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'She Ugly': Black Girls, Women in Hiphop and Activism—Hiphop Feminist Literacies Perspectives

Elaine Richardson aka Dr. E

Abstract

This work draws upon Hiphop feminism, studies of Black girlhood, and Black women and girls' literacies to illuminate the layered and violent narratives that shape society's treatment of Black women and girls, what these narratives look like in everyday life, how they are taken up and negotiated in different social spheres, such as an afterschool club for Black middle school girls and the platforms and artistry of women Hiphop artists and creatives. Richardson considers what activism is possible through juxtaposing Black girls as emerging creatives, celebrity corporate artist activists Nicki Minaj and Cardi B, independent activist artists such as Noname and dream hampton. Given the far-reaching representations of Black women and girls in popular culture, the art, lives and platforms of women in Hiphop are critical sites to understanding complexities, strategies and possibilities for social change.

Keywords

Hiphop Feminism, Black girls' and women's literacies, Hiphop women artists, performance activism, social justice, Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, Noname, dream hampton

“**S**he ugly. If you don't know when somebody ugly, I don't know what to tell you. She had surgery. Some people are ugly. She ugly and she nasty.” That was Nicole's case closed slam dunk statement on the matter. We had just watched a music video “Letter to Nicki Minaj” that came out during the 2012-2013 school year. It featured a group of young Black girl performers called Watoto from the Nile. Their 2012 Kickstarter campaign page describes them as “A group of young princesses from their hometown of Harriet Tubman City (Baltimore, Maryland). They have come to breathe life back into a destructive music culture that's on life support.”¹

Around the time of “Letter to Nicki Minaj,” the core of the group was comprised of 3 sisters Nia (12), Nya (11), and Kamaria (7), and another girl, Mary Angel (12). The oeuvre of their work speaks to social injustices against Black people. The group is mentored by the sisters' father with a strong Afrocentric emphasis. Watoto has songs

1. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/watoto/help-watoto-from-the-nile-kickstart-the-love-proje/description>.

about police brutality, violence, misogynoir (Black racialized and gendered misogyny, Bailey) in Hiphop, Black Lives Matter-a dedication to Trayvon Martin, the benefits of a plant-based diet, and more. I purposefully shared this video with my afterschool club girls because it featured Black girls close to their own ages, who were creating a public platform using performance arts to share their opinions about things that concerned their lives and their communities. The video fit with the Black and Hiphop feminist performance-based approach I was implementing.

During the time of the club (2010-2015) – and unfortunately, throughout history, and currently – Black women and girls BE facing down discourses NOT of our own making that empower everybody but us! I’m deeply invested in doing my part, to push against structural barriers and narratives, to make visible complex mundane “truths” that are killing us, like “She ugly.” As such, I come at this work, as a Black woman literacy scholar in community with my community; and I don’t know who all needs to hear this, but: WE TIRED.

Black Women and Girls’ Literacies: on Our Own Terms

We tired of the traditional narrow view that promotes literacy as a print bound, politically neutral, private mental activity, where letters correspond to sounds, and sounds to words, and reading and meaning making are universal and context-free. Who beautiful? How YOU define beauty? Who smart? Who is a good girl or woman? Who is worthy? How you answer these questions is informed by your identity, the images, patterns, and words you’ve internalized from the social activities in which you have participated, from school, from media, your life experiences, your history. The sense you make and the meanings you identify with are informed by your socialization. The ideas, myths, attitudes and values you hold are programmed into you. Critical literacy is the search for truth through interrogating what we’ve been fed. We must ask ourselves who told us that and why? Who is empowered or disempowered by certain knowledge and social arrangements? For example, Black women’s and girls’ so-called inherent “at-riskness,” in particular, is socially constructed. This means there’s a whole web of social practices related to economic, political, patriarchal, cultural, racist and sexist arrangements that continually hold us down.

The mission of Black community literacies education is to interrupt racism, sexism, classism, cultural conflict, and social inequality. In my Black critical Hiphop feminist literacies approach, I use storytelling, viral and rap music videos, artmaking, news media, documentaries, short literature pieces, performance, creative writing, and dialogic inquiry to center our lived experiences and activate our creativity for the purposes of our collective empowerment. Drawing upon Hiphop feminism, studies of Black girlhood and Black women and girls’ literacies, I focus on how Black women and girls advance and protect ourselves and our loved ones in society, strategies we use to make meaning and assert ourselves in the face of violent systems of power (Richardson). Hiphop feminist literacies work thwarts violence against Black women and girls and centers herstories (Lindsey). The focus is upon the creative potential of Black girlhood (Brown). It’s also about our joy, pleasure, and love. In 2000,

Joan Morgan, the thinker that described and defined Hip-hop feminism, highlighted the grayness of the perspectives that manifested in her own life and in young Black women of that era.² Kierna Mayo says of the late 1980's and the 1990's Hip-hop feminist generation:

We manifested the politics of a spanking-new Black feminism and told her she could bring all her homies—contradiction, agency, image, desire, power, media, sex, white folks—to the hood and the academy. And we did all this while steeped in a cultural ecosystem that was developing at warp speed, fueled by the machinations of young men that were often toxic. Young men that we loved. (x)

Then and now, Black women and girls are entangled in patriarchal systems with our brothers, sons, and loved ones. We are expected to be sources of love, loyalty, and labor, even when being the source may be harmful. This expectation is manifested by the general society in which Black people and Hip-hop are entangled. This is the grayness of life. Hip-hop feminist-informed community literacy work holds space for women and girls of color to work through our experiences and imagine better for ourselves individually and collectively. As a Black Hip-hop feminist literacies performance activist, I facilitate Black girlhood as a space of creativity (Brown). I ask: What power can be harnessed if we see our girls and ourselves as creatives? What activism is possible from commercial corporate celebrity artists? What can we learn from looking at artists as activists? Not every artist is an organizer, but artists have fans, followers, platforms, and are social influencers. The messages they convey in their art and lives are far-reaching and important sites of critical inquiry.

The Making of Black Girl Activist Artists

Our work in the club was about us creating our own brand of powerful self-literacy education and teasing out the threads of critical social justice possibilities in Black popular culture and in ourselves, even as both are tied to violence. So, Nicole's slam dunk seemingly self-evident "fact" about Nicki Minaj, "she ugly," is a statement not to be written off or taken lightly.

"But where do we get that from? Where did that come from? Why do we call each other ugly?" I ask.

Georgia chimes in low-rating Nicki Minaj as a person and an artist, "She ratchet and she can't rap."

"Can you beat her?" I ask.

2. For a thorough review of Hip-hop feminism from Tricia Rose and Joan Morgan to the contemporary cadre of Hip-hop feminist scholarship and activism See Halliday, Aria and Ashley N. Payne's Introduction: Savage and Savvy: Mapping Contemporary Hip Hop Feminism. "Twenty-First Century B.I.T.C.H. Frameworks: Hip Hop Feminism Comes of Age," *Journal of Hip Hop Studies*, Vol. 7, Iss. 1, 2020. pp. 8-18.

“I can beat her. I can rap better than that if you give me some words to rap on,” Georgia says with conviction.

My tones rise to match hers, “I’m giving you words, by showing this video.”

“Nicki Minaj CAN rap and I love her. I watch her videos over and over,” says Maelynn.

“That’s for dudes,” says Georgia, just as matter-of-factly as she pleases. “Why Nicki Minaj wanna be like ratchedness and dirty and having on no clothes? I’m not gay bruh!”

I say, “If Nicki Minaj was in here right now, you wouldn’t be saying none of that.”

Mya speaks her thoughts in a quiet timid voice. “I watch it over and over too and I’m not gay.”

“Thanks for keepin it real,” Maelynn replied as though she was a defense attorney, pleased by the contribution of her star witness.

I turn and scan the whole group of about 14 girls on that day, to encourage them all to speak. “Why did Watoto from the Nile make the video? What is “Letter to Nicki Minaj” about?”

Maelynn jumps right in. “The girls singing about how Nicki a star, and how all the young girls in school wanna be just like her. She should use her power for the community. Girls shouldn’t look up to her as a good person.”

Again, scanning the room in hopes of including more voices, I ask, “How do we know if she a good person from her performance?”

Then an argument starts.

Georgia: “She ratchet!”

Nicole: “I on’t like her.”

Maelynn: “Who cares. Shut up”!

Georgia, Nicole and Maelynn were friends and three of the strongest personalities. One of my roles as facilitator of the club is to hold space for all of the girls and give them a chance to voice their thoughts but also to redirect and keep them focused. I threw up my hand to try to head off a negative argument and keep us connected to the purpose of the group. I posed a question:

“Do y’all remember when we watched *The Black Girl Project*? Remember our talk about Black women and girls and our ongoing fight for social change? Anybody got any notes on that? What are some of the ideas in the Watoto song that show some of the same issues we been going through in our history?”

“About class mobility”? Tamia offered up for our consideration.

“Umm,” I say. “Ok, speak on it! How does “Letter to Nicki” relate to class mobility?”

“Moving up in life,” said Kat.

“Ok, good. She said moving up in life. Isn’t Nicki Minaj being successful and moving up in her life? How do we as Black women and girls and our community move up in life? A person moving up as an individual doesn’t necessarily help other people in our community move up. How do we move up together?”

“By having a good job,” Lizzie says.

“Ok. But you having a good job gonna help us all move up?” I asked, as I stood up to move around the room.

“Having a education,” Georgia says, and I smile at her because I am pleased that they dropped the argument, and she is in the dialogue!

Walking over near Georgia, I respond, “Education is gooood, but we need the right education, that helps us as a people.”

“Havin a dream,” Lizzie says.

Lizzie’s answer recalls the contribution of our brilliant and beloved Civil Rights Leader, Dr. Martin Luther King. This answer in a conversation on social change is great; but I am pushing the girls to recount key ideas from the *Black Girl Project*. The documentary explicitly spoke of Black women and girls as pathbreakers in science, education, culture, entertainment, and government, accompanied by images of Oprah, Michelle Obama, Shirley Chisolm, Beyonce, Lil Kim, and Alicia Keys. Yet the documentary raised an important question that we spent ample time on: “But does any of that matter when we are still looked upon as mules, mammies, and the work-horses of the world?” So, I respond to Lizzie and the entire group:

“I mean it’s good to have a job, a dream and education, but what are some concrete ways, that we can make differences in our community and our own lives, change stuff that’s not right, like how Black women fought for us as Black people to get free, to vote, to have rights, and support the needs of Black women and girls as a group.”

Georgia asks, “Can we watch that video again?”

She does not like my reply, “We can. But not at this moment.”

“Err! [she goes imitating screeching tires]. You bootleg!” She decries.

“Sorry if you didn’t catch it or were absent that day. I’ll show it again, but right now I know somebody in here remembers the one girl who was talking about how reading W.E.B. DuBois helped her learn that Black people can have power through social change. What does that mean? To have power through social change?”

“She said direct change,” Kat says. “She said a lot of his readings talk about you can only have direct change from political power.”

That got Nicole’s attention. “Who said that?”

Summoning Kat with my right hand in Baptist tambourine flair, “Say it again, Kat.”

Kat obliged in a cool voice of knowing, “The girl in *Black Girl Project* said she learned that from reading W. E. B. Dubois, a Black sociologist.”

“I remember some of y’all talked about things you wanted to see changed. Y’all said y’all want people to stop calling Black girls names, like baldheaded, for school to stop suspending people, and teachers to listen more. These are important issues about how y’all are treated. We said we were gonna organize, do creative projects and present them to the school.”

Black Girls and Women: Desired, Despised and (In)Disposable

The range of responses to Nicki Minaj³ praised and castigated her as a star and personally, largely revealing Nicole's and Georgia's moves for affirmation and the contradiction of the Black rhetorical condition. This is a condition where Black bodies are despised for not being so-called normal and desired as essential to the political economy. Nicole, one of the girls castigating Nicki, had access to light-skinned privilege. But she also experienced discrimination because she identified as lesbian. Georgia was lightskinned as well, but known as a bully and a "struggling reader." Nicole had to defend herself a lot, fending off boys who picked on her. She was suspended often, which broke my heart, as she was a star when she was able to participate in the club. Similarly, I saw the star power in Georgia. Both of these girls challenged me in different ways to be the best and learn from them how to bring the best out of them and myself.

In the larger school system, both of these girls were marked as "bad" and at-risk for the school-to-prison pipeline and other forms of containment. Their lives reflect the Black rhetorical condition as well as align with the *Black Girl Project's* view that Black girls and women are exploited as mules, mammies, and workhorses of the world, having to work twice as hard to be valued yet devalued. The sentiment, if not, the words, the girls assigned to Nicki Minaj ugly, nasty, ratchet, dirty, naked, having surgery, bears this out as well. Additionally, Georgia's insinuation that girls who find pleasure in Nicki's performances are gay, marks same gender adoration as aberrant. This is not to say that Nicki's "ratchet" performance in 'Stupid Hoe' (the song and video that Watoto of the Nile target) should not be critiqued. It is messy and gray, not as black and white as any of us may like it to be. And for those consumers who love her performance gay or not, more power to them.

The song disses Lil Kim, aka the Queen B. Kim gained wide-recognition in the mid 1990s with Biggie Smalls and the Junior Mafia camp. Kim and Nicki had ongoing beef ever since Nicki dropped a mix tape around 2007, with an image of herself on the cover, that was a definite "bite" off Lil Kim's "Hardcore" album cover. During the time when Nicki dropped "Stupid Hoe" (2012ish) ratchet was almost synonymous with 'classless.' Of course, like most Black slang, "ratchet" has changed rapidly and has a range of meaning potentials depending on who is saying what, when, where and to whom. Middle class Black folks can perform and find joy in ratchet performance and critique notions of anti-Blackness and (anti) respectability (Lane). Respectability is always held over the heads of working class Black people perceived as not measuring up to middle-class Blackness.

I identify with working class Black people, even though I have earned a Ph.D. in English and Applied Linguistics. We are seen as the personification of lowness, rather than performing narratives that underlie oppressive systems, neither of our own making. I am thinking particularly about my one-woman show and book from *Po Ho on Dope to Ph.D.* I understand performance as survival. Ratchetness is a form of social currency. Human beings that perform ratchetness are not illegal nor illiterate. Some-

3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicki_Minaj.

times a girl has to do what she must. We are incorporated into a punitive culture of varying realms of anti-Black woman violence, from the performances of Nicki Minaj, to young Black girls, all trying to find their way to power.

So, when Georgia and Nicole started dissin Nicki, I tried to redirect their thinking to our collective humanity and to how they themselves experience violence every day: when they are called names, such as baldheaded, by those who want to diss and degrade their humanity; when teachers don't understand or have time to listen to their experiences; when suspension is the schools' answer to Black girls' unmet needs. These Black girls and masses across the country live in communities that continue to suffer intergenerationally from decades of federal, state and local policies that disadvantage them. I'm not alone in recognizing this. Black feminist scholar Aria Halliday reminds us of "how the histories of subjugation, degradation, and subsequent stereotyping of Black women affect how [Black women and girls'] bodies are made visible, invisible, and hypervisible in the media..." (78). Sensibilities normalize the economies of rape culture and Black girls' socialization into existing power structures.

For me, rape culture is about people in power taking advantage and exploiting "weaker" people. Rape is entangled with capitalist exploitation. This includes countries that underdevelop "third world" peoples and take their natural resources, environments where rape is rampant and normal and people who get raped are blamed. Rape is powerful when a powerful and well-resourced country systemically withholds social goods from people because they are not able to pay, or they are not seen as worthy because they have been racialized, or made outcasts because of their gender and sexuality.

I understand racialized gender and sexuality are part of power structures in my usage and refers to the diminishment of people of color because they have been othered, negatively sexualized and gendered, as they are not white middle-class and heterosexual. This racialization and stigmatization of people because they are not white, middle-class, or seen as less than human because of their gender and sexuality is made to seem normal. It is an acceptable form of hatred used to deprive people of rights, privileges, goods and services. Personal achievement narratives also create power structures that uphold the violent system of capitalism which is based on the myth that some people are better and worth more than others, because of their individual hard work. The hard work that many people do to stay alive is discounted though it is essential life blood for the system of sexist racial capitalist inequality. It is difficult to focus on the violence of capitalism because it is intertwined with social progress, mobility and leisure. For collective power building work that brings us together, Alicia Garza, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, urges that we must learn and unlearn about each other to create strong alliances based on "differently experienced yet connected exploitation and oppression" (150).

In this particular conversation with the girls, I tried to prevent erasure of Nicki Minaj the performer and person and encourage them to think beyond the binaries, to which we've become accustomed. Because of the constraints within which I worked, in the afterschool space with middle school girls, I was not able to engage more deeply the ways that Nicki's performance could be considered an attempt to clap back at

racialized sexual and gender ideas of beauty and sexuality. What I did was try to center us in art as a mode of inquiry, resistance, creativity and freedom. My commentary as well as ongoing work with women and girls and my own self seeks to illuminate and refuse violence against us; center the need for us to strive to love our whole selves and each other and develop critical consciousness; and focus toward working for concrete change in our community.

The girls of Watoto from the Nile rap and sing a song that encourages Nicki Minaj to use the power of her celebrity as a Hiphop artist with a huge platform to lead young girls to fight for their liberation. The representations of Nicki's performance in Watoto's song and video highlight her star status, alluring sexuality, revealing clothing, spectacular performance of sexual and music industry bondage/freedom. Watoto also highlights Nicki as a Harriet Tubman figure, a linkage to Black women and girls' historic struggle against systems of exploitation. They illuminated Nicki as a purveyor of stereotypes of Black sexuality and framed her within the dehumanizing white male enslaver gaze of Black feminine sexuality. This is a widespread practice rooted in slavery which polices, criminalizes, and exploits Black women and girls' bodies and lives.

What can we learn from taking a closer look at Black women Hiphop artists as celebrity corporate artists as activist and independent artist activists?

Celebrity Corporate Artist as Activist: Nicki Minaj

Like many other Black celebrity Hiphop artists, Trinidadian born and Queens, New York-bred, Nicki Minaj started life in humble beginnings. She came up the ranks through mixtapes and made her way to be the first woman rapper signed to Young Money Records. She is a highly skilled and carefully crafted commercial Hiphop music industry artist. She is beautiful and voluptuous. Her lyrics are filled with braggadoccio. She is known for creative, if sometimes controversial, persona. She has amassed pop cross-over appeal and a high standard of living for herself and her family. Among Nicki's stances, she has spoken out about white cultural appropriation of Black culture, in particular how Black artists are snubbed and devalued, while white artists are rewarded (VanDerWerff). Because of her solidarity on issues of women's and LGBTQ rights, in 2019, she pulled out of tour in Saudi Arabia (Associated Press).

She has also donated proceeds from one of her songs to the Bail Project, which works to end cash bail and disrupt mass incarceration (Wikipedia). Her philanthropic efforts include financing clean water wells to villages in Chennai, India⁴, as well as providing college scholarships and loan repayments for students through her initiative, "Student of The Game" (Bailey).

Nicki is a complex artist and Black woman in America. She is good, sometimes makes bad decisions, but not ugly. It is clear that she has a penchant for supporting her men relatives and friends regardless of their violence against women and girls. She fell under scrutiny when she bailed out her brother, in 2015, on charges of sexually assaulting his then 11-year-old stepdaughter. Her brother was recently convicted

4. <https://www.looktothestars.org/news/18084-nicki-minaj-awards-37-college-scholarships>.

and sentenced to 25 years in prison (Onley). Similarly, Nicki has stood by her husband who in 1995 pled guilty to attempted rape (to avoid the charge of first-degree rape that occurred in 1994). The woman who accused Nicki Minaj's husband of rape has alleged that Minaj offered her money to recant her story as well as harassed her. The woman is now suing Nicki Minaj. Her husband has also been recently charged for not registering himself as a sex offender in the state of California for which he will face sentencing. Further down this trail and tale is that:

Minaj previously defended [her husband], writing in reference to the alleged rape, which occurred when Hough [the victim] was 16: "He was 15, she was 16 ... in a relationship . . . But go awf, internet, y'all can't run my life. y'all can't even run y'all own life." [Minaj] has previously worked with and defended [fellow rapper] 6ix9ine, who pleaded guilty to the use of a child in a sexual performance in 2015. (Juzwiak)

Furthermore, Nicki has been rebuked for reckless use of her twitter platform of over 22 million followers. She tweeted that her cousin's friend in Trinidad became impotent after being vaccinated and that she wasn't going to the Met Gala because she didn't do enough research to feel comfortable to take the vaccine. She was confronted by Anthony Fauci, Chief Medical Advisor to President Biden, and Joy Reid, a well-respected Black woman MSNBC Correspondent, among others. Joy Reid stated that although Black people should be skeptical of a mandated vaccine, given the treatment of Blacks in this country, conspiracy theories have been debunked by science. Reid expressed sadness that Nicki used her platform in a way that might encourage already vulnerable Black people to not get the vaccine (Adams).

Looking at Nicki Minaj as a celebrity corporate artist as activist highlights how her complex positionality plays out in her performance around critical social justice actions. It is equally important to take into consideration how we are all socially positioned, by our beliefs, psychological status and spiritual clarity. Reading the world with Black girls through a popular woman Hip-hop artist, such as Nicki Minaj, presents the opportunity to examine our self-interests, self-investments, self-determination, and the ways that the white power structure and corporate patriarchal interests penetrate how we see each other and ourselves. Reading Nicki's performance art and her life should help us think more creatively about how to get free. We must read against the patriarchy and create what we need.

Independent Artist Activist: Noname

As an independent rapper, not tied to a major corporate label, Noname⁵ may be more explicitly legible as an activist artist, rather than a celebrity artist as activist. Her fellow Chicagoan and phenomenal independent artist Chance the Rapper featured her on the track "Lost" on his 2013 mixtape *Acid Rap*. It was downloaded over one mil-

5. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noname_\(rapper\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noname_(rapper)).

lion times.⁶ In 2016, she shined again on Chance's Grammy-winning *Coloring Book*. She dropped her own critically acclaimed debut, *Telefone*, in 2017. These moves provided wider recognition for Noname, and the means to become a self-sustained artist, with creative control over her brand and the music and politics she chooses to share. "I wish there was a different narrative of what rappers can be. We're only pitched to aspire to be almost unnecessarily wealthy," she tells music reporter, Dan Rys.⁷ I think "unnecessarily wealthy" is a valuable idea. For me, it conjures the idea of necessary wealth, capitalism as a tool, rather than a means to an end. Another narrative Noname pushes against is myths of women in Hip-hop and conscious rap, that pit them against each other, to the detriment of their collective power. She has written about horniness, her first time, a failed love affair, and used her vagina as a powerful character in her lyrics on her *Room 25* project. She says she used the word "pussy" around a thousand times in it. "A lot of my fans . . . I think they like me because they think I'm the anti-Cardi B. I'm not," Noname tells Rawiya Kameir in *The Fader*.⁸ I think Noname deliberately wrote songs celebrating her sexuality to show solidarity with Black women rappers whose bread and butter is portraying their sexuality in their music. And to let them know she sees them as whole persons and much more than their performances.

Though she is not the anti-Cardi B, and I would add, nor the anti-Nicki Minaj, fame is not the end game for her, at least not to the point where she is "taking up unnecessary space."⁹ She seeks to attract people to political education through her brand of music and art. As someone who was a slow reader in school, being fed "fictitious bullshit," she found slam poetry and the rest is history.¹⁰ She became attracted to revolutionary concepts and ideas through enjoyable art, music and film that can be seen and heard. Her creation of Noname Book Club comes out of her experience. The book club is a space to discuss social justice literature and donate books to prisons. She raises money through Patreon to send monthly book picks to prisons and to pay facilitators, staff, graphic artists, who work to curate high quality monthly book discussions. Book club meetups are online because of COVID-19. There are book club chapters in major cities throughout the United States and one in London. Noname Book Club has partnerships with libraries around the country to make sure monthly book club picks are available for free (nonamebooks.com).

Her artistry and community building outreach are intertwined with her quest to understand and thwart inequitable systems. She uses Twitter to connect with liberation movements and revolutionary thinkers such as longtime prison industrial com-

6. <https://www.insider.com/who-is-chance-the-rapper-2017-4#a-few-months-later-childish-gambino-donald-glover-featured-him-on-his-song-they-dont-like-me-3>.

7. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/8508730/noname-indie-now-artist-interview>.

8. <https://www.thefader.com/2018/09/11/noname-room-25-interview>.

9. <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/19/948005131/i-want-us-to-dream-a-little-bigger-noname-and-mariame-kaba-on-art-and-abolition>.

10. <https://www.thefader.com/2018/09/11/noname-room-25-interview>.

plex [PIC] abolition organizer Mariame Kaba @prisonculture.¹¹ “PIC abolition is a positive project that focuses, in part, on building a society where it is possible to address harm without relying on structural forms of oppression or the violent systems that increase it” (Kaba 2).

In a beautiful conversation between Noname and Mariame Kaba about the role of art in abolition, Kaba explains that we need art such as Hiphop to help transform our world.¹² She believes we all have that responsibility, to make the world better. At the same time, Kaba acknowledges “not everybody’s an organizer, and that’s OK.” But when artists do create art that helps people think differently, “it can help disrupt patterns and old ways of thinking.” Of her fellow Hiphop artists, Noname ruminates, “I just want us to dream a little bit bigger than reform.” I feel a bit of frustration in her reply, since she bemoans the power of Hiphop artists to bring people together, but largely for their own capitalist gains. “That’s all I’m wanting from us — from hip-hop artists as a community. I think a lot of it is because folks don’t have people around them challenging them,” Noname reflects.

The wise Kaba agrees that a major problem with celebrities is that they must be self-regulated, self-accountable, and tied to organizations. With regard to Kaba’s abolitionist praxis, Naomi Murakawa attests:

Kaba’s abolitionist vision burns so bright precisely because she refuses to be the single star, dazzling alone. Why be a star when you can make a constellation? ...[A] constellation of co-organizers, cofounders, and coconspirators, together in abolitionist practice of refusal, care, and collectivity. (xviii)

In alignment with this philosophy and movement, Noname honors Hiphop’s origins in collective struggle. She believes this art form was created for Black liberation, to share the message of what is going on in our communities. “Because a community that I come from made this work, and now I’m able to sustain myself, I feel it’s my responsibility to be as honest and radical in my music as I possibly can.”¹³

Celebrity Artist as Activist: Cardi B

Cardi B is no less honest and radical, if not in her music, then certainly in her representations, her critical commentary on the politics of feminism, the music industry, conservatism, racism and more. She is a Black Latina rap star, who made a name for herself in reality TV on *Love & Hip Hop: New York*.¹⁴ Cardi B doesn’t embrace traditional ideologies of feminism or respectability. She represents a naked truth that resonates with the life experiences of today’s Hiphop and Black Lives Matter generations,

11. <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/19/948005131/i-want-us-to-dream-a-little-bigger-noname-and-mariame-kaba-on-art-and-abolition>.

12. <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/19/948005131/i-want-us-to-dream-a-little-bigger-noname-and-mariame-kaba-on-art-and-abolition>.

13. <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/19/948005131/i-want-us-to-dream-a-little-bigger-noname-and-mariame-kaba-on-art-and-abolition>.

14. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardi_B

in her unashamed journey from stripping to chart topping celebrity artist. She gets “the bag”¹⁵ and works to support her community. In 2018, *Time Magazine* named her one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

In her 2017 piece, “Cardi B Love & Hip-hop’s Unlikely Feminist Hero,” Sherri Williams writes about the powerful activist work that Cardi B does through pop culture and social media. Williams suggests that Cardi B should be enlisted in the feminist movement. In particular, Williams cites Cardi B’s November 2016 Instagram post that reached millions of her followers that might not otherwise fathom (Black) feminism:

If you believe in equal rights for women, that makes you a feminist. I don’t understand how you bitches feel like being a feminist is a woman that have a education, that have a degree. That is not being a feminist. You discouraging a certain type of woman, that certainly doesn’t make you one. Some bitches wanna act like “oh you have to read a book about feminists.” That’s only a definition for a simple word. The problem is that being a feminist is something so great and y’all don’t want me to be great but too bad. Because at the end of the day I’m going to encourage any type of woman. You don’t have to be a woman like me to encourage and support you and tell you “yes bitch, keep on going.” And that’s why you mad you little dusty ass bitch.

Cardi B claps back on a narrowly defined view of her literacy, as relegated to reading “a book about feminists.” This strand of her literacy work is in the lineage of the great abolitionist Sojourner Truth. The liberatory mindset of abolitionist and women’s rights activist, Sojourner Truth, could not be contained by conventional definitions of literacy that can be measured on standardized tests. The standard conception of literacy stratifies human beings and reproduces harm. Sojourner Truth’s readings of “men and nations” resists and confronts stratifying white patriarchal systems. In “Woman Suffrage,” Truth is reported to have said:

... I don’t read such small stuff as letters, I read men and nations. I can see through a millstone, though I can’t see through a spelling-book. What a narrow idea a reading qualification is for a voter! I know and do what is right better than many big men who read. (Painter 230)

Truth’s actions on behalf of self-preservation and collective uplift of Black lives, her critical feminist literacies, challenged patriarchy, enslavement, sexism, racism, and disenfranchisement. Unlike Truth, Cardi B is literate in the narrow sense required of high school graduates in the current system, what Noname coined “fictitious bullshit” reading. Like Sojourner Truth, Cardi B reads men and nations for the collective good of women and humanity.

Like Nicki Minaj and many other Black women artists, Cardi B has been denigrated for having cosmetic surgery. One strand of thought among Black folks is the stigma of selling out or not being natural. Depending on the type of cosmetic surgery, selling out would be changing one’s body to gain access to higher value in the market, based on certain dominant conceptions of beauty and worth. With regard to having

15. Hip-hop slang term for wealth or money.

butt surgery, the last time I checked, large and shapely butts are highly desirable as a Black beauty mark.

Rather than continue down this trail of beauty marks and recreated body parts, the point is all of us have the right to bodily autonomy. And as Black feminist activist Tanya Fields shared “Radical Black Joy is inherent as a human need and not some special trinket you get after you rise high enough on the socioeconomic ladder or unlock some special level of desirability or accomplishment” (29). Generating spaces of Black joy and affirmation helps us to see ourselves with clarity. Our worth is inherent. We are not defined by market values and white Anglo aesthetics. Whether we decide to get surgery or not, we have to be spiritually healthy and self-loving. At the end of the day, we are all performing and complicit with the market on some level.

In Cardi B’s Foreword to activist Tamika D. Mallory’s book,¹⁶ *Is There Room for Someone Like Me?*, Cardi ponders if she is a fit for movement work. She describes herself as “a real-ass bitch” who feels compelled to speak out about injustice. “Yes, I’m a rapper. Yes, I twerk. No, I’m not trying to be your children’s role model” (xxii). Presenting herself this way addresses the mindset of the shut up and rap, strip, run or dribble sentiment of conservative critics. They want Black artists and athletes to get the bag and run! Colin Kaepernick and LeBron James are arguably the most iconic athletes of this generation who reject this sentiment. Along with artists such as Cardi B, they stand up, speak out, kneel, twerk, and otherwise advocate for racial justice. They want a country where the masses have their basic needs met, e.g. healthy food, clean water, housing, education, healthcare, art, joy, and a non-violence-based society. Cardi B is “a real-ass bitch” and a damn good one, as we used to say.

Though they have different experiences and neither woman is perfect, Cardi B is as important, if not moreso, as an activist as is Michelle Obama. Both know the metaphysical dilemma of bein alive, bein a woman and bein colored (Shange). They both experience misogynoir (Bailey) and have some stake in the freedom of Black people. Their politics inform their identities and influence how people react to them. Both have inspirational stories that are about belonging. Both are celebrities with massive social reach and cachet with their respective constituencies. Both are political actors, whether they, or others, deem them so or not.

Michelle Obama wants to be read as non-political in her story of personal achievement and perseverance against Chicago’s racism. She tells the story of opportunities that were not afforded suffering adults and foreparents in her life, such as attending a magnet high school, that set her on the path to Princeton, Harvard Law School, a six-figure salary, and beyond. She also spills secrets, such as smoking marijuana and pre-marital sex as a youth, that make her relatable to everyday people. She made it because of her family’s commitment to her and her brother’s success and their teachings of positive thinking. Keeanga Yamahtta Taylor shows up the problem with this narrative:

16. Mallory, Tamika, D. *State of Emergency: How We Win in the Country We Built* (as told to Ashley A. Coleman), Black Privilege Publishing, Atria, 2021.

... Obama's own emphasis on striving as a way to overcome racial discrimination ... reduces racial inequality to one of psychological impairment that can be overcome through sheer determination and a positive attitude. She fails to see how it was bitter struggle against real institutions that created the new world she was able to thrive in.

Michelle Obama's message resonates with all kinds of women, especially Black women. As Taylor reminds us:

Indeed, black women in this country are so debased and ignored that it often feels as if the success and public adoration of Obama can lift and make visible all black women—a process Obama herself encourages.

Cardi B may not have as wide an appeal as Michelle Obama, but her story is potent and connects with masses. She tells of growing up in a very strict home in her Bronx community. She describes herself as a loud kid who was full of confidence. Her inspiration to succeed was not wanting to go through what her mother went through. She always wanted to be an artist. She graduated high school and rebelled against her mother's rules and her mom kicked her out. Cardi went to college but did not finish ("See Her, Hear Her: Celebrating Women in Music"). She worked as a cashier and then as a stripper to become financially independent and escape an abusive boyfriend. She used that money to invest in her music career (Decker et al.). She describes herself as someone from the bottom, where it's a struggle to not be killed (B, Cardi).

Cardi B's struggle and rise to fame is what drives her to use her voice for those still in the bottom. A social media post by a former high school teacher speaks of Cardi B's political impact and intellect:

For those of you on my feed who are trashing Cardi B for representing a political voice a) she probably scored higher than you on the US History regents' exam and was in my AP govt class b) you're not nearly as busy as her, and what have you done to advance political discourse in this country? C) She has a national platform and is using it to speak about things that are important... why can't we respect that? d) STFU and take a seat. (Tinubu)

Cardi B's platform brings awareness to millions "with a single tweet, with a single social media post, with a single sound bite..." (xiii). Even so, she is less legible to many as a political force than Michelle Obama. Even with all of her clout, rap moguls such as Jermaine Dupri assessed women rappers such as Cardi B as not having any skills and just being a stripper rapper. To that, Cardi speaks to the conditioning of audiences:

... First of all, I rap about my pussy because she my best friend, you know what I'm saying. And second of all it's because it seems like that's what people wanna hear. I ain't even gonna front because let me tell you something, when I did "Be Careful," people was talking madd shit in the beginning. ... 'What the fuck is this? This is not what I expected. I expected this. I expected that. ... So I'm like, if that's what people ain't tryna hear, then alright. Then

I'mma start rapping about my pussy again. ... There's a lot of female rappers that be rappin they ass off and don't be talking about they pussy, and don't be talking about getting down and dirty. Y'all don't be supporting them. ... And they be madd dope. These bloggers don't support them. They don't give them the recognition. So, don't blame that shit on us, when y'all not the ones that's supporting them.¹⁷

I don't see rappers such as Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion acquiescing to stereotypes, as much as I see them capitalizing off their moment. They gettin in where they fit in. They are not fighting to change the music industry. But they speak out and advocate on social issues. Cardi B campaigned for Bernie Sanders. In 2020, she interviewed him on her Instagram and Twitter to represent and educate her followers. She also spoke out against conservative Black woman republican activist Candice Owens who railed against her, calling her "illiterate" and irresponsible for using her platform to support Joe Biden, who played a role in mass incarceration.¹⁸ Owens also bashed Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion for their celebration of women's sexual pleasure song "WAP". Owens argues that the song is destroying the values of the Black community.

Megan Thee Stallion is set to graduate college with an undergraduate degree in Health Administration as of this writing and plans to go into building assisted living facilities. After allegedly being shot in both her feet by a Black male rapper, Torey Lanez, Megan discussed how she was expected to keep silent, be strong and not disclose her trauma or the identity of Lanez. She was already a supporter of Black women but this incident caused her to speak out more forcefully as an advocate for the protection of Black women. Megan published a powerful opinion piece in the *New York Times*, "Why I Speak Up for Black Woman." The piece addresses stereotypes, the many disparities Black women face, the lack of widespread education on the many contributions Black women have made in society. She also spoke out against Daniel Cameron, the Black Republican Attorney General, who did not indict the Louisville Kentucky police, that killed the young Black woman emergency medical technician Breonna Taylor in a botched raid.

But this passage from Megan's piece confronts why going after Black women rappers for portraying their sexuality misses the mark:

I've received quite a bit of attention for appearance as well as my talent. I choose my own clothing. Let me repeat: I choose what I wear, not because I am trying to appeal to men, but because I am showing pride in my appearance, and a positive body image is central to who I am as a woman and a performer. I value compliments from women far more than from men. But the remarks about how I choose to present myself have often been judgmental and cruel, with many assuming that I'm dressing and performing for the

17. Cardi B responds to Jermaine Dupri's comments on female rappers, July 12, 2019. https://twitter.com/i/events/1149584118851575808?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

18. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/9446762/cardi-b-candace-owens-political-debate-timeline/>.

male gaze. When women choose to capitalize on our sexuality, to reclaim our *own* power, like I have, we are vilified and disrespected.

To protect children from materials that they are too young to critically process in this wide open digital information society is nearly impossible. This is not to excuse the corporate music industry as well as Hollywood that slot women and girls of color into certain sales categories and formulas that they created for maximum profit. Following bell hooks, I call it selling hot pussy. Hot P structures feed the mindset that other aspects of women's and girls' humanity are not worth as much (hooks).

Artists such as Megan and Cardi B are seen as street hookers in the parlance of conservative forces who want to put fear into (white) Christian fundamentalists or win over Black Democrats. It is not surprising that Cardi B asks legendary activist Angela Davis, co-foreword writer to Tamika Mallory's book, where do people like her fit in movement work? Davis extols:

It is important that you and people like you, our artists, cultural workers, and influencers of new generations, are present because you invite critical engagement with our current issues. ... Hip-hop like everything else, is diverse and full of internal contradictions, but it is absolutely clear that this music has helped to create new communities of struggle. ... Most often it is the forgers of our popular musical and visual cultures who know how to invite the world to experience, at the level of feeling, desires for habitable futures that scholars have not figured out how to convey. (xvi-xvii)

Independent Activist Artist: dream hampton

Her love for the Detroit hood of her nurture. Her near rape at age 12.¹⁹ The verbal violence that gripped her in the mid 1980s rap battle between Roxanne Shante and the Real Roxanne. Her coming of age during the devastation of the Black community by crack cocaine to the sounds of rap. Graduated from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. Her profiles of up-and-coming Hiphop artists and stars in rap rags provided insight. Her writings about police brutality, misogynoir in rap, and the politics of the music industry, raised awareness among the young and elders. Highly productive soul she is. Her passion is for producing justice-oriented films and documentaries. One of many is *Treasure: From Tragedy to Trans Justice: Mapping a Detroit Story* about Shelley Hilliard, a murdered Black trans teenager. I had the honor of screening that film for the Hiphop Literacies Conference at Ohio State University in 2016. She co-founded the New York chapter of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement. A by-product of that was her film *Black August*. This film centered Hiphop performers and music to school their peers to the plight of incarcerated Black political prisoners (Rausch). *We Demand Justice for Renisha McBride* highlighted the consequences of suburban segregated sunset towns. The case in point demonstrated the dehumanization of a car-wrecked Black teenaged girl in Dearborn Heights, Michigan, in 2013. A white man shot and killed this girl for knocking on his door for help. The 2018 documentary

19. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dream_Hampton

It's a Hard Truth, Ain't It chronicled 13 incarcerated men as they studied filmmaking to explore how they ended up with decades-long prison terms. Another executive produced docu-series, 2019's *Finding Justice*, moves the lens from mass incarceration to mass criminalization of Black folks and our search for justice. For this work and much more, activist artist dream hampton was named one of the most influential people by *Time* in 2019.²⁰ This recognition came in the year she produced the documentary, *Surviving R. Kelly*.

Surviving was the documentary that did what the viral tape of R. Kelly "having sex with" and urinating in an underage girl's mouth in the early 2000's could not do. This documentary did what approximately \$200,000.00 in civil settlements paid by R. Kelly to cover-up wrongdoings over the past two decades could not do. This documentary did what 25 years of journalism and careful research by Jim DeRogatis was not able to do. None of this got the courts interested in charging R&B/Hiphop Soul star R. Kelly for his abuse and exploitation of Black and Brown women and girls. *Surviving* created public empathy for the survivors by creating a carefully informed and curated platform for the stories of survivors and their families. *Surviving* was aided by #MeToo, #TimesUp and the work of activist and grassroots organizers. Assata's Daughters, Black Lives Matter, BYP 100 are organizations whose work on different fronts helped to make a way for *Surviving*. A Long Walk Home is an organization dream hampton reached out to for its expertise in supporting sexually abused young girls. The organization provided pivotal support for survivors as they told their traumatic stories. #MuteRKelly was co-founded by Oronike Odeleye and Kenyette Tisha Barnes with the goal of interrupting R. Kelly's eco-system of handlers, employees, music sales, concerts, and other entities that sustained his world of sexual exploitation of Black and Brown women and girls (and boys).

When Odeleye and Barnes formed #MuteRKelly in 2017, few people were listening to the accusers who had stepped forward to tell their stories. They went on a mission to literally stop people from playing R. Kelly's music, trying to get it removed from radio airwaves and streaming services. The two also worked to get Kelly's label, RCA, to end his contract and gave a platform to local grassroots organizations working with survivors. Their push led to the industry acknowledging Kelly's wrongdoings more seriously than ever before. It also created a runway for "Surviving R. Kelly," the 2020 docuseries that brought national attention to the singer's abuse. (Finley)

Surviving validated so much for me. In an interview about *Surviving* with *Democracy Now* in February 2019, dream hampton said something that gripped me: Many more women than the survivors who appeared on camera told her their stories off-camera. These women knew that they would be shamed, not believed, and dragged. At the 2016 Hiphop Literacies Conference: Black Women & Girls'Lives Matter one panel featured a presentation by Ronette Burkes, then warden of the Ohio State Reformatory for women. This one thing she said has also stuck with me. Upwards of 80% of the women in the prison were victims, manipulated by men. The ma-

20. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dream_Hampton.

jority of these women don't see themselves this way. This shows how deeply ingrained it is for Black women and girls to support Black men, even when it's to our own detriment. As a survivor of teenaged and young adult sex trafficking, it took me a long time to figure out that I was exploited—not by R. Kelly. I was exploited by 4 pimps from the ages of 13-24.

Black women and girls are among the most vulnerable people in this society, as Black men and boys are more often foregrounded as endangered, miseducated, mass incarcerated, ignored by public healthcare, exploited economically. However, Black women are the fastest growing incarcerated population (Kajstura), experience the biggest health disparities, and face economic oppression. From an intersectional standpoint, "Black women are subjected to high levels of racism, sexism, and discrimination at levels not experienced by Black men or White women." This is the foundation of health inequities (Chinn et al.; "Did You Know? The Plight of Black Girls & Women in America"). Further, Black-on-Black conflict, subordination of Black women and girls and homophobia are historically and currently rooted in racism, white heterosexual male supremacy, and capitalism. This shows how systems colluded to support R. Kelly's decades' long reign of sexual violence against Black and Brown women and girls in plain sight. A guilty verdict came down on R. Kelly in New York, September 27, 2021, for racketeering, sexual exploitation of children, forced labor and sex trafficking (Tsioulcas). Though, as of the writing of this piece, he still has more trials and charges to face in Illinois and Michigan:

The rhetoric that allowed Kelly's pattern of abuse continued immediately after news broke. Outside the courtroom, Kelly's supporters blasted his music and cursed those "lying bitches." Twitter users called Aaliyah "fast" in the same breath they condemned Kelly. Bill Cosby, who was found guilty of aggravated indecent assault but was recently released from prison after his conviction was bizarrely overturned, said that Kelly was "railroaded" and didn't have a fair trial. (Finley)

R. Kelly's conviction is the manifestation of a herculean amount of labor, by so many mostly women organizers and allies, for such a long period of time; yet it seems miniscule in the face of the deep-seated hatred of Black women and girls that this case represents.

dream hampton represents an independent activist artist who has been able to produce culture and art reflective of her political commitments to humanize Black people. Her work represents a belief in people and insight into critical social justice possibilities in Hiphop literacies and movement for Black lives.

To maximize their profits, the corporate music industry promotes certain narratives and representations thereby controlling how Black people including Black women are represented to themselves and the larger public. As Nicole Rosseau explains, "the needs of the political economy determine Black women's position in the U.S. social structure," ... "Black women are a unique laboring class within the racialized patriarchal structure of the United States," ... "[S]ocial rhetoric is meaningfully constructed and manipulated as a tool of oppression." (452)

Given this context, what activism is possible for women Hiphop performers and producers? The present brief review of celebrity corporate artists as activists and independent activist artists, gives some idea. It was clear from the conversation with the girls in the afterschool club that some girls found Nicki Minaj's performance as pleasurable and appealing, while others saw it as negative. This divide among the girls is reflective of the Black rhetorical condition: desired, despised, (in)disposable. Amplification of social justice possibilities is necessary to inspire informed community work.

For the most part, corporate celebrity artist activists (such as Nicki Minaj and Cardi B) don't have as much room to experiment with activist stances they can perform inside the commodified space of Hiphop, if they remain with major music labels. To recognize their contributions as well as their complexities, it is equally important to look at the causes they support, the stands they take, and the ways they use their platforms. As an independent activist artist, Noname's activism is equally legible across her performances, music, and platform. As far as Hiphop generations go, dream hamptom is an O.G., who has been able to consistently and explicitly direct her output to social change. As an independent activist artist and producer (writer and filmmaker), she leverages her status, relationships with individuals, organizations and movements to produce art and culture, to push narrative shifts. Noname is on this same path.

So much more investment and work is needed in our society to shift the narratives that make devaluation of Black women and girls' lives normal. These narratives are almost ubiquitous. And while all of this is going down, our mostly white conservative citizens are trying to stop schools from teaching the racist history and systems of our country that continue to harm people. They want to keep the masses docile, homophobic and aggressively racist, or unmotivated to fight for social change, while major conglomerates stay banked up at the expense of our misery.

Black women and girls are working on many fronts to heal ourselves and recover from the constant barrage of everyday violence we experience. From my perspective as an engaged Black woman community literacy scholar and Hiphop feminist literacies performance activist, I see it as imperative to read the world with and through Black women and girls' words and works to reveal our complexities, strategies and possibilities for social change.

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