muted from the deafening sounds of our cries that we now need someone to sing our song, to resurrect the colored girl who has been listless, lifeless, and loveless for too long? Because, to sing her song is to tell her life: the struggles, the hard times, the strewn notes void of rhythm and tune. To sing her song is to sing a song of sorrow and possibility, a possibility of her moving to the end of her own

rainbow.⁵³ However, thirty years later the curtain remains open and the age-old parable of the metaphysical dilemma still exists. On stage the colored girl is voiceless and motionless, yet she flawlessly performs the recital of phrases from a song other than her own. The play leaves the audience wondering: if hip-hop is this stage and all the colored girls merely players, will the colored girls play the role or ask for another script?

At present, the discourse surrounding the commercialization of hip-hop, and its egregious exploitation of Black females centers on the aforementioned question: will Black girls play the caricatured role of the hip-hop jezebel or reject and re-appropriate their fragmented and colonized bodies and psyches? Popular literature, such as *Essence* magazine, has explored such inquiries through a series of articles dedicated to developing initiatives to “take back the music” from Black male rappers and corporations that profit from dismembering and commodifying the Black female body.⁵⁴

However, misogyny and objectification neither originated in, nor is it endemic to hip-hop, but the glorification of the degradation of Black women has become pervasive in hip-hop culture. A music that is a unique and rich form of Black cultural production, which stems from a reclamation of space and identity,⁵⁵ has now become co-opted; with this misappropriation, a consequence of an incessant desire for capital, comes the hyper-hetero-sexualization and commodification of the expendable Black female body. Once

54 Diane Weathers, “Straight Talk: Why We’re Taking Back the Music,” *Essence*, March 2005, 34.

55 Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

again Black females are chattel—willingly and unwillingly—sold(out) by Black males and their compatriots to a global market.

As *Essence* and other advocates of Black women's rights contend: the abhorrent and sexually exploitative depictions of Black females are detrimental to the psychological and social development of Black children, but especially Black girls.⁵⁶ Black girls growing up in the hip-hop era, an era in which hip-hop is a fixture in the global marketplace, are growing up at a time where they are encouraged to aspire to be: groupies, video-hos or vixens, eye candy, chickenheads, hoodrats, apple bottoms, baby's mamas, and ill nanas with dreams of acquiring money, men, and material objects. The occupational options seem endless; however, these titles are just new monikers for the controlling images, offering false empowerment and very limited opportunities for growth and positive affirmation.⁵⁷ So, how can Black girls develop positive self-esteem and self-respect when the media portrays an archetypal Black woman as the overly sexualized video-prop whose being and value is reduced to her body parts and sexual performativity? How can Black girls love hip-hop and concurrently love themselves when they are consistently portrayed as ghouls, children of horror, or jokes?⁵⁸ Is there a rainbow at the end of this storm, or is death of the spirit the solution to this (ir)reconcilable dilemma?

56 Jeannine Amber, "Dirty Dancing," *Essence*, March, 2005, 162.

57 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 69-96.

58 Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, (New York: Scribner Poetry, 1975), 4.

Although there has been much speculation about these matters in popular and academic literature, little attention has been paid to the young Black women themselves and what they think and do about these concerns. Qualitative research such as life history and ethnography seeks to explore and understand the attitudes and experiences of real people; it complements and/or complicates academic theorizing and popular discourse by attending to the voices of those who are theorized about.⁵⁹ Through in depth interviews and participant observation, I intend to illustrate how race, sex, sexuality, class, religion, education, age, and nationality complicate and enrich inquiries and analyses of how Black girls grapple with Black womanhood in the hip-hop era. Not only “by doing a case study of one [or more] person[s] are we adding to the complexity of lived experience,” but also by making the individual lived experience of a sepia “colored girl” and her relation to the world valuable.⁶⁰ Therefore, this ethnography/composite of hip-hop life (her)stories serves as a “base line” to help hip-hop feminists begin to see how one life or three lives relate to, and resonate with the lives of other sepia “colored girls”. Since this ethnography/composite of hip-hop life (her)stories is not necessarily representative of the attitudes and experiences of all sepia “colored girls,” the study attempts to begin investigating, problematizing, and expounding on the current dialogue within hip-hop feminism, ultimately examining the way Black girls negotiate being Black and female in the hip-hop era.

59 Robert M. Emerson, ed., *Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and Formulations* (Long Grove: Waveland, 2001).

60 John Caughey, *Negotiating Culture and Identities: A Life History Approach*, (Place: Publisher, forthcoming), 131-132.

THE CAST

Overall, the “cast,” or the three research participants I interviewed, all identified as Black/African-American, which was a requirement for the study. They were from the DC/Maryland metro area, from different class backgrounds, high school seniors, and posse scholars.⁶¹ Throughout the study I provide greater detail about the “cast” ascriptions in the monologues which precede each section of the paper in order to give the audience a better idea of how their backgrounds influence their conceptions on hip-hop. In accordance with my “elements of style,” which I will later discuss, I decided to change the names of the three research participants and refer to them as “cast” members, though this study is not fictitious. I opted to use the “cast” names: lady in sienna, lady in mahogany, and lady in chestnut to represent the multiple shades of sepia/brown and to signify on Shange’s ladies of the rainbow.

THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE

The brilliant playwright Suzan-Lori Parks provides her readers with an “elements of style” which serves as an instructional guide to navigating and examining her artistic scholarship.⁶² Like Parks, I have a unique writing style; I fuse poetry with scholarly/critical essay. I believe that it is crucial that knowledge be accessible to many people and in many forms. I use the combination of poetry and scholarly/critical essay to further my commitment to rejecting the activist/academic dichotomy because poetry and theatre,

61 The Posse Foundation began in 1989 in New York to create a support network for students from urban areas to help them graduate from college. With offices in various regions of the country, the foundation “identifies, recruits, and trains youth leaders from urban public high schools and sends them in groups as posses to top colleges and universities across the country.” For more information about posse go to: <http://www.possefoundation.org>.

62 Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Plays and Other Works*, (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995).

which is often viewed as activist and artistic, and non-academic, are theory, and should be validated as such. I recognize that as a Black woman in academia, our work is often devalued because of the Eurocentric Masculinist Knowledge-Validation Process, which, at times, forces Black female academics to write in jargon, that limits their audience.⁶³ However, I believe that as a Black female artist and academic, it is my duty to bridge that gap and fight for all of our work to be recognized as valid without being apologetic for what we as scholar-activists do.

I chose to signify on Ntozake Shange for this very reason. Although Shange is not recognized as a “scholar,” her choreopoem *for colored girls* addresses the difficulties Black women face as they negotiate multiple identities while operating within a white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. Her commentary on Black women and the simultaneity of oppressions should be recognized as a major contribution to the contemporary scholarship on intersectional analysis.⁶⁴ Moreover, the issues that she addressed thirty years ago in *for colored girls* are still relevant today.

I have divided this essay into five sections. In the introduction, “when there waz a rainbow,” I begin with my poem and my “story” about hip-hop’s shift from culture to industry, and how this shift influences the negative depiction of Black women in hip-hop and mainstream culture. In the second section, “dark phrases of womanhood...she’s dancin on beer cans and shingles,” I address the representations of Black womanhood and female sexuality in hip-hop, and how such representations construct new body and beauty

63 Patricia Hill Collins, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 341-344 (New York: The New York Press, 1995).

64 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminis Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 69-96.

ideals. In the third section, “bein a woman and bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma,” I address the conflict sepia colored girls face as Black females in the hip-hop era, and how they negotiate the dilemma of listening and dancing to music that degrades women. In the fourth section, “ever since...I been tryin not to be that,” I address the way the girls cope with hip-hop’s misogyny through a “culture of distancing and disassociation.” The final section, “a requiem for rainbows?: conclusion,” is introduced by my poem followed by my concluding thoughts.

THE METHODS

As mentioned in previous paragraphs, qualitative in depth interviews with one 18 year-old and two 17 year-old Black/African-American girls were the primary method of data collection. I chose to interview the three female Posse scholars for two reasons: one, because I am a volunteer at the organization, I have good working rapport with the girls, which made the interviewing process less daunting for both parties; and two, because the girls had a pre-existing relationship, the group interview yielded rich data since there was a level of familiarity to allow them to be vulnerable and share thoughts among one another. Initially, I did not have a concrete ethnographic method that I used to conduct research; however, retrospectively, I adapted ethnographic methods, fusing tropes of Black Feminist Epistemology, and Steinar Kvale’s concept of the “traveler metaphor.”⁶⁵

The traveler approach, fused with elements of Black Feminist Epistemology, allowed me to place Black females at the center and view the study as an opportunity to converse with peers, which ultimately lead to this story. Although I approached the

⁶⁵ Steinar Kvale’s, “traveler metaphor,” quoted in Barbara Sherman Heyl, “Ethnographic Interviewing,” in *Handbook of Ethnography*, ed. Paul Atkinson, et. al., 370-371 (London: Sage, 2001).

interviews with a particular set of inquiries, I allowed for deviation during the interviews in order to focus more on the journey to the story, but most importantly to focus on my participants' feelings and thoughts, and how their intimate experiential knowledge of the subject would lead to further inquiries and conceptualizations about Black womanhood in the era of hip-hop. The traveler approach allowed for a level of egalitarianism since we as participants were having a conversation about the everyday things and our relationship to hip-hop culture and the society at large.

I conducted three sets of tape-recorded interviews: two sets of individual interviews and one group interview. The first set of thirty-minute to one-hour individual interviews were conducted at the Posse office. In this interview I gathered personal information about the girls and their feelings about their relationships with hip-hop. The second one-and-a-half hour interview, conducted approximately two weeks later, also held at the Posse office, was a group interview and participant observation. In this interview/discussion forum, I had the three girls watch the VH1 *(Inside)Out* series, on Nelly's Search for Miss Applebottoms, and discuss their reactions to the documentary. The final sets of one-hour individual interviews were conducted at a restaurant in DC approximately two weeks after the group interview. Unlike the Posse office, the restaurant was noisy and less private, which influenced how the girls answered the questions because they, like me, were consistently aware of their surroundings and consequently their thoughts were interrupted during certain moments. Overall these final interviews allowed the participants to illuminate on previous responses.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Lady in chestnut was the only participant whom I was unable to conduct a final interview with.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

WHEN THERE WAZ A RAINBOW

*in the beginning there waz me / i waz life: a cipher / my **cycle** waz the perfect beat / my **flow** waz a tight rhyme / and all it took waz one time: one **mic** and a dope line / and we became a meta-phor: / culture / this is before i became a whore / and before your lyrics and hot rhythms tore / a schism between my gender and my core / back in the day / i waz a microphone fiend / i had an (au)/(o)-ral fixation / a reputation for rockin the mic / but not in a sexual connotation / back in the day / i waz **hip** / cuz i put the e on the end of your hop / i waz full of **hop-e** until i went pop / and burst into the scene as just another commodity / whose purpose waz to feed a hungry economy / sí, yo recuerdo cuando: (yes, I remember when) / you were my rainbow: today and tomorrow / the calm after the storm; the solace after the sorrow / you filled a place that was hollow: my heart / and i would follow / you / because you promised me / more than beautiful weather / or tangible treasures / but pleasure / from your measures and bars / this is before it waz all about the **stars** / cuz it waz about the rainbow / damn you could put on a show / in those days when the sway of my hips didn't make me a **ho** / in your **ho-p** / and now you won't stop / so i submit / i drop / down and "get my eagle on" / and let you beat "it" up with a baton / let a "nigga get in them guts" / "and ahhh skeet skeet skeet skeet" / becoming your vessel replete with the seeds that you secrete / "from the window to the (lining of my vaginal) walls" / so you can have a thrill / and make a bill / off of my "tip drill" / so i let you "whisper in my ear and tell me some things that i'd like to hear" / cuz i'll listen if that's what it takes to get to the rainbow / so i'm running towards illusory dreams / running through rivers / and running through streams / to get to you / "leakin and soak n wet" / another silly ho / getting low / tilling the soil to help our new seeds grow / from below the rainbow / so we can get to the treasure / that promises platinum/ ice and dough / to heal my internal wounds that don't show / but i'll trade you the bitches and the riches / for the rainbow i used to know / for hip-hop*

Before confessions from video-vixens, the addition of bling-bling to the American lexicon, the 'burbs and boardrooms, there was the boogie down: the BX, which gave birth to this culture called hip-hop. The art forms of deejaying, rapping/emceeing, break-dancing and graffiti-ing, comprised this youth culture of the marginalized. These young Blacks and Latinos: the debris of the federal government's suburbanization: the post-civil

rights' "dream deferred," used these four elements to reclaim their space, place, and identity. Not only did these youth use these genres as a means of expressing their discontent and distrust of the democratic institutions, but also, as a medium for finding enjoyment in a world that deprived them of their inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. For many who identified with the marginalized "underclass," hip-hop was the rainbow, the promise of brighter days after decades of desolation.

Through the medium of rap, this residual culture and "Black noise," evolved from the clamor of the underclass to the reverberation of the masses; it transcended the darkness and rainy days providing treasures to its progenitors and naysayers alike. As hip-hop made its exodus from culture to commodity, so did rappers; they too became manufactured and mass-produced. Consequently lyrical finesse and dexterity were no longer a prerequisite to become a rapper because in the contemporary cultural marketplace money is the only thing that matters. Hence, the formula for instant rap success became: two parts gangsta, i.e. gun shot wounds and jail time; grills; and incessant references to money, drugs, sexual dexterity, physical endowment, material objects, and women.

Although it is assumed that video would kill the radio star, the hip-hop video is what made the former residual culture the commodity and industry what it is today, courtesy of the video-vixen. Black women's roles as fierce emcees in the hip-hop game has dissipated and the major role women play in this industry is that of the abject sexual object, an absent presence whose major purpose is to sell sexual fantasy. For those of us looking for the true SUPERHEADS of the world: those Black women blessed with intellectual prowess acclaimed for what comes out of their mouths and not for what goes

in, are left with the Karrine Steffans of the world, and this is a travesty. For those of us sepia colored girls who love hip-hop and ourselves and are still moving towards the end of our rainbows, this one is for you.

“DARK PHRASES OF WOMANHOOD...SHE’S DANCIN ON BEER CANS AND SHINGLES”

i'm heterosexual / i'm 17 years old / i'm caribbean american... / trinidad and tobago / i was born in dc / but i was raised in maryland / working class definitely because i am in a single family home... / i wouldn't say middle because of the situation that we are in... / i live with my mom... / it's always been me and my mom / she's the biggest role model in my life... / she always told me that i had to be strong and respectable woman / my dad did live in this country but he eventually got deported / so that was at a young age so it's always been me my mom and my brother... / he is 31 / and he doesn't live with us / he lives in dc... / i would say that i am more spiritual than religious / i haven't been to church in a while but i do read the bible and i do pray / i have a christian background and a catholic background / i go to a catholic school so there is a lot of daily prayer and theology classes / i would say that i have a positive self-esteem but negative body image / i think my self-esteem has improved since i've been going to the school i go to / i go to an all girls school so it's true what they say that when you are all around females you definitely feel that you can talk and stand up for yourself... / so it helps me see myself in a different light than when i was in public school / in a sense it helped me with my self-esteem / and they say that a lot / but it does because i don't have to prove myself to the opposite sex or anything like that... / i still have a negative body image because i feel that i am overweight... / i've felt overweight my whole life / i lost a lot of my baby fat but i still have some left

--lady in mahogany

“Drop it like it’s hot,” “shake ya ass,” “back dat ass up,” “shake it like a salt shaker”: these infectious hooks serve as instructional guides for the performance and maintenance of Black femininity in the hip-hop era. Unfortunately, this is hip-hop pedagogy at its worst: indoctrination and normalization of a hyper-sexualized heteronormative Black gender and sexual ideology. And in the hip-hop era where the

“video-ho” reigns supreme, Black girls learn to imitate these *phrases* of dark womanhood. They, not only learn the melody-less-ness of her dance, but also how to dress, and speak (or be silent). The result is the fracturing of her soul as she dances on beer cans and shingles.

For instance, in the fall of 2003, VH1 aired the (Inside)Out documentary of “Nelly’s Search for Miss Applebottoms,” a “modeling contest” for his casual/urban clothing line that catered to women with unconventional proportions. This model/talent search, which took place in New York, Atlanta, Miami, St. Louis, and Los Angeles, with the finalists from these cities competing in Las Vegas for the grand title, had thousands of women of various ages and races, but mostly Black, waiting in droves to be crowned the next Miss Applebottoms. As lady in mahogany, chestnut, sienna and myself observed, what initially began as a contest to represent “alternative” beauty standards and ideals, transformed into a booty contest. Contestants were asked if they were married, boasted about “making it clap,” demonstrated how they could “get low,” and “react in certain environments,” such as getting drunk in a club and giving the judges lap dances. This “contest” looked more like an audition for Mr. Tip Drill’s next video. The contestants were simply performing *phrases* of dark womanhood.

After viewing the tape of the Applebottoms contest and moving through our mixed emotions which ranged from disgust to amusement, we discussed the significance of the contest, the representations of Black women in popular media, and beauty ideals and standards. I begin the conversation:

In a world where skinny, white, blonde, and blue eyes has been, and in some ways still is, the standard, epitome, or image of beauty, which has often excluded women of

color, but especially Black women, is Nelly's Applebottoms competition valuing or devaluing the Black female body?

Lady in Sienna eagerly replies:

I like his [Nelly] little motto in the beginning where he said he was looking for real women with real curves, but it didn't follow through. When you get into: "I can make my bottom clap [*laughter from ladies in mahogany, chestnut, and amber*]," it kind of was no longer about curvaceous women.

As lady in sienna notes, the contest became less about a clothing line and modeling search for women with curves, and more of a spectacle of Black women's sexuality. Lady in chestnut echoes lady in sienna's remark, she states:

If you want that [big girls] you can go to a plus-size modeling place to find curvaceous women. It's [the contest] more about the bigger the booty and the skinnier the waist: there you go [*gesticulating*]!

In a similar vein, lady in mahogany exclaims:

They didn't pick any big girls! They wouldn't pick me, cuz I don't have that skinny waist. I got a little gut.

As lady in mahogany grabs a portion of her stomach to illustrate her point, though it is important to note that she is not as big as she thinks she is, the girls laugh at her remark, and she continues:

They're not looking for that! I've got thunder thighs. No, she's got be disproportioned ya know. Skinny, skinny, skinny, and like big ass!

What lady in mahogany is referring to is Nelly's reconstruction of an ideal woman, which is similar to Eurocentric standards of beauty in which the ideal woman has a body that is disproportionate. Instead of women having huge breasts, tiny waists, and slender hips and thighs, which white males typically find desirable, this new ideal woman whom Black men find desirable is that of Jessica Rabbit, a.k.a Melyssa Ford, the multi-ethnic

Canadian beauty with a 20 inch waist, 34D chest, and 38 inch hips, free of cellulite and fat.

Furthermore, lady in sienna notes that Nelly and VH1's exhibition of this contest is nothing more than a spectacle for a white audience, which is rooted in the age old tale of the Black woman as the jezebel, the hyper-sexual deviant, the spectacle for white voyeurs to enjoy. Lady in sienna contends:

What is that book about Venus?[...]That's what they are kind of doing in the media, this is kind of exotic fun to the white audience so let's just put it forward to see how they react to it.

Who the "they" is, is a bit unclear, but lady in sienna suggests that this contest conjures up racist depictions of Black women, such as that of Saartjie Baartman, though derogatorily referred to as the "Hottentot Venus." Nelly's contest is simply a contemporary way of fragmenting the Black female body, objectifying it, and commodifying it all in the name of entertainment.

Although the girls appeared to abhor such depictions of Black women as nothing more than gyrating big butts and smiles, or spectacles unable to see themselves for what they are, the girls were still caught between rejecting these images and embracing them in order to be accepted and acknowledged as beautiful and authentically Black. As lady in mahogany tells me in our second one-on-one interview about how she feels about her butt in this ass-obsessed society:

I feel that I go through a lot of stages because I feel like my butt is too big and that I look fat, and then other times I feel like, hmm my butt is not big enough. It should be out to here!

After she holds both of her hands out a few inches behind her butt, to show me how she thinks her butt should look to fit in with Black beauty/booty ideals, she continues:

It needs to be sticking out of my chair in order to get someone to notice it, and I think it depends on where I am going. I know one time I went for an interview and I had on a skirt, and I thought, oh God, my butt looks so big, I look like a ghetto girl! It's funny that I connect big butt with ghetto girl, see automatically who said this? Like, if I am going out with my friends to a mixer or something, I'm like, oh no, I'm not filling out these jeans right...what am I gonna do, padding?

Lady in mahogany's dilemma of not having a big enough butt, or having too big of a butt, or appearing not to have a big butt, or appearing to have too big of a butt, which has become termed a "ghetto booty," plagues even the most astute critics of these monolithic representations of Black women and their sexuality. She appears to be trapped in between wanting to look like an authentically Black woman--like those in Nelly's contest--when she is with her friends, and wanting to distance herself from this stereotypical view of the "ghetto girl" with the big ole butt when she attempts to navigate the white male public sphere. She is not sure if she wants to perform the dark phrases of womanhood for fear of being perceived as dancing on beer cans and shingles.

"BEIN A WOMAN AND BEIN COLORED IS A METAPHYSICAL DILEMMA"

17 / heterosexual / i consider myself to be Black / african-american / my father is from dominica, my mom is from texas / another country / born in dc / middle class / my father's retired / my mother is working in a comfortable job / and there are only three of us in the house right now / i have three siblings / i've never been part of an organized religion / then my father is very much atheist / but i do kind of want to believe / in a higher being / i feel comfortable with who i am and the way my body looks / i don't feel like i need to put my body out there / i like jazz / rock and roll... / preferably jazz or soul... / with hip-hop especially with stuff on the radio / it seems like they're all the same song right about now / a lot of bend over and put the pillow in your mouth... / oh, i hate that song!

--lady in sienna

Being a sepia colored girl in hip-hop culture is a metaphysical dilemma. Often forced to choose between our gender and our soul, we choose our soul. We choose Blackness. We choose hip-hop. We choose rhythm and life that we once bore but now betray us. We choose our soul that continues to throw its love back on our delicate faces.⁶⁷ We choose to move to the rhythm of songs that take the life from us leaving us searching to find wholeness in a world that reduces us to pieces.

In my first one-on-one interview with lady in mahogany, I ask her if she dances to hip-hop whose lyrics defamed women. She replies:

Okay, between you and me, both: sometimes the beat, and sometimes the lyrics. I know some of these lyrics are crazy, especially these days; they are very blatant about being wrong against women. I mean this one song my friend was singing the other day: “I’ll beat that bitch with a bottle”—

Curious about how she rationalizes liking a song that explicitly degraded Black women and how it made her feel as a sepia colored girl, she says in our second one-on-one interview:

Let’s say I’m in my car and I like the song, but there is one little line in it that I don’t really agree with, I just don’t let it register, ya know; I hear it but I don’t take any heed of it. I don’t let it anger me because I think there needs to be creative license. But, I definitely don’t take it to heart unless it is especially hateful [and] then I’m offended. A lot of it, I let it go through one ear and out the other.

Although I was not sure if she was completely desensitized to the misogyny because it is normalized in mainstream society, or if she just wanted a way to enjoy the dope beat of songs made by artists who will never change their lyrics because sex sells, I gathered that the negotiation of the beat versus the lyrics, much like the soul and the

⁶⁷ Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, (New York: Scribner Poetry, 1975), 45.

gender dilemma is too complex to understand, thus we ended our discussion on her method of filtering.

In another discussion on how Black women are perceived by others if they dance or recite lyrics to a song that degrades Black women, lady in chestnut remarks:

Yeah, unfortunately people get...people are looked at a certain way by what they dance to...so in that way you almost want to not dance to certain songs because other people will think badly of you, but then it's hard for you not to be like, 'why do I care what these other people think. If it's a song I like I will dance to it.'

It seems that lady in chestnut was expressing how sepia colored girls are caught in a catch twenty-two because the spectator will view the girls as acting in complicity even if they make a conscious choice to exert agency and dance to a song because they like the beat and do not agree with the lyrics.

Lady in mahogany notes that some people already have preconceived notions about sepia colored girls and their sexuality, and it does not matter what song they are dancing to or how they are dancing. She exclaims:

The school that I am going to...has a high Caucasian population, and I'm in the Midwest. Let's say that I'm in Iowa, and they don't see Black people, and if they do and lil' kim comes on and she is talking about how many licks does it take...ya know, I can easily fall into that. I can go to a little party they have on campus. I go and when I am dancing I am not there to impress anybody, but the way that I dance would say something. You wouldn't call a belly dancer a ho because that is what she does, but if I go to the club and I am dancing [people think] 'she's a ho,' and 'she's out of control. She's promiscuous...and you know Black girls!'

Lady in mahogany's comparison of Black women's hip-hop dancing with traditional belly dancing is an attempt to comment on the history of Black women's bodies being inscribed with hyper-hetero-sexuality, and how this legacy prevails and pervades with and without Black women like Lil' Kim. She notes that Black women who perform

hip-hop dance moves will be perceived as performing bad behaviors of a deviant culture whereas women of a different race or ethnicity who perform traditional dances that are sexual are viewed as “exotic” and performing culture.

To complicate this dilemma meta/physical, a dilemma of two undesirable options: choosing not to dance because of derogatory lyrics, or choosing to dance because of the ill beat, lady in mahogany notes that by not dancing to certain songs it makes her feel bad. She contends:

One time, I went to this one party and ‘drop down and get your eagle on’ came on and I felt kind of guilty cuz I couldn’t do it. I felt bad because I couldn’t act a certain way. Because the song came on and every girl was doing it and I felt bad because I wasn’t like that. It gives you [the culture and music] that you should be able to booty dance.

Once again lady in mahogany feels bad because she is unable to perform Black femininity. She is conflicted about her loyalty to her culture because she could not act like the other girls because they were betraying their gender. Lady in mahogany like lady in yellow is unable to conquer this metaphysical dilemma.

“EVER SINCE...I BEEN TRYIN NOT TO BE THAT”

*18 / heterosexual / african-american / i was born in dc / but i was raised in maryland...
i'm an only child / [live with] my mother / actually / my great grandmother / my
grandmother / and my mother / middle class/ my mom gave me the opportunity of
choosing which religion i wanted to be part of... / sent me to churches / synagogues... / i
know that is very uncommon / i realize that / but i just never found anything that like
preaches what i want / goofy that's me / thankfully i have a positive self-image / but i
think i am okay / there is nothing that i absolutely hate about myself / i'm definitely into
the local ska scene / that's where i usually spend my weekends... / rap...i strayed away
from it... / partially because some of the lyrics especially / a lot of the rap music today
don't really speak to me / i can't really relate to a lot of like “living in the hood” /...cuz i
never have... / i can't really relate to this music / it's so... / it seems like a lot of rap is like
“this is my life” / you know /” i've gone through these trials and tribulations” / and i
haven't / so i find it that i just can't relate to it / well most of it...*

--lady in chestnut

Black womanhood in America has been tarnished with distortions of promiscuity. False representations have controlled our sense of who we are as Black women; they have forced us to devote our lives to rejecting false portrayals by “defending the name.”⁶⁸ As Black women, it is unfortunate that we have defined ourselves by actively rejecting who we are not. From Maria Stewart, to Mary Church Terrell, to Zora Neale Hurston, to Patricia Hill Collins, to Ntozake Shange, to Joan Morgan, we as sepia colored girls and women have always had to (re)construct Black womanhood and ourselves. In the era of hip-hop, this fight for an accurate portrayal of Black women and Black womanhood is still an issue. Do we as hip-hop heads “claim jezebel” and revel in being bitches and modern day “Hottentot” beauties? Do we do what the “niggas we love to hate” do: boast about how good our sex or head is, getting high, and violence? Or, are we advocates of Black feminism just trippin’ because we have entered an era where the historical context is no longer relevant today? How do sepia colored girls growing up in the midst of this changing climate in Black sexual politics negotiate “defending the name”?

Lady in chestnut notes the difficulties of being a sepia colored girl and the legacy of defending the name and the role it plays in contemporary society.

It is always said that as a Black person, period, you have to work twice as hard to accumulate from what someone of Caucasian descent would have, and so for Black females, with all, you know, of these negative depictions of what it means to be a Black female, it seems you...like you know, times two, times three, you know. You have to push away new stereotypes that are made by people of different races. Now, you have to also deny stereotypes that people have made that are of your own race, so you find yourself trying to not dress a certain way even though it shouldn't matter what you wear, or things like that, just to kind of without saying it to show

68 Term used by Deborah Gray White in *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves: 1984-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).

to others that you are not that type. So, I think yeah, you definitely have to work harder to get away from these stereotypes. It's unfortunate.

As lady in chestnut notes, these stereotypes of Blackness and Black womanhood created in the white imagination have taken a life of their own and have become adopted by not only other racial and ethnic groups, but also other Black people, and it makes it even more difficult to be yourself because you are representing your race and your gender. You are robbed of agency and any type of subjectivity because you are viewed as a collective unit of dehumanized beings or inanimate objects fighting to be recognized as diverse individuals.

But, whom do we as sepia colored girls hold accountable for these one-dimensional representations of Black womanhood? If these representations are true why should we even contest them. Lady in chestnut comments:

Um, I think that is true to a certain extent [that Black women are degraded in hip-hop]. It's almost like a lot of these lyrics are so like, "what" that there is no imagination behind it. Like, it has to come from some fabric of truth or something like that. So, yes, it is misogynistic, it defames women, especially Black women, but I know it's almost like they're not pulling this, you know, from nowhere. You have a lot of these groupies who do a lot of the stuff that are in these rap lyrics, but I don't know what came first: the chicken or the egg. You know, did the groupies get this idea by these songs, or are they just this way and the guys make these songs of them and so it's like furthering this...I don't know.

This issue of accurate representations and personal accountability is a difficult web to unravel. However, lady in chestnut is certain that there are women who are hoarding their bodies for fame and/or fortune.

When asked if pervasive images of sexually promiscuous women make her feel she has to behave a certain way to attract males she asserts:

Oh God no! You have to act that way to attract a guy, I don't know if you would want that type of person to begin with. I guess for other females, who, Black females who have um, who listen to the music, who dance to the music, who sing along to the music, who are into the music, it's become a bit of truth to them. But, I think I can step away from that; that's not the way it has to be you know. That's not who I am as a person so why would I change myself to attract a guy?

Lady in chestnut is very self-confident and sure of who she is, but as she notes, other girls who live and breathe hip-hop and are unable to discern between the truth and the lies are victims of culture. As she proclaims that she is not like the other girls, it is evident that she wants nothing to do with being perceived or associated with girls who are unable to step away or distance themselves from (in)accurate portrayals of Black womanhood. She notes that women do not have to buy into the misogyny, but it appears that she succumbs to the notion that, that is simply the way things are and she just will remove herself from this culture.

Similarly, when asked about how hip-hop makes her feel as a Black girl growing up in the world, lady in sienna assertively exclaims:

Well, I don't associate myself with really the "ghetto environment," the "ghetto ideals" of a woman being a ho, a man being a hustler type thing. I try, even now when I am in an all Black school, and everyone is from...everyone lives in/around the ghetto...um, I guess I try to distance myself from that, that view of Black people [...] I find it to be a negative, a criminalistic type of view, not something I want to portray to other people.

Lady in sienna does not want to associate herself with negative representations of Blackness because it further perpetuates stereotypes of hip-hop culture as a set of behaviors that serve to hinder the progress of Black America. These representations are simply fulfilling the prophecy that White America has created for Black people.

However, the tone of her remarks seemed to echo the rhetoric of Black middle class elitism.

In order to understand what she meant by the comment, I asked her if her middle class status and two-parent household influenced her self-esteem, and why she would not subscribe to such “ghetto behavior.” Her response:

No, coming from a middle class family, I was definitely taught to always um...act a certain way, get an education, and I don't know about a single family home versus a two-parent family because all of my siblings grew up in single family homes [...] I've always heard that, you know, that if girls didn't have a male influence around them, they reach out for other males, but I don't know if that's true.

From her response lady in sienna admits that her middle class status and her two parent home has

influenced her perceptions on Blackness but she does not contend that those who do not come

from a background such as hers are debased beings.

In sum, both lady in sienna and lady in chestnut “distance” themselves from the other sepia colored girls and boys whom they perceive as accepting and re(presenting) dominant culture's views of Blackness. They recognize that (in)accurate representations of Black women exist, and as a result, they are conscious of how they behave and portray themselves. This type of “distancing” or disassociation from the misrepresentations, however, is rooted in the Black Feminist tradition of “defending the name” and redefining self. However, similar to the “culture of dissemblance,” in which Black women in the middle-west concealed their feelings about sexuality to preserve self, and create a coping mechanism to survive in a world that viewed them as licentious creatures that could justifiably be raped, this “culture of disassociation/distancing” that these sepia

colored girls constructed lie within the same tradition.⁶⁹ Black girls in the hip-hop era are ubiquitously portrayed as sexualized creatures who should be defiled in order to have their sexuality controlled. Consequently, Black girls have to reject such images in order to remain whole in not only a culture, but also a society that severs their minds and bodies. This “culture of disassociation/distancing” proves that the times have not really changed, and once they realized what it meant to be a sepia colored girl, they tried not to be that.

A REQUIEM FOR RAINBOWS?

*& this / & this / “ & this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/ but are movin to the ends of their own rainbows” / no lady in brown / this is for sepia girls / us “metaphysical dilemmas” / martyred deities / now resurrected / resuscitated / no reincarnated from colored to / brown shades / giving offerings other than pieces of self / no longer broken spirits / from supposedly abstract lyrics / that made us reified relics / or / graven images / artificial artifacts to adorn walls / so we will no longer whisper when we are called / anything other than our names / amber / sienna / chestnut / mahogany / so we shout this elegy / and instead / we offer you lilies / we plant them in the rain / symbolizing the death of you / for this is a requiem for rainbows / and a remembrance of self / this is a eulogy for hip-hop / as we part our separate ways / movin clouds to find the sun’s rays / transcendin rainbows / cuz **we** are our brighter days / & this is / & this is / & this is for sepia girls who have considered self/when hip-hop is enuf*

Unlike Ntozake’s ladies of the rainbow, the sepia colored girls have not considered suicide, or the death of their souls because they do not identify with the misogynistic messages or overly sexualized depictions of Black women in hip-hop. Though at times they were often conflicted about how to cope with being a sepia colored

girl in society that often sends the message that it is easier to comply with the status quo, the sepia colored girls sought to resist in various ways. It is unfortunate that hip-hop is killing the souls' of other sepia colored girls softly and slowly, but ladies in mahogany, chestnut, and sienna have had enuf of the lyrical slaughtering and negotiate the conflicting views of Black womanhood by filtering messages and distancing themselves from the negative representations. Although it is unfortunate that the plight of the "colored girl" is not an anachronism, we as sepia "colored girls" and women are in a position to work towards singing songs that affirm our voices so we are no longer "dancin on beer cans & shingles" puncturing' our bodies and souls. This ethnography/ composite of hip-hop life (her)stories was an attempt to "sing a Black girls song / to bring her out / to know you" so she will no longer be "closed in silence so long."⁷⁰ And like Shange affirmed thirty years ago: "I am offering these to you as what I've received from this world so far. I am on the other side of the rainbow/ picking up the pieces of days spent waitin for the poem to be heard/ while you listen/ I have other work to do."⁷¹

70 Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, (New York: Scribner, 1975), 4.

71 Ibid, xvi.

“The Miseducation⁷² of Talibah⁷³: Life History Adventures in Examining “Real” Black Girlhood in the Era of Hip Hop Culture”

Rap music and Hip Hop culture has come a long way from the ghetto that once bred it. Now a fixture in the global cultural marketplace, the musical genre once dubbed “black noise”⁷⁴ and the “double H nation” that spawned it, left the ‘hood behind for pecuniary power, and with that money and power, also came the respect that notorious female rapper Lil’ Kim once boasted about getting. By respect, I am referring to how Hip Hop’s pugnacious reputation for being a “fuck you” to mainstream America and the federal government for its marginalization of people of color, and creation of the social, economic, and political conditions in which hip hop emerged earned rap music and Hip Hop culture respect from their core audience of marginalized and dispossessed people. Moreover, while rap music and Hip Hop culture were being irreverent towards white upper-class American values, rap music and Hip Hop culture earned respect from mainstream culture for being a unique, genuine, viable, and most importantly, lucrative form of black cultural production, regardless of the musical content and intentions. In addition to this respect that rap and Hip Hop garnered from both groups, they earned and

72 The “Miseducation” is an allusion to Carter G. Woodson’s 1933 text, *The Miseducation of the Negro*, which is about the history of African Americans and the legacy of slavery and the psychological subjugation or contemporary or neo-slavery of African Americans. Woodson argues that it is the mind of the African American that is enslaved because Black people have been miseducated about their culture, history, traditions, and capabilities,, and once the mindset is altered or decolonized then the African American is truly free; however, this is no easy feat. The “miseducation” is also a reference to Lauryn Hill’s multiple Grammy Award Winning 1999 album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, which is a narrative about being miseducated about love, in all forms, in the era of Hip Hop culture. I employ both titles to address how Talibah, the one who is in search of knowledge, educates herself and arms herself with knowledge in the midst of the false information that she is given as a young black woman growing up in the era of Hip Hop culture.

73 Talibah is a pseudonym. In Islam, Talibah is female name which means seeker of knowledge.

74 In *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, author Tricia Rose suggests that most people who discuss rap music refer to it as black noise or a musical genre that is a nuisance.

maintained another form of respect: street credibility or street cred' for being "real," "genuine," and "true" to the streets and urban black people.

Ironically, it is rap music and Hip Hop culture's obsession with the "real," the "true," and the "genuine" that is central to these dialectics and polemics over the content and intentions of rap music and Hip Hop culture. Despite rap music and Hip Hop culture's dissemination of the black, male, underclass narrative of 'hood life, which consists of drug dealing, drug and alcohol use, gang warfare, promiscuity, disregard for education, hatred and distrust for the police and women, homophobia, and conspicuous consumption, the problem with the content of the music and the intentions of the culture for its audience is rooted in this problem of the "real," the "true," and the "genuine." On one hand, rap music and Hip Hop culture, though censored and censored for its explicit content, is lauded and respected for its candor and honesty in depicting life in the 'hood'; however, on the other hand, rap music and Hip Hop culture is criticized and critiqued for exaggerating about life in the hood and thus not honestly depicting the true lives of black people. Or, rap music is criticized and critiqued because it does not depict middle-class blackness or reflect a "normative" blackness, and therefore it is not depicting the "real." Consequently, rap music and Hip Hop culture is at war with itself and other black people for being disingenuous, for poorly performing a scripted or "reel" blackness which resembles minstrelsy in order to earn white dollars, for harboring a bunch of "miseducated negroes," and for serving as a cog in the wheel of the machination of the racist white imagination. While code words and phrases such as, "negative portrayals of black women in hip hop," "conscious rapper," "reality rap," "gangsta rap," "wanksta,"

“claiming jezebel,” “keepin’ it real,” and “representin’” pop up during these Hip Hop debates about the present and future status of rap music and Hip Hop culture, how this music detrimentally affects the psyche of youth, especially young girls who live and imbibe the music and culture, and how these images, which (mis)educate young black girls and boys about love, loving relationships, and failure to provide “positive” or affirming examples of blackness, demonstrate how these debates are imbedded in a larger and ongoing conversation on racial authenticity, or an authentic and real blackness.

Americanist scholar and Hip Hop studies pioneer Tricia Rose writes in *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--And Why It Matters*, that “hip hop has become the primary means by which we talk about race in the United States.” I would like to suggest that Hip Hop has become not only the primary means by which we discuss race in the United States, but also the primary means by which we discuss the “real” implications the socially constructed category of blackness has on racialized, gendered, classed, young, sexualized, and able bodies, and how Hip Hop has become the cite of arbitration and the arbiter of racial authenticity or a “real blackness.” Therefore, this paper will examine the issue of racial authenticity in Hip Hop culture and the implications it has for identity construction and cultural negotiations of a young black woman coming of age in the era of Hip Hop culture.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

My research participant is a seventeen year old, heterosexual, female, who is a self-proclaimed “African born in America,” who was raised and resides in the Northeast, Brookland neighborhood of Washington, D.C. She is from a working class background,

two-parent, married household. She has three siblings: two brothers and one sister. She is a high school senior and honor student at an Afrocentric high school, in Washington, D.C., and a new member of Bucknell University's 2010 graduation class. She also practices a Kamitic "way of life" which is the ancient Egyptian, Pan-African, spiritual practice of the Ausar Auset society.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research methods I used were those oriented to life history/person-centered ethnography research. My primary source of data collection was in-depth interviews, which I supplemented with participant observation and self-ethnography. In a series of three, approximately one hour long, audio-tape recorded interviews conducted at a bookstore in Silver Spring, MD, I explored the many layers of my research participant's cultural traditions, with a particular emphasis on her relationship with rap music and Hip Hop culture. While the interview setting and location were not as intimate or private as I would have liked, nevertheless, my research participant was candid, outgoing, and fairly comfortable to share with me such personal information in a very public space.

I used three different yet complimentary research methods to conduct these interviews: the life history and self ethnography methods of John Caughey as proposed in *Negotiating Cultures and Identities: Life History Issues, Methods, and Readings*, and those of Ardra J. Coles and J. Gary Knowles in *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research*, as well as a Black feminist standpoint or epistemological approach, as defined in Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. In *Negotiating Cultures and Identities: Life History Issues*,

Methods, and Readings, John Caughey provided the life historian/ person-centered-ethnographer with reflexive, introspective, self-ethnography exercises which assisted the life historian/ethnographer in developing not only rapport with a participant, but also appropriate questions for the interview. By making the researcher aware of his or her own cultural traditions and practices, it helped in showing me how my own cultural traditions influence how I formulated my research questions, how I analyzed my findings and represented them in the final monograph. In *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research*, Ardra J. Coles and J. Gary Knowles developed an “arts informed research” method, which they contend, “[brought] together systematic and rigorous qualities of scientific inquiry with the artistic and imaginative qualities of the arts. In so doing the process of researching [became] creative and responsive and the representational form of researching for communication embodies elements of various forms--poetry, fiction, drama, two-and-three-dimensional visual art, including photography, film, video, dance, and multimedia installation.”⁷⁵ Last, I also used a black feminist standpoint, as modeled in Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, to conduct my research. Black Feminist Thought aimed to place Black women at the center of the research inquiry, and privilege black women’s voices and their unique individual experiences that are often left untold, told through the voice of the oppressor, or simply rendered inaudible or too insignificant to be heard. Since ethnography has a long sordid history of being the “handmaiden of colonialism,” these three methods for doing life history or person centered ethnography were the best

⁷⁵ Ardra Cole and Gary Knowles, *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research*. (Lanham: Alta Mira Press, 2001), 10.

suited for helping me be aware of my position of power, but not being overly consumed by my position and thus spending excessive amounts of time writing about my position of power, and reifying it. Instead, these methods allowed me to treat this project as an opportunity to engage in conversations about the “real” in hip hop culture, and the “real” of ethnography through the eyes of a young, black female, which is an unheard narrative.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Part I: “Lost Ones”/ “The Miseducation”

It's funny how money change a situation/ miscommunication lead to complication/ my emancipation don't fit your equation/ I was on the humble, you on every station

--“Lost Ones,”

Lauryn Hill

I look at my environment and wonder where the fire went/ what happened to everything we used to be? /I hear so many cry for help/ searching outside of themselves

-- “The Miseducation,”

Lauryn Hill

As previously mentioned, rap music and Hip Hop culture has undergone a major, transformative evolution in the image, style, and content of the music and culture in order to be the commercial and economic movement that it currently is. Initially a culture of the marginalized Black and Latino youth, who have sought to disassociate themselves from the decay of their environment that and was ravaged by the local and federal government, these young women and men of color, have used the Afro-Caribbean-diasporic traditions of rap music, aerosol art, break-dancing, and turn-tabling as a means of reclaiming their space, place, and racial and ethnic identities. In many ways, rap, the voice box of the culture, has become the primary and most significant vehicle of resistance, often creating

mantras, which could get the crowd inspired not only to move on the dance floor, but also make a movement towards changing their social, economic, and political “underclass” position.

In the years between 1988-1993, rap music offered a multitude of oppositional and subversive music, which was afrocentric, and masculinist in tone, but filled with a counter-hegemonic or a decolonialization rhetoric that had urged black people to value and love blackness despite what the media or other agents of socialization disseminated about the inferiority and inhumanity of black people. For instance, Afrocentricity as espoused through the teachings of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, Amiri Baraka with the Black Arts’ Movement and his creation of a Black aesthetic, and Malcolm X with the scripture of the Nation of Islam all are examples of a decolonialization rhetoric, which also promoted the affirmation of a “real” and “true” African blackness through the rejection of white supremacy, as the dominant ideology. and it countered the dominant white supremacist teachings through asserting the superiority of black people or African peoples. This rhetoric is present in rap music well after the end of the Black Panther and Black Arts movements circa 1988-1993, and saw its re-emergence due to the rise in the many post-colonial movements occurring throughout the African Diaspora. This decolonialization rhetoric, however, was short lived because rap music’s commercialization and appeal to white audiences, via its MTV-ification, stifled the oppositional thread or oppositional moment in rap music and Hip Hop culture. And with this absence of a decolonialization rhetoric, and reconstruction of a blackness has impacted Black people in complex and varying ways. This section is a

narrative of how Hip Hop's evolution changed the way that Black people see and do blackness as told by Talibah.

Growing up Black and girl at a time when Hip Hop reigns supreme, ubiquitous with scantily clad video vixens who satisfy the sexual fantasy of men, the disappearance of the female rapper, and an obsession with expensive cars, clothes, and jewels, and the conflation of black female sexuality with these expendable commodities, it is difficult to believe that Talibah, a young, formally educated, Bucknell College bound, afrocentric, spiritual, proud African born in America woman can be a fan of rap music. However, Talibah's relationship with Hip Hop is a little more complex than automatically placing her in a category as a victim of the objectification of rap lyrics, or falsely empowered woman, comfortable with her sexuality, accepting and performing scripts from "reel" blackness. Despite her parents who are members of the Ausar Auset society, which is a 30 year old cultural and religious organization based on the premise that people of African descent are the descendants of Kamit or ancient Egypt and are the physical manifestations or incarnations of Gods, and promotes veganism, reverence for black women, solidarity, love, and affirmation of African identity through spiritual relationships with Egyptian deities, Talibah became a fan of rap music through an introduction by her older brother. While Talibah and her older brother practice the beliefs and way of life of the Ausar Auset society in which they were born into, she became a fan of rap music, even with its antithetical teachings and disdain for black women, "because" she states, "I like the beat. I like the lyrics. I like the artists. I can relate to them. I understand what they are saying. And personally, I can feel the music. It's not just like me listening to the

music, I feel it within me. I am really into the music. I like all types of genres, but I listen to a lot of rap.”

Talibah recalls that she became introduced to rap music “pretty late in the game,” but remembers the impact that Lauryn Hill, and her first solo album, in 1999, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* had on her. Lauryn, whose album filled a void in rap music during the time in which there were few female rappers, when there was the emergence of the video-vixen, and the proliferation of the hyper-sexual, thuggish, female ingenue rapping alongside their male compatriots, represented a sensual and empowered black femininity and womanhood. Lauryn with her dark brown skin, thick shoulder length black dread locks, and pan African rhetoric, embodied a decolonialization rhetoric that Talibah, who is lighter skinned, with shoulder-length strawberry-blonde dread locks and matching eyebrows can relate to and admire.

The departure of Lauryn Hill from the Hip Hop world, rumored to be due to the stressors of being a woman and a mother, the affects of becoming a mainstream success and feeling like a sellout, and her psychological breakdown, Talibah still remains a fan, yet critic of rap music and Hip Hop culture, especially because of the current juncture.

She attests:

I respect a lot of rappers who come from [slight pause] who talk about where they are coming from, where they are at, as opposed to selling out to the media. I know you have to make money, but [...] 50 cent started out as a rapper talking about his lifestyle as a hustler, and now he saw this [rapping] as a whole media type commercial rapping, making money, [and] downing other rappers. But, in the beginning it was supposed to be about him, you know.

Talibah's dislike for 50 cent, but her appreciation for where he has come from stems from the issue of him being truthful about his narrative, his origins, and his journey, but once he has entered into the Hip Hop industry, he becomes less about telling about his life, his life journey and his individual struggle, and more about embellishing or sensationalizing and glorifying violence and misogyny, or he is simply promoting arrogance and posturing just because it is profitable and a palatable form of blackness. Therefore, she can no longer believe him or support what he is saying, or what he is about because he is no longer telling the truth and simply being violent and sexist because that is the formula for success in rap music at present. Talibah also notes that this issue of cockiness, and posturing is part of the larger problem in rap music and Hip Hop culture. She muses on the history of Hip Hop, through her short few years of exposure:

To me, when you think about it, Hip Hop was originally started--this is like my clarification of the history of Hip Hop--as a liberal type of music for people in the hood to speak out, but it turned into something different. [...] It turned into artists who still focus on that aspect. [But] you have artists who are talking about dancing. And then you have your artists who are gangsta artists, which I respect, but at the same time I don't agree with because of the mentality that they promote amongst the youth out there.

She continues on in what seems like a tangent, but it is emblematic of how this spirited, passionate, and political young woman, is overwhelmed by emotion and opinion, and she goes on to express how significant this change in the content and style of rap music has on youth and black America, she continues:

You have people who didn't even grow up in the hood, rapping about [pause] these musical artists [pause] and they don't know nothing about this lifestyle. But they think because it is so cool, it is okay, and this music influences more than people realize. People I would point my finger at mainly are the artists, but what I do understand is that a lot of them probably come from backgrounds where they

weren't making that much money, and they've come to the point mentally that they are willing to sell out to make the money, and in their view, it's probably not a bad thing. So, a lot of people wind up getting hurt in the process, but people don't look at it like that. They're like, "oh, it's just a song." But, subliminal messages are very influential.

Expressing a fairly common recanting of the history and transition of rap music and Hip Hop culture: the origins of opposition, multivocality and diversity in the sound, artists, and content, and the affects of commercialization on the music and the youth, her comment about rappers who are not from the 'hood or the working poor lifestyle posturing like they are gangstas in order to gain success in a society that otherwise keeps Black people, and especially urban black males disenfranchised and impoverished, and her comment about rappers reaching a point that they are mentally, or consciously or cognizant in selling out the race to make money, is tied to this larger issue of racial authenticity and its relationship with sincerity and decolonialization.

Talibah perceives this 'hood posturing as "whole racist mentality [that] has us in the state we are in now. [...]. We have people who hate themselves, hate their sisters and brothers, and they make this stuff, but [we] contribute to that, and that goes beyond the black community, you know white kids, white people love it[...]the promotion of that hip hop mentality is a cool thing right now, and they [white kids] are just looking for a way to be cool." Talibah is upset with the lack of truthfulness in rap music and the way black people are selling out, and buying into a white racist mentality, which subjugates Black people. Born and raised into a cultural tradition which espouses the magnificence and brilliance of African peoples, Talibah is hurt and upset at how Black people do not recognize their worth or demean themselves for money.

However, this selling out and buying in mentality of Hip Hop is not a new phenomenon or unique to the Hip Hop generation, and is rooted in the history of Black people and the legacy of subjugation in the United States.

As Carter G. Woodson who writes in the seminal text, *The Miseducation of the Negro*:

The problem of holding the negro down, therefore, is easily solved. When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary.⁷⁶

Talibah, echoing Woodson, is suggesting that Black people are being colonized through the mind through images and messages disseminated by rap music and Hip Hop. As Woodson notes in the 1930s, if you can subjugate the mind of people, and tell them that they are inferior they will believe it and continue to oppress themselves. Lynn Weber also notes that this "miseducation," or what I believe Talibah is suggesting, a mental colonization, is part of a process known as internalized oppression through self-negation. Weber defines this as a process in which a "subordinate group member sometimes restrict their own lives out of a belief in negative views and limits imposed on their group by the dominant ideology. When subordinate group members internalize oppression, they do not challenge the social order and may even exhibit self-destructive ways."⁷⁷

Through the eyes of an esteemed, and self-possessed young African in America woman, her teachings from the Ausar Auset society, and her teachings of her parents, and

76 Carter G. Woodson, *The Miseducation of the Negro*. (Trenton: African World Press, 1998), xiii.

77 Lyn Weber, *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework*. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2001).

her Afrocentric high school, the issue of authenticity, or a “real” blackness stems from being truthful about one’s own background and culture, despite, the “truth” or candor being imperfect or perpetuating a racist ideology because the racial subject is unaware of the oppression and unable to have a means of resisting or subverting it, but also it is the possibility of rap music as a counter-hegemonic space and decolonialization discourse that has been used to resist white supremacy that makes Hip Hop a form of real blackness or authentic blackness, and thus so appealing to Talibah.

Part II: “Forgive Them Father”

It took me a little while to discover/ wolves in sheep coats who pretend to be lovers/ men who lack conscience will even lie to themselves/ to themselves/ a friend once said and I found to be true/ that everyday people they lie to God too/ so what makes you think that they won't lie to you/ forgive them father for they know not what they do

--“Forgive Them Father,”

Lauryn Hill

Throughout my life as a young black woman in America, I have often felt like I have been in the margins. Not simply because I was black, working poor, born to a 15 year old black girl, and a black boy who abdicated his parental responsibilities due to drugs and incarceration, or because I was living in a white world which asserted that because of my origins and circumstances I would never amount to anything except a statistic. Instead, I felt like an outsider residing in the periphery because I was black in a black world. Now, I know what you are thinking, I need to qualify this seemingly absurd comment, since most people who are surrounded by people of their racial and ethnic background or similar cultural upbringing feel a sense of comfort and ease because they

are understood, validated, and accepted. However, I definitely felt like an other, a traitor, invalidated, misunderstood, and rejected. Because of my lighter skin, my love for education and the written word, and what some of my black peers perceived as a white vocal intonation and inflection, I was ostracized. I was excommunicated and estranged from the race because I did not “do” their version of an “authentic,” “real” working class blackness. Despite being from the ‘hood, and being born to an unwed darker skinned teenage mother, and having a father who was lighter skinned with an IQ of 150, but was involved in criminal activity, I lost my street cred because I did not look, sound, or act like the Black children I grew up with and went to school with. But, the persistent and determined girl that I was, I learned the scripts and the codes of working class/underclass/urban/real/authentic blackness and like a thespian, I performed my role. I wore my hair braided with extensions, I learned how to fight--and fought a lot, I wore provocative clothing that accentuated my ass, or my greatest physical asset, I spoke improper and “ungrammatical” English, and I let my grades slip--despite my love for school, as education was my refuge. I could articulate and gesticulate blackness--the same blackness that I learned from observing my peers, and the same blackness that my peers learned from emulating MTV and BET.

However, this “real blackness” that I performed during my junior high school years did not serve me well. Misguided, I found myself again misjudged and misunderstood because my hyper-performance of blackness allowed my white teachers to justify their racist, classist, and sexist assumptions about black inferiority. I found myself watching my life fall apart as my “friends” watched and whispered as they saw me get

suspended for assault on a teacher and failure to adhere to a dress code, and I endured their vocalized presumptions that I was sexually promiscuous because of my sexually suggestive attire. But, the resilient woman that I became, well, she learned to relish in being in the margins, developed her own self-definition of blackness, and thirteen years later is writing about the reel, the real, the authentic, the genuine, and now the sincere as it relates to race, and blackness in particular.

In reading Anthropologist and Americanist John Jackson's *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*, which is an ethnography of contemporary Harlem, I encountered a new way of investigating, understanding, and exploring the significance of race, the performance of it, the social constructedness of it, and the realness of it. Jackson, wandering around Harlem, the Mecca of Black culture, history, and politics, stumbled upon and composed a narrative about the lives of everyday black people and the constructions of their social worlds. *Real Black*, which can also be described as an Americanist narrative about the significant and intertwined relationship among race, space, and place and how this narrative on spatiality influences the realness of race., is also an accidental, yet serendipitous approach to looking at race through a prism of sincerity. While working with his main research participant--who seemed to be the most difficult and most agitating of his interlocutors--Jackson began to see race through Bill's eyes: of being too sincere in helping your race succeed that becomes detrimental to your own well being. Not that Jackson, shares Bill's views about the deadliness of racial uplift, but it is Bill's comment about racial sincerity versus racial authenticity that is the gem that is discovered through Jackson's ethnographic rapport with Bill.

With a self-ethnographic, theoretical and methodological musing in such an informative, wordy, yet witty introduction, Jackson defines authenticity and sincerity as models for looking at how race is done. Describing authenticity, he notes:

Authenticity conjures up images of people, as animate subjects, verifying inanimate objects. Authenticity presupposes this kind of relationship between an independent, thinking subject and a dependent, unthinking thing. The defining association is one of objectification, ‘thingification’: a specialist applying his or her expertise to a seventeenth-century silver candlestick, or a newly discovered Picasso, or any item dusted off from a dead grandfather’s attic and brought before the appraisers of PBS’s *Antiques Roadshow*. Authenticity presupposes a relation between subjects (who authenticate) and objects (dumb, mute, and inorganic) that are interpreted and analyzed from the outside because they cannot simply speak for themselves.⁷⁸

As this definition illustrates, racial authenticity, or an authentic blackness renders individuals, human beings objects of scrutiny and observation. Human beings, racialized subjects, and race cannot be measured or judged by the same standards as an artifact. Therefore, this model of authenticity and ‘thingification’ is not an appropriate model for examining race, and in this case blackness. Following the same example of the *Antiques Roadshow*, Jackson distinguishes between sincerity and authenticity. He writes,

Sincerity is a trait of the object’s maker, or maybe even its authenticator, but never the object itself, at least not as we commonly use the term. Instead, sincerity presumes a liaison between subjects--not some external adjudicator and a lifeless scroll.⁷⁹

78 John L. Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*. (Chicago: Chicago University, 2005), 14-15.

79 Ibid, 15.

Therefore, sincerity or racial sincerity to be more exact, is a better or more humane way for understanding, examining, and analyzing the realness of race and the implications it has for racialized subjects.

For the purposes of this paper, I would like to propose that racial sincerity, or a sincere form of blackness, is predicated on the authentic physical appearance of blackness, and a sincere dedication or commitment to uplifting and liberating black people through espousing a decolonialization rhetoric that is often found in Afrocentric movements and organizations, such as the Ausar Auset society that Talibah is part of. There is evidence of this during the Black Arts and Black political nationalist movements and what a Black person really looks like. Through my relationship with Talibah, learning about her cultural traditions as a member of the Ausar Auset society, her cultural traditions from home and her Afrocentric high school, and her relationship with rap music and Hip Hop culture, I gather that to her, there is an authentic or a real blackness. An authentic blackness is gesticulation plus articulation. More specifically, you must not only look the part of an African person, but also be sincerely committed to prosperity of the collective African race. Thus, while Jackson notes that authenticity is a rather delimiting and objectifying way of understanding race and blackness, in particular, authenticity or an authentic blackness is a real way for everyday black people to interpret racial sincerity, or a dedication to uplifting the race, which is why I will continue to employ the usage of racial authenticity. Through my conversations with Talibah, I argue that a real blackness is the relationship between an authentic look and the sincere commitment to the race, which is espoused by decolonialization rhetoric.

As briefly aforementioned, the Ausar Auset society is an international Pan-African society committed to the spiritual development of African peoples through the Kamitic, Afrocentric teachings taught for over thirty years. Founded in 1973 by His Excellency, Shekem Ur Shekem, who is the King of the organization, and Ashem Ur Ashem, the High Priestess of the organization, the Ausar Auset society has a traditional African kinship structure, which disseminates teachings from Kamit (Ancient Egypt), Indus Kush (Pre-Aryan Vedantic India), Canaan (Palestine), and Kush (Ethiopia) that differ from Judeo-Christian religious teachings. Based off of the Kamitic Tree of Life, the *Paut Neteru*, the cosmology or philosophy of the organization, human beings are God manifested on Earth, and are encouraged and taught to act in accordance to the *Divine Self Principle*. The goal of the organization is for black people to grow spiritually, harmoniously, and productively together.

According to Talibah, her organization “is not necessarily a religion [or] about what you believe. It’s about what’s real.” Baffled at first by what she means by “it’s about what’s real,” I replay the conversations we have about rap music, and I begin to see a re-emergence of the words: real, natural, regular, and strong. For instance, when I show Talibah a few magazine covers with different famous Black women: such as Mariah Carey and Faith Evans who are biracial (black and white), Lauryn Hill, Mary J. Blige who often dons a blonde hair weave, Lil’ Kim who is sexually explicit and usually wears blue contacts and silky straight long blonde hair weave, and I ask her about what she thinks these magazine covers are saying about Black women and how Black women are supposed to look, she asserts:

Well, looking at them, I can definitely see that I would not fit in because they all have permed hair, and that is something that has been deeply entrenched in our culture, and the straightening of our hair, and a lot of people don't realize where that has come from. I'm not downing people who straighten their hair, but at the same time, it is definitely an imitation of Caucasianness.

While hair is a very political thing for Black women, for Talibah, it is definitely emblematic of the realness of race. How a Black woman wears her hair determines her racial authenticity. It determines who is really black or not black because women who choose to wear their hair relaxed have been colonized to believe that whiteness and white attributes such as straight hair is beautiful, and thus believe that their curly or kinky African hair is ugly and not suitable to be worn in its organic manner. In that same discussion, we talk about hair dye, and she notes that hair dye, along with hair relaxers are "not the look of a natural African American woman, point blank," even though she and I both dye our hair. By natural, Talibah is also referring to the natural or organic state of a Black women's hair. Most African women do not have blonde hair; however, she along with myself dye our hair, yet she considers that to be part of how we too are affected by dominant ideology, leaving not wiggle room for other interpretations of why we alter our looks.

Struggling with defining some of these own self-imposed concepts of real and natural, I ask Talibah what she means by a strong black woman, and thus a real Black woman, she contends:

Um, first, self-identity. I think people confuse self-identity with what you wanna be and what you are. So, knowing who you are, your history, where you came from, where you stand as an icon for the people around you, um definitely, and that being [seen] in a positive light.

From this passage, Talibah conveys that a strong black woman, which is a real black woman, is aware and in control of who she is, but part of a culture of self-affirming blackness--she is an icon, and therefore must look authentic. The real, as she states that Ausar Auset teaches her is to be sincere to who she is as an individual, and as a member of the African diaspora with a commitment to preserving the race and the culture, i.e., through knowing her royal and noble history of African Kings and Queens. Real, natural, and strong blackness is a sincere blackness that not only looks the part: i.e. non-straightened hair, but also a sincere blackness that acts the part, and is intertwined with the decolonialization rhetoric, which is espoused by her Pan-African spirituality, which is conceptualized as a vision of humanizing and liberating blackness.

Part III: "Tell Him"

Now I may have faith to make mountains fall/ but if I lack love then I am nothing at all/ I can give away everything I possess but am without love/ then I have no happiness/ I know I'm imperfect and not without sin/ but now that I'm older/ all childish things/ and tell him/ tell him I need him/ tell him I love him/ it will be alright

--"Tell Him,"

Lauryn Hill

The biggest complaint about Black America, which has become conflated with Black culture, which has become conflated with Hip Hop culture, in which as Blackness is "done" or performed on television, is that there is a hyper-visibility of sex, violence, drug abuse, conspicuous consumption due to the growth of nihilism and an invisibility of love. "Where is the love," a popular black song, and a popular afterword in books on black popular culture, especially books on Hip Hop culture, always discusses the disappearance of love from the black community. The question is often, "what happened

to the love of the race, the love of blackness, the love of community, and why did we replace it with money, cars, and hos?" In her text, *Salvation: Black People and Love*, public intellectual and feminist bell hooks talks about the importance of love in sustaining the black community, she writes that love is "a combination of care, knowledge, responsibility, respect, trust, and commitment."⁸⁰ In this section, I discuss love and its relationship to racial sincerity and a "real" and "authentic" blackness.

In my final conversations with Talibah, we go back and forth talking about Ausar Auset, her transition from high school to college, and Hip Hop culture, and while I initially intended to focus exclusively on Hip Hop culture for this project, I became fascinated by the reemerging theme of love, the absence of and the presence of, love for oneself, love for the race, love for family, and love for God and all God's creatures, and how this love is part of the equation on what determines real versus reel blackness. Meeting at our usual spot, on a rainy Sunday morning, the cappuccino machine loud, obstructing the sound on my audio-tape recorder, Talibah and I talk about the representations of Black women in rap music and Hip Hop culture and how these sexualized images influence how Black girl's perceive love, sex, and body image. Talibah notes that many of these images of women in Hip Hop tells black girls to:

give yourself a sexy look, wear your hair a certain way, and it doesn't necessarily have to be straight, but there's definitely a certain standard, long hair, straight hair, dyed hair, especially long hair is the main assumption for black women, and to be into beauty and to ear things that are revealing, and be comfortable with your sexuality. That is a term that definitely gets on my nerves: 'I'm comfortable with my sexuality.' But, there's a difference between being comfortable and being open to the point where you're like 'just because I have sex with him [it] doesn't make me a whore...I've only slept with five different men and they each love me.'

80 bell hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), xviii.

I'm not knocking people who do it, but it's about where you're coming from. [...] I mean I've had females tell me [about sex] 'no, it's not that serious,' but actually, I've only heard one who really said that she didn't care, but I can tell she's been hurt in her life because she probably can't take it personal anymore.

Talibah notes that Hip Hop teaches a script on how to be black, and it is rooted in this false love and acceptance through the act of sex. Talibah, who because of her way of life, and home teachings rejects this conflation between sex and sexual appeal with true love and acceptance. Just because there are women who are comfortable with their sexuality does not mean that they love themselves, or that they engage in loving relationships because they have sex, they develop a sense of false love and false empowerment because there is a prevalence of these images and messages in Hip Hop, which deem it normal and acceptable, and this is especially the case with black girls who are performing a scripted black womanhood.

It is important to note that Talibah, while sometimes coming off as preachy, as her friends tell her she is, or judgmental and self-righteous, is not exempt from the traps and delimitations of an authentic urban black womanhood. Going through a period of lovelessness, though part of an organization, which espouses self-love, familial love, Godly love, and love of the race, Talibah engaged in premarital sex, at 15 with a boy who was not part of the society, and who helped her indulge in acts of self-hate and lovelessness. She candidly recollects:

When I was with him, I was indulging in my emotions a lot. But, I guess I can say I was indulging in my emotions when I was with him. And my religion, one of the things that it teaches you to do, is not to indulge in your emotions, so I allowed myself to get caught up in him and in the end that's my butt whooping. My sisters especially woke me back up to the fact that 'you have have to realize that this is not what you think it is. You're caught up in something.' And then, aside from that, after the fact, I was so depressed, it's not even funny. When I reflect back on

how--I don't even know how. I wasn't so depressed that I was walking around gloomy, but I don't even know how people managed to be around me. In a sense that I had this attitude, it was like uhh! It was because I was hurting inside. The reason was cause I got myself into a situation. I had no idea what I was doing. I was indulging in something I shouldn't have been in. And, that's what my religion teaches you. It teaches you to control your emotions, to understand your place, and also analyze situations in a sense that you're gonna be tested in life, you're gonna be presented with a lot of crossroads, and the question is which way do you go? And at that time in my life, I was failing a lot of tests. So, it's like what time or what place is it for me to wake back up and realize that I do tell them I can get out of this; I don't need to be in this; I don't need to put myself in this detrimental situation because it went beyond the physical. It was like everyday, I was sad when I saw him with another girl, but I didn't show it a lot. That's one thing about me is that I can hide my feelings a lot. But even that, it eats you up inside, and was taking a lot out of me. I guess my religion plays that role and the practices I was instilled within it was like, 'this is my calling, like this is what you know, so you need to apply it now.' This is the perfect time to apply your practices and change, which is my idea to change my emotions. It got to a point where I would sit down with my father and we would meditate on doing what's right because he can't control me. My dad is like, 'you know, you're gonna be presented with a lot of stuff, and I'm not gonna be there to tell you yes or no. You're old enough to make your own decisions, but there are ways that you can guide yourself to be potentially able to say no, and that's what I had to practice to do.

In a very long and emotional passage, Talibah in all her candor and resilience tells me about her involvement with a young man who obviously did not love her at a time when she does not love herself. While she does not explicitly talk about love in this passage, she does talk about her depressed state because she was being played by the young man, and how her practice and the love of her friends and family helped her turn her life back around.

Continuing with her thoughts on sex and the way it is portrayed in the media, Talibah notes, that because of the portrayal of sex in the media, young girls are having sex, and:

it is the question of why? Mainly sex is meant for creation. If we just allow sex to be something that we do for pleasure, then that's one thing that allows rape to be accepted--not that it is accepted--but it's kind of understandable. But, to me, it disrespects the sexual act and what it represents. We believe sex is a spiritual act. So when you are going with another man, you are allowing him into you and giving you a part of you as well, but sharing something much deeper than physical pleasure. [...] Are you spiritually and mentally cultivated enough to have sex and go beyond sex being a physical act, 'cause to me, it's out of ignorance that people have sex for pleasure, especially if you're doing it disregarding the other person's emotions afterward. People say, 'what's wrong with having sex at a young age?' I've never met a female who had sex at a young age and there's no emotional feeling behind it. They may claim, and say, 'it doesn't affect me,' but I don't believe that.

From both passages, Talibah is a believer that sex, while is most often a means of recreational activity, as illustrated in mainstream media, is a spiritual and sacred act, a Godly act, in which two people who are in love should engage in. What she is disgusted by is this lack of love and the disregard for love in the act of sex. She feels that the physical act of sex being mistaken for love. Love, the emotion shared between the commitment of two heterosexual people, who in the physical expression of their love procreate to preserve the race, and my goal is to show that is real love, and the act of real and sincere blackness.

In this life history, my goal was to show not only the realness of race, or the real implications that it has on Talibah, a Black girl growing up in the era of Hip Hop culture and her world view, but the realness of Talibah, and by what I mean is her sincere candor, and commitment to uplifting her race by making black people recognize the truth and their potential as taught by the Ausar Auset society. In this three part person-centered-ethnographic, reflexive, quasi theoretical narrative, I tried to show how the social constructedness of race, as exemplified by the performances of blackness done in Hip

Hop, which is interpreted by some as a detrimental and unreal form of blackness, countered by decolonialization rhetoric, is also another type or performance of blackness, and specifically a real blackness. Despite the objectification and delimiting of an authentic blackness, or looking at blackness through a lens of racial authenticity, Talibah articulated and helped me understand that racial sincerity, while a better model for looking at blackness, is still rooted in racial authenticity. Through Talibah's relationships with the Ausar Auset society, her parents, her peers, and Hip Hop, which offer competing or at times mutually exclusive types of "real blackness," Talibah uncovers a real blackness that is authenticity plus a commitment to uplifting the race, which is rooted in an ethic of love and caring. Therefore, Talibah, the one who is in search of knowledge, is not truly miseducated, but speaking on how her resilience through her journey is due to leaving her miseducation of blackness behind in order to follow a true and affirming vision of an empowering, emancipating, and loving, or real blackness.

In conclusion, the life histories of multiple Black girls growing up during the rise and reign of Hip Hop culture as a fixture in the global cultural marketplace demonstrated the various ways black girls negotiate coming into their womanhood. Commencing with my short self-ethnographic narrative about growing up during the mid 1990s and negotiating race, class, gender, sexuality, and body image while Hip Hop was going through its first phase of hyper-commercialization, I laid the foundation for the two essays that followed. In the subsequent ethnography and life histories of the sepia colored girls and Talibah, I discussed how the evolution of Hip Hop ten years after my encounters

with representations of objectified black womanhood have continued to affect the lives of black girls in unique ways. Whether the girls, including myself, have decided to find new mediums to define their identities outside of a Hip Hop worldview, or distance themselves from hyper-sexualized and “negative” portrayals of blackness and black womanhood, or looked to spiritual and ancient cultural practices to construct a positive or real black womanhood during a time when black womanhood is overly sexualized, they illustrated the agency girls have in opposing such representations and defining their own identities independent of Hip Hop.

Chapter 4: Reconsidering *for colored girls*: Creative Writing as Qualitative Method for Exploring Resistance and Resilience in Black Girlhood

*sing a black girl's song
bring her out
to know herself
to know you*

...
*she's been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn't know the sound
of her own voice*

--Ntozake Shange, for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf

Introductions on Being a Metaphysical Dilemma

Debuting on Broadway at the Booth Theater in September of 1976, Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* sang a black girls' song about the struggle and survival of being a "metaphysical dilemma."⁸¹ Through the power of poetry and music, Shange's colored girls shattered a silence about the dismemberment of black women, whether they were fractured and fragmented by being forced to choose between their race or their gender, by rape, by domestic abuse, by abortion, by love and loss, by interlocking and institutional oppressions, or by betrayal at the hands of black men as they both struggled with asserting agency in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. From a whisper to a

81 Shange, refers to Black women being a metaphysical dilemma because of being forced to choose between their race or their gender. Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 45.

scream, the ladies of the rainbow told a narrative about making oneself whole in a world that wanted and benefited from the black female being in pieces. Through the chaos and charisma of choreography, Shange's colored girls demonstrated what it was like to walk, or dance in a black girls' shoes, as they moved towards re-membering themselves individually, collectively, and in solidarity. Although Black female writers prior to Shange have written about--and were continuing to write about--the complexities of being a Black female in the United States: Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937); Paule Marshall, *Reena* (1962); Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973); Alice Walker, *In Love and Trouble* (1973), and Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (1975), Shange's *for colored girls* was significant and remarkable for its time because it was a contemporary, explicitly feminist, urban collection of coming of age stories, which addressed the politics of working-class black female sexuality, and black girls' encounters with and negotiations of race, class, gender, and sexuality, which premiered at the end of the black literary, cultural, religious, political/revolutionary nationalist movements that focused on the liberation of the Black male through the sexual subjugation of the black female.

Despite being heavily criticized as lacking artistic merit, denounced as black male bashing, and erroneously labeled racial treason, *for colored girls* created a space for black women writers to be heard.⁸² Through the genres of fiction, poetry, prose, and drama, black women writers, public intellectuals, and activists during the late 1970s and early 1980s were discussing, documenting, and debating the shared history of black women's

⁸² Lester Neal, *Ntozake Shange: A Critical Study of the Plays* (New York: Garland, 1995); Cheryl Clarke, *"After Mecca": Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2005).

oppressions, their individual lived experiences, and unique ways of resisting. While these forums aired the racial unmentionables for everyone (read: white people) to see, they afforded black women the opportunity to remake themselves and become whole on their own terms. And, in the process of this literary “talking back,” and “looking back,” black women cultivated a black feminist/womanist literary movement.

However, for black youth growing up in post-industrial urban epicenters, such as New York, during the aftermath of deferred dreams of civil rights and the demise of black power, the rise of black feminism(s)/womanism, both literary and political, were not of much relevance. While Shange was singing a black girls’ song, Sha Rock, and the Mercedes Ladies were rapping over deejay’s cuts of disco records about how fly and lyrically dextrous they were. It was not because the youth were ignorant or apathetic to what was happening around them and to them, but after the deaths of charismatic Black leaders, the disappearance of work and housing, disproportionate budget cuts for equitable public education, and the decline of social service programs for marginalized peoples, Black and Latino youth, male and female, developed new and innovative ways of not simply coping with urban decay, but becoming artists and part-time social critics and would appeal to masses of youth in a way that black literary, feminist, or nationalist movements were unable to. With two turntables and one mic, Hip Hop culture, and rap music especially, gave a generation of youth a voice and an opportunity to make money from a presumed passing fad, which would temporarily address and assuage the immediacy and saliency of their issues.

Three decades after deejays saved the lives of a so-called “bastard generation,” misbegotten from civil rights and black power demagogues and “castrating black matriarchs,” Hip Hop moved from the margins to the center but further marginalized black girls and women in its exodus and ascendance. From Hip Hop’s great migration from the boogie down to the ‘burbs, boardrooms, and beyond, it evolved from a youth culture with oppositional tendencies to a fixture in the global cultural marketplace yet often resembling an adult entertainment industry. Once a site for the artistic cultural production of black women, Hip Hop has become replete with images of black girls and women “dancing on beer cans and shingles” as hyper-sexual cultural bearers or as fertile terrain who are told that in order to get exposure and re-enter the growing Hip Hop industry as more than rappers, and to be considered beautiful, loved, respected, and important to the culture, they had to get naked and expose themselves.

At this critical juncture, in which young black women, mostly working-class, are becoming exposed to HIV and AIDS; are going to jail for being real bitches or ride or die chicks holding it down for their niggas and not snitchin’; are getting pregnant young and parenting solo; being victimized by a social work system, the criminal justice system, and the feminization of poverty; getting addicted to drugs and alcohol; becoming homeless, jobless, and unable to make a living wage; coping without healthcare; functioning yet illiterate, black girls and women with scarce or limited resources for social and economic uplift, are bombarded by stereotypical and one-dimensional, hyper-

sexed and hyper-ghettoized images of themselves.⁸³ Once considered a black CNN, Hip Hop, purportedly keeping it and representing the real, no longer addresses the real black life of women, unless they are on a stripper pole, getting low, making it clap, and trademarking monikers that symbolize how great their head game⁸⁴ is. Sex and the sexual objectification of black women has become so ubiquitous in Hip Hop that it is synonymous and conflated with what is supposed to be a youth culture and touted as a potential oppositional youth movement. Women, recognizing the plethora of pussy pervasive in Hip Hop, wield it like it is power, and the fortunate few, have parlayed the glamorized and glorified sexism into other business ventures, all while lauding how empowering being a sex symbol is and how important and symbiotic they are, as a commodity, to the Hip Hop industry. But to a generation of girls coming of age and defining themselves by a music and enveloped in a culture that only shows Black women as sexual subjects and objects, embracing their sexuality, and being liberated by sex, how empowering and revolutionary can uninhibited fucking be when girls outside of the studio are dying from or being exploited by their false liberation? Black scholars and public intellectuals who now dabble in Hip Hop mention that race matters, class matters, and Hip Hop matters, but how long do Black girls have to wait until they matter too?

83 Tricia Rose, *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality and Intimacy* (New York: Farrar, 2003); Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008); Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* (New York, Basic Civitas, 2002); S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Beacon, 2005); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

84 head game is urban or street vernacular for fellatio.

Instead of waiting for the death of Hip Hop and the birth of a post-hip-hop movement, for *chickenheads to come home to roost*,⁸⁵ for *confessions from video vixens*,⁸⁶ for Congressional hearings on nappy headed hos,⁸⁷ for white male record executives to stop pimping P.I.M.P.S⁸⁸, for real black, Republican, Russell Simmons' Compa\$\$ionate Capitalism⁸⁹ to really give back to urban black people, for Lauryn Hill to return from her maternal leave or spiritual hiatus, for Black men to start loving and respecting their Black queens, for Black women to put down the dick and pick up the mic, for something meaningful to come out of their mouths instead of notorious for what is going in, spoken word artists and poets such as Jessica Care Moore, with her performances, publications, and press, and Sarah Jones, with her fusion of poetry and elements of playwriting are among a group of renegade black women artists/activists/intellectuals reclaiming Black women's vocality and reappropriating Black female

85 Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip Hop Feminist* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

86 Karrine Steffans, *Confessions of a Video Vixen* (New York: Amistad, 2005).

87 On September 25, 2007, the U.S House of Representatives Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection held a hearing entitled, "From Imus to Industry: The Business of Stereotypes and Degradation," which featured chairs of radio networks, rappers, record executives, and black scholars, in order to address the pervasive sexual objectification of women in Hip Hop, as a result of the Don Imus, "Nappy Headed Ho" comment about the black women on the Rutgers Women's Basketball Team.

88 P.I.M.P. in rapper 50 cent's song, "P.I.M.P", a P.I.M.P is a man who has a sexiness or swagger about him which allures women who are only with him to gratify his needs. However, rapper Nelly, reappropriates this term and uses it as an acronym to mean: a Positive Intellectually Motivated Person. According to Nelly's definition, anyone can be PIMPS, and it removes the negative connotation from the word. However, I employ the term here to discuss the growing conversation about Black men being victims of the recording industry and are forced to objectify black women and themselves.

89 Russell Simmons, the proclaimed, godfather of Hip Hop, who is responsible for marketing Hip Hop to the masses, promotes this message and defense of Hip Hop as "keeping it real" and speaking the truth even when the truth is homophobic or sexist, and claims he is committed to the 'hood and poor black people but he is truly committed to capitalism and the Republican party. Rosa Clemente has criticized Russell Simmon's exploitation and co-optation of all aspects of Hip Hop, including his new venture into politics.

sexuality in Hip Hop.⁹⁰ Even as outsiders/within, these women make their voices heard, while encouraging the voices of other women to speak. Slam poetry or spoken word poetry, which is recognized as a faction of Hip Hop culture, has become an enclave for black women, such as Moore and Jones to be vocal and address the intricacies of negotiating race, class, gender, and sexuality in Hip Hop and the United States as embodied subjects without having to be naked, scantily clad, or coifed and donned in artifice and then marketed as real black women. Although their voices are not commercial, in a sense that they are not played on Clear Channel radio stations in a top five rotation, or accessed and consumed regularly in music videos aired on Viacom channels by the masses of youth and adults who need to hear counter narratives about blackness, black femininity and womanhood, and black masculinity and manhood, both Sarah Jones and Jessica Care Moore, along with many other poets/spoken-word artists/playwrights are creating an oppositional cipher and carving a space for a Hip Hop feminist, spoken word/poetry revolution.

As a fellow poet, spoken word artist, singer, and budding visual artist, I have always been inspired by Hip Hop, and music in general, feminism, ethnography, and the literature of African American women, especially the works of Ntozake Shange, Suzan Lori-Parks, Marita Bonner, Toni Morrison, and Sarah Jones. More recently, I have become interested in the potential poetry has for doing qualitative research and how it can be used as feminist ethnographic method for exploring, teaching, and nurturing feminist resistance and resilience in black girls who are negotiating race, class, gender,

⁹⁰ Both Jessica Care Moore and Sarah Jones are biracial or mixed race, but identify as black women because of how they are perceived by the society at large.

and sexuality and coming into their womanhood during the hyper-sexualization and hypercommercialization of Hip Hop. Based off of my experience and relationships with Hip Hop and poetry as a black girl coming into black womanhood, and my relationships with feminism and ethnography via my formal education, I now ask in what ways might Shange's choreopoem, the spoken word poetry of women such as Jessica Care Moore, Sarah Jones, and myself, or the act of writing poetry be a new way of doing ethnography, life history, or feminist ethnography? And in addition to that question, how can the act of writing poetry and the creative writing process offer new insights into doing research on black girls and black girlhood, who look to Hip Hop to shape their conceptions of Black femininity and womanhood, provide black girls with the tools to articulate, interpret, renegotiate, and transcend the oppressions that they are facing at this unique cultural moment?

Ethnographic Adventures in Black Girlhood and Hip Hop

In previous qualitative research projects, I explored how Black girls, between the ages of 17-18, growing up during the prominence of Hip Hop culture and the hyper-visibility of the hyper-sexualized representation of black women in Hip Hop, negotiate race, class, gender, and sexuality. Through participant observation, in-depth audio tape-recorded individual interviews, reader response, and group interviews, I examined whether Black girls were victimized by the onslaught of representations of Black women as hos, jump-offs, and embracers of their sexuality, as popular black women's literature, such as *Essence* magazine has noted, or if they found these representations of Black women as empowering, profitable, liberating, and revering as some women and men in

Hip Hop magazines, such as *XXL*, *The Source*, *Smooth*, *King*, and *Vibe* have claimed them to be. Instead, I found that the black girls growing up on rap music and defining their identities within the context of Hip Hop culture do not neatly fit into one side of this false virgin/whore binary. The girls I interviewed and mentored, who were college bound, were not victims and rendered powerless by such images, or ready to embrace “ho-dome” and cash in on this enterprise. Torn between the infectious beat and the incessant messages of the hypersexed Black female, some girls did the following: chose to filter and compartmentalize “the negative,” “less progressive,” one-dimensional, and/or sexually demeaning lyrics of mostly male artists, turned to other genres of music and musical cultural traditions to affirm their identities, disassociated themselves from a working-class blackness that they attributed to a Hip Hop mentality, down-played their sexuality and denied any gender expression or performance that would mark them as a female (i.e. tight or revealing clothing), and thus sexually available, in order to prevent and avoid encountering sexual harassment or unwanted male attention; or they used their other cultural traditions, such as education, religion/spirituality, art to garner strength and resolve to speak out against the racism, sexism, and classism perpetuated by Hip Hop and their peers, and encouraged other girls to do so as well. But, in their process of resistance and resilience through their self-assertion, in which they garnered respect from males and females, they unfortunately reified a false binary of good black girl/bad black girl, or more appropriately, wifey/chickenhead or educated black woman/hood-rat.⁹¹

91 Chyann Oliver, “for sepia colored girls who have considered self/when hip hop is enuf,” in *Home Girls Make Some Noise!: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology*, eds. Gwendolyn Pough, et. al (Alta Mira: Parker, 2007), 248-270.

While I have opened up a much needed, honest and conflicting discussion about the politics of young black women's sexuality in my previous research, that is not solely about victimization, pathology, and the perpetuation of the myth of the urban girl, as the very few studies on Black girlhood investigate and reveal, I still feel that there is much more that needs to be discussed and uncovered that unfortunately quantitative or qualitative research alone or in conjunction cannot allow me to do. Although ethnography provides insight and illuminates and problematizes quantitative studies by showing the myriad ways individuals negotiate and grapple with--and in this instance--race, class, gender, and sexuality in Hip Hop, in depth interviews and participant observation, no matter how much rapport building, equitable power relationships between participants and ethnographer, time, care, ethics, self-reflexivity, and a native perspective, are unable to offer solutions to and for the issues Black girls encounter as they try to define themselves on their own terms and in their own words.

Despite the fact that ethnography has never inherently been about the empowerment of research participants, and has a long legacy of exploiting subjects, and an inability to verify the realness, authenticity, truthfulness, or the sincerity of the narratives the informants share, when a researcher enters the lives of another person or a group of people, with the intentions of shedding light on a particular issue, demonstrating how other cultures live, or illustrating how people within a culture have multiple and sometimes conflicting cultural traditions, the lives of their participants change, and the effects can bring "rich-points" or "break-downs" in not only the research process, but also in the lives of our participants. After my research "concludes," I cannot help but

wonder, what happens to the participants after I, the ethnographer, the feminist, the native, and the postmodern leave the field? What do my interlocutors get out of this research relationship once I get my story?

As ethnographers, we can aim to rectify this problem with our written monograph and focus on the best representation so our informants are accurately and properly reflected in something that is not written for them to consume. However, the reality is, we are forging relationships with people for our own needs and then “peacing out,” or leaving and moving on to the next narrative. My intentions are not to trivialize the significance and usefulness of the ethnographic, life history approach, or the advances in anthropology with the postmodern and feminist turn, but the ethnographer in me, the 13 year old black girl in me, the feminist in me, and the 26 year old race woman in me has a problem with this aspect of ethnography. To bite off of comedian Dave Chappelle, this is when “keeping it real”--with self-reflexivity and introspection--“goes (really) wrong!”

In order to attempt to find a mediation to this issue, I dug deep, and as a result of my self-ethnographic adventures into my Hip Hop girlhood, I began to think about the ways or the strategies I employed for surviving and redefining my identity and renegotiating my race, class, gender, and sexuality while being bombarded by conflicting messages about black women, black womanhood, and black femininity, and how I could use my narrative to re-inform my research approach. Through introspection, I remembered how I developed an alternate voice and a counter discourse to Hip Hop from reading about feminism and writing and performing poetry with a Hip Hop aesthetic.

And, then after what some in anthropology would consider, narcissistic navel-gazing, and self-indulgence, I reached an epiphany for my new research project.

Resistance and Resilience in Black Girlhood

Through ethnographic, self-ethnographic, and feminist ethnographic approaches, I decided to develop a new way of not only researching the lives of Black girls growing up in and around Hip Hop culture, to show how, in spite of such “assaults” or “attacks” on black femininity and womanhood, black girls can resist and be resilient as they grow into their womanhood and develop new ways of reaffirming their identities as black, working-class/rising middle-class, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual women. I wanted to give them the gift of voice, true empowerment, and the feminist tools to re-make themselves whole, and redefine themselves as independent, confident, empowered, young women, and to foster solidarity with other girls.

In this project, I employ two terms, resilience and resistance. While there have been very few studies conducted on the resistance of Black girls, probably because many are deficit models of research, or contextualize resistance within a discussion of resilience, there have been several studies on the resiliency of urban, inner-city, and working-class black girls. With an attempt to demystify and deconstruct the discourse on the myth of the “urban girl” as aberrant, pathological, hypersexual, deviant, impoverished, unintelligent, apathetic, and unmotivated, (i.e. deficit model), there is a resurgence of research on working-class black girlhood, and their resilience. Dr. Joyce West Stevens, a social worker who researches the lives of inner-city black girls in the

Boston metro area, defines resilience as, “achieving a good outcome from misfortune as well as the successful management of risk factors to avoid misfortune.”⁹² She continues,

resilience is understood to mean factors that interact with stress to moderate risk factors that ordinarily would produce negative outcome. In the use of this definition, I infer that resilience is evolutionary, evolving over time, and a characteristic that can be promoted by stress. Thus stress encompasses ‘constructive confrontations’ of life crises that can promote growth and development. Life crises are opportunities for the reorganization of psychosocial resources to promote and enhance psychosocial functioning.⁹³

In this project, I will be using Joyce West Stevens definition of resilience because of its specificity of resilience being a characteristic that is developed and nurtured through encountering opposition in a way that does not cause harm or more hindrance, and her emphasis on resilience as evolutionary and changing over time. However, I would like to add that resilience, in the way that I will be examining it, and attempting to nurture it, is a type of resistance to the everyday stressors. It is the resistance implicit and inherent in refusing to succumb to stressors or adversity that makes resilience possible. Therefore, resilience is part perseverance and part resistance.

Resistance, though inextricably linked to resilience, is not clearly defined in the few resilience studies of black girls. For the purposes of this project, I define resistance, in more specific terms, as a feminist act of rejecting dominant and pervasive narratives and social inscriptions that subjugate black girls, not through physical violence, but through the power of vocality or transgressive speech acts. Black girls can develop, nurture, and refine this resistance through education and through the arts. Prolific public intellectual, poet, memoirist, cultural critic bell hooks, writes that “talking back,” is a

92 Joyce West Stevens, 7

93 Ibid, 7.

method and a practice of resisting against the misperception that women are supposed to be silent, object who are to be seen and not heard. Through speech, and writing as a way of capturing speech, holding onto it, and keeping it close, hooks illustrates her defiance, and the potential for other women and girls to liberate themselves.⁹⁴ Therefore, in this project, poetry serves as a type of feminist resistance and is a site for exploring and developing resilience in black girls and counter-narratives or oppositional discourses about black femininity and womanhood in Hip Hop culture.

Methods

The research methods that I used to construct this project and conduct my research were a fusion of diverse methods, which consisted of ethnography and life history orientations, and June Jordan's "poetry for the people" poetry workshop models, all of which, in one way or another are incarnations of participatory action research and black feminist anthropology. In the Sage *Handbook of Action Research*, editors Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, in their introduction, write that action research is,

a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.⁹⁵

The purpose of action research, they continue,

94 bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End, 1989), 5-9.

95 Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, "Introduction: Inquiry and Participation in Search for a World Worthy of Human Aspiration" in *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, ed. Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (London: Sage, 2001), 1.

is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives. A wider purpose of action research is to contribute through this practical knowledge to the increased well-being--economic, political, psychological, spiritual--of human persons and communities, and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part.⁹⁶

Although Reason and Bradbury run the risk of romanticizing the concept of community and idealizing the overall efficacy of such action research on solving community problems, their move beyond postmodern rejections of positivism in the social sciences and postmodernism's obfuscating language and theories that are supposed to elucidate, provides an opportunity to demonstrate dynamic or interactive ethnographic approaches that have a social justice component attached to the research endeavor. Unlike postmodern and/or feminist ethnographic attempts at reflexivity, in order to produce more egalitarian research relationships to reject--and sometimes, overcompensate for the inevitable--inherent unbalanced power relationships, and issues with representations of participants in the final monograph, participatory action research includes the participants as agents examining problems and solving issues that are affecting their lives.

Participatory action research, first attributed by Orlando Fals Borda and Marja-Liisa Swantz who use the research to solve community problems in developing nations, such as education,⁹⁷ shares commonalities with Black feminist anthropology, which is also the foundation for my research. In her seminal anthology, *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*, Irma McClaurin contends that Black

⁹⁶ Ibid, 2.

⁹⁷ Budd L. Hall, "I Wish This Were a Poem of Practices of Participatory Research," in *Handbook of Action Research*, eds. Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (London: Sage, 2001), 171-178.

Feminist Anthropology is a Black feminist intervention in anthropology, which has historically neglected to recognize the contributions of African American anthropologists and has depicted peoples of African descent in the United States, in Africa, and throughout the diaspora as savage, primitive, debased, etc. At the core of Black Feminist Anthropology is black feminism as an epistemology and framework for examining the lives of African American people. Because Black feminism is the nexus which links African Americans with anthropology, there is a vindicationist thread that is imbedded and inherent in black feminist anthropological research. McClaurin poignantly notes:

Black feminist anthropology, then, derives its political identity and its praxis from this intellectual heritage of innovation and implicit critique, from the fusion of art and politics, theory and poetics, from the interplay between identity and ethnography to produce an anthropological legacy of ‘concrete multiplicity...as seen from the margins...[designed] to expose the falseness of the view from the top and...transform the margins as well as the center...[, in which we] develop an account of the world which treats our perspectives not as subjugated or disruptive knowledges, but as primary and constitutive of a different world.’ And it is from this historically grounded sense of difference/*difference* that I propose we, who self-identify as Black feminist anthropologists, continue to fashion unique and efficacious ethnographic strategies of data collection, analysis, and representation (i.e., knowledge production) as our contribution to the contemporary scholarly tradition of anthropology. Notwithstanding Hartsock’s caveat that power impedes the creation of alternatives, I nonetheless propose that autoethnography is a viable form through which Black feminist anthropologists may theorize and textualize our situated positions and elevate our subjugated discourses to levels recognized by both margins and center of the discipline.⁹⁸

Black feminist anthropology, as a type of autoethnography/native anthropology with its roots in Black feminist theory and anthropological practices of participant observation and in-depth interviews, this vindicationist praxis is formed as a way of not only

98 Irma McClaurin, “Theorizing a Black Feminist Self in Anthropology: Toward an Autoethnographic Approach,” in *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*, ed. Irma McClaurin (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2001), 56.

correcting the wrongs of anthropology's legacy of racism, sexism, and classism, and writing African American women into the history of anthropology, but also doing research that focuses on the problems facing Black women and with the sincere commitment and dedication to developing methods and tools to eradicate the intersecting oppressions.

As a method of inquiry, life history research, and/or person centered ethnography involves the study of a small number of participants, through building rapport with in-depth interviewing, and observing the everyday lived experiences and the engagements and negotiations with various cultural traditions of research participants. Life history and ethnography orientations to research are useful when trying to use experimental methods to collectively develop solutions to community problems or issues facing a particular group of people with a shared history of oppression. For the purposes of this project, I employ two methods of life history to foreground my research. First, I prefer to use John Caughey's methods for doing life history or person centered ethnography in order to examine the cultural traditions of individuals specifically for the reflexive and introspective exercises, which encourage the life historian to be as vulnerable and candid as the participant. The goal and reward for doing self-ethnography, and introspection makes the researcher aware of his/her situatedness and privileged vantage point in order to problematize the research and revise the process if necessary.

Second, however focusing more on representation, Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles arts-informed or arts-based research for doing life history is useful when constructing a postmodern or Zora Neale Hurston-esque ethnography. They write:

Arts-informed research brings together the systematic and rigorous qualities of scientific inquiry with the artistic and imaginative qualities of the arts. In so doing the process of researching becomes creative and responsive and the representational form for communication embodies elements of various art forms--poetry, fiction, drama, two- and three-dimensional visual art, including photography, film and video, dance, music, and multimedia installation.⁹⁹

In this project, which fuses elements of Hip Hop and poetry, feminism, and ethnography , by definition, an arts-informed research project, Cole and Knowles' approach is well suited for this research project.

As previously mentioned, ethnography alone could not provide constructive ways to provide solutions for black girls who are coming of age at present who look to popular culture for examples of black womanhood and femininity, therefore, another method was needed. While I had the idea of constructing a poetry workshop, I did not know of any ethnographic projects that included poetry as a method, or any examples of poetry workshops that considered itself to be ethnographic method. However, as ethnographic intervention would have it, I stumbled across *Youth Poets: Empowering Literacies In and Out of Schools* by Korina M. Jocson, which was about June Jordan's poetry for the people (P4P), program which Jordan began in 1991 while a professor at the University of California, Berkeley. Jordan, an esteemed poet herself, during and after the Black Arts movement, created the program to challenge the literary canonization of European poets. Focusing on examples from Black Arts and the Harlem Renaissance, as well as Hip Hop, Jordan using her privilege as a professor at UC Berkeley formed a relationship with Bay Area schools, the children, and the community, and with the help of her college students

⁹⁹ Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles, "What is Life History Research," in *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research*, eds. Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles (Lanham: Alta Mira Press), 10.

and teaching assistants, they transformed the lives of students through the empowerment of oppositional education and vocality.¹⁰⁰

Jocson, a former P4P senior poet/instructor, focuses on how the poetry, as a tool for vocality and opposition, is also used as an efficacious tool for building literacy and creating a legacy for children to go to college. Writing about the premise of her book and how she has witnessed the benefits of the program, she is concerned with,

how poetry as a process, product, and practice in the lives of urban youth of color offers ways of better understanding complexities in teaching and learning, [which is done] within the context of a university-school partnership called Poetry for the People (P4P). P4P offers poetry writing workshops that happen inside classrooms *during* school hours at Bellevue High. It provides a place for unrecognized students to shine in a form of literacy practice that is highly respected among youth of all races. P4P is also a unique educational reform that has implications for the changing culture of the larger school community.¹⁰¹

Whereas Jocson is concerned with developing critical literacy in youth, male and female, through poetry, I am concerned with how this model of teaching poetry and using life history methods, and black feminism can explore and teach resistance and resilience in black girls who are coming of age and negotiating race, class, gender, and sexuality during Hip Hop's hypercommercialization through the hyper-sexualization of Black women.

Project Design and Framework

Objectives

100 Lauren Muller and the Poetry for the People Collective, eds. *June Jordan's Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

101 Korina M. Jocson, *Youth Poets: Empowering Literacies In and Out of Schools* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 3-4.

The purpose of this project was to explore, teach, and nurture the ways black girls resist inscriptions, assumptions, and expectations placed on their bodies, as well as their resilience during such encounters and negotiations of race, class, gender, and sexuality through the medium of poetry and the teachings of feminism. This project hinges on the fact that black girls are being influenced by representations of Black women in Hip Hop culture, as hypersexual, but it deviates from this basic premise to show how, in spite of being bombarded with such representations, which affect the way they are perceived and treated as black girls, they are able to resist and be resilient. Also, poetry is the medium through which feminist resistance and resilience can be taught, examined, demonstrated, and nurtured, and provides a useful and constructive way for girls to interpret and articulate their negotiations of race, class, gender, and sexuality as they are coming into their womanhood.

Creative Writing Seminar

The creative writing curriculum that I have developed, consisted of a one week 1.5 hour poetry seminar for black girls between the ages of 12-17. I thought it was crucial and important to do an all female workshop to allow girls the space to be girls without worrying about “offending” males or being self-conscious about their answers and appearance with males present. Each day covered a particular concept/theme, such as autobiography, resistance, and resilience. I carefully constructed each day to cover the main themes of this project, and each day was designed to build on the previous day. Therefore, because of its construction, it was important and imperative that the girls attend the workshops everyday on time. I created writing portfolios that contained the

basics of poetry, from selections of Betsy Franco's wonderful text, *Conversations with a Poet: Inviting Poetry into K-12 Classrooms*, and supplemented the portfolios with feminist readings and selected poems, featured as appendices. I also created exercises, discussion questions, and poetry assignments to get the girls in touch with their own voices, thoughts, creativity, and feminist consciousness. At the end of the week on the final day of the workshops, I compiled all of the girls poetry and create a chapbook for their personal consumption, their friends and families,' and attempted to have the girls perform some of their poetry as well.

Annotated Bibliography (in the order in which they appear in the portfolio)

Franco, Betsy. *Conversations with a Poet: Inviting Poetry into K-12 Classrooms*. Katonah: Richard C. Owens, 2005.

This text provides an extensive, user-friendly how-to-guide to writing and teaching poetry to K-12 students. Franco includes examples of her own poetry, as well as the process of writing poetry to demonstrate how teachers can assist students in the creative writing and rewriting process.

hooks, bell. "when i was a young soldier for the revolution: coming to voice" in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End, 1989.

In this essay, hooks discusses the significance of speaking and vocality as a feminist act. She discusses her relationship with poetry and feminism as it relates to being resistant, and liberatory.

_____. “writing autobiography” in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End, 1989.

Writing on the act of telling one’s story as a way of transcending the self, hooks re-imagines the act of writing autobiography and the usefulness of writing autobiography as re-membering herself. Through writing about her life, hooks speaks to the politics of resilience.

Moore, Jessica Care. “Poem for Pain,” in *The Alphabet Verses the Ghetto*. New York: Moore Black Press, 2002.

In this poem, Moore expresses how poetry can be used to heal and uplift, as it has done for her since she was a child.

Weber, Lyn. *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2001.

I chose selections from this text to define concepts of race, class, gender, sexuality, and oppression in order to provide the girls with a language to explain and reject their existence and experiences.

hooks, bell. “Feminist Politics: Where We Stand” in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Boston: South End, 2000.

This essay defines feminism and the feminist movement, and provides recommendations on how feminism can be made useful again for the present.

Oliver, Chyann L. “Whose Pussy Is This?” in *Home Girls Make Some Noise!: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology*, eds. Gwendolyn Pough, et. al. Alta Mira: Parker, 2007.

This poem, which is based off of the bell hooks essay, “Whose Pussy Is This?: A Feminist Comment,” discusses the objectification, fragmentation, and exploitation of black women in Hip Hop. Through a fusion of the Hip Hop aesthetic and feminist theory, Oliver talks back to Hip Hop and feminism, and to girls and women to challenge the sexual politics in Hip Hop as well.

hooks, bell. “talking back,” in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End, 1989.

In this essay, hooks defines “talking back” as the transgressive speech act, which women use as a type of feminist resistance. She discusses the power of vocality as a resistive act, and how she has deployed it in her youth and continues to do in her writing as an adult.

_____. “love is our hope” in *Salvation: Black People and Love*. New York: William Morrow, 2001.

As the introduction to her text, hooks discusses the legacy of black love and the struggles for asserting it and its disappearance at present. Critiquing popular culture as a site of loveless, hooks argues that love needs to return to show black children how to love so they can begin to heal.

Baraka, Ras. "Black Girls Learn Love Hard" in *Black Girls Learn Love Hard*. Atlanta: Moore Black Press, 2005.

This poem, though written by a man, addresses the difficulties that Black girls face because they are black and female. Through a conversation on love, or how black girls experience, contextualize, and conceptualize love, Baraka illustrates how black girls are experiencing pain in the hands of black males and by Hip Hop.

Rationale for the Readings

I selected a combination of poetry and essays to show how poetry is informed by theories on race, class, gender, and sexuality, and to show how poetry in turn can be a form of theorizing on oppressions. I selected many excerpted chapters on feminism from the works of bell hooks, and concepts on race and oppression from Lyn Weber. Learning from my experience as a youth, wishing I had the language to define the injustices I was experiencing to help make my poetry as powerful as it is today, and my experience as a scholar at present who believes that knowledge and the dissemination of it can be present in many forms such as poetry, critical essays, and prose, I justify my pedagogical approach with Donald Macedo's introduction to the 30th edition of Paulo Freire's,

Pedagogy of the Oppressed. This rather lengthy passage, poignantly highlights the rationale for my reading selections. Macedo writes:

The following two examples will bring the point home: Henry Giroux and I gave a speech at Massasoit Community College in Massachusetts to approximately three hundred unwed mothers who were part of a GED (graduate-equivalency diploma) program. The director of the program later informed us that most of the students were considered functionally illiterate. After Giroux's speech, during the question-and-answer period, a woman got up and eloquently said, 'Professor Giroux, all my life I felt the things you talked about. I just didn't have a language to express what I have felt. Today I have come to realize that I do have a language. Thank You.' And Paulo Freire told me the story of what happened to him at the time he was preparing the English translation of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He gave an African American student at Harvard a chapter of the book to read to see how she would receive it. A few days later when he asked the woman if she read it, she enthusiastically responded, 'Yes. Not only did I read it, but I gave it to my sixteen-year-old son to read. He read the whole chapter that night and in the morning said, 'I want to meet the man who wrote this. He is talking about me.'¹⁰²

My goal with teaching these readings on feminism and the feminist practice of love by hooks and introducing concepts by Weber, coupled with the poetry of Moore, Baraka, and myself, is to provide the girls with a language to articulate their experiences as working-class black girls. I wanted to use resources that are similar to Freire's which speak to the complexity of intersectionality and situated identities, but with the ability to be received well by girls and women alike who may not have the same literacy skills because of age or resources. By using poetry as an example of articulating and theorizing these same issues, but in an artistic form, I aimed to show how there are multiple ways of not only speaking about oppression but also resisting and being resilient in the process.

102 Donald Macedo, "Introduction to the Anniversary Edition," in Paulo Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 2004), 22-23.

Participants and Participant Selection

I called the District of Columbia's Department of Parks and Recreations and discussed my previous research projects, my work as a volunteer writing coach with Posse, D.C., and my creative writing workshop proposal, and after a background check, I was sent to work for one week at a community center in South West, D.C. With the assistance of the director of the community center, we created a sign-up sheet for girls between the ages of 12-17 in order to get a wide range of perspectives and experiences, but mostly from girls who would be more cognitively developed and more mature to discuss some of the contents on race, class, sex, and gender. All of the girls were from the South West, D.C. area, which in some locations, due to gentrification, can be either very affluent or very impoverished. However, many of the girls were from the working-class and working-poor areas of Southwest.

Findings and Analysis

Day One: Introductions and the Poetry Basics

It was Monday at 6:00 p.m. and I was nervous. It was a fairly nice March evening, no rain, no clouds, slight breeze, and I was nervous. I was nervous because D.C. public schools were on vacation, and with nice weather and school out for the entire week, I just knew that no one was coming to my workshops. Although, Sandy, the community director, said that she had ten girls sign up for the workshop and she would make sure that they would attend with her, I was skeptical that all ten girls would show up in the evening of their week-long spring break. But, Sandy, or Ms. Sandy, as the children at the

community center called her, assured me that the girls would show up because she would make them “get their asses involved.” Ms. Sandy demonstrated tough love, and from the looks of her stature, this full figured and well-endowed, medium height, brown-skinned, 29 year old black woman, was not to be messed with. The children at the community center respected her--so when she informed me that she was going to see to it personally that they showed up to my class, I took her word, but nevertheless I was nervous.

I arrived at the community center a half-hour early to set up for the workshops. I set my organic snacks, my portfolios, notebooks, pens, and dictionaries on the table, in the recreation/community classroom. It baffled me that in this large, recently constructed community center there was only one room for community instruction or special classes. There was a huge indoor basketball court, a small fitness center, and a small computer room that belonged to DC employment office that was off limits to the children at the community center. Nevertheless, I entered the community room and waited for Ms. Sandy and the girls to arrive.

6:30 came and I only had two girls. Ms. Sandy, committed to helping another “smart, strong, black sister out,” kept her word and called each girl personally, and sure enough, by 7:00 p.m., I had three more girls, and Ms. Sandy. Ms. Sandy informed me that she was involved in every workshop and special classes that were offered at the community center, in order to see what her kids were learning, and to encourage them to take part in different activities other than sports. But, for my first day of this workshop, I did not get my ten girls as promised and hoped for, but I got five: Raneeka, Charlene, Amina, Mika, and Audrea, and I thought that would suffice.

Raneeka and Charlene were my two youngest girls and the best of friends. Raneeka was 12 and in the 6th grade at Jefferson, Jr. High, and Charlene was 13 and in the 8th grade at Jefferson as well. These two were opposites, and in appearance reminded me of younger versions of myself and my cousin, Simmica. Raneeka was tall, 5'7" I think, very thin, light skinned, with boxed braids. Charlene was shorter, about 5', thin, darker skinned, with a short relaxed bob. Whereas Raneeka was athletic--a basketball superstar, who disliked reading, Charlene was an avid reader who was not interested so much in sports. But, these two were inseparable, or at least they appeared to be during that week.

Amina, Mika, and Audrea all seemed to be friends. Amina, who would unfortunately, only attend on Monday, was a 15 year old 9th grade student from Wilson High School. She was darker skinned, full-figured, and medium height with shoulder length relaxed hair. Mika, 17, who informed me that Ms. Sandy helped transform her into a more calm and less-violent young woman, was also a full-figured, darker skinned girl with long boxed braids. Mika who had experience writing poetry, and was interested in taking the course, was a senior, ready to graduate from Potomac High School. Audrea, who was senior at Woodrow Wilson High, was a 17 year old medium build black girl with braids.

After all of the girls arrived, I introduced myself and my project. I told the girls about why I wrote poetry, how I began writing, and how it has served as a way to talk about things that I was struggling with as a black girl. I talked about issues with negotiating race, class, gender, and sexuality (in a hetero-relational context), as well as

my struggles with being bipolar. Mika gravitated towards my story, but Raneeka and Charlene were not really interested in anything that I had to say. They continued to play with Raneeka's cell phone text messaging--which was frustrating me, but I did not show it. Both Audrea and Amina were listening as well, but I seemed to be truly reaching Mika.

Time was moving by quickly, and I only had an hour to give a quick overview of the week, stress the importance of attendance, and begin my lesson and the exercises on poetry. I passed out the portfolios/workbooks, the reading packets, the notebooks and the pens, and I had the girls begin the first exercise on attempting to define what poetry was. In this exercise I asked them if they had ever written poetry before, who their favorite poets were, and if they thought or believed poetry had the potential to change their lives or the way they view the world.

Mika, who had experience, prior to this seminar, writing poetry, wrote, "to me poetry is a sense of writing what you feel. It is a method of writing things down based on what you sense: see, taste, hear, smell, and touch." For Mika, poetry was about expressing sensations. Charlene wrote that poetry was important because it could turn into a career and help you express your feelings. While Raneeka said, "I think that it could change [your life] by becoming a poet and telling people your poems, and they could listen, and it could really change their life. Suppose one of your friends do weed and you write a poem about what it does and they hear it and they would feel an inspiration." For both Charlene and Raneeka, as much as they put on a little bit of a "cool pose" by being uninterested, they both agreed that writing poetry could lead to a successful career, and inspire other people to change their behaviors. It would be Mika,

Raneeka, and Charlene who would consistently attend the sessions and do all of the assignments and more.

As a result of the late start, I had to alter my lesson plan, and move quickly through the poetry basics and mechanics. Although I have never truly been taught how to write poetry, I made sure I researched the different rules and forms. I taught myself the basics of meter, familiarized myself with several styles of poetry, and found examples to share with the girls, in order to teach the girls the “proper way” of writing poetry. I wanted them to be well versed in all types of poetry and not just free verse. However, all of my assiduous researching and studying was a waste of time. Mika, the most vocal participant said that she did not want to learn how to write formal poetry, she just wanted to write and express herself, and the rest of the girls concurred. After all of that hard work, and torturing myself about “not knowing” how to write poetry, I missed the whole point of the workshops: to teach girls how to express themselves, find their voices, and be resistant and resilient. In that moment, the girls taught me that I seriously had to work on my insecurity issues of feeling like what I know is not right or not good enough. After my lesson, I collected their portfolios, notebooks, and packets, and we called it a night.

Day Two: Poetry as Autobiography

Still paranoid that girls were not going to show up, and I was going to fail this assignment, I arrived at the community center early. Another nice day, and more anxiety about who was or was not going to show up. I set out the organic snacks, but the girls who were used to eating potato chips, soda, and juices laden with high fructose corn

syrup, were not into my healthy eats. I figured that I would not offer them anything that I would not eat--because of my health issues, which were a result of stress and a poor diet, and because of my recent move towards an on again off again veganism, but they would rather starve than eat my low sodium popcorn, organic cane sugar lemonade, and corn chips without the salsa--I have a tomato allergy. They did however eat the organic Trader Joe's chocolate cookies that my non-vegan, unhealthy eating girlfriend picked out. But, before I digress, I got there early in an attempt to allay my fears about no one showing up the next day, or no one showing up on time on our first official day of writing.

Alas, my fears became a reality, and the girls were not there. Ms. Sandy had to rally up the girls again. She made phone calls, and sent out reinforcements into the community to get the girls involved. She also asked the other girls at the community center, who were watching the boys play basketball in the gym if they wanted to attend the workshop, but they declined. While Ms. Sandy and I were scrambling to get Audrea, Mika, Amina, Charlene, and Raneeka to the community center on time, a little black girl walked in the community room to speak with Ms. Sandy. Sweet and polite, she said hello to me and asked me if she could have some snacks, so I gave her a cookie. Inquisitive as ever, little miss thing then asked me what I was teaching. I told her that it was a poetry class, but it was for older girls--she was 9. She interjected, "well, I don't think I would like the class anyway because I don't know nothing about writing no poetry." I replied, "that is why you take a class so you can learn how, it is easy." I was saddened by her remark, as she then went off to cheerlead and watch the boys play basketball. I wanted

her to be excited to learn about new things, especially about vocality and feminist resistance.

It was approaching 6:45 p.m. and Audrea, Mika, Raneeka, and Charlene were entering the room, along with a new young woman, Ebony. Ebony, was well like her complexion, smooth, and dark brown. She was a 16 year old slender and medium height girl with a shoulder length relaxed coif who was a junior at Bladensburg High. She told me that she was supposed to attend the seminar on Monday, but was sick--and from her congested voice, and hands full of tissue, I believed her. Once all the girls entered the room, I closed the door and began the lesson on the relationship between poetry and autobiography.

After having the girls completed exercise three, on “what is autobiography,” I had the girls read aloud together bell hooks’ essay, “writing autobiography.” Raneeka, who disliked reading, was not too thrilled about the large packet of essays and poems. However, Charlene, an avid reader and lover of the written word told Raneeka to stop complaining. She turned and said to me, “she needs to read, but she just lazy.” These two, cracked me up because, they represented an age of innocence, and a solidarity among girls that was now rare in this age of “girl-fighting” and “queen-bees.”¹⁰³ Once the girls finished reading the essay, I had them answer questions, and then read Jessica Care Moore’s, “Poem for Pain” in order to see if they could make the connections between poetry and autobiography, and some of them did.

103 Lyn Brown, *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection among Girls*. New York: NYU, 2003.

An hour into the workshop, and again, I was moving behind schedule, I had the girls begin working on exercise four, which was a questionnaire, similar to John Caughey's self-ethnographic exercises in *Negotiating Cultures*¹⁰⁴, in order to get an understanding of who the girls were and give the girls an opportunity to understand and describe who they were in their own words. I learned about their favorite foods, zodiac signs--and there were a few fellow Sagittarians like myself--favorite songs, favorite books, fears, hopes, where they see themselves in five years, etc. This type of "traditional" ethnography minus the audio-tape recorder and me verbally asking the questions, revealed a lot about the girls. It showed me their differences, even though they come from the same 'hood, but it showed me their eerie similarities, which included a fear of death or dying at a young age. Mika, Charlene, and Audrea wrote that they were afraid of dying. And, in D.C. the reality is that you can get killed from a stray bullet, or from H.I.V. On the bright side, all the girls saw themselves doing something in the future: attending college, playing basketball, becoming a doctor, owning a salon, being an interior designer, or a homicide detective. With dreams like those, death and the constant reminder that you could be next, was frightening.

Last, I resumed the poetry basics lesson from Monday evening, and taught the girls how to write an acrostic autobiographical poem. Mika, who was familiar with the acrostic form helped me explain it to the other girls, along with Ms. Sandy. Forgetting to remember that I was going to use pseudonyms in the dissertation, I had the girls write an acrostic poem using their names. But despite this slip-up, with my commitment to

104 John Caughey, *Negotiating Cultures and Identities: Life History Issues, Methods, and Readings* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2006), 44.

anonymity, I decided to include their poems without identifying them by their pseudonym.

“TANTANIA”

Talented and pretty young lady

Amazing at everything I do, to me.

Nervous when it comes to certain things.

Terrific is what I’d like to think of myself.

Athletic because I like to play a lot of sports.

Nice to people.

Important because I think I am just like every other business person out there.

Artistic because I can

“ALICIA”

AMAZING AND CRAZY

LOVABLE AND UNDERSTANDING

INTELLIGENT AND WISE

CREATIVE AND OUTSPOKEN

IMPERFECT

ACCOMPLISHED

“CHARNITA”

Charming

Honest

Arranged

Real

Nice

Intelligent

Talented

Aware

“DONAE”

Dedicated to me, life, and everyone around me.

Obesity can't take over me because I'm as fly as a butterfly and busy like a bee.

Never take things for granted because everything must come to a end.

Always claim my mom and be as best friends.

Everyday I live, I live for the best because grandma always told me don't settle for less.

“KARITA”

Kind

amazing

Rough



independent

talkative

athletic

From these series of poems, the girls have demonstrated how they already had a sense of pride about themselves and have been resistant and resilient. While their poetry is not Pulitzer prize winning--yet anyway, they talk about the positive and the negative aspects of themselves, and in less than a half-hour, they had to do something difficult: they had to begin to think about who they were, write about it with flare, and share it with an audience. From Tania's acrostic ode to herself, Alicia's whimsical self-portrait, Charnita and Karita's one word summations of self, and Donae's fighting spirit to not let obstacles like obesity--which she was not obese--stand in her way, they all on a basic level were demonstrating vocality, resistance, and resilience.

Day Three: Poetry as Resistance

I was not as nervous on Wednesday, even with the rain, and even with Ms. Sandy having to attend late because she had to work a summer youth employment fair. I was not nervous despite the basketball game against another "rival" community center, or the weekly "Oldie's but goodies night" for the seniors in the community room that I had been teaching in. Instead, I was certain that I was going to fail this task of teaching the girls resistance and resilience through poetry because they were late, did not show up everyday, I was not able to get through my lesson plans in the way that I had hoped, I had no room to teach in, and could not compete with a basketball game. On Wednesday, I felt like a failure. I felt like I had failed the girls because the only person to show up on time on Wednesday was Mika.

Because Ms. Sandy was late, her colleague at the community center, Derek, was in charge, and since he was more interested in the basketball game and did not understand why the poetry class had to be for girls only, he forgot that I was supposed to be teaching. But, without a room, and without Ms. Sandy, I was forced to start my class late, again. As a person who has always been punctual, and a control freak with type A tendencies, I could not deal with another twist in this road of experimental ethnography. I knew from previous experience that you could never predict or anticipate the outcome of events when working with human subjects, but this experience was beginning to work my nerves. But, once Ms. Sandy came, again, she saved the day, and she snuck me in to the computer room, as she, Mika, and I waited for Audrea, Ebony, Amina, Raneeka, and Charlene to arrive.

While we waited, Mika and I began to discuss why the girls did not want to attend the creative writing seminar, and she said, “they don’t want to learn nothing different. They just like things the way they are. They like to hang out on the streets doing the same thing--nothing.” Grateful for her candor and insight, we continued to chat, as a young black boy walked into the room. She said, “Me, I used to be like that, always wanting to be in the streets, but as I got older I changed, and I wanted to learn and experience new things.” After our side-bar conversation, Audrea walked in and we began the lesson.

Disappointed that I only had two girls to teach, I began my lesson on oppressions and explained how race, class, gender, and sexuality was socially constructed. Explaining intersectionality, in fifteen minutes was not easy, especially to junior high and high school students, in a room that had kids walking in and out, and realizing that I had to get

them ready to move on to writing poetry. As Mika, Audrea, and Ms. Sandy and I finished our discussion about oppressions, I begin to talk about my relationship with feminism and how I used it to help me resist against oppression.

For this day, I assigned the girls an essay to read on feminism and my poem, “Whose Pussy Is This?,” but I decided to perform it, per their request. Before I was to perform it, a young black teenage couple entered the room with their newborn baby girl. And, their friend who was eight months pregnant entered the room as well. They sat in the back, while I began to recite the poem. Mid verse, I captured the attention of the young couple, and their 16 year-old pregnant friend, Monique, and they were shocked by my usage of the profane word, “pussy,” but inspired and in awe of my rapper like flow. Monique decided to take a copy of the poem to some of the boys in the community center to show them that a girl could rap, and the girl from the young couple, Amber, she asked for a copy to put on her wall because she wanted to show that she knew someone famous for being published. And then, the girls wrote their poems.

After my impromptu performance, I happened to see Raneeka and Charlene outside of the window walking by. With snacks in their hands, they came in the room, and I quickly gave them the lesson about oppression and feminism. I could tell that they were not grasping the concepts, so I explained sexism, and gender oppression in the context of males calling girls hos, and they got it, and were fired up. They quickly read my poem, and my usage of profane language and signifying on male rappers gave the girls creative license to do the same. In 15 minutes Charlene wrote the following poem: “Woman with a heart”

I am a woman with a heart
I feel the pain all over my body like it's
been there all along.
I hear them say that we're their
bytches and hoes, that they pimped
US
It's not the cry of the baby
It's the cry of my soul trying to be
free.
You have no shame over me
I am a woman with a heart
I see the darkness of my fellow
relationships
I dream that you will kill
me
You have no shame over me
I breathe as a living being you
asshole I am free
You can't control me
You are the brother, the cousin,
the husband, the father, of a family
let me be, no let me sleep
I control you, you're my bitch, my hoe, I play you
How is it not to be free
No one can control me
I am a woman with a
heart.

In this poem, even in its unrefined state, Charlene articulated the unique ways black girls have experienced oppression, and how it often has crippled their bodies physically, but spiritually, and emotionally as well. In this poem, she asserted herself from the yoke of abuse, verbal and physical. When I asked her about her poem, to clarify what she meant by the lines: You have no shame over me/ I breathe as a living being you/ asshole I am free/ you can't control me/ you are the brother, the cousin/ the husband, the father, of a family/ let me be, no let me sleep/ I control you, you're my bitch, my hoe, I play you,"

she was reluctant to explain in detail the inspiration for her poem. I was not sure if I should read the poem as her talking about sexual abuse, or if she was attempting to talk about the many ways black males, as brothas, and family members have betrayed black women by assaulting their character. Nevertheless, she showed her resistance and resilience by closing the poem with: “no one can control me/ I am a woman with a heart.”

Charlene’s comrade also wrote another powerful poem that day that she finished later that night and returned the next day. Similar to Charlene’s poem, and reminiscent of my poem, “Whose Pussy Is This?” Raneeka wrote:

“Untitled”

Let’s get things straight
I am not a bitch, I am not four legs
I am not free. I am not priced tagged
I do have a heart and yes I have feelings just
like your “mova.”
You can’t feel what we feel because you’re just
not us.
Yeah, I’m pretty and I’m definitely sexy
But ONE thing about ME, I am NOT YOURS.
You don’t own me, “Oh, no I am not for sale!”
I know I have a bright future
The way that you talk to these girls makes them think
that they don’t have a future, and it just isn’t cute.
You know you have manners somewhere in there
you really don’t think of them as hoes. Put it
aside and make her your official girl but the
way that you treat them is just too much
Don’t even think of saying Bitch ‘cause that
shit ain’t for me. I’m too classy for that B.S.
You say that you care and love them when
You know you really love smoking that weed
Yeah we all now dat you be thugging the block
and hustling rocks
You get excited when they tell you that your
fly cause you rocking some Gucci

No young lady wants no disrespectful ass
nigga in their life so get your punk azz off your
dusty butt and make a living.
I'm that new P.Y.T.
I am not a Bitch!

In this poem, Raneeka set the boys straight about being degraded. She acknowledged that she was attractive, and sexy, but that definitely did not mean she was to be disrespected. Possibly a poem directed at a male love interest, or adolescent males who learn to posture like players/womanizers, or drug dealing hustlers, and misogynists who do not show any loving emotion. Although she asserted herself in the poem, she also commented on the larger issue of black masculinity and the performance of a hyper-black masculinity. For a 12 year old, she was very insightful and articulate, even though she was not able to comprehend the concepts of oppression by Weber.

Day Four: Poetry as Resilience

I arrived to the community center on time, yet fatigued. It was rainy, and I already knew that neither Ms. Sandy was going to be able to make it, nor Mika because she was getting fitted for her prom dress. I found it ironic that Mika, who told me how much she hated high school, and the ignorant people who were always in her business, wanted to attend prom. So, without two people whom I could definitely count on for attending the workshops, I felt defeated, but to my surprise, both Raneeka and Charlene were there waiting for me in the community room. The girls whom I thought would probably give me a difficult time because they were playing on a cell phone on the first day, were late,

and told me how nasty my organic food was, were the only ones to attend every day, and they came with more poems.

I decided to wait a little longer to give the other girls a chance to participate if they were running late, and Raneeka, Charlene, and I began to talk about poetry, how they were liking the seminar and what I should do differently when I teach it again. They told me that when I teach this course again I should give homework and assign many of the readings for the evening. They also told me that I should have assigned less reading--that was Raneeka's suggestion, but Charlene disagreed. They said I should offer the course for more than a week, maybe over three weeks, or once a week for a month--something Mika also mentioned to me a day before. As we were rapping up our conversation, and I was taking notes, again learning from my students, Ms. Sandy walked in. She left her meeting early to make sure the girls attended.

After twenty minutes, I decided to get started with the lesson on love, and it was very improvisational. I deviated from the lesson plan and workbook because of time, and because I wanted the girls to read more about love and discuss issues of love, dating, and body image. Ms. Sandy was candid about her experience growing up in a very strict Christian household, and was told to hide her curvaceous, well-developed body, and to stay away from boys because they only wanted her for sex. She told the girls about how she developed a complex about her body, and sexual feelings--nothing graphic because we were both professionals working with kids. But this improv, like all improv was definitely a "rich point" in the midst of what I thought would be a "breakdown." The girls talked about dating and why boys were so rude and fickle, and asked us about dating

advice. I do not think they realized that I was not heterosexual, and in order to avoid outing myself for risk on how it would be received and alter the research relationship, I let Ms. Sandy give them some advice. Before we moved on to the essay and the poems for our assigned discussion, the girls told me about their discontent with other girls who are promiscuous, and eager to grow up too fast. These girls, they named “the crack girls,” because they would purposely wear low rise jeans to show their butt cracks in order to get male attention. These girls would make fun of Raneeka and Charlene because they were not “goosing”--a term that Raneeka used to explain how the girls were obsessed with getting male attention, or having sex, with the sole intention of getting pregnant. The girls would inform me that this pink wearing, crack showing clique of minors all had children.

In a rush to get to the readings and writing, I had the girls read another essay by bell hooks, on black love, and a poem by Amiri Baraka’s son, Ras, entitled, “Black Girls Learn Love Hard.” They resonated more with the poem, and although I originally planned for them to write an ode about themselves, they wrote in free verse. Unable to finish the poem in the short time we had left, Raneeka took hers home, even though I needed it to put in the poetry book for the next day. Charlene however, produced a poem about love, or the lack of love for black girls. Borrowing Baraka’s title, she wrote:

“Black girls learn love hard”

Black girls learn love hard
It doesn’t matter what race you are
All that matters is it hurts

“Roses are red
the sky is blue”
love does hurt
how about you

love is okay but it has to be true

“bacon is bacon
eggs is eggs
don’t let them boys between your legs”

They say you’re sexy
They say you’re fine
they hurt your feelings
But 3 days later
they’re like “bye”

Love doesn’t have to hurt
it’s just who’s giving the love
Black girls learn love hard
I mean, We learn love
hard!

This poem was very rudimentary, but spoke to the realities of issues black girls are dealing with in terms of love and romance. They must learn that in order to protect themselves from males, they should not be a fast girl, and “give it up.” Yet, girls who have been yearning to be loved, feeling unloved, will do whatever they can sometimes to gain affection. I was very disappointed to learn that even after reading the hooks essay on black love, and that black love does exist and needs to be shown, the girls still felt that love and the opportunity for love was not a reality for them, or maybe it was just romantic love that was not a reality.

Day Five: Presentations of Poetry book and performance

Unlike the other four days, I was five minutes late, but the girls did not mind because I had their poetry books. I printed out their collection of words, entitled, “The Power of the Pen: Poetry as Resistance and Resilience” on multicolored paper. I was

originally going to have it bound at Fed-ex kinkos, but it was too expensive and would have taken two days to do. But, the girls were delighted. Raneeka, Charlene, and Mika were ecstatic. Mika said, “Ooh Ms. Chyann, this is so pretty, I never seen my work typed up before!” Both Raneeka and Charlene smiled at each other as they read everyone’s work. They did not want to read their poems aloud, but instead enjoyed them silently. As we said our good-byes, I gave the girls back their portfolios with the concepts and terms on oppression, as well as their packet of essays, and their notebooks to encourage them to continue to read and write because it would improve their poetry and critical thinking skills, and further develop their vocality and ability to resist and be resilient.

While I was walking out of the community center that Friday evening, I noticed the growing throng of black girls dressed in pink with low rise pants revealing their butt cleavage and babies adorning their hips. I walked back to Raneeka and Charlene, and pulled them aside in the room, and I asked, “are those the crack girls?” and they replied and snickered, “yes!” I left the room and walked away in amazement, horror, grief, frustration, and intrigue, because while they seemed to think that their babies were a rite of passage and an accessory, and they formed this alternate affirming teenage motherhood community, as a product of that difficult life, they did not realize the larger world was not kind to black women, and it was even harsher for black girls.

Conclusions

This chapter examined the ways poetry has been used as a means of vocality, feminist resistance and resilience in black girls and women. From Ntozake Shange, to

women such as Sarah Jones and Jessica Care Moore, poetry has been used by black women to discuss how they negotiate race, class, gender, and sexuality, and define who they are, in their own words, and on their own terms. Fusing methods of ethnography and life history, rooted in participatory action research and black feminist anthropology with creative writing workshops, I developed a new, interactive and innovative way of doing person-centered ethnography research on black girlhood growing during the hypersexualization and hypercommercialization of Hip Hop. Because of the social justice, black feminist activist element in this new mode of doing ethnography, I attempted to give back to the girls by showing them the importance and power of their voices.

Because most research has claimed that black girls, and working-class and urban black girls in particular are victims of society and exploits of Hip Hop's "attack on black womanhood" unable to resist or be resilient in the midst of such assaults, I decided to create poetry workshops to show how black girls can be vocal and talk back to hip hop, and society. With a feminist pedagogy and curriculum, this project moved beyond postmodern ethnography's attempts and discussions on doing egalitarian research.

This chapter speaks to the next chapter on how poetry and feminist teachings can over time help girls refine and hone their craft as writers and find new ways of doing feminism and feminist resistance by reaching many audiences with poetry and spoken word. This next chapter foretells what Charlene and Raneeka's poetry will become as they grow from 12 and 13 year old girls to twenty-something women.

Chapter 5: Publicly Intellectual: A Collection of Words

When critics write to engage wider diverse audiences, we confront the limitations of discourse, of the languages we use. It becomes ruthlessly apparent that unless we are able to speak and write in many different voices, using a variety of styles and forms, allowing the work to change and be changed by specific settings, there is no way to converse across borders, to speak to and with diverse communities.

--bell hooks, "Dancing with Words" in *Remembered Rapture: The Writer At Work*

As a cultural critic, feminist, poet, public intellectual, and refugee of the academy, bell hooks has been my source of inspiration. After reading selections from *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, in my first women's studies course during my sophomore year of college: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Difference, I changed my major from Government to Gender, Race, and the Politics of Difference--an independent major I created--and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies all because feminism, only as explained by hooks, offered the potential, at least in my eyes, to radically change the world. Ironically, at this predominately and historically white (supremacist capitalist patriarchal) top-tier liberal arts institution, I was introduced to a radical black feminist, who stood in opposition to the culture of Colby College, the culture that gave me the language and the tools to recognize my marginalization yet further marginalized me because I was black, female, working class, and gay. While poetry gave me vocality and visibility, hooks gave me a feminist voice and taught me how to be empowered and oppositional, more than Hip Hop, my old frame of reference, could ever offer. She taught me how to "talk back" as a way of resisting oppressions. And as much as I do not like to admit this, but it is absolutely truthful, without entering such a privileged space, wrought

with issues of power, I would not have encountered the woman who opened my eyes to a new way of thinking and writing.

I open this chapter with a quote from hooks not only to pay homage and praise, but also to address this issue of the limitations of language, particularly the usage of language in academic scholarship, as it pertains to this larger and ongoing discussion about knowledge, accessibility, and power. As a working class/rising middle class, black, lesbian, soon to be PhD, also theorized as an “outsider within,” a “hybrid,” “cyborg”--or whatever new and fashionable term best expresses my fragmented, fluid, situated identities, and incongruous cultural traditions--and as a part time ethnographer and poet, I almost always have to be cognizant of the limitations of language, and issues of power inherent in epistemology and ontology: knowledge validation, ways of knowing, and origins of knowledge, and the privilege implicit in being able to access or consume knowledge in the written form. Scholars who are like me are often caught in this dilemma over a commitment to whom they are producing knowledge for: either the people/the folk/the subaltern/the marginalized/the poor/the community/the impoverished/the less privileged or the elite/the few/the academy/the center/the wealthy/the capitalist machine. Without recognizing it, we get lured into this trap of trying to “keep it real” and romanticizing this idea of the community, the “real world,” the ‘hood, the barrio, with “real” people, who speak in “real” languages, who are oppressed in real, and not socially constructed ways, who do not need and cannot use the words of the privileged few, who with their fake, inauthentic performance and posturing of “real” validated subjugating knowledge, and “real” authoritative ways of knowing, cannot truly, honestly, and

sincerely speak to, with, and for the real, regular, common, everyday people. But for sincere scholars, concerned about how social constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, as systems of imbalanced power relations, have real, that is material ramifications, for all people, this model of authenticating and privileging knowledge via who is more qualified to speak, and in which voice or language they are allowed to speak in is futile, delimiting, and does nothing to truly disrupt the discourse to make knowledge emancipatory for all.

I used to truly believe in this false dichotomy and often got caught up in idolizing and idealizing my working-class, marginalized situatedness to show the marginalized--the only groups to truly accept me--that I have not changed or become an oppressor because I had access to knowledge and some semblance of power. I thought I was radical because I would reject the jargon and dismiss all theory as impotent and self-aggrandizing and useless since it had no bearing in the "real world." However, I realized that I would be doing myself a disservice and an injustice, as well as the myriad groups and communities that I belong to, by rejecting one voice and one identity in order to privilege others. As a scholar with multiple situated identities and subjugated and subjugating knowledges, I would be naive to think that I can solve this issue of accessibility, or the limitations of language by privileging the voice of the marginalized through romanticizing their lived experiences, articulating such experiences solely in the vernacular, and discrediting the scholarship of the privileged world of academe.

This binary is an erroneous construction and does nothing to solve the issue at hand. It marginalizes and discredits scholars who are in positions of power within the

academy but have used their power, knowledge, and language in a liberatory way. These same scholars have been my teachers, mentors, and primary reasons for me to pursue a PhD. Although, in the past I have agreed with Audre Lorde that, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,”¹⁰⁵ I have to now challenge that assertion today, and say that some tools choose to stop building the master’s house, and if they cannot dismantle his house, they attempt to create an entirely new structure that bears no resemblance to the master’s.

Instead, in this intellectual space, I opt to offer another way of speaking in order to reach multiple audiences, to, as hooks urges, provide another style, genre, or medium to reach out and across privileged and lesser privileged spaces. Language will always be limiting, but as scholars, activists, artists, hybrids, outsiders within, cyborgs, public intellectuals, whatever and whoever we decide to be on a given day and in given moments, let us work collectively, abandoning this romanticized idea of community, to construct a collective of rogue intellectuals within and outside of the academy committed to eradicating this privileging, delimiting, and marginalizing through speech acts. Let us not just talk back, but talk to, and talk with, and across these imagined boundaries that we continue to reify with distractions about accessibility.

105 In her essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Lorde writes, “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support” (112). Although Lorde is referring to white, middle-class, heterosexual women in the feminist movement as the master’s tools, and the master’s house, as their white heterosexual middle-class male counterpart’s home and the larger systems or nexus of oppressions that benefit white heterosexual middle-class males, I employ it in this discussion to discuss the relationship between academy as a site of domination, and scholars as agents or tools of domination.

This chapter, as a culmination or zenith of the dissertation, serves several political purposes: it seeks to disrupt notions of privileged speech, valid knowledge, and superior ways of knowing, and one method or approach of doing or articulating theory; it seeks to talk back, talk to, and talk with the rest of the chapters and concepts throughout the dissertation and to multiple audiences; and it demonstrates the potential that feminist theory, coupled with theories on intersectionality, through the medium of poetry has for presenting the opportunity to transcend such limitations of language, and offering a new opportunity or space to be a theory, a method, and a praxis of resistance. Before I sound too ambitious and idealistic, I must offer this caveat of sorts: I do not wish to romanticize poetry, because as black people, we have never truly been conceived of as true, “real,” “authentic” poets in a traditional literary canon, and when we were considered real poets producing real poetry, it was only when it was written in the vernacular. I also acknowledge that as an art form, poetry has its limitations of accessibility because not everyone likes to read poetry, they may not consider my Hip Hop style flow poetry, or are unable to comprehend the messages in this form.

As hooks notes, no one, single genre can speak to everyone; however, poetry and the way that I (f)use it in this dissertation, with essay and jargon, demonstrates how poetry has the potential to be be political, critical, informational, emancipatory, and oppositional in the same way that rap music, as a type of poetry, serves as pedagogy for marginalized youth. My goal with this chapter and dissertation, though lofty, and maybe impossible, is to begin to unravel, dismantle, disrupt, and rupture such polemics on knowledge, power, and accessibility. As writers, scholars, consumers, and producers of

knowledge, we are not in the business or practice of writing for ourselves, we write for an audience, we write to share, writing is communal, and my goal as a writer is to share my knowledge in multiple forms with multiple audiences recognizing that not everyone will comprehend what I am saying in either form, or desire to comprehend some of the things I am saying, but as long as I try, I am one step closer at moving towards transcending this divide. With this said, this chapter will take the reader on a journey from my progressions as a budding public intellectual as 13 year old high school student struggling with issues of race, to my 18 year old self grappling with issues of intersectionality, and my 21 year old self struggling with issues of the gaze, knowledge, power, and accessibility.

I have divided the poetry into three sections, as they reflect my years in high school, college, and graduate school, and the shift and evolution of my thought process and encounters, engagements, and negotiations with critical social theories and concepts that explain identity politics, and I will open each section with a short conversation about texts that speak to the overarching themes during each phase of my education. Part one addresses my growing discontent with race and racialization, specifically constructions of blackness and this issue of racial authenticity. Most of the early poetry that I began writing in high school shows my tenuous relationship with racial scripting, and racial authenticity, which John L. Jackson, Jr.'s concepts of racial authenticity and racial sincerity from *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* speaks to. In part two, the poetry shows my growth as a writer and a thinker through my discourse on being and outsider/within, and I try to contextualize these poems within a discussion about feminism, intersectionality, situatedness and marginality, with Patricia Hill Collins' text,

Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice. In the final section, these poems discuss my graduate school experiences, and show my enculturation as an academic, my relationships with ethnography and the oppositional gaze, and what it means to be an educator and educated. I draw from bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, to address my move away from institutional education. In sum, the poetry chapter, "Publicly Intellectual: A Collection of Words," is my attempt at sharing intimately, myself, through words, thoughts, and rhymes, publicly, as a move towards illustrating how one can be an intellectual in myriad ways, through hybrid languages and forms, spiting oppositional speech from a colonized tongue with a colonizing language.

Real Black: My High School Adventures with Racial Authenticity and Sincerity

School for me has always been a problem. I never struggled intellectually, but socially, well that is another story. I never fit in. I was like the tragic characters who would become my imaginary friends: John the Savage, Sula Peace, Helga Crane, Bob Jones, and the lady in green, I simply didn't belong and might have been better off dead--or so I thought. But it always bothered me that I wasn't accepted or I was alienated because I was not considered black enough. I was too black for white people and not black enough for black people. I couldn't comprehend this. I was confused, frustrated, and in an attempt to make sense of this illogical construction of race--something I was on the cusp of articulating--yet did not have the correct language or access to language that would say just that, I wrote poetry to address these issues of scripted/inscripted

blackness, and racial authenticity. I was also articulating how race was interconnected with class, and gender, but I would not tease such issues out until college.

However, John L. Jackson, Jr., whose book I wish was written when I was going through this crisis of identity, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*, has helped me reevaluate some of my earlier poetry from High School, which has been primarily about race, and specifically an authentic blackness. Although I didn't have the language of critical race theory, racialization, inscription, racial performance, etc., Jackson's work has helped me contextualize my experience within a discourse about the social constructedness of race and the implications this has for identity politicizing.

Critiquing the idea of racial scripts as a primary way scholars have been looking at race and questions of identity politics, Jackson writes:

These scripts provide guidelines for proper and improper behavior, for legitimate and illegitimate group membership, for social inclusion or ostracism. We use these scripts as easy shorthand for serious causal analysis, and scholars who invoke 'racial authenticity' usually do so to talk about how such scripts delimit individuals' social options--describing how racial identity can be made to function a lot like social incarceration, a quotidian breeding ground claims Paul Gilroy, for even more brutal forms of fascism."¹⁰⁶

Jackson, and scholars such as Gilroy, and Kwame Anthony Appiah, whom he also mentions in this passage, all describe my childhood, adolescent, and teenage experiences. But, Jackson attempts to move beyond talking about racial authenticity, as performance and inscription. Instead he seeks to disentangle the meaning of authenticity from inscription and places it in a dyad with sincerity.

106 John L. Jackson, Jr. *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 13.

On authenticity Jackson states:

Authenticity conjures up images of people, as animate subjects, verifying inanimate objects. Authenticity presupposes this kind of relationship between an independent, thinking subject and a dependent, unthinking thing. The defining association is one of objectification, ‘thingification’: a specialist applying his or her expertise to a seventeenth-century silver candlestick, or a newly discovered Picasso, or any item dusted off from a dead grandfather’s attic and brought before the appraisers of PBS’s *Antiques Roadshow*. Authenticity presupposes relation between subjects (who authenticate) and objects (dumb, mute, and inorganic) that are interpreted and analyzed from the outside, because they cannot simply speak for themselves.¹⁰⁷

From this passage, Jackson demonstrates how attempts to authenticating one’s race is impossible as authenticity is only relevant for authenticating things, objects that have traits that can be measured as fake, artificial, unreal, and inauthentic.

Jackson helped me name exactly how I had been feeling as a child. Like an object, that had been discarded because I could not properly mirror, replicate, perform and yet embody a blackness that had been depicted as real on the reel screen of television. Yet I was not dumb, clearly, and I was not mute or inorganic.

Showing that authenticity is a rather narrow and myopic lens for examining race, and blackness, Jackson continues his discussion about the objectification of subjects through an authenticity framework. With the help of his research participant, and “real black man,” Bill, when people are talking about racial authenticity, and exuding and defining a real blackness, they are really talking about the sincerity attached to race. Using the same scenario and trope of an object at the *Antiques Roadshow*, he asserts:

107 Ibid, 14-15.

Sincerity, however, sets up a different relationship entirely. A mere object could never be sincere, even if its authentic sincerity is a trait of the object's maker, or maybe even its authenticator, but never the object itself, at least not as we commonly use the term. Instead, sincerity presumes a liaison *between subjects*--not some external adjudicator and a lifeless scroll. Questions of sincerity imply social interlocutors who presume one another's humanity, interiority, and subjectivity. It is a subject-subject interaction, not the subject-object model that authenticity presumes--and to which critiques of authenticity implicitly reduce every racial exchange. In this sense, analyses that deal exclusively with discussions on 'racial scripts' dehumanize, much like the processes they ostensibly critique. They turn us all into mere objects of our own social discourses, less the actors who read and interpret scripts than the inert pages themselves.¹⁰⁸

Jackson, continues on to note that sincerity, as a new model for looking at race, is a way for humanizing racial subjects who only seek to authenticate or verify sincerity or sincerity, as a way of one showing his/her commitment to black people. He insightfully notes,

Classifications by race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality are all such shortcuts, templates we use in lieu of absolute interpersonal transparency. We might employ them to get at the truth of the world, t get at the *real world*, which is why it is so much more comforting tho think about these categories as natural occurrences and not man-made conventions[...] Racial sincerity and authenticity are both ways of thinking through how we find these shortcuts for knowing ourselves and others--for locating *the real* in (and intentions of) everyone around us. The difference is that authenticity theorizes this as an unbalanced relationship between the powerful seer and the impotently seen, the latter being a mere object of the seer's racial gaze and discourse, a rendition of identity that Frantz Fanon famously illustrates with the exclamation of a child, 'Look, a Negro...Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened.'¹⁰⁹

With his cunning insight and knack for storytelling, Jackson provides me with a new way of understanding and looking at my racialized experience in High School.

108 Ibid, 15.

109 Ibid, 16-17.

Retrospectively, I think poetry at the time had been a way for me to assert my subjectivity in a place and space where black people tried to treat me like an object. In these poems that follow, I question the realness of race, and blackness in particular, as it pertains to this larger discussion of authenticity. I also explore this issue of racial sincerity through my commitment to addressing and arguing for a move towards historical legacies of resistance.

The New World was one of the first poems I wrote in High School. I was inspired by this black history book that showed pictures of slaves on an auction block, and in response, I wrote this poem to give words to what the slaves might have been feeling. It was a rather rudimentary in style, since I was trying to follow a rhyme scheme.

“The New World” (Fall 1996)

we were bought from the motherland
becoming people unknown
working for the white man till
he didn't need us any more

they put us up for sale
to work up in the fields

if we decide to fail
he beat us till we bleed

the highest bidder
gets the prize:
a big black nigger
in their eyes

rape the black wench until
she is halfway dead
on a boat with a stench
that is dizzying my head

a non-enlightening expression

that is on my face
the sign said, "The New World"
and the founders said, 'welcome to
this place'

My grandmother hated being called African-American, and she instilled this belief in me and the rest of her kids and grandkids. I think part of her dislike for being called African American is because she never wanted to be associated with African people. For, me, I felt that I could not be considered African because I came from a mixed background of Native American and white. As a result, I wrote this poem because I could not understand who we were as black or African American people, and how I fit in.

"Unknown" (1997)

You can run, but you can't hide
How the expression is so true
We have been running for our lives
And bypassing to get through
We've gotten through the "motherland,"
Through slavery and the Civil War
Through discrimination, through beatings
Through 400 years, but more

All through the ways we have been treated
We have lost
All because our color wasn't the color of frost

Identities confused we are not African but black
We can't be considered African because Africa
Is what we lack

We have no language to unite us
We have no culture but a name
And still we lose; we cannot conquer this game

One can't define black because it is a color
Not a race
I can't be considered black
Because that is not the color of my face

If you are African you are from Africa,

But black there's a distinction
Black can't be defined it is a fact
Not fiction

We are the descendants of slavery
We are the children of slaves
We were treated like animals and
Subjugated to behave

So our identity and culture
Is all just blown
Therefore, we shall be called
The people unknown

In what can be read as a middle-class rant about working-class or underclass black people, a group of which I belonged, is a tale on why as Black people, we, the working-class are not progressing. All of the people I grew up with were getting pregnant or going to jail, but were gifted just like me, and it became frustrating because they would say that I was not black like them. I began to think that the only way for black people to succeed is if slavery or blatant oppression and subjugation were present.

“Those Were the Days” (February 1998)

If I could turn back the hands of time,
Or if I could reminisce, I would reminisce on
A past when all we could do was wish.
Wish for a time when our voices could possibly
Be heard. But during that era, all of those
Wishes were just absurd.

When we dreamt in a field of cotton with
The hot sun beating on us from above and
The only thing that kept us going
Was God's strength and God's love,
and we would hum
Old Negro spirituals and then
Pass on their words from one of the
Following songs: “Take My Hand Precious Lord.”

Then we moved into the Civil Rights Movement in 1963
When there was a strong black man and his

“Impossible Dream;” when there were strong black women that stood by their strong black men. But, I’m just reminiscing. This is now, and that was then.

So now we’ve gotten past the slave days and into 1998.
Martin’s dream is a reality, and we are the masters of our fate.
Yet all that hard work, but has it gone to waste.
Did we create our own problems that we cannot face?

In the PAST we were oppressed by the supreme ruler,
“The mighty white man.”
But now the oppressor is the oppressee
and yet we won’t understand.
There were dreams of equality so
that the black man could rise,
but now those hopeless aspirations have been compromised.

A black man is no longer a leader,
But a follower on the side: a thug, and a drug dealer.
And to the law he won’t abide.
He has a fascination with Hilfiger, Ralph Lauren,
or any designer clothes,
phillie blunts, old cars, and his bitches or his hos.

He has a fascination with this facility to which he constantly returns.
A place where he is some man’s girlfriend
and where more injustice is what he learns.
And for every weak black man, there’s a weak black woman
that knocks a sista like me. They say that I am white,
but I’m just as black as I can be.
I guess because I don’t choose to do things wrong,
but to do them right, So they’re implying that black is negative;
therefore, positive is white.

Yes, these are the same black sistas who use sex to console their lost hearts,
which is the same physical act that has gotten them lost from their initial start.
They have illegitimate children, and they have no chance.
They continually get abused by a weak black man and they consider that romance.

And yet back in the day when we fought not to be called a nigger,
we now disrespect our black pedagogues and we want to point the finger.

Yeah, I get criticized because I want succession.
Yes, I WANT TO RISE.

But, I'm just a little white girl who's reminiscing about
White lies.

Oh, If I could turn back the hands of time,
Or if I may reminisce, I would reminisce on a past when
All we could do was wish.

But I wonder would Black America succeed if again we were
Slaves and had a white man to praise?
Would we have dreams and success?
But then again, those were the days!

This poem is about some of the girls and boys who made fun of me when I decided to reject Hip Hop and the conspicuous consumption associated with the culture. I was criticized when I would wear used clothes and rejected messages about black women as promiscuous. Because I already went through my phase of trying to fit in, I went to the other extreme of asserting my uniqueness by completely shunning all aspects of a monolithic blackness. Instead of fighting and getting suspended, I wrote this poem and had it published in the high school poetry journal, Folkus. The Owl is my Native American totem animal, which is an insightful observant creature, such as my budding ethnographic self.

“The Owl” (March 1999)

I watch you, all of you while you judge me,
But your ignorance won't budge so I am criticized.
Style is what I possess, not what's in at the moment.
I see you pretend to be what you are not: so hot,
Appealing to the sexual desires of the guys as their eyes
probe your body that is accentuated by your tight yeast infection jeans.
Yeah, they are fiends but for what?
Your mind?
Not even!
You're believing their lies
when all they wanna do is get in between your thighs.
You attract them with your European silky weave.
You're so naïve to believe that he loves only you.
Your blue hued eyes that you just bought, weren't you
Taught from “that thing,”¹¹⁰ cause I hear the words you sing?

110 Lauryn Hill's song, “Doo Wop That Thing” discusses how black males and females only go after the opposite sex for sex and superficial things, and thus sell themselves short in the process.

And guys don't you realize that there is more to life than
Clothes and hos, memorizing lyrics from Wutang, conversing
About new kicks and new tricks you had, hoop dreams and
Ill schemes but never how to make the grade,
how to be a player and how not to get played?
And you have the nerve to call a girl a chickenhead
when you have had fifteen others that have lain in your bed.
Like I said, I know my path, and it is only for one.
I do not follow the "in crowd" and I am one who can see
And I am only here to appease me!

I wrote this poem for the annual black history month show in response to Jay-Z's song and video Big Pimpin' and the way guys have approached me and been disrespectful. I created this scenario to mimic what it is like to be a black girl walking down the street and having all kinds of boys and men cat call. When you are in such a situation, you feel powerless because if you talk back or ignore the boys and men, you may get physically assaulted because you do not assuage their bruised and needy masculinity.

"No I Will Not" (February/March 2000)

Setting: Male and female are at club and guy approaches female in a derogatory way. This is the depiction of the scenario between the two. Rap music is playing in the background.

Male: "Damn shorty, can I get your name?"

Female: You know what I hate, that brothas contemplate that they can even get with me. Why you can believe, how you can conceive that you can be the one for me. 'Cause from what I see, you ain't even that fly. Why you would think I would even reply to your weak game, that's inane, it's a shame! When you respect me then you can get my name!

Male: Name don't want it and don't need it. 'Cause conceited girls like you need to be mistreated. You say I ain't fly, yeah you should know pigeon. With your skin tight jeans, you know fiends just wanna hit it. Maybe I'll get with you when your weave is redone, and maybe you'll be my lucky one. But for right now, I'm gonna make a switch, cause all you are is a stuck up bitch!

It begins when they disrespect us with their slanderous tone
as they caress the microphone
Yet we recite the rhymes

and exalt the crimes against us.
But every lyric recited has often incited
the degradation and defamation of us all
So ladies here's a wake up call

I will not let you degrade me
When I am one that made thee
When I am one that carries the seed
When I am one that bears your breed

I will not conform no matter what you say
I don't give a damn if you won't accept me anyway

I will not let you diminish my soul
When I am the half that makes you whole
When I am the strength that makes you strong
When I am the one that creates a throng

I will not let you degrade me
'Cause I am one that made thee
'Cause I am one that carries the seed
That bears your breed.
No, I simply will not!

Outsider Within: Feminism and Intersectionality

I went to college hoping that I would finally find a place of acceptance and refuge. A place where I would co-exist amongst other intellectuals, who were open-minded, eclectic, eager to learn, desiring to experience new things--I always liked to try new things. I envisioned college as being this racial utopia, where I did not have to prove my blackness even if I was attending a predominately white liberal arts institution in Maine. Unfortunately, my idyllic visions of a liberating, mind altering, college experience never became a reality. For the first time in my life, I learned about, experienced, and named what it was like to be oppressed because of my race, class, gender, and newly

added sexual oppression. I learned how isolating it felt to be an outsider within, even within an intellectual space that provided me with the tools and the language to articulate such a phenomenon.

In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins describes how black women domestic workers in white homes occupied this outsider within status, but she further explicates it in *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*. She writes:

For my own survival, I chose the term *outsider within* to describe the location of people who no longer belong to any one group. Initially, I used the term to describe individuals who found themselves in marginal locations between groups of varying power. This usage, however, reduces the construct to an identity category that resembles the ‘marginal man’ of classical sociology.¹¹¹

Unsatisfied with her description, and this reduction of marginality, she continues:

More recently, I have deployed the term *outsider-within* to describe social locations or border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power. Individuals gain or lose identities as “outsiders within” by their placement in these social locations. Outsider-within spaces are riddled with contradictions. From the perspective of members of dominant groups such as White girls in my high school, individuals like me who occupy outsider-within locations appear to belong, because we possess both the credentials for admittance and the rights of formal membership.¹¹²

She concludes, “under such conditions of social injustice, the outsider within location describes a particular knowledge/power relationship, one of gaining knowledge about or of a dominant group without gaining the full power accorded to members of that group.”¹¹³

111 Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), 5.

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid, 6.

My experience at Colby forced me to recognize and attempt to reconcile my outsider-within status. I may have felt like an outsider within my racial groups back in Providence, RI, but in this place of refuge, I was an outsider within this predominately white, upper-class privileged institution. Although I was perceived by some that I belonged or was an insider because I was attending a \$30,000 a year school (now \$45,000), and wore Northface, I would always be an outsider because I was black and working-class. And unfortunately, when I would return home, I would also be an outsider-within because my visible blackness may have allowed me to fit in, my expensive elite education, at a predominately white institution, and my decision to apply and attend that PWI instead of an HBCU, made me an outsider, and again, non-Black. As a result, I felt lost, abandoned even. But, with my new privileged voice, and expanding lexicon, I would write poetry that would speak to the feelings of my two-ness, my outsider-within identity, and the interconnectedness of my race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

This poem was inspired by W.E.B DuBois concept of the “double consciousness.” I felt my two-ness in many ways. This poem tells the story about being bipolar, being working-class and rising middle-class, in a white world and black world, etc. The twoness, or two warring ideals in one dark body made me feel like I was going to implode.

“2 Worlds” (2001)

2 worlds
un-similar
yet both are familiar to me
I visualize one that is more civilized
one with greater opportunities
instead of savage impecuniosities

which burgeon in my urban communities

my pilgrimage to the Mecca
of the privileged and the wealthy
has been unhealthy
it is a stealthy place
with the invisible face of oppression
yet I am told that this is my obsession
with something that no longer exists
or persists in institutions such as this

this arena for higher learning
is turning me into something and someone that I don't wanna be
but this is the result of an education that has its foundations in white supremacy
but my Colby College Degree will make a qualified yet colored woman out of me

I realize that I am a token
it is always spoken of
every day that I am here
but I can't go back to what I fear

I can't immigrate back to a place
where my textbooks taught me to hate
which is my fate that is determined by my gender
my sex
my orientation
and my complexion

a world of blissful dejection
where conceptions are controlled by colored folks with white souls
and their capital
which is impractical to me
yet my people won't agree
so when I try to elevate minds
I am gradually diminishing mine
because I am trying to keep it real in a world
where conspicuous consumption is now how we function
and where pecuniary emulation
gives you status and reputation in urban relations

now I am residing in a residence where my hesitance is growing
and my true colors are showing
and I am unable to remain stable any longer

the stronger woman is now the weak girl
and I can't even speak right

my worlds are dichotomous
like day and night
they are bipolarized
like blindness and sight
yet this is my plight
my circumstance
my chance to explain why I am going insane
living dual lives as one being
seeing two lands but I am taught one vision
I am trying to master this shit with precision
but not even religion can relieve all this tension
'cause I elevate into mania
and I digress into depression

being bipolar living in two different zones
has me pleading to the Lord to send his child home
'cause my life is heaven and hell
two distant places filled with faces un-similar
yet both are familiar to me
but I can't take this because propriety is lost
it died with my Savior on the cross
and I am living amongst the lost
I am out of control
and only Depakote or Zoloft
can console me
each day my situation worsens as I live as a person
struggling with two worlds and the only way that I can flee
is when God chooses me
so I pray that he takes me soon
as I wax and wane like the rotations of the moon
I wish he would release me from this womb that I call life I wish he would end this strife
but until he sets this caged bird free
she'll be in two worlds searching to find one
whichever one is me
2 worlds

This poem was written in response to Joan Morgan's When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost, which I felt was not a book on feminism at all. Morgan, who has claimed that this Hip Hop feminism, "fucks with the grays," did nothing for me. It did not address issues that I was facing. Instead, it was her attempt to rant and grieve about chickenheads taking away good black middle class men from good, black, educated middle class women such as herself. I often felt, where is the solidarity in that?

"Ghetto Feminist" (spring 2002)

I am a ghetto feminist
I ain't one of those middle class white girls
from suburbia
walking and talkin
about equal wages
when i am half their equal
I'm part of that 3rd wave movement
cuz this feminist shit goes through stages

I ain't about burnin my bra
cuz in my life I need a little wonder
under certain circumstances
instead, I burn my timbs and tommy
I burn the records that disrespect me

I burn all, well some of my hoochie gear
but i am sincere to this movement
I wanna break free of these manacles
that have captured me
I wanna immerse myself in a truth that enraptures me

I am a ghetto feminist
a reaction to the production of white capitalism
and the consumption of black miseducation
and fictitious emancipation
which constructs the
commencement of incarceration

I am a ghetto feminist
informed about my people and our struggle
worried about surviving eugenics

cuz racism is no longer generic like it used to be
the plan is to get all us colored folks dismissed
before we can resist you
but remember 9-1 1
has shown you
what you white boys
in blue
have done to spill
our red blood
which one is patriotism?

my theoretical rhetoric
is from observing my people
using a street dialect
is how we can connect

a ghetto feminist
I address issues my sistas face
concerning my bruthas who abuse us
and misuse us in their videos
cuz we are their tools
helping become their hos
or their whores
Shit, it is their duty to do us
bcuz we are their chores

they lose all of their direction
with the onset of an erection
and the image of their reflection
from their platinum guides them to even sell out more
and then who is the whore

i am a ghetto feminist
a sista
dually educated
highly venerated
even with my finger point
neck snappin
hand on my hip
and mouth yappin away
i am a ghetto feminist
as womanist and as ghetto as i can be

This poem was inspired by bell hooks' essay, "Whose Pussy Is This?" in Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black, Sarah Jones poem, "Your Revolution," and Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, for colored girls.

"Whose Pussy Is This?" (January 2003)

Whose Pussy Is This?
now I have to ask this question
cuz you mothafuckas keep disrespectin' my shit

in every line that your lame asses spit
I am forced to hear about my pussy
that is always on sale
a hot retail item wrapped in plastic for \$12.99
and this shit is drastic

because everyone thinks they too have ownership of something that belongs to me
and I do not agree with this

I want to break free from this lyrical prison that I currently live in
I hear every common nigga and their respective hos and bitches chantin'
that they're down with OPP
when that last P, which is my pussy
belongs to me

but none of you care about my feelings
because you keep dealing me the same bullshit lines
committing the same sexist crimes against me
you all want to label our pussies' pet names
because you want to restrain us

you think that because you can beat up the oochie
or attack my chocha by pinning me down on your sofa
roughly sexin' me after I've consumed some Hennessey
that the contents within my panties
that I have freely given up
so you are livin' it up
have your name inscribed inside of them

and although some of us may abide by your rules
by allowing you to:
"thug us

fuck us
love us
then leave us
cuz you don't fucking need us"

not all of us are fools

some of us have reclaimed the pussy
as we now croon to the ever so popular tune:

"my neck
my back
my pussy and my crack"

which is now the anthem or the ode to a liberated pussy

because

it is NOT what our pussies can do for you
but what you or WE can do for OUR pussies
it is not about our coochie
that we so freely give up for Gucci
or the lucci

just because some of us may stroke the male ego
but letting you stroke us
movin' and groovin' to your melodic misogyny
we all ain't puttin' the pussy up as a hot commodity

I am like Ntozake's lady in green
I scream about repossessing my shit
cuz I am going on a woman's trip and I need my stuff
and I've had enuf of you possessing it

whose pussy is this?
I ask this question one more time
nigga, you can keep the "bitches" and the "hos"
but this pussy
is
MINE

This poem is inspired by bell hooks' essay, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance." In the opening to this chapter, hooks writes, "Within current debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in acknowledgment and enjoyment of racial difference. The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture." This poem articulates this point.

"Bon Appetit" (Spring 2004)

Attention: you lily-white suburbanites
Upper middle-class wanna-be urbanites
Loosen up your du-rags and cornrows
Cuz they are too tight
Cuz I want you to comprehend
How you emulators offend
My people by consuming our plight

Listen Up: you blonde-hair, blue-eyed, Anglo-Saxon
Phat Farm, Timberland, RocaWear wearing faction
Ebonics speaking, Realist Nigga, tryna be down acting
You Muthafuckas consume our culture cuz you are just reacting

To your conservative upbringing
You think you live the life we singing
Clinging onto a culture cause you wanna rebel
So you buy what us dumb ass niggas wanna sell

Out for that fictitious White American Dream
Cuz these Sambos continue to smile on the screen
As long as we continue to live by the creed of the CREAM¹¹⁴
Getting that paper that comes by the ream

The underclass is selling hotter than pussy
You can get it at a discount or full price
Purchase the whole pie or just take a slice

Get it at Wal-Mart or K-Mart

114 CREAM is an acronym made popular by the WuTang Clan, which stands for, Cash Rules Everything Around Me.

Buy it retail
Buy it wholesale

At Neiman Marcus
Nordstrom's
Macy's
Or at Bloomingdales

Buy it at a boutique
Cause every body wants to wear that ghetto chic

That underclass couture
So get it while it is hot
And while we sellin it
"Big Pimpin" it
Like we whores

Attention you crackers: Eat it up
We are a real delectable delight
A ghetto delicacy
A delicioso
Assorted chocolate fantasy
Put some hot sauce and Paprika on us
And enjoy your poverty exotica
But don't regurgitate
Savor the nigger flavor
A la Carte
Don't worry we pay for it

So eat all that you can eat
Enjoy the meal served by your house nigger
Bon Appetit

Beyond Subjugated Knowledge and Situated Standpoints: Education as the Practice of Freedom

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks writes on education:

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.¹¹⁵

Despite my arduous four years at Colby, I met wonderful professors who embodied hooks' quote, and in essence what the liberal arts' education was supposed to be. My professors whom I revered, took their vocation seriously, and helped nurture and develop my intellect. They sincerely believed and taught with the conviction that education was liberating and liberatory. They inspired me to become one of them. In fact, they encouraged me to become one of them. With my critical eye and ear, love of knowledge: the production and consumption, gift of writing critical essay, and poetry, this was my calling: it was a handwriting on the wall, a message from the divine, a sign from the universe that said, Chyann, you were meant to be a professor. Unsure of myself, yet aware of my strengths and talents, I took their trusted words, my optimism, and leaped into the world of ideas: academe, and would later realize that I must not have heard the divine correctly, because it felt like the divine was trying to kill me.

¹¹⁵ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 13.

Luckily, throughout this experience, and as always, I used my gift of voice, poetry, to still talk about issues that were plaguing me, such as Hip Hop's hypersexualization of Black women--the usual topic of disgust and discussion for me. However, I became more introspective about who I was becoming as a result of attaining a PhD., and I came to the conclusion that hooks did, that:

Progressive, holistic education, 'engaged pedagogy' is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. that means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students. Thich Nhat Hanh emphasized that 'the practice of a healer, therapist, teacher or any helping professional should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people.'"¹¹⁶

And, because I was not whole, happy, or healthy going through this process, I was not in a position to help anyone. I realized that I had to change vocations. These poems are a reflection of my experiences and experiencing of graduate school.

I wrote this poem for the autobiographical statement project for AMST 603. I talk about the politics of inscription and how it influenced me to do a research project such as this. I think that as a scholar our identities heavily influence our research. My identity as a black, working-class lesbian, with bipolar disorder influences the type of research projects that I take on.

"who i be" (spring 2005)

I was born during the Reagan administration
the beginnings of crack cocaine
the maturation of hip-hop
and the rise in teen impregnation

the era of the welfare queen
in which I was the product

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 15.

of a mother who was only fifteen
and an imprisoned father who didn't bother

so I was already a statistic
a perfect example
of a black characteristic:
immorality
because of the legacy of bodies inscribed with hyper(hetero)sexuality
the consequence of an urban girl's ghetto mentality
searching for love in the midst of its mortality
cuz there "ain't no love in the heart of the city"

so they find it in between their thighs
offering pieces of self
to fill that void
that was once occupied by black patriarchs
before they were chased out
by castrating black matriarchs

I was a premature baby
born at six months
on the 23rd of November
12:49 in the morning
I was destined to die
yet I rose from the ashes
and proceeded to fly
soared beyond expectations
cuz I was taught the limit was the sky
despite what sociological data tried to imply
or predicted?

rather it restricted me from succeeding
but I found refuge in education
a first generation high school graduate
with a destination
other than welfare recipient as my occupation

I was headed to Colby College
an elite institution
where I was trapped in this illusion
in this state of confusion
that I was equal to my white peers
but they made it very clear

that I was an affirmative action baby
I only got in because I was black
just a nigger girl who got in because she lacked
merit and white skin
and that's when all the insecurity would begin

so I was doped up on psychiatric medication
to cope with the racism
so I was obsessed with killing myself
but failed to succeed
so I suffered through four years of pain
going insane on Mayflower hill

but I survived
cum laude
honors
distinction
senior scholar

once again I rose from the ashes
the phoenix rising
to pursue a Ph.D
that explores my identity
I dedicate my work
to people like me
cuz I believe that knowledge
can set us free
from the pervasive nihilism
that I read about

cuz I am of that Reagan generation
but I seek to give vindication
to all of the misrepresented
the victims of urban terrorism
genocide
that is constructed by conservative agendas
and the liberals' good intentions
the personal is political
and the political is personal
so I think it is a bit hypocritical
when scholars say that work is objective
because all scholarship is subjective
it is reflective of who we are

and that's why I have come this far
this is who I be

This poem is the introductory poem for my life history project, "for sepia colored girls who have considered self/when Hip Hop is enuf," it makes reference to a lot of rap song's that degrade women. It charts the evolution of Hip Hop by situating women at the center of the discussion. It also discusses this idea of Hip Hop being something more than an entertainment industry.

"when there was a rainbow" (spring 2006)

in the beginning there was me
i was life: a cipher
my cycle was the perfect beat
my flow was a tight rhyme
and all it took was one time:
one mic and a dope line
and we became a meta-phor:
culture
this is before i became a whore
and before your lyrics and hot rhythms
tore
a schism
between
my gender and my core
back in the day
i was a microphone fiend
i had an (au)/(o)-ral fixation
a reputation for rockin' the mic
but not in a sexual connotation
back in the day
i was hip
cuz i put the e on the end of your hop
i was full of hop-e until i went pop
and burst
into the scene as just another commodity
whose purpose was to feed a hungry economy
sí, yo recuerdo cuando:
(yes, I remember when)
you were my rainbow:
today and tomorrow
the calm after the storm;

the solace after the sorrow
you filled a place that was hollow:
my heart
and i would follow
you
because you promised me
more than beautiful weather
or tangible treasures
but pleasure
from your measures and bars
this is before it was all about the stars
cuz it was about the rainbow
damn you could put on a show
in those days when the sway of my hips didn't make me a ho
in your ho-p
and now you won't stop
so i submit
i drop
down and "get my eagle on"
and let you beat "it" up with a baton
let a "nigga get in them guts"
"and ahhh skeet skeet skeet skeet"
becoming your vessel replete with the seeds that you secrete
"from the window to the (lining of my vaginal) walls"
so you can have a thrill
and make a bill
off of my "tip drill"
so i let you
"whisper in my ear and tell me some things that i'd like to hear"
cuz i'll listen if that's what it takes to get to the rainbow
so
i'm running towards illusory dreams
running through rivers
and running through streams
to get to you
"leakin and soak n wet"
another silly ho
getting low
tilling the soil to help our new seeds grow
from below the rainbow
so we can get to the treasure
that promises platinum
ice and dough

to heal my internal wounds that don't show
but i'll trade you the bitches and the riches
for the rainbow i used to know
for hip-hop

This poem was inspired by Horace Miner's 1957 satirical essay, "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema," which inverts the anthropological gaze that has historically been fixed on foreign, exotic, "primitive" cultures, onto "civilized," first-world, American culture.

"Nacirema: Backwards American" (fall 2006)

I am a Nacirema
I'm not your homeless schizophrenic
begging and yelling obscenities
but your depressive-manic
peddling remedies
for the maladies my fellow American tribe
has caused

but I'm only 250 milligrams of Lamictal and Seroquel a day,
blue cross' reimbursement pay for
a psych ward's inpatient stay and
a psychiatrist's visit away,
from making North Capitol my habitat
for the (in)humanity and (in)sanity
cuz there's no affordable dwellings
when \$500,000 condos are selling
to those
who have living wages with PPOs
and prescription plans
so they can
purchase anti-depressants and atypical antipsychotics
while the impoverished cope with their **Home Made Oblivion**:
or dope up on **HMO** narcotics
rummaging through their hard times
hoping to locate themselves
in this neo-urban slum removal
or gentrification
"niggers" and poor folk are being disposed of
and all we can say is it's an unfortunate situation?

my momma says: "it's all about education

if you've got it, then you won't be the victim of the discrimination"
so with a PhD, I can think and write myself out of exploitation!

but the academy is just another fabrication of capitalism
relying on the alienation of knowledge producers from the commodification of the
"underclass"

i had this revelation while furthering my procrastination
when I should be finishing my five incompletes
but those incompletes are the material ramifications of how I am feeling right now

I find it hard to understand why I was the little colored girl that made it
cuz meritocracy much like democracy is elusive and illusory

I went from public school learning
to elite, top tier, liberal arts college
more knowledge than I know how to handle
but what about "no child left behind" who can't read or comprehend this poem
the nomadic children who roam
the school hallway or the streets
trying to make it by spitting misogynistic lyrics to beats
or make their way out of the hood with a pair of "Jordans" or cleats
instead of using the dexterity and finesse of their intellect
but with the neglect of poorly paid teachers
deplorable learning conditions
over-prescribed Ritalin as an instant form of discipline
we are training these Alphas, Betas, Gammas, Deltas, and Epsilons of this "Brave New"
America
for higher learning institutions:
penitentiaries where they learn the rudimentary lessons
they didn't get in elementary school
but the exception has become ignorance when apathy is now the rule
we are just a nation full of nihilists being led by fools

"now faith is the substance of things hoped for,
the evidence of things not seen"¹¹⁷
but in America hope and faith is evident in the substance of the green

buy faith, those of you whom can afford to tithe ten percent of your wages
buy faith in our children's poor education so they can stand in the front line as gages

buy faith in the Babel of nine eleven, a 24 seven convenience store(y)

117 Hebrews 11:1.

buy faith in the spread of imperialism and free market capitalism as democratic glory
buy faith in the “sanctity of marriage” instead of worrying about feeding, housing, and
rehabilitating the poor
buy faith cuz the propaganda is being sold by girl scouts door to door

buy faith instead of sex education and medication to treat AIDS disproportionately killing
Black mothers and daughters
buy faith in Black immorality instead of levees that could’ve prevented genocide by
raging waters
buy faith in the millions of “Niggers” and Latino immigrants who struggle to construct
and occupy
prisons and borders

buy faith in million dollar reverends who sell out their sistren and brethren to
conservative politicians
buy faith in America, so the wealthy 1 percent can get their 90 percent commissions
buy faith when you can’t afford pauperization
buy faith in a president who has ravaged, disenfranchised, and exploited nations
buy faith cuz it keeps war as the journey to freedom ostensible and long
buy faith in the Nacirema tribe cuz consumption keeps this nation’s economy going
strong
buy faith cuz it’s just like an old record: skipping and repeating
buy faith cuz we are used to being fed the shit that we are eating

I am an American
I’m not your homeless schizophrenic
begging and yelling obscenities
but your manic-depressive
yelling and begging for remedies
for the maladies the Nacirema tribe have caused
they’ve got me on 250 milligrams of Lamictal and Seroquel a day
and Blue Cross won’t offer any more reimbursement pay
for my extended psych ward
impatient stay
and I’m only one psychiatrist visit away
from making North Capitol my residence
just a few blocks from the President’s place

but I can prolong my neurosis
while blocking my psychosis
with a playlist from my ipod
I silence the cacophony of the begging and screaming
with the euphony of the myriad voices in my head

with my privilege of desensitizing
I evade the stares of the homeless who resemble the living dead
just a reflection of who I am or soon could be
if I let the Nacirema tribe destroy me
cuz now, I got no faith in things that I can see
so I become the ethnographic eye reversing the gaze
on our backward American tribe with our primitive culture and uncivilized ways

Part of this poem was originally written in 2005, but I discarded the previous ending when I wanted to talk more about Hip Hop as a contemporary social movement. This poem discusses how women must be integral to the future of Hip Hop.

Street's Disciple (fall 2005/fall 2008)

I'm a street's disciple
I'm a soldier for this cause
I hold my pen like a rifle
shooting with a phrase and a clause
cuz I believe poetry can bring us to salvation
in a world where substance is lost
or has been placed on pause
while rappers play talk about the gun inside they drawers
and how they gonna take us bitches to war
get inside our trenches and tear down the walls
it's lyrical FGM
but it's supported by the FCC
cuz it ain't a felony to say, "little black girls don't mean shit to me"
"they are just dark phrases with a crunk melody"
"jump-offs dancing on beer cans and shingles"

yet niggaz say, "the video hos is just tryna get some exposure"
yet colored girls are willing to lose more than composure to get into this industry
but rappers get all angry and defensive when critics clamor that hip-hop is black
America's peril dudes say, "this misogyny type shit is all hype"
"a mass production of a pre-existing construction concocted by
"blue-eyed white or jew executive devils"
"getting off on black men boasting about rims and timbs,
being well hung, and virile
and while some purist believe that this is why hip-hop is dead
I prefer to say that it's sterile:
lyrically overcompensating for a culture that is now politically impotent and infertile

I'm a disciple of the street:
a ghetto griot who knows that music is more than just a dope beat
just like women are more than "a big butt and a smile"
and big dicks can't go the extra mile or get change to cum
if we are trying to erect a real social movement
and even you, you socially conscious black queen deifying brothas,
please know that it takes more to sustain the roots than simply sowing seeds
we're tired of you too causing our wombs to bleed
from allegorical coercion/metaphorical and rhetorical sacrificing of virgins
and common cries that you used to love her
but you only want the sturgeon to produce roe for a new version
of your phallogocentric revolution
sometimes it makes me wanna holler:
"let this bitch off her collar"
"this culture can't burgeon until you recognize that this disciple can bring about
conversion
so dog,"shut the fuck up"
"and listen"

This poem is about where I am currently at now emotionally, spiritually, and mentally. It is a culmination of resilience. I found myself searching for something unknown in many places throughout my life, and never found what I was looking for and still remained empty. As I finish a long journey of searching for answers and something to fill this unquenchable and insatiable desire for "something more" in intellectual spaces, I am not sure where to go from here. I am not sure if this is the death of me or the rebirth of someone new no longer searching for herself and identity through education.

The precipice (April 2009)

I was
a
lone
soul
solely
searching
for something
to fill this
emptiness
and as I sit on the precipice
I cannot reckon

which beckoning
call I should answer
do I fly?
or
do I fall?

I've worked so hard to get to this point
not a solo
but joint
venture
and now I feel like an
indentured servant
I'm not quite a slave
but I'm indebted to the lives of those
who gave
me this opportunity

I've got a commitment to uphold
but let the truth be told
my dedication to my education
which has been this means and practice of liberation
the ultimate elevation
not spiritual
but social and spatial
has got me tired of
righting everyone else's wrongs
in order to fulfill or reject
other people's expectations
of what this colored girl should be

yet they wonder why suicide
is always appealing to me
or why i consider letting this terminal degree
terminate me
after all,
at least my epitaph will read PhD
after this caged bird sets herself free

from this anhedonia and apathy
that are spreading within me like cancer
and no doctor has the answers
to why melancholy and mercurial moods
are multiplying

marring my mind and my body
abnormal thoughts
are dividing me
into binaries
or polarities
I'm developing dualities
confining me to define my socially constructed world
or reality
as one or the other
I'm stuck in the past
in a modernist meta-narrative
A PoMo nacirema's nightmare
cuz post-modernist theory can't explain why
this fissure feels so real and combative
and why no medication
operation
therapy
or fascination with conceptualizations
can diagnose
numb
heal
suppress
or assuage
this internal proliferation for something greater

why can't I recover
what do I continue to suffer from?

but I discovered
on my journey to the precipice
that this is symptomatic of this
working class exodus
to talented tenth betterment
this PhD is becoming an impediment
it doesn't make obstacles and misery obsolete or irrelevant
nor is it a deterrent to internal conflict
because I still feel the detriment of being
empty

yet I am filled with plenty
of theories on why I am experiencing
frag-
men-

ta-
tion
though i am still starving for solutions to my own
satiating
thirsty even after taking bottomless libations
from fountains of knowledge and truth
I guess it is the naivete of my youth
in believing that my degree can summon my salvation

so while other people's dreams and hopes keep me overfed and undernourished
I'm temporarily filled by the opportunity to flourish
yet so emaciated and fatigued
that i am about to perish

as I rise to the precipice
I feel like I am standing on unstable sediment
feeling quite irreverent in my beliefs in this system

I feel like I am sinking
falling through hollow ground
watching my world come tumbling down
thinking to myself, I'm so tired now
cuz I am too somnolent to speak
withering away from being so weak
writhing in agony while on the brink
of the
precipice

alone
solely searching for my soul
something greater to fill this (w)hole
the sum of things greater than institutionalized education
more potent than psychiatric medication
a higher plateau than this final destination
I want to go to a place where this
emptiness
doesn't exist

but how do I get there from here
do I fly?
or
do I fall?

This chapter aimed to show how poetry can be a way of theorizing about identity. It shows the evolution and maturation of my writing and me. It has talked back to and with the previous chapter on how poetry can do feminism and feminist resistance, and over time, show how one can be resilient in the face of adversity. It shows how my negotiations of race, class, gender, and sexuality are similar to the young women of the previous chapter, and ultimately shows the potential their poetry and feminism has to offer for their lives in the future. Through the genre of poetry and languages of the academe as well as vernacular, this chapter attempted to demonstrate how despite limitations of language, one can still theorize in many ways and reach many audiences along lines of difference and situated vantage points.

Chapter 6: It's Bigger Than Hip Hop: Black Girls Matter Too/an Outro

It was June 28, 2009. Approximately a week after the sudden death of the King of Pop, Michael Jackson, and the date of the B.E.T. Awards. The best in black entertainment were in attendance to be humored and honored, and to pay homage to one of the greatest black entertainers of all time. Jamie Foxx hosted. Chris Brown, a Michael Jackson protegee, was notably absent and rumored to be banned from performing because of his assault against former girlfriend Rihanna. Beyonce performed "Ave Maria," or "Hail Mary" to honor the legend while adorned in her signature unitard that would have made the Catholics blush. Monica and Keyshia Cole co-performed one of Keyshia's hit songs about love and heartbreak. And, the King of Hip Hop, Lil' Wayne, along with new comer Drake, better known as Aubrey Graham, the half-black, half-Jewish Degrassi: The Next Generation star from Toronto, Canada, co-performed, the "Best I Ever Had" and "I Just Want to Fuck/Love Every Girl in The World."

Drake, pretending to be down with the Cash Money and Lil' Wayne crew, performed his Black hyper-masculinity like a professional and the crowd loved it. The View's Sheri Shepherd, who cried on-air about wanting to support McCain and Palin for president and vice-president because she was about family values first and had a son who was mentally disabled like Palin's, was moving and grooving and reciting the lyrics of Drake's song about the best sex he ever had. From the looks of her excitement when Drake was on stage, this cougar did not appear to have much conflict with enjoying the music which lacked of family values.

But, before I digress, Drake's song, which is typical of rap music today, was not deemed as offensive since people have gotten used to the ubiquity of black women represented as expendable semen-receptacles. Black women and men have justified sexualized lyrics, which have often promoted and defended the sexual objectification of black women, as "art," "fantasy," "simply entertainment," and, "an honest expression of gender relations in the ghetto," to name a few. However, it was not until Lil' Wayne joined Drake on stage--maybe in an attempt to spice up Drake's bland performance and weak stage presence due to his torn ACL--with his adolescent daughter and their underage and overage entourages that people began to have a problem with rap lyrics discussing "fucking" or "loving" every girl in the world.

This B.E.T. debacle was the first time in several years that I can remember people being outraged about offensive rap lyrics. While there was the Don Imus "Nappy Headed Ho" faux pa a couple of years ago, the onus was placed on Imus because he was white and, not to mention, had a history of berating black women, but he was censured mostly because he was white. Although Imus was fired, and there was a Congressional hearing about the Hip Hop industry following his indiscretion, nothing changed in the Hip Hop industry and business went on as usual.

As a result of the tween and early teen aged black girls dancing on stage to lyrics that they think are normal and harmless and about love and romance, Black Exploitation Television caught a lot of backlash about the degrading, "immoral" performance that included young girls on the stage being subjected to inappropriate lyrics. In fact, B.E.T. edited out the performance with the girls for subsequent viewing, and Viacom removed

the original live performance from YouTube. I guess it would have been okay if the girls were of the legal age to consent to be in the music video--which was simultaneously playing on a large television screen on the stage--for the song because at least the hos consented, had agency, and a choice to perform sexualized roles unlike these young girls. All I kept thinking was, "what did this song have to do with Michael Jackson, and was this performance a dedication to his alleged pedophilia or penchant for young children?" And all people kept blogging about was, "how was this song, with these underaged girls, including Lil' Wayne's daughter, appropriate in light of MJ's death and in light of their young age and adolescent and presumed non-existent sexuality?"

This performance of black femininity and its symbiotic relationship with black masculinity was the point that concerned, grown-ass black girls like me have been trying to make for a very long time: that black girls use these images and messages or gesticulations and articulations about blackness and femaleness to discover and define who they are. They use these tools and scripts to come into their black womanhood, to understand their black womanhood, and aspire to become the next desired, deified, and loved video-ho or misogynistic lyrical muse. This spectacle was the conflation or the collapse of the supposed separation of two worlds that Hip Hop claims exists: the world of fantasy and entertainment and reality and education.

In the distinct worlds of fantasy and entertainment, unattractive male rappers have unprotected sex with hundreds of video-hos in a realm where HIV and AIDS doesn't exist and isn't killing black girls and women. But, in the world of reality and self-education and parental guidance, parents, such as Lil' Wayne teach their kids the

meaning of self-worth, how Hip Hop is sexist male fantasy, and how this youth culture is not made or intended for youth audiences. But the truth and the meaning behind this performance was that there had never been a such thing as distinct separations.

However, what truly made everyone uncomfortable about these girls on stage with these lude lyrics, and grown men rapping about equating love with sex, cashing in V-cards, and fucking Miley Cyrus when she turns 18 of course, was that they were finally starting to see how little black girls become the big hos with a little bit of gentle coaxing from a dope beat and lyrics that are altered to equate fucking with loving. What made black people uncomfortable was that they finally saw their defenses for rap and Hip Hop's degradation of black women crumble right in front of their faces as the little girls were dancing on beer cans and shingles. What made them talk back about this one instance at the B.E.T. awards was the fact that they were finally starting to see how this was bigger than Hip Hop. Unlike, these newly concerned parents and critics, throughout my life as a black girl and black woman who has been, and to some extent still is affected by the images about blackness and femaleness, and throughout all of my research with my young black female interlocutors, I have always recognized that issues such as "negative" or hyper-sexualized, and one-dimensional images of black women are much bigger than Hip Hop. The lives of black girls are much bigger than Hip Hop, and this is why black girls matter too.

This dissertation was an attempt to move beyond the usual polemics of Hip Hop: the misogyny, the sexism, the conspicuous consumption, the violence, the homophobia, or other exemplars of what is wrong with the music and industry, on the one hand, or the uncritical praise of a bricolage culture of opposition that has just lost its way, on the other. Such polarized polemics have done the following: either they demonstrated the cultural significance of Hip Hop as a distinct postindustrial youth culture that helped generate a new area and form of commerce for young black people who were excluded from the public sphere; or they justified the pervasive hyper-masculinity, fetishization of black women, and the glorification of illicit street culture as products of structural racism. Such debates have served as the foundation of this project. However, instead of getting embroiled in such monotonous conversations and debates that have done nothing to rectify or find pro-active solutions to issues, such as how representations of black women in Hip Hop as expendable sex objects truly and in varying ways and degrees have affected the lives of black girls, this dissertation assumed the reader was familiar with such debates and provided a new way of looking at Hip Hop throughout its 30 years from a black woman-centric perspective.

Throughout five chapters, I took the reader on a journey from Hip Hop's evolution from the margins to the center by doing the unthinkable and uncommon, I placed black women at the center of the discourse, charted their evolution, and focused on the influence the music and the culture had on their lives. In chapter one, "Beyond Beats and Rhymes': American Studies, Black Feminism, Ethnography, and the Future of Hip Hop/ an Intro," I provided an introduction to my initial encounters with Hip Hop as a

black girl and Hip Hop's significance as a youth culture, alongside the literature review, which charted the history of Hip Hop via the dominant and contemporary conversations. Diverging from traditional introductions, I had a Hip Hop interlude or interjection about the future of Hip Hop and the debate about a Hip Hop movement. Instead of engaging in the dichotomous debates about a yea or nay for a future Hip Hop movement, I contextualized this debate within a discussion about the role black women will play in a Hip Hop movement as more than sexual bearers or cultural reproduces, which were the roles that black women were expected to play in idolized black power movements that Hip Hop has modeled itself after. While I have often believed that it will be impossible for a music and culture imbedded in capitalism to be a revolutionary social or political movement of the future, I did discuss the only possibility that I see of a Hip Hop movement, which was one with women as integral to the movement and feminism as a foundation of an emancipatory movement. I saw such a model best exemplified by the Differential or Oppositional Mode of Consciousness that Chela Sandoval discusses in her seminal text, *The Methodology of the Oppressed*.

In chapter two, "From Divas in Hip Hop to Video Hos: Black Women Negotiation Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Hip Hop," I discussed the ways black women have been integral to Hip Hop as fierce emcees and then became devalued as artists and deified as video-vixens. Ultimately, I charted the evolutionary labor roles in the Hip Hop industry focusing primarily on how black women's negotiations of race, class, gender, and sexuality in their music and images evolved as the industry changed. I introduced the arguments from the two major texts about black women's roles in Hip Hop, namely

Gwendolyn Pough's, *Check It While I Wreck It*, and Cheryl Keyes' *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, and I reframed their models for looking at black women's roles as cultural producers in Hip Hop. Instead of placing black female rappers into a black feminist legacy to show their significant contributions, importance, and relevance in Hip Hop as Pough has done, and/or placing black women rappers into categories or archetypes as Keyes has done, I decided to demonstrate how black women in Hip Hop have negotiated race, class, gender, and sexuality since 1979, and how their negotiations have evolved in correlation with changes in the Hip Hop industry that led to a change in their roles from cultural producers to cultural bearers, or as fierce emcees who addressed a multiplicity of issues such as sex, romance, racism, love, and domestic violence to video vixens who sit a look pretty in black male rapper's videos.

Instead, I defined the four phases that black female rappers have gone through in the Hip Hop industry, such as: the Female-ist Presence: Black Women Carving A Space (1979-1988); Afrocentricity, Ghetto-centricity, and Female-centricity: A Multiplicity of Messages (1989-1994); "Selling Hot Pussy": Black Girls Rockin' the Mic--in A Sexual Connotation (1995-2000); and Looking for Lauryn: The Disappearance of the Divas in Hip Hop and the Rise and Reign of the Video Vixen (2001-2009). I demonstrated how black women in Hip Hop's roles have changed from visible and audible female rappers to visible and silent video vixens, which have correlated with shifts in the the male dominated Hip Hop industry and were a result of black female rapper's engagement, encounters, and or confrontations with legacies of black women's sexuality as deviant, immoral, and licentious.

In chapter three, “Ethnographic Adventures in Hip Hop and Black Girlhood,” I compiled a collection of three essays: a self-ethnography about my experiences with Hip Hop in the 1990s, an ethnography about three teenaged black girls’ experiences with Hip Hop in the 2000s, and a life history about one black girl’s experience with Hip Hop in the 2000s. I wanted to demonstrate how the absence of black female rappers as artists and cultural producers, coupled with the hyper-visibility of overly sexualized video-vixens and degrading lyrics about black women as sexual objects affect the lives of black girls in varying ways. With this chapter, I showed how my experience with rap music and Hip Hop culture during its first phase of hyper-commercialization during my middle school years of 1994-1996, in which women were still present but the lyrical content was too sexually explicit and less empowering, affected how I understood what it meant to be black, working-class, and female. I also illustrated how, as black women as vocal and empowering rappers disappeared and were currently replaced by video-vixens impacted how black girls today, ten years plus after my encounters with blackness influenced college bound black girls. Last, I wanted to complicate this discussion by showing how girls could be influenced by competing ideologies and cultures, such as Hip Hop and a religious, black supremacist, and cultural ideology as the Auser Auset society. In this chapter with these three essays, I demonstrated the complex ways that black girls of varying ages, ethnicities, sexualities, religions, and educational backgrounds were affected by rap music and Hip Hop culture, but found different ways to negotiate conflicting messages and images about black womanhood and femininity in the Hip Hop era. This chapter laid the foundation for the next chapter that showed how Black girls

could go from being victims of Hip Hop's disrespect and assault against black women and black womanhood to being agents of change and resisting through poetry and feminist pedagogy at a younger age.

In chapter four, "Reconsidering *for colored girls*: Creative Writing as Qualitative Method for Exploring Resistance and Resilience in Black Girlhood," I discussed the significance of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*, and the ways that black women have used poetry, prose, and other forms of writing to candidly, critically, and unapologetically discuss the myriad ways that they experience blackness and femaleness. In such texts, black women have addressed the ways black women experienced oppressions because of their race, class, gender, and sexualities; they discussed how women have been resistant to such oppressions, and became resilient in the process. I demonstrated how Shange's poetry was the first space to discuss contemporary urban black girlhood and emerging black womanhood in an explicitly feminist way.

By introducing Shange, I wanted to discuss how poetry could be a way of doing ethnography or life history research on black girlhood, and more importantly explore issues of resistance and resilience in black girlhood. I demonstrated how poetry was the space that allowed black women of the Hip Hop generation, or girls and women growing up identifying with Hip Hop to speak, "talk back," and be heard and seen without having to perform a sexualized black womanhood and femininity. I argued that poetry, and spoken word/slam poetry was the space where black women artists had autonomy and could be resistant to dominant Hip Hop discourse, and in the process provide counter

narratives about blackness, and demonstrate resilience.

Through a discussion of previous research on black girls between the ages of 17-18, and the impact Hip Hop had on their psyches, i.e. the way they perceived their bodies, issues on love and sex, I showed how Hip Hop's representation of black women affected girls in myriad ways, but in ways that are not always detrimental because girls were able to find ways to resist. However, recognizing the limitations of ethnography/life history methods, and the inability to show how black girls could be resistant and resilient at younger ages, I decided to create an interactive, dynamic, qualitative approach to study black girlhood. Rooted in participatory action research and black feminist anthropology traditions, I created a week long, 1.5 hour series of creative writing workshops to explore how black girls between the ages of 12-17 can use poetry to locate their voices, develop feminist voices, and demonstrate resistance and resilience through such speech and expressive acts.

Using feminist essays and women centered poetry, I taught 6 black girls how to write poetry and the importance of feminism. Each day, I demonstrated the relationships between poetry and autobiography, poetry and resistance, and poetry and resilience. After each lesson, the girls wrote poetry that I collected as data for analysis and compiled for their chapbook. This chapter showed how poetry had the ability to nurture resistance and resilience already present in black girls. It was also the foundation for my next chapter, which illustrated how over time and with a feminist teaching, poetry could reveal the ways black girls resist and are resilient.

In the final and culminating chapter: "Publicly Intellectual: A Collection of

Words, I demonstrated how my poetry was evidence that over time, black girls could produce work that was more refined, radical, and critical. In somewhat of a case study of the self, I provided a selection of poetry from 1996, when I was first introduced to poetry, to 2009 in order to chart my evolution and maturation as a writer. I also demonstrated the effectiveness of feminist pedagogy and feminist theory in helping me expand my reservoir of knowledge and ability to be resistant and resilient. By dividing my work into three parts, I demonstrated how my poetry went from discussions of race during my high school years, to discussions of intersectionality in my college years, and discussions of language, knowledge, power, and new ways of looking at myself and the world. I fused different types of writing: critical essay, poetry, and prose, and used different rhetorical devices such as vernacular and academic “jargon” to show how I am part of multiple cultural traditions and use multiple languages, theories, and methods to articulate and interpret who I am and the world around me. Ultimately, I wanted to show that despite limitations of language you could find many ways to reach multiple audiences and disseminate theory in non-traditional or unconventional ways, much in the way that rap music has done.

In retrospect, this dissertation was a heteroglossic hybrid. It built on ways of rethinking and re-doing Hip Hop, qualitative research, and feminism as black woman and on the lives of black girls. However, as with any research, there are limitations. First, conducting qualitative research and using only poetry and written exercises as data collection can result in too little data or conflicting data when students have different levels of education and literacy. I think supplementing the poetry and written

ethnographic exercises with audio-tape recorded interviews could have helped. But, in order to do audio-tape recorded interviews, rapport must be established first, and that can only happen with time.

Next, conducting weeklong poetry workshops in order to teach poetry and feminism, and evaluate resistance and resilience is too short of a time. Since resilience must be studied and measured over an extended period, a week is not sufficient. Also, attempting to introduce new concepts such as intersectionality, literary devices, and feminist theories cannot effectively be done during one week. Because I consistently ran out of time each day, either because girls were late, or because of issues with room scheduling, I was not able to really teach and discuss all of the materials in depth, which may have altered the research experience and the poetry.

Third, by working with multiple age groups in one setting with one curriculum that is geared towards older girls or girls with greater literacy skills, it was evident that some girls were on different reading levels and had different cognitive abilities because of age. I noticed that some of the girls were not as interested in reading some of the essays or contributing to the discussion for fear of showing that they did not understand.

When I conduct the workshops again, I plan to conduct them over the course of a semester in order to establish a routine in the girls lives. Many of the girls attended late or wandered in to the community center because they did not have a set daily routine. The problem with the poor attendance could have be remedied if the girls knew that there was a class every week or several times a week at a particular time. Mika, one of my participants encouraged me to keep this in mind for next time. She said that the girls

would look forward to doing this once a week or several times a week over an extended period of time. Therefore, with more time, I could spend several days teaching feminism, intersectionality, resistance, and resilience. Also, throughout four months, I could effectively measure the efficacy of the workshops on teaching and nurturing resistance in girls. And, thus the longer the duration of the workshops the more change, growth, and evolution of the young women as writers, and as feminists, and the better the opportunity to measure resistance and resilience.

Last, I would like to have multiple workshops for girls of various age groups in order to make sure they grasp the concepts. The age range from 12-17 was too large of a demographic, and it included a wide range of literacies. When I do this again, I will consult education research on how to divide girls into age groups, and teach multiple classes with 11-12 year olds, 13-15 year olds, and 16-18 year olds.

In sum, this dissertation and project provided me with the opportunity to engage ongoing issues that affected me as a young girl coming into my womanhood. Issues of negotiating race, class, gender, and sexuality is not unique to black girls, but the ways they negotiate these social constructions and the ways the social constructions intersect are unique. Since black girls have very little opportunities and spaces to truly and safely grapple with their development as black girls, they engage in activities that may lead to risk, which is why there has been a proliferation of such quantitative and qualitative research on black girlhood and deficit. By allowing black girls to address such issues in a safe, affirming, and proactive way, they can become resistant and resilient in the process. Closing with Shange once again, “I am offering these to you as to what I’ve received

from this world so far. I am on the other side of the rainbow/ picking up the pieces of
days spent waitin for the poem to be heard/ while you listen/ I have other work to do.”

Appendices

Creative Writing Seminar: Poetry as Resistance and Resilience

Name:

Age:

Grade:

School:

Exercise One

1. What is Poetry?

2. Do you write poetry, or have you ever written poetry before? If yes, how long have you been writing? What types of poetry do you write? Do you have any favorite poets?

3. Is poetry important? Why is it important, or why is it not important?

4. Do you think poetry has the ability to change your life or the way you view the world? Why? How?

5. What types of music do you listen to? Why?

6. Do you think music has the ability to change your life or the way you view the world? Why? How?

7. What do you hope to learn from this creative writing seminar?

Exercise Two

Read the two handouts on "What is Poetry?" and write down your favorite definition(s) of poetry.

Discussion Questions

Read the essay, “‘when i was a young soldier for the revolution’: coming to voice” and answer the questions below.

1. Why is poetry important to the author?

2. What does the author mean when she writes on page 12, “speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subject can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless--our beings defined and interpreted by others”?

3. What is the relationship or the connection the author is making between poetry and “finding a voice”?

Exercise Three

1. What is autobiography?

2. How does poetry relate to autobiography?

3. Have you ever read or seen an autobiography? If yes, whose autobiography have you read or seen?

Discussion Questions

Read the essay, “writing autobiography” and the poem, “Poem for Pain” and answer the questions below.

1. In the essay “writing autobiography,” why is autobiography important to the author? What does autobiography do for her?

2. In the poem, “Poem for Pain,” what is the author talking about?

3. What is the relationship between the essay, “writing autobiography,” and the poem, “Poem for Pain”?

Exercise Four

Before writing an autobiography, one has to begin to think about who they are, such as likes, dislikes, dreams, desires, fears, etc. This exercise is intended to encourage you to begin thinking about who you are, or who you are becoming. This exercise will help you with your next assignment, so please answer the questions thoughtfully.

I am _____ years old.

My favorite color is _____.

In my free time I like to _____.

In five years I see myself _____.

My dream job would be _____.

If I had three words to describe my personality they would be

_____.

I dislike _____.

I love _____.

I'm afraid of _____.

My greatest hope is _____.

My zodiac sign is _____.

My favorite song is _____ By: _____.

My favorite food to eat is _____.

My favorite book is _____ By: _____.

My favorite TV show is _____.

I'm from _____ neighborhood in DC.

The motto I live by is _____.

Discussion Questions

Please read the essay, “Feminist Politics: Where We Stand” and the poem, “Whose Pussy is This?” and then answer the questions below.

1. What is feminism? What does it aim to do?

2. Is feminism relevant today? Do we need feminism?

3. Is the poem feminist? What makes it feminist? What makes it not feminist?

Exercise Five

1. Have you ever experienced any type of oppression, discrimination, or prejudice because of your race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, or class? How did it make you feel?

2. Have you ever witnessed someone else being oppressive to another person, or have you participated in discriminating against or being prejudiced towards someone based on their gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion? How did it make you feel?

Discussion Questions

Read the essays, “talking back,” and “love is our hope” and answer the questions below.

In the essay, “talking back,” how does the author define “talking back”?

Why is talking back important?

How is poetry a form of talking back?

In the essay, “love is our hope” how does the author define love?

Why is love important?

What does love have to do with resilience?

Exercise Six

Please answer the questions below in order to begin thinking about how resilience has operated in your life.

1. Have you ever gone through anything in your life that was difficult?

2. Have you ever felt like you could not overcome the problem or situation? Did you feel powerless?

3. How did you overcome the situation?

4. What role does love play in your life?

Assignment Three

Write a list poem about something that you have had to overcome.

Rough Draft

*The Power of the Pen:
Poetry as Resistance and
Resilience*

Raneeka

“Untitled”

Let's get things straight
I am not a bitch, I am not four legs
I am not free. I am not priced tagged
I do have a heart and yes I have feelings just
like your “mova.”
You can't feel what we feel because you're just
not us.
Yeah, I'm pretty and I'm definitely sexy
But ONE thing about ME, I am NOT YOURS.
You don't own me, “Oh, no I am not for sale!”
I know I have a bright future
The way that you talk to these girls makes them think
that they don't have a future, and it just isn't cute.
You know you have manners somewhere in there
you really don't think of them as hoes. Put it
aside and make her your official girl but the
way that you treat them is just too much
Don't even think of saying Bitch 'cause that
shit ain't for me. I'm too classy for that B.S.
You say that you care and love them when
You know you really love smoking that weed
Yeah we all now dat you be thugging the block
and hustling rocks
You get excited when they tell you that your
fly cause you rocking some Gucci
No young lady wants no disrespectful ass
nigga in their life so get your punk azz off your
dusty butt and make a living.
I'm that new P.Y.T.
I am not a Bitch!

Audrea

“Untitled”

I AM A GIRL IN A BIG WORLD.

WELL THAT’S WHAT I CALL IT.

MY LIFE IS FANTASTIC!!

WELL THAT’S WHAT YOU THINK.

A DREAM I WANT TO BECOME.

KEEP PRAYING FOR THE DAYS TO BE SEEN.

LAUGHTER AND TEARS ARE WHAT KEEPS THE SMILING.

REALITY CHECK, LIFE’S NO GAME.

LIVING ON THE EDGE WITH BIG SURPRISES.

TAKING TIME TO REALIZE.

I SEE LIFE ONLY THROUGH MY EYES.

**I DREAM BIG TO MY FUTURE
GROWS. I WANNA BE THE ONE THAT EVERYONE KNOWS.**

Mika

“Hurt”

I’m just one person with a lot of feelings!!!!

“Why do people always treat them like their appealing?”

I understand I will always have regrets

“But why do people put me up after the threats?”

Lies, love, lust, and living all start with the big “L”

“But, when I fucking live my life, I get caged in like I’m in jail.”

Forget that I’m spitting this lyrical spit

“Because when I show you who I really am and what I’m about

You gonna respect my shit”

Charlene

“Woman with a heart”

I am a woman with a heart
I feel the pain all over my body like it’s
been there all along.

I hear them say that we’re their
bytches and hoes, that they pimped
US

It’s not the cry of the baby
It’s the cry of my soul trying to be
free.

You have no shame over me
I am a woman with a heart

I see the darkness of my fellow
relationships
I dream that you will kill
me
You have no shame over me
I breathe as a living being you
asshole I am free
You can't control me
You are the brother, the cousin,
the husband, the father, of a family
let me be, no let me sleep
I control you, you're my bitch, my hoe, I play you
How is it not to be free
No one can control me
I am a woman with a
heart.

“Black girls learn love hard”

Black girls learn love hard
It doesn't matter what race you are
All that matters is it hurts

“Roses are red
the sky is blue”
love does hurt
how about you
love is okay but it has to be true

“bacon is bacon
eggs is eggs
don't let them boys between your legs”

They say you're sexy
They say you're fine
they hurt your feelings
But 3 days later
they're like “bye”

Love doesn't have to hurt
it's just who's giving the love
Black girls learn love hard

I mean, We learn love hard!

“Step-up”

You make me sick
the baby's crying for food
the mom saying, “she won't take it anymore”
you're in the kitchen smokin' that
dope.
It just won't work
you're just so fucking ignorant
come close to the heart of their life
so that I can just hear your
point of view
You feel like you can't do any
thing for your child.
You dream that you falling more
into the bullshit around you.
STOP! STOP! STOP!
The bullshit is just too much
ignoring your job as a father
is fucking bullshit.
you shouldn't have had sex
if you knew you couldn't take it
ignoring all prior advice
isn't easy
your mom left and that was cruel
step up to the plate and don't be no fool.

“Haters”

I am someone important
I hear that bullshit them haters
talk
I dream I'm around people who
love me
I try to understand that you
aren't that nice
I say, “thanks and okay” like
it doesn't hurt me
I'm tired of your mess, fuck
you

I am someone important
All you are is a lost and
found box
You wait for your soul to get
lost 'cause someone told you, you weren't
important
you find yourself by talking about
others.
But, I'm just like a rainbow
I show my true colors, bitch.
Now, cry, it's okay now you know how I feel.
Bounce.

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