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Sisters Rap the Blues: Examining the Perceived Impact of Rap Music on Black Women College Students

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Abstract: The following qualitative study examines how Black women college students enrolled at a Predominately White Institution (PWI) perceive the impact of mainstream rap music on their academic experiences. For the purpose of this study mainstream rap music is defined in two ways: a high profile subgenre of Hip Hop culture and, second, pervasively sexist, homophobic, heteronormative, violent music. Respondents of the study provided oral narratives of campus encounters that reinforce stereotypes related to race and gender (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000); depict Black women as incompetent or as less intelligent (Williamson, 1999); and create isolation or cultural miscues among White peers (Banks, 2009). The conceptual framework of Hip Hop Feminism serves as a point of entry to unpack how respondents negotiate intersecting social identities and complex contradictions of Black womanhood, identity and culture. Moreover, in this paper, four of the six findings are highlighted to illustrate common practices respondents used to resist stereotypes. These include engaging in self-imposed boundaries; creating emotional distance from the perceived source of harm; code switching to thwart negative perceptions of intellectual inferiority and participating in Hip Hop on 'their' terms. The implications of this inquiry could impact the successful matriculation of Black women as institutions attempt to cultivate a healthy campus climate specific to social spaces, embed culturally relevant and engaging pedagogy, and develop policies and procedures that seek to reduce or eradicate gendered racial microaggressions.

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The influence of rap music

Research on the experiences of Black college students enrolled in PWIs shed light on campus environments riddled with gendered racial microaggressions. Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood & Hunt (2013) describe such environments as ‘subtle and everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one’s race and gender’ (p. 54). For Black women college students the toll may intensify, due in part to images in mainstream rap music. These images promote stereotypical and archaic notions of Black women as subordinate, dense, and intensely dedicated to using sexuality to secure the attention of men (Pough, 2004; Rojas, 2009; Rose, 2008).

Over the last twenty years, scholars have provided a generous amount of research that addresses the impact of Hip Hop on the identity development and self-esteem of Black adolescent girls (Peterson et al., 2007; Stephens & Few, 2007). These topics include adolescents’ acceptance of dating violence when exposed to rap music content (Johnson et al., 1995); and the role of popular culture in Black adolescent girls’ perceptions of body image and attitudes toward relationships, and their sense of empowerment (Lindsey, 2013; Sharpley-Whiting, 2007). While these works and others are helpful in providing longitudinal context about the experiences of Black women vis-à-vis Hip Hop culture, access to research that addresses Black college women is minuscule. Henry, West & Jackson (2010) address this problem in their literature review of [Hip Hop’s] influence on the identity development of Black female college students. The authors assert [that] ‘many critics have discussed the negative influences of [Hip Hop] on Black adult women, [however] few quantitative and qualitative research studies explicitly address or validate this perspective’ (p. 243).

A review of scholarship on Hip Hop culture in post-secondary environments produced indirect discussions on the topic of Black women college students. For example, Scott and Rosenberg (2006) examined the relevance of Hip Hop culture as a non-academic factor in Black students’ retention at a traditionally White university. Hall & Martin (2013) studied the use of Hip Hop pedagogy to engage Black college students in the curriculum, and Cundiff (2013) investigated college student’s perceptions and response to women when exposed to rap music with misogynistic lyrics. More specifically, Henry (2010) explored how Hip Hop feminism can be used to enhance the identity development of Black college women. Pickney (2008) studied the negative, and positive influences of Hip Hop on students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Haynes (2011) examined the counternarratives Black college women use to

cope and resist ideas of intellectual inferiority, which can be difficult in a society that reinforces and projects stereotypes of Black women through popular culture.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that guides this study is Joan Morgan's (1999) seminal work on the shifting ideologies and practices of feminism vis-à-vis the Hip Hop generation. In contrast to second-wave feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Hip Hop feminists are not inclined to create bold structures of separatism between the sexes to disconnect from the most pervasively sexist, demeaning, and stereotypical symbols of rap music. Instead, Hip Hop feminists choose to step into the discourse and engage in what Pough (2003) describes as public pedagogy, where the landscape for knowledge production and sharing situates rap music as a forum for analysis, critique, and response. Furthermore, Black women from the Hip Hop generation contend with a duality that engenders soul searching beyond the scope of women as oppressed and men as oppressors. Evidence of this juxtaposition is the thin line between objectification of the female body and the sexual agency of women that exercise the right to participate on their terms (Rose, 2008).

Are these women complicit and misguided or are they engaging in public spaces of hypersexualization from a platform of empowerment? Taken further, who has the right to demarcate the definition of these roles? Moreover, why are such critiques unapologetically harsh when it comes to Black women? Morgan (1999) suggests that these types of questions are essential to engaging in a feminist discourse that evaluates platforms hypocritical of authentic gender equality, but unwillingly fails to ask difficult questions that intersect the gray areas of Black women's culture, identity, and socio-political environments. 'This gray area,' writes Ofori-Atta (2011), 'includes the contradictions of loving an art that is reluctant to include you; loving men who, at times, refuse to portray you in your totality; and rejecting sexual objectification while actively and proudly embracing your sexuality' (p.2).

Accordingly, this study explores the coping strategies of Black women college students drawn to a musical culture that affirms and celebrates their intersecting social identities but falls short of eradicating or diminishing stereotypical characterizations of Black womanhood [1].

Step into the Cipher: Procedure, Design, & Methodology

Within the context of Hip Hop culture, a cipher (also written as ‘cypher’) structurally is a circular formation that invokes a space of refuge for persons that desire to contribute their knowledge, sense of style, creativity, and identity free of malevolent judgment. There is no formal invitation into the cipher; one simply steps into the center, but, there are unwritten rules of engagement paramount to keeping the peace. For example, it is a cultural miscue to interrupt someone centered in the cipher; doing so can be viewed as a sign of disrespect. As it relates to this study, the cipher metaphor has been useful in maintaining participants’ ways of knowing at the forefront of analysis [2]. Furthermore, their lived experiences, whether real or perceived, allow ‘the unique knowledge domains of Black women to come into full view’ (Vaz, 1997, p. vii). The following sections are written in first person to maintain aesthetically direct language that exists throughout the paper.

As a college student matriculating at a predominately White college, I carried Hip Hop with me into the culturally rigid structure of the classroom and often used the canon to contest academic practices and standards that failed to represent me. As a scholar-practitioner, I use Hip Hop as an accessible framework to engage students in discussions about deeply-rooted forms of institutionalized oppression. Collectively, we unpack topics that include, but are not limited to, sexism, homophobia, hypermasculinization, privilege, and the glamorization of life in the ‘ghetto.’ We also critique how cultural appropriation and the disenfranchisement of marginalized communities exist in all forms of popular culture. The format aligns with how the students and I experience Hip Hop culture, a cipher of raw and unfiltered thoughts communicated through code switching, syntax discussed later in the chapter; gut-wrenching debate; and often agreeing to disagree when consensus over a polarizing issue was not possible. In fact, on many occasions the power dynamic between professor and student shifts to show my willingness to learn from students.

A class discussion on representations of women in rap music is one example of the difficult dialogues that surfaced. In the results section, I provide an account of a moment between the only Black male student and study participants to demonstrate how the classroom serves as a transformative space for transparency. As part of the cipher-lecture format, twelve students enrolled in the course received an informal questionnaire. I asked the students three questions, two of the questions dealt with perceptions of women of color who participate in Hip Hop. The third question asked students to discuss how the perceptions they listed might impact the experiences of women of color on college campuses. The students were asked to return the

questionnaire so that responses could be used to guide the class discussion. The responses to the questionnaire, subsequent class discussions about representation and the influence of rap music, and engagement with participants throughout the semester, served as the impetus for this study.

While the cohort was predominately White, the ratio of self-identified men and women, based on pronoun preferences, was split. The composition of the class resembled the demographic of the larger institution, a predominately white, state university located in the Midwest. After a class meeting, I asked four Black women enrolled in the course to participate in a study that specifically addressed the impact of mainstream rap music on Black women college students. Three of the students agreed to participate.

At the time of data collection, I had known two of the participants for two years. Both students had me as a professor for Introduction to African American Studies as well as the Hip Hop course. The third respondent worked closely with me as a volunteer for a Hip Hop conference I developed as an extension of the course. However, the respondent's enrollment in the Hip Hop course was her first encounter with me as an instructor.

These dynamics shaped my discussion with study participants and allowed uncensored access to their perspectives. I earned their trust as an ally to Hip Hop culture, and an accessible Black woman faculty member who provided guidance, social support, and mentorship; resources often needed by some students of color attending PWIs. While in the past, the number of participants might preclude this study as credible, Crouch and McKenzie (2006) assert that 'interview-based studies involving a small number of respondents are becoming more common in social science' (p. 484). The criteria for participants were as follows: self-identify as a Black woman; actively engage in Hip Hop culture in some form; and express an acute interest in the depiction and treatment of women in rap music.

The participants ranged in age from 19 to 25 years old. Two of the students were sophomores, and one student was a junior. All participants self-identified as heterosexual women. The academic majors of respondents include the fields of biology and anthropology (dual major); social work and child welfare (dual major); and education. Data collection methods occurred in several ways, interviews that took place over a two-day period for one hour, participant's written assignments, and analytical memos, notes written during and after the interview. The memos were used throughout the study to document participants during classroom discussions, informal interactions

on campus, and emotions (i.e., body language, facial expressions) made visible during our time together (Rossman and Rallis, 2003). Participants' written assignments in the course were used with consent and offered a nuanced approach to understanding participants' perceived impact of mainstream rap music (Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte, 1999).

The epistemology of respondents exists at the heart of data interpretation in tandem with the perspective and voice of the researcher. This acknowledgment is an important factor in addressing the limitations of the study. The methodological approach of narrative inquiry provided a deeper understanding of participant's responses 'because I was investigating meanings of experiences...' believed to be shaped by mainstream rap music (Trahar, 2009, p.3). Participants' views about the correlation between the discourse of rap music and the way they are perceived or treated demonstrated that 'narratives are not simply about how Black women view themselves, but also about how spaces [circumstances and people] influence their identity and their educational experiences' (Haynes, 2011, p. 46). This study focused on three college students situated at the nexus of feminist epistemology, Black identity, and Hip Hop culture. Pseudonyms were used to maintain participants' anonymity.

Findings and Discussion

Self-Imposed Boundaries

Overarching criticism about the current state of mainstream rap music centers on the abundance of misogynistic and sexist content. At the heart of this criticism are assertions that women who choose to be a part of the rap industry as artists or fans are complicit supporters of rhetoric and behaviors that support the degradation of women. In 2004, comedian Chris Rock reinforced this opinion in a comedy sketch during his HBO special, *Never Scared* [3]. In the segment, Rock argues that women dancing to pervasively insulting rap songs are eager to detach themselves from the lyrical content because, according to Rock, if 'the beat's alright, she will dance all night' (Gallen, 2004). The true intent of the joke, however, is revealed when Rock exclaims that when women are challenged about the belittling content of rap songs and their motive for dancing to these songs, the complicit response women offer [is] 'he ain't talking 'bout me,' and then the women continue to dance. Conversely, the decision to detach from far-reaching stereotypes may not be a matter of personal choice, particularly for Black women. Such images have a looming effect and often require deliberate acts of separation from negative representations.

Z: The lyrics provide a portrayal of Black women that is narrow and over sexualized. Rap music doesn't show how diverse Black women are which is why I try to involve myself in campus activities that might be outside of Black cultural groups and events. My interests are broad, and I hope others see that.

The decision to exist outside of campus affinity groups left Z vulnerable to social spaces that were culturally restrictive and not affirming of her identity. Although she recognized stressors associated with being a part of predominately White campus organizations (i.e., anxiety, second-guessing academic ability, microaggressions, perceptions of tokenism, and so on), the prospect of being seen as a well-rounded person with broad interests outweighed feelings of isolation and cultural disconnect. Interestingly, challenging the notion of complicit support and agreement with the misogyny of rap music was a burden of choice shared by other participants. They understood that within the context of mainstream rap music, Black women are often subjected to the preconceived idea that their attention and bodies are readily available and accessible to men when desired. Hence, the ability to circumvent or cope with gendered racial microaggressions may also entail engaging in conscious self-imposed boundaries that contest notions of a monolithic existence. Q's poignant self-assessment and critique offers further insight.

Q: The portrayal of Black women on stage and videos cause people to think that Black college women will do the same thing [therefore] I often dress in long skirts and a shirt that fully covers my top.

A review of Q's thought process in a written assignment on the topic of equal access in Hip Hop revealed that her decision to not dress in ways she deemed provocative is symptomatic of existing in a culture dominated by patriarchal standards. In her examination as to why some women rap artist gain access to the industry, while others do not, Q asserts that the reason Nicki Minaj rose in popularity so quickly is because "[Minaj] shows off her body... and dresses crazy to get ahead in the Hip Hop game." Q provided a comparative critique of Minaj's early career to demonstrate how the artist moved away from being a skilled emcee touted for her talent to an "entertainer... playing up the typical image of rap music to get further [in her career] and ...have an equal platform as men."

For Q, a desire for equal access or career advancement required Minaj to be uninhibited in her style of dress and adopt the persona of being a boss chick or bad bitch, which more often than not implies a woman's desire to achieve success with

skills that support rather than dismantle patriarchy. In remixing the politics of respectability within the framework of mainstream rap music, some Black women have resisted stereotypes by embracing terms and behaviors considered negative or demeaning as a mantra of empowerment. However, a source of empowerment for some Black women also co-exists as a consequence for others. As Q pointed out during the interview, “even if we cover up our bodies it doesn’t matter, people will continue to feel the way that they do, which is why I cannot internalize that nonsense...[because] I know I am a good woman.”

Black women have never been exempt from depictions that lay at their feet insurmountable standards of being a good woman. Rojas (2009) points to the ‘distinction between “good” and “bad” Black women [as a strategic invention] to justify the different sexual roles that they were forced to perform...’ (p. 35). The ‘good or bad’ dichotomy exists in myriad ways, but the two that are most profound are the educated, hardworking, strong Black Woman (‘good’) and the gold digger, booty shaking, ‘chickenhead, (‘bad’). While neither are exempt from pervasively sexist characterizations, for many Black women, establishing ourselves as women of substance is a never-ending journey that we are socialized to undertake. In the following section participants’ shift in behavior or self-imposed boundaries reveals salient points about the perceived obligation to alter misguided perceptions about Black womanhood.

Emotional Distance

Part of the Hip Hop feminist epistemology is for Black women to detach themselves from the brunt of injurious assaults and misguided characterizations. Morgan (1999) describes this type of disengagement as emotional distance, a place of refuge that allows [Black women] to ‘recognize that the attack, [laden with vitriolic language] isn’t personal but part of the illness’ (p. 76). In 2006, film director Byron Hurt stumbled upon this issue while interviewing a group of Black women about the use of the term ‘bitch’ in mainstream rap music. There was a consensus among the women that they were not personally offended because they were not the intended targets of insulting lyrics. One of the women emphasized her detachment by asserting, ‘I know he’s [rap artist] not talking to me, I know what I am.’ In response, Hurt uses his off-camera narrative to challenge the idea that misogynistic language in rap music has little to no impact on women unless it is a direct attack. Notwithstanding, while Hurt offered compelling points about denial, shared accountability, and complicity, he neglected to acknowledge Black women’s ability to affirm our existence despite fervent acts of marginalization.

Furthermore, invoking positive affirmation as a counternarrative to disingenuous representations of Black womanhood is directly linked to engaging in emotional distance as a form of self-preservation and resilient self-love.

An encounter with a Black male student during a class discussion serves as an example of resilient self-love. ‘What these girls want,’ he exclaimed, ‘is dudes with money, nice cars and a gangsta lean.’ Initially, the student’s position received support and agreement from some of his male peers, but eventually there was pushback from some of his classmates when he admonished women for dancing to offensive rap songs, arguing that a woman’s decision to gyrate in a sexually alluring matter exempt her from receiving respect from men. I found the student’s comments alarming but recognized that ‘generations of [black] males are having their consciousness (sense of self, values, perceptions of the world, etc.) influenced by rap music’ (Jamison, 2006, p. 50). Therefore, the student’s comments demonstrate why heteronormative, hypersexual fantasies are dangerous, and it is incumbent upon Black women to engage with [our] men from a ‘distance that’s safe’ (Morgan, 1999, p. 76).

Most of the women in the class, including the participants of this study, did not challenge the male student. Some of them offered a nervous laugh, while others showed visible discontent but did not express their thoughts verbally. Perhaps Morgan (1999) is on to something when she proclaims that Black women cannot afford to expend energy, interest or discussions on sexism when other issues that assail Black women exist. This point is supported by participants’ insights into how representations of Black women in mainstream rap music have an effect on their interaction with Black male peers on campus:

T: I think ... rap music gives these dudes a narrow and hypocritical notion that Black women should not be treated with respect if they are on campus being good girls by day, but at night are acting crazy or wild out at a party. Yet, this rule does not apply to men.

Q: I have seen him (male student in class) out at parties doing the most raunchy dances and then come to campus in a nice shirt and tie. Why didn’t he mention his own behavior at parties? The next time I see him out at a party I’m going to remind him about what he said.

By pointing out the double standard in how women are labeled or portrayed for the same behavior; in this case provocative dance moves, T and Q dismiss the notion that

critique of behavior linked to the worthiness of respect should only apply to women. In their reflection of the class discussion the two respondents were not disturbed by the comments because the credibility of the source, in their opinion, was inauthentic and immature. Also, 'considering that Black women are often characterized as being aggressive and confrontational,' their decision to not engage in the class discussion was a matter of picking the right battle (Haynes, 2011, p. 49). While such strategies are laudable and serve as a buffer to dealing with gendered racial microaggressions, I was drawn to Q's moment of vulnerability as she discussed an unfortunate outcome of engaging in emotional distance as a means to circumvent judgment:

Q: My mother always taught me that things are going to be different for me as a Black woman, I'm okay with that [but] it sucks that I can't be myself.

The decreased volume in Q's voice and her eyes shifting downward is indicative of the angst many Black girls and women are forced to contend with; longing to exist on campus, at work, and in the world unapologetically rooted in our skin, identities, and ways of knowing and doing. The desire to exist on our terms is the awesome power of self-definition, using standards foreign to men and White people. For many Black women, the freedom to simply be is the antithesis of acculturation.

Code Switching

The art of code switching, fluid movement between variations of language within the same conversation, is a time-honored tradition in marginalized communities. Those who engage in code switching do so for various reasons. Two common rationales are linguistic confrontation to contest negative assumptions about intelligence, and the desire to maintain cultural connections to affiliated communities. In fact, to understand the syntax of code switching one must have an acute understanding of the people who are part of the community. People who find value in superficial interaction, sound bite communication (i.e. social media), and cultural voyeurism, often miss opportunities to understand and experience Black people outside of rap music. The lack of understanding has troubling implications for developing cultural competence when the only messages received are stereotypical; and those receiving such messages lack cultural knowledge and understanding of Black life, the language of Hip Hop culture, and lyrical context. Participants offer two narratives that illuminate encounters with White peers.

Q: Hardly anyone talks to me [in class] unless I talk to them first... I seem to have more problems in talking to the white men [because] ... I know what I'm talking about [regarding the subject], and I don't engage in slang or street talk — they seem to be uncomfortable... I'm thinking maybe Hip Hop is influencing others in thinking that every Black woman is going to be loud or in your face, and when I don't act that way, maybe they are disappointed in some way.

T: Me personally, I was in class with majority white people and nobody wanted to be my partner. We [Black women] can be perceived or treated as dumb. That's why I always speak proper when I'm around them (white people) and then kick it the way I want to when I'm not around them. I feel sometimes – due to rap music, even in a college situation Black women are looked at negatively.

The establishment of boundaries (self-imposed and emotional) emerged among participants as a common theme to avoid unsolicited judgment. Similarly, detachment from misguided perceptions and expectations from White peers in the form of code switching, is yet another example of Black women taking on the task of protecting themselves as well as safeguarding their community from stereotypes that 'often communicate...not only how society views them but also how they are expected to behave' (Haynes, 2011, p. 47). After viewing a documentary that examined White people's appropriation of Hip Hop culture, students were assigned a one paragraph response to ascertain immediate insights (Clift et al., 2010). T was drawn to the way in which those featured in the film seemed detached from the Hip Hop experience. She writes:

it was like a novelty to them...they had no clue what they were rapping to or dancing to, but I guess in their mind that was Hip Hop...at times I felt offended when that group put gold teeth in their mouth and [wore] gold chains. They put those things on like a costume...I am not a costume; Black culture is not a costume.

Similarly, Q made the following observation, 'It's a shame when people use poor humor and caricatures of rap music when they don't understand something. That's my major problem with commercial rap; it invites this type of stuff.'

T and Q's observations are in stark contrast to healthy inter-group dynamics that occurred between some Black and White people during the early days of Hip Hop. Rose (2008) describes the engagement of White people as fans willing to leave:

predominately White social spaces and comfort zones...to be down with Hip Hop [where] their participation often required, if not cultural knowledge, certainly familiarity with aspects of black life and a willingness to express a shared appreciation for actual black people (p.232).

Nearly four decades later, the persistence of racial and cultural silos on college campuses does not afford opportunities for genuine intercultural engagement and communication.

Consequently, for some White college students, information about Black culture and contact with Black people is solely rooted in their access to mainstream rap music. As a result, polarizing campus microaggressions such as cultural assumptions, racially insensitive theme parties, detached misperceptions about the academic aptitude of Black students and bias incidents related to language and behavior continue to serve as campus climate challenges at PWIs. Contending with gendered racial microaggressions is taxing for Black women and further exacerbates assumptions about their presence in the academy. Q and T's decision to code switch or maintain a communication pattern of Standard English with White peers is a preemptive action based on how they perceive White people's investment in Black culture through mainstream rap music. The obligation to speak 'proper' or not use slang is indicative of Q and T protecting communities they feel connected to, contesting assumptions about their presence in the academy, and preserving aspects of Hip Hop culture that merit artistic reverence.

Hip Hop on their terms

Hip Hop feminism emerged in the literary works of Black women who assert 'loyal but vocal, highly principled opposition to Black male uber masculinity' (Chang, 2005, p. 445). In this space, Black women can address contradictions of empowerment without subjecting female artists to criticism that links worthiness of respect to inflexible standards of sexual morality. Likewise, Black women can articulate without guilt why polarizing language and practices in mainstream rap music appeal to them, and how their multifaceted interests and identities are discovered and celebrated within the framework of Hip Hop culture (McNeely Cobham, 2015). For Black women 'to develop a deeper sense of self-acceptance and not allow negative stereotypes to dictate how they perceive themselves,' asserts Haynes (2011), they have to find ways to express the totality of their experience through a medium rooted in their cultural paradigm (p. 42). This is important in understanding participants' unwillingness to disengage from rap music:

Z: The people here (on campus)... judge me; they don't seem to know the difference between a Black woman being assertive [versus] aggressive. That's why I am drawn to some aspects of mainstream rap music and Hip Hop culture; I am given permission to tell the whole truth about being a Black woman.

For Z, the ability to connect, contrast, and dissect the Black experience in 16 bars, the equivalent of one verse in most rap songs, cements Hip Hop as a musical culture that peels back the many layers of her identity. For example, the 'Miseducation of Lauryn Hill' was Z's response to a written assignment that asked students to list a rap song or album that described them. She wrote,

*I can relate to every song on that album and how it connects to my life in some way. The song Lost Ones is the zero f**ks anthem, Doo Wop is either my friends telling me or me telling my friends to leave that boy alone. Forgive Them Father is like a prayer and resembles my spiritual side, To Zion is a manifestation of unconditional love, and I Used to Love Him, is the epitome of relationships that come with heartbreak.*

In a nutshell, the experiences of Black women are personified in Z's narrative. The no-nonsense friend that will tell you off and pray for you at the same time, while offering a cautiously understanding shoulder to lean on during times of distress, is a real moment of reciprocal vulnerability among some Black women unearthed in various styles of rap music.

Q: Although I have decreased the amount of bullshit rap music I listen to, I enjoy participating in Hip Hop in other ways, like slam poetry, watching documentaries, listening to female artists ... and taking the time to be a part of formal and informal settings where Hip Hop is discussed. I mean its [Hip Hop] a part of who I am as a person, as a Black woman. I don't want to be totally disconnected from the culture that I will always be associated with in one way or another (shrugs shoulder). I'm down for life as they say (laughs), but I am more than what you see in [rap] videos.

T: I am Hip Hop; I got that from you (referring to the author). I keep my Sirius radio on the 'old school [Hip Hop] station because I refuse to be [turned] away from music simply because a few artists and executives have hijacked it. Every now and then I'll get up with Minaj... but I listen to Lauryn Hill, MC Lyte, Rah Digga, Yo Yo ... all that old school.

When asked to expound on her definition of ‘bullshit rap music,’ Q pointed out that her use of the term was a critique of nonsensical rap that is incoherent, disconnected from historical traditions of Hip Hop culture, and tone deaf on important socio-political issues that exist in society. Q’s discernment between rap music she refuses to engage or even consider a part of Hip Hop, and music that draws a link to her identity as a Black woman unabashedly makes clear that her affinity for rap is not a blind allegiance. In the same way, T not only embraces some aspects of rap music, but she claims a stake in it by referring to ‘I am Hip Hop,’ a manifesto that asserts an unwavering connection to the internal and external principles of Hip Hop language, music, behaviors, and style. For these students, the decision to participate exists at the intersection of self-love and self-preservation. This position aligns with the values of Hip Hop feminism, which ‘allows us to continue loving ourselves and the brothers who hurt us without letting race loyalty buy us early tombstones’ (Morgan, 1999, p. 36). Morgan’s point is made clear by T’s final thoughts on why she will not abandon Hip Hop nor be victimized by gendered racial microaggressions:

T: I mean I should be able to drop it like [it’s] hot and when I stand upright still have my dignity intact, because that’s what we do as a people, we get knocked to the ground and get back up. We go down to the ground, spin and pop back up (does the B-boy/B-girl pose with her hands). Getting low has never been the issue, the issue is how low will some of these artists stoop to perform modern-day buffoonery.

While mainstream rap music can be a source of emotional pain for some Black women, other forms of rap music and the culture of Hip Hop broadly provides a sense of cultural affirmation and freedom to simply be. For example, there are countless rap songs that offer lyrical homage to bamboo earrings, apple bottoms, skin complexion in a multitude of hues, #Blackgirlmagic and infectious around the way girl speech. These types of songs are necessary for two reasons; to contrast degrading narratives of mainstream rap, and affirm the lived experiences and epistemologies of Black women devoid of Eurocentric ideas and standards.

Implications and Conclusions

Higgins (2009) defines Hip Hop as the ‘world’s leading counterculture, subculture and youth culture’ (p. 8). One can surmise that Higgins arrived at this definition because of Hip Hop’s undeniable presence in American popular culture. For example, elements of Hip Hop serve as subtext for films, books and magazines, theater, and television shows;

which include high-profile award shows (i.e., Oscars, Grammys, Tony, Billboard, MTV, etc), and the media phenomenon known as ‘reality TV.’ There are burgeoning subgenres of rap music that have the capacity to reach rural communities (Country Rap); religious communities (Christian Rap); LGBTQIA communities (Queer Hip Hop); and suburban environments via the success of White rappers such as Eminem, Asher Roth, Macklemore, and Mac Miller, to name a few. Hip Hop also extends to massive mainstream audiences of all ages with the influx of R&B, Jazz, and Rock and Roll artists that collaborate with rap artists, or are open to a remix of their classic songs to solicit a younger fan base. These examples skim the surface on the myriad of ways Hip Hop has dominated discourse, attitudes, and behaviors.

For college administrators, the practical implications of Hip Hop’s influence can be found among the majority of students who have or will participate in some form of rap music during their tenure at a college or university. At the center of the debate is whether or not rap music can be used to exempt people from behaviors that are polarizing at best, and promote covert acts of discrimination, marginalization, and intimidation. These types of discussions are beneficial in the social spaces in which incidents most often occur (i.e., residence hall, dining room, recreation center, sporting events, etc.).

However, it is incumbent upon administrators, particularly at Predominately White Institutions, to establish a healthy campus climate specific to social spaces by developing interventions that will help students understand how certain behaviors within the context of rap music and Hip Hop culture have the potential to be insensitive and offensive to members of the campus community. Likewise, campus departments charged with recruiting new students should also be mindful as to how cultural appropriation may surface during attempts to appear ‘cool.’ The opportunity to unpack the topic of cultural appropriation can occur through pedagogical practices that are culturally relevant and engaging. The objective of culturally relevant pedagogy is attainable by embedding elements of Hip Hop culture into the curriculum of various academic subjects. For example, a discussion about urban renewal in poverty-stricken communities pushes students to examine acts of environmental violence and racism that occur in geographical locations where social and political capital is non-existent.

What is more, Hip Hop in academia holds the potential to cultivate meaningful interracial camaraderie, articulate the multifaceted experiences of marginalized communities, and create an opportunity for students to engage in culturally relevant

topics that develop skills in areas of critical thinking, written critique and healthy debate; tools beneficial for academic success.

Finally, a historical timeline of controversial incidents on college and university campuses has revealed that non-academic and academic approaches to fostering culturally responsive and inclusive environments enable administrators to think about procedural guidelines that seek to reduce or eradicate gendered racial microaggressions. Equally, developing procedures before incidents occur advances the institutions' commitment to standards of civility and demonstrates a willingness to provide students a timely response to situations that may cause psychological, emotional, or physical harm.

Since the inception of Hip Hop culture, Black women continue to be important stakeholders. Their role and contributions, however, are often overlooked or placed on the fringes of critical analysis because entities in the forefront of documenting the trajectory of Hip Hop are pervasively male. As a result, there is a noticeable deficit in the number of women in leadership roles who participate as high profile entertainers, and who have the social and economic capital to influence how Black women are discussed and portrayed in Hip Hop. These factors and many others support an unrelenting trope of mainstream rap music that necessitates the subjugation of Black women to elevate braggadocio, sexist and hyper-masculine roles. As a consequence, there continue to be intragroup communication and boundary challenges between Black men and women that lead to nefarious acts of pathologizing Black female bodies. These two issues, intragroup challenges, and pathologized bodies are the findings not discussed in this paper but addressed in a forthcoming publication. Topics for additional research include the difference in perceptions found among Black women not enrolled in college, and Black women a part of the LGBTQIA community.

This study examined how Black women college students perceive the impact of mainstream rap music on their academic experiences. Framing the discussion through the conceptual framework of Hip Hop feminism allows the practice, epistemologies, and narrative styles of the respondents to be understood and discussed. The study revealed that participants resisted stereotypes by engaging in self-imposed boundaries to contest preconceived ideas about Black women. They also created emotional distance from aspects of rap music that were injurious and insulting; relied on code switching to thwart White peers misperceptions about their intelligence; and participated in affirming representations of Hip Hop culture on their terms. These acts of resistance

and empowerment are ‘the strategies of survival for a generation of women never meant to win, and who yet survive.’ (Crunk Feminist Collective, 2010).

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Long live Hip Hop. Black Lives Matter.

Footnotes

1. ‘Musical culture includes styles that reflect social hierarchies and have different functions within a culture, from entertainment to worksong, and ceremonial to religious’ (Robinson, 2009, p.12).

2. After completing a transcription summary of data (Janesick, 2000), preliminary categories were written on index cards with headings related to variables of gendered racial microaggressions (Lewis et al., 2013). Second, preliminary categories were collapsed, and quotes from each participant were re-coded and categorized into identified themes (Bogdan and Biklen, 2006) about gender and racial microaggressions, experiences on campus, and perceptions about mainstream rap music. The next phase involved comparison of participants’ responses. In this stage, themes were linked or eliminated until a pattern of relevancy emerged. Also, observation of respondents’ posture, visible emotions, and side or off-topic conversations not recorded but noted in analytical memos provided further context to the interviews. In the final phase, data relationships were reexamined through inductive analysis and moved into four categories that represent the findings of this study.

3. Warning: Strong language. Audio of Chris Rock skit.



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Footnotes (returns to text)

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◀ BLACK ◀ COLLEGE ◀ HIP HOP FEMINISM ◀ PEER REVIEWED ◀ RAP MUSIC ◀ WOMEN

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