University of North Carolina – Wilmington

**The Importance of Hip Hop Feminism in Creating Safe Spaces**

Dillon Harless

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Sean Palmer

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**“**I am a Black Feminist. I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my blackness as well as my womaness, and therefore my struggles on both of these fronts are inseparable,” (Braswell). Here, Lorde (who identifies as lesbian) touches on two aspects of an idea called *intersectionality,* a term borne of Black Feminism that describes race, gender, sexuality, and class as interconnected social constructs to be analyzed together, not separately. Black Feminists such as Lucy Ann Delany (1830 – after 1891), Harriet Anne Jacobs (1813 – 1897), Ella Baker (1903 – December 13, 1986), Audre Lorde (1934 – 1992), and several others were aware of intersectionality since the early 1800s and pushed social reform since the time of Slavery in the U.S. An understanding of intersectionality is imperative to recognize why different fields of Feminism, such as Black Feminism, are constructed and studied. Without intersectionality, one cannot see why Black women need a movement that is separate from a White-dominated Feminism (Thompson). In the quote above Lorde uses a term, “womaness,” and ties it to her Blackness. Her two traits are inseparable to society, and therefore her social interests differ from White women. Though White women also experience inequality, they are spared the hardships of race and color under an intersectional lens (even poor White women), left mostly to deal with the fact that women at large are treated unfairly by men. This is important because Feminism is largely driven by middle-class White women who are not only spared of those social hardships linked to race and color, but also of those related to class. Feminism is mostly concerned with eliminating sexism specifically and lacks an intersectional lens. Womanism then becomes a term that Black Feminists use to further separate their movement from Feminism to create a political bubble to which Black women can relate more accurately. All this considered, it is no surprise that as subcultures emerge from others, new movements become necessary to address the specific issues that women of these new cultures face. Today, there exists a new type of Feminism, one that distinguishes itself even further from Feminism as it is more specific than Black Feminism. This movement is Hip Hop Feminism, and it focuses on the trials of Black women born in the Hip Hop generation. To understand and support Hip Hop Feminism, it is first important to understand how Hip Hop culture originated. This essay seeks to demonstrate the need for Hip Hop feminism as a catalyst of social reform for the benefit of those born in the Hip Hop generation suffering oppression based on class, gender, color, race, and sexuality through a masculine analysis of the origins of Hip Hop, appearance of females and “alternative” lifestyle artists, and an analysis of such artists who redefine and boldly fight against social norms in Hip Hop music.

To understand why a new Feminist movement is required to address women of the Hip Hop generation, one must understand how Hip Hop music began as a male-dominated genre (Damani). There is much debate on exactly where Hip Hop began because, as with many art forms, its history is complicated. Black music during the late 60s and early 70s was largely funk or funk-influenced subgenres. Hip Hop would eventually spread through DJs, and several DJs had already made names for themselves by the mid-70s playing funk and R&B. The first DJ to achieve fame was Jonathon Cameron Flowers who eventually opened for James Brown in 1969 at Yankee Stadium. Others that followed around the same time were DJ Plummer, Eddie Cheba, DJ Hollywood, and DJ Jones. These DJs all rose to fame in different parts of New York, proving that Hip Hop did not originate in just one city, as several people from the Bronx like to claim. These DJs were also all males, which is not surprising considering the social climate of the 60s and 70s; there were many barriers that were not broken by women yet, including the occupation of professional disc jockeying. It is important to note that these disc jockeys were indeed professionals that were recruited by venues and clubs because when disco was created, it was an instant hit. This meant that DJs who were payed to play to the crowd’s interest simply had to start playing disco. In the song “The Love I Lost,” by Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, studio drummer Earl Young plays a revolutionary drum pattern now called Four-On-The-Floor which implies a kick drum on every beat of a 4/4-time signature paired with a consistent sixteenth- or eighth-note high hat. This song marked the beginning of disco, and made it much easier for DJs to mix records, using the consistent high hat as a cue to switch to their next record on a downbeat (the first note of a measure), allowing for smooth transitions and dancing (Jackson).

The advent of disco was imperative to the evolution of Hip Hop music because of this ease of transition while DJ-ing. And since male DJs had their hands around funk, they also controlled the disco scene and, in turn, Hip Hop music. Hip Hop music became its own distinguishable genre, denoted by loop-based samples stitched together with Music Production Centers or MPCs, around the time these MPCs became affordable for the common citizen. It is important to note that Hip Hop is often incorrectly used to refer Hip Hop music because Hip Hop technically refers to the entire culture, including key elements such as DJ-ing, rapping, dancing, and graffiti. Though the Bronx was not entirely responsible for the invention of Hip Hop music, one DJ, Mario, is responsible for the initial wave of popularity that the genre experienced. DJ Mario (often referred to as the King of Disco) was by far the most popular DJ in New York, and anyone that wanted to DJ outside at block parties or at a school (where most parties in the projects were held) had to get permission from DJ Mario. This is critical in understanding where much of the masculinity seen in Hip Hop originates; DJ Mario was a founding member of a gang called the Black Spades which provided him two things: a large fan base and protection (Seba Demani). During this time, gangs were essentially the law in many urban areas of New York, and punishment for crossing into unowned turf was never light. For this reason, and the fact the DJ Mario had the nicest sound system around, Mario transitioned from disco to what would later be called Hip Hop as smoothly as he transitioned between songs in his sets. According to DJ Boogieman, Mario’s brother, they didn’t start hip hop alone; but they helped start it and without them Hip Hop music would not have made it as far as it has. Boogieman also details how DJ Mario bore witness and approval of new gang members during their initiation into the Black Spades which was usually a fight with one of the older members (Waynetv). Considering that DJ Mario (along with most members of the Black Spades) was a martial artist, one begins to see the masculinity that enveloped the gang lifestyle and the DJs of Hip Hop culture that were affiliated with gangs, often playing their first gigs with borrowed equipment from DJ Mario himself. Among those who borrowed equipment from Mario was Afrika Bambaataa, the founder of the Universal Zulu Nation, an organization consisting mainly of members of the Black Spades and accredited with officially defining and spreading Hip Hop culture. There is little to no documentation of women in the Black Spades, so one can infer that even if women were allowed in the gang, they did not hold much weight in the decisions of the gang at large. Considering this gang is largely responsible for spreading Hip Hop culture, one can easily see how the same masculine tendencies would spread throughout the culture at its very origins and why women require a movement to create a space for them in this culture.

Even a less-than-thorough study of Black Feminism shows that Black women would not sit idle for long. Shortly after Hip Hop culture started spreading rapidly, female DJs and MCs started using their art to change the image of women and the culture itself. MC Lyte set an example as the first woman to release a full solo album (“MC Lyte”). She was also featured in an anti-violence movement song title “Self-destruction” in which she detailed her confusion regarding violence specifically between males:

Funky fresh dressed to impress, ready to party

Money in your pocket, dying to move your body

To get inside you paid the whole ten dollars

Scotch taped with a razor blade taped to your collar

Leave the guns and the crack and the knives alone

MC Lyte's on the microphone

Bum rushing and crushing, snatching and taxing

I cram to understand why brother's don't be maxing

There's only one disco, they'll close one more

You ain't guarding the door, so what you got a gun for?

Do you rob the rich and give to the poor?

Yo Daddy-O, school em some more (line 1-12)

Her first two lines set up the mindset with which one should approach a night at the club, the next implies one should not waste the night because it cost so much to get in, and then she details a popular trend amongst Black men in Hip Hop culture at the time. Men would tape razor blades underneath their collars to get through a metal detector at the door, so they would always have a weapon on them if a fight broke out . MC Lyte then takes a self-empowering stance by telling everyone to forget about their weapons and fighting and instead listen to her rap in an effort to help everyone enjoy their time at the club dancing. The term “snatching” refers to the thievery of someone else’s chain, often taking place in a club because everyone is “dressed to impress.” This is an act bravado or boasting, another trait that is seen more commonly in males. Continuing, MC Lyte tries to elucidate how ridiculous she believes owning and flashing a gun is, if one is not using it solely to protect others. MC Lyte’s tone and inflections imply that she feels her lyrics should be common sense. Aware that it is not, however, she takes on the role of a teacher and employs an attitude of disappointed love for her brothers and sisters in the accompanying music video. In the video, at approximately 2:02, when MC Lyte says, “I cram to understand why brothers don’t be maxing,” she turns to a man in line outside a club after getting his attention by gently touching his arm, conveying that she is trusted and worth listening to. The only other woman on the same track, Ms. Melodie, was also a pioneer of the rap game. In her verse on Self-destruction Ms. Melodie declares, “If we want to develop and grow to another level / We can’t be guinea pigs for the devil,” employing a double entendre. She is implying that Black people must work towards evolving the mind instead of being satisfied with consumerism in a capitalist society, and uses “the devil” to refer to the White race. At that time, Islam was popular amongst rappers, and according to Islam White people are “devils” created by a team of scientists. Ms. Melodie was one of the first women to push rappers towards communicating conscious information under the lens of Womanism. One year after the release of “Self-destruction” Ms. Melodie released her full album titled “Diva” on which many of her songs include lyrics empowering women and accepting and loving oneself for who they are. For example, in her song titled, “B..B..B..Bklyn” she declares:

You know I have not come to down the other women

I make my own money, I got my own opinion

I write my own lyrics, make my own calculations

View the situation (69-72)

These lyrics are a statement to both men and women in which Ms. Melodie acknowledges the existence of a trend in Hip-Hop music of belittling women and making them seem dependent on men. By detailing that she makes her own money, forms her own thoughts, and produces her own art based on the conclusions she has reached about society within her mind she is doing away with the dependent stereotype. This mindset shows up in all of Ms. Melodie’s art, and modern Hip Hop Feminists still reference her. In context of the track “Self-destruction,” both MC Lyte and Ms. Melodie’s ideologies and presence on the track produced a more progressive atmosphere than any of the men. For example, there were arguments between some of the men on the tracks for reasons that seemed to go completely against the message of the song. KRS-One, who oversaw the production of the record and happened to be Ms. Melodie’s husband at the time, recalls a couple of these in a reflective interview:

So having said all of that, we started working on the ‘Self Destruction’ record. Doug E. Fresh came up with the chorus…long live Doug E. Fresh. D-Nice did the music…long live D-Nice. But then D-Nice and Doug E gets into an argument while we were recording the song. It was over something stupid like D-Nice not being large enough to be on the record. There was an argument about Just-Ice because somebody had a problem with him being on the record because he was prone to violence. He was the original hip-hop gangsta…no bullshit. (KRS-One)

KRS-One goes on to detail how the argument over Just-Ice’s presence was resolved with the support of Ann Carli, Jive Records’s A&R who helped him create the song. Most of the men on the track did not feel Just-Ice’s presence was a good idea considering the message, where KRS-One and Ann Carli felt that a man who had recently been an icon of violent behavior should absolutely be one of the spokespeople against violence. There were other women that broke the barrier around this time and one, Lisa Lee, even before MC Lyte who released a popular track titled “I Am a Pioneer,” and indeed she was. The influence of women who entered the Hip Hop culture around 1980 is undeniable, as references and similar styles are seen in other Hip Hop Feminist’s art through each decade and still today. And as time presses on, Hip Hop feminists begin to challenge misogyny and the ideas around gender, sex, and orientation more boldly, building off the foundation that the pioneers laid before them.

1993 brings us Queen Latifah’s powerful piece titled “U.N.I.T.Y.” in which she conveys a story of misogyny she experienced and how she responded:

Instinct leads me to another flow

Everytime I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a ho

Trying to make a sister feel low

You know all of that gots to go

Now everybody knows there's exceptions to this rule

Now don't be getting mad, when we playing, it's cool

But don't you be calling out my name

I bring wrath to those who disrespect me like a dame

That's why I'm talking, one day I was walking down the block

I had my cutoff shorts on right cause it was crazy hot

I walked past these dudes when they passed me

One of 'em felt my booty, he was nasty

I turned around red, somebody was catching the wrath

Then the little one said (Yeah me bitch) and laughed

Since he was with his boys he tried to break fly

Huh, I punched him dead in his eye and said "Who you calling a bitch?" (12-28)

Queen Latifah’s intention in this song is to stand against misogyny per her moral compass, while simultaneously providing a voice for women who experience the same kind treatment in day to day life and in Hip Hop culture (Gebreyes). She describes her approach in several interviews. When Huffington Post asked her about the message of U.N.I.T.Y, she replied:

I chose to kind of take the route of uplifting women by trying to make some records that had some positive thoughts in it. There are ways to make records that appeal to the masses but still have a message that leaves something with you. I had a problem with [misogyny]. I was never the kind of person that was going to take something lying down. And maybe that’s my father’s influence on me. I just was raised to protect myself and stand up for myself and speak my mind and be true. And even if I had to stand alone, I was to do that.

Queen Latifah was an icon of Hip Hop feminism in the 90s, and is still pushing the boundaries of what is socially acceptable in the United States, continuing to create safe spaces for oppressed people. For example, in 2015 she starred in a movie titled “Bessie” which follows the true story of a bisexual blues singer born in the late 1800s.

Not long after Queen Latifah started creating political space for women and people of lesbian and gay orientation, a gay male artist named Big Freedia hits the stage. Born Frederick Ross in 1978, Big Freedia recounts growing up in New Orleans being, “fun,” in an interview with Edge Media. In 2011 Freedia stated in an interview, “"I am not transgendered; I am just a gay male... I wear women's hair and carry a purse, but I am a man. I answer to either 'he' or 'she'," but two years later elucidates that she prefers “she” (Welch, Hutt). Achieving success in New Orleans, Freedia performs an average of six times a week and blurs lines between what is acceptable in public and what should be questioned. A pioneer of a hip-hop subgenre call bounce music (which Freedia refers to as “happy music” in the same interview with Edge Media), she approaches life from a consistently positive perspective, being one of the first artists to return to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and start working (Dee). She has had many local hits, released her first single in 1999 titled “An Ha, Oh Yeah,” and has even been reference by Lil Wayne (“Big Freedia Interview”). Freedia’s success, acceptance, and positive attitude alone are enough to empower people with lifestyles viewed as alternative. Freedia gained national recognition after performing at the Bingo Parlour Tent and Voodoo Experience in 2009, and then released an album under her own label in 2010 composed of singles dating back to “An Ha, Oh Yeah”. A few after releasing the album, a funk band named Galactic featured her on an album titled “Ya-ka-may”. Considering all the success she experienced in late 2009 through 2010, it is no surprise that Freedia was named Best Emerging Artist in 2011, Best Hip-Hop/Rap Artist in January 2011’s "Best of the Beat Awards," and her self-released album was nominated by the 2011 GLAAD Media Awards. In approximately the next year and a half she appeared in several television shows and talk shows (including a performance on “Jimmy Kimmel Live!), she was praised in 2012 by Rolling Stone as “…favorite SXSW set,” and won an MTV award for “Too Much Ass for TV.” Continuing the success in mid-2013, Big Freedia toured with the socially conscious electropop group, “The Postal Service”. In the same year, her reality TV show called “Big Freedia: Queen of Bounce,” which follows her on tour and at home in New Orleans, airs for the first time. A year later, Freedia headlined the “4th Anniversary of Bounce Event,” and in 2016 she was featured on Beyoncé’s visual album “Lemonade”. Beyoncé used Big Freedia’s voice to open each concert of her 2016 tour:

Oh Miss Bey, I know you came to slay! Give them hoes what they came to see. Baby, when I tell you, I’m back by popular demand. I did not come to play with you hoes. I came to slay, bitch! Oh yes, you best believe it, I always slay. You know I don't play (Chief)!

Per Spotify’s released statistics, Rap/Hip Hop was the most popular of its music genres in 2015, and the age of people that use Spotify are mostly millennials (President). This is important because it shows just how popular Hip Hop music is amongst youth in the United States, and one can infer that this is unlikely to change. So, if this music is most of what is reaching the ears of those who will one day be the backbone of the United States, Hip Hop Feminism becomes even more important. It takes on the role of spreading knowledge of love and acceptance for fellow human beings, educating future adults on the social struggles around which intersectionality focuses. Hip Hop music provides a valuable tool for the dissemination of such information, and Hip Hop Feminism ensures that it gets the job done. It is important to remember that while the artists discussed in this essay (and other Hip Hop artists that are progressively pushing social boundaries) do not share all the same ideologies and interests, they do share one quality, the desire and ability to speak up for what they believe. In doing so, they have and continue to influence society progressively, redefining stereotypes and showing that there is nothing wrong with being a woman, colored, gay, or lesbian; embodying the essence of Hip Hop Feminism.

Hip Hop culture began as a heavily masculine-influenced culture, and while it still shows many aspects of masculinity, Hip Hop Feminists have been working since the late 70s to change that. Hip hop Feminism is about more than eliminating sexism, and even more than intersectionality. It focuses on the impact of intersectionality amongst the Hip Hop generation, and uses Hip Hop music to positively influence Hip Hop culture. As with all things, it will take time for everyone to experience equality; but just as the female pioneers of Hip Hop did, new artists will stay ever working and emerging to create safe spaces for people like them.

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