WHITNEY A. PEOPLES

"Under Construction"

Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges between Black Second-Wave and Hip-Hop Feminisms[1]

Abstract

This essay seeks to explore the sociopolitical objectives of hip-hop feminism, to address the generational ruptures that those very objectives reveal, and to explore the practical and theoretical qualities that second- and third-wave generations of black feminists have in common. Ultimately, the goal of this essay is to clearly understand the sociopolitical platform of hip-hop feminists and how that platform both impacts and figures into the history and future of black American feminist thought.

I have titled this essay "Under Construction" after the fourth album, of the same name, by rapper Missy Elliot. Elliot begins the album by explaining that "under construction" signifies that she is still "working" on herself. Additionally, it represents Elliot's project of taking hip-hop back to "the rope" or to the beginning when it was about the music. As Elliot says in the introduction to her album,

> my album which is titled under construction, under construction simply states that I'm a work in progress I'm working on myself. . . . We all under construction trying to rebuild, you know, ourselves. Hip-hop

done gained respect from, you know, not even respect from but just like rock and roll and it took us a lot of hard work to get here so all that hatin' and animosity between folks you need to kill it with a skillet. You don't see Bill Gates and Donald Trump arguing with each other cuz both of them got paper and they got better shit to do, get more paper. So all I'm sayin is lets take hip-hop back to the rope, follow me. (Elliot 2002)

I find Elliot's words and the title to her album a fitting comparison to the work of a cadre of black American feminists that I read as an attempt at "(re)working" black American feminism and its response to the contemporary lives of black women and girls.

Young black female writers such as Kristal Brent Zooks (1995) and Joan Morgan (1999) have argued that black American women are in dire need of a new feminist movement.[2] Zooks and Morgan, both of whom I consider "third-wave"[3] feminists, argue that second-wave black feminism has failed to address the current realities and needs of young black women. To this extent, shani jamila argues, "as women of the hip-hop generation we need a feminist consciousness that allows us to examine how representations and images can be simultaneously empowering and problematic" (jamila 2002, 392). To address this perceived deficiency, jamila, Morgan, Pough, and others have begun a dialogue between two unlikely partners: hip-hop and feminism.

Although there is contention over the nature and potential of hip-hop as progressive political practice (Lipsitz 1998; Kitwana 2002; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003; Bynoe 2004; Kitwana 2004), some cultural analysts read parts of hip-hop culture and rap music as providing political analysis—although at times problematic—about racist, sexist, economic, police, and community violence that African-American men and women face. As a result of hip-hop culture's relevant depiction of black life in America, Joan Morgan and others argue that hip-hop culture and rap music hold radical and liberating potential. This potential, they argue (Davis 1995; Morgan 1999; Pough 2004b) should be tapped by the contemporary feminist movement to speak to younger feminists, particularly those of color. To this end, writers such as Joan Morgan (1999), shani jamila (2002), and Gwendolyn Pough (2003) have coined and begun to circulate the term "hip-hop feminist." In response to what they perceive as an out-of-touch

feminism, hip-hop feminists seek to pick up where they believe second-wave black feminists left off. They offer that beyond the problematic of demeaning women via its incontestable misogyny, hip-hop provides a space for young black women to express their race and ethnic identities and to critique racism. Moreover, hip-hop feminists contend that hip-hop is also a site where young black women begin to build or further develop their own gender critique and feminist identity, which they can then turn toward the misogyny of rap music (Keyes 2000; Pough 2002; Byrd 2004). Gwendolyn Pough speaks to the potential of hip-hop in feminist consciousness-raising when she writes, "Parents do not want their children listening to [rap], and educators do not see the educational value in [rap]. I believe that the value resides in the critique" (Pough 2002, 92–93). For Pough, the objectionable elements of hip-hop are part of what make it valuable to feminism because they provide the opportunity for students to analyze and hone their skills of critical analysis.

This essay is rooted in an investigation of hip-hop feminism and not hip-hop culture per se; thus, even though I do attempt brief explanations of hip-hop culture for the purposes of clarification, I do not engage in lengthy analyses of rap music lyrics, videos, hip-hop magazines, etc. I decided to forego analyzing the work of rappers for feminist sentiment or excavating the contributions of women to hip-hop primarily because that work has already been done by authors who have successfully argued that women have always been a critical part of the foundation of hip-hop culture as well as of its present success (see Roberts 1991; Goodall 1994; Roberts 1994; Guevara 1996; Emerson 2002; Pough 2004a). Other works attempting to link women, feminism, and hip-hop have revolved largely around issues of identity, investigating the impact of hip-hop on the individual subjectivity of black women as fans, consumers, and members of the hip-hop community (Davis 1995; Roberts and Ulen 2000; Byrd 2004). While the work of these authors has provided fertile ground on which to continue a discussion about the intersections of women, feminism, and hip-hop, they are nonetheless incomplete. My project will attempt to move the discussion beyond one of identity and legitimation into a more critical engagement of the ways in which hip-hop feminism operates and the spaces in which it resides to determine the nature of the resistance it represents. In the end, I am not concerned with whether hip-hop and rap music express feminist politics; I am concerned with the ways that hip-hop

feminists claim to engage hip-hop culture, rap music, and feminism and the effects of such an engagement.

I contend that previous examinations of generational responses to employing hip-hop within feminist practice drew premature lines in the sand, setting black feminists at odds when really they were much more in line with one another. This essay addresses the premature division of black feminists by identifying and exploring three specific yet interrelated issues affecting the future direction of black American feminism. In this piece I attempt to (1) identify the sociopolitical agenda of hip-hop feminism, (2) tease out the specific arguments of second- and third-wave black American feminists in response to the recent development of hip-hop feminism, and (3) explore the theoretical and practical linkages between generations of black American feminists. Through the examination of power, hip-hop culture, feminism, and the interactions among all three, I hope to provide a coherent framework for interpreting the work of hip-hop feminists and for clearly understanding their genealogy. Ultimately, I argue that the sociopolitical agenda of hip-hop feminism shows evidence of crucial connections between generations of black feminists that position hip-hop feminism as a continuation—though a disruptive one—of second-wave black feminism.

The Political Economy of Hip-Hop or Why It (Should) Matter(s) to Feminism

Hip-hop has become an undeniable force today because of the wide influence it wields. From young white men in suburbia buying Ludacris albums to classes in the modern American academy, hip-hop has infiltrated almost every aspect of the greater American culture. But even with its rise to iconic status within the American social and economic landscape, hip-hop comes from humble beginnings.

Born from the work of poor and working-class black and Latino youth, many of whom were of Caribbean descent, in the late 1970s and early '80s, hip-hop was, in part, a response to the class exclusivity of the New York disco scene (Ogg and Upshal 2001) and the growing gang culture of inner-city New York. Initially, the culture was created as a social and recreational space for the working-class and poor folk who had been pushed to the fringe of society and forgotten. Gradually, hip-hop emerged not only as a

recreational space but also one in which to voice contempt for the living conditions of the economically and racially marginalized. From its inception, hip-hop has represented resistance to social marginalization, and later, resistance to and commentary on the political and economic oppression that makes social marginalization possible.

Moreover, it must be foregrounded that hip-hop is not a homogeneous entity. It should be understood as an umbrella term containing at least four distinct parts: break-dancing, DJ-ing, graffiti art, and rapping. It is important to foreground the multiple components of hip-hop culture since it is often reduced to rapping and rap music, which immediately limits the discussion of it and also excludes potential and actual sites of resistance within hip-hop occurring outside of rap.

Any discussion of the circulation of hip-hop culture in the American and global mainstream that does not address the political economy of the culture and the demands of the capitalist marketplace is incomplete. Norman Kelley describes the context of the political economy of black American music in general as "a structure of stealing" whose origins date back to the period of American slavery (Kelley 2002). For Kelley, the antebellum period provided a foundation for the contemporary economic relationship between black musicians and the music industry because "[b]lacks served as commodities—objects purchased, controlled, and sold by others—while their labor was valued as an instrument in the production of cotton and other goods and services" (Kelley 2002, 7). Kelley further argues that the relationship of slaves and slave owners informs contemporary music industry labor relations in the form of a "network of interconnected operations, businesses, business practices, and social ties that mostly understand blacks as 'talent', i.e., labor" (Kelley 2002, 13). Furthermore, Bakari Kitwana argues that the reduction of black bodies and talent to nothing more than labor is also evident in the hype surrounding the notion that young white suburban kids represent the largest buying bloc of the hip-hop marketplace (Kitwana 2005). Kitwana questions this notion by asking "but what's at stake if white kids are not hip hop's primary audience and we accept the myth? The overwhelming message here is that Blacks are not a significant variable in a music they created and music of which Black culture is the very foundation" (Kitwana 2005, 102). Using both Kelley and Kitwana, we understand that black bodies are valued only insofar as they represent potential to create products that can be transformed into capital

via marketing and sales; outside of that process those bodies are dispensable. Under this rubric hip-hop becomes a commodity as it represents the productive potential of black bodies when they enter into a capital-producing enterprise.

Yet it is important to highlight that it is not just any kind of hip-hop or rap music that is easily commodified. Much of mainstream rap music has been reduced to a never-ending obsession with monetary gain, appropriation of patriarchal notions of power, material possession, partying, women, and sex, all of which are secured and protected through the hypermasculine threat of violence. Mainstream rap music is most easily commodified because it represents ideas of blackness that are in line with dominant racist and sexist ideologies; it has economic potential only because it works hand-in-hand with long established ideas about the sexual, social, and moral nature of black people. In other words, the images of black male violence and aggression that dominate mainstream rap music are highly marketable in America because of already existing ideologies of racism that long ago named the black male as supreme aggressor and physical and sexual threat. Similarly, the images of sexually available black women that pervade rap music are marketable because of already existing ideologies that designated black women as hypersexual and morally obtuse.

Through the political economy of hip-hop we see how the discursive and material functions of coercive power have co-opted what began as oppositional and rearticulated it in service to capital. Yet even as parts of hip-hop culture draw on over-determined tropes of black gender roles, there is the possibility that those parts can be rearticulated or engaged in a subversive manner. Take, for example, Gwendolyn Pough's work on women's ability to critically disrupt the hip-hop space. Pough argues, via reading the lyrics of female rappers against the grain, that they "wreck" dominant hip-hop discourses by contesting stereotypes that often leave women without agency (Pough 2004a). Pough goes on to argue that although rappers such as Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim draw heavily on American social/racial stereotypes of black women as sexually promiscuous, they simultaneously disrupt black community norms that silence black female sexuality and encourage shame around it for black women and girls. For Pough, despite the obvious negative aspects of Brown's and Kim's work, they nonetheless acknowledge "that they are sexual beings who enjoy sex, and lots of it, . . .

[and what they] offer is the opportunity to embrace the sexuality of the self" (Pough 2004a, 188). In Pough's analysis we see both the potential for coercive power to assert itself via the use of racialized hypersexual tropes and the simultaneous disruptive possibilities that arise when those tropes are read in a different light. So while the imagery of Lil' Kim as a black woman who enjoys sex is not necessarily radical in and of itself, when placed into dialogue with oppressive community norms that deny black women sexual agency, her work takes on a new light.

In reading a public persona such as that of Lil' Kim it cannot be ignored that her hypersexual rap image was not her creation but that of a group of male rappers and producers with whom she worked, namely Notorious B.I.G. and Sean "P. Diddy" Combs. However, instead of allowing that fact to render void the disruptive possibilities of her image, cultural analysts and feminists should stretch a bit further and see her not as the symbol of the liberation of black female sexuality, but rather as a catalyst who forces a particular conversation around black women and sexuality. It is not that black women will find sexual and individual liberation by adopting Lil' Kim's public persona; however, as a result of the circulation of her image they might find enough of a cleavage in dominant African-American community discourses to begin a simultaneous critique and exploration of the sexual scripts that have been provided for them by institutions and individuals external to them.

Furthermore, hip-hop's heterogeneity, widespread popularity, and sociocultural and economic currency create the possibility for using it as a tool of resistance. The same dynamic that makes hip-hop effective as a marketing tool for Sprite and Nike makes it effective as a means by which to market and spread resistance (e.g., MTV's "Get out the Vote" collaboration with Russell Simmons or Puff Daddy's 2004 presidential election "Vote or Die" campaign). Hip-hop's popularity and intelligibility across a number of spheres imbues it with undeniable potential for those hoping to reach young people and particularly black youth. Additionally, the diversity of hip-hop culture and rap music provides sites of political disruption and subversion that also work to reinforce messages of resistance.[4] In this way, hip-hop emerges as what I term "the generational and culturally relevant vehicle" through which hip-hop feminists can spread their message of critical analysis and empowerment.

What Is Hip-Hop Feminism, Who Does It Represent, and What Does It Stand For?

The birth of hip-hop feminism might be best understood as a means of reconciliation and reclamation on the part of young black women in the U.S. trying to create a space for themselves between the whiteness and/or academically sanitized versions of university-based feminism, where most first encountered a conscious naming and exploration of feminism, and the maleness of the hip-hop culture that most grew up on. As shani jamila explains of her introduction to feminism, "my understanding of Black feminism is rooted in the theoretical texts written decades before I was first introduced to them in college" (jamila 2002, 391). Nevertheless, Eisa Davis tells her audience that "[h]ip-hop gave me a language that made my black womanhood coherent to myself and the world; hip-hop revived me when my soul was blanched from neglect" (Davis 1995, 127). Hip-hop feminists are products of the hip-hop generation but are also, as Joan Morgan writes, "the daughters of feminist privilege" (Morgan 1999, 59). For Kimberly Springer, being a daughter of feminist privilege signifies "college-educated, middle-class Black girls who believe that there is nothing that we cannot achieve because we are women, though sexism and racism might fight us every step of the way" (Springer 2002, 1067). As a result, I identify those who are crafting a political identity based on hip-hop and feminism largely as younger, college-educated black American women who either grew up middle-class or who are now a part of the growing young black and upwardly mobile crew entering the American class hierarchy, and who are often better off than their parents were. These women have been influenced by both the feminist movement and by hip-hop culture, and borrow core themes from both for the development of their own identity. Through using their lives and experiences to bridge the divide between hip-hop and feminism, these women appear to be challenging assumptions about the nature of that divide.

There also exists, however, resistance to the label of hip-hop feminism, making it a contested term even within its own generational constituency. Some women, such as Tara Roberts (Roberts and Ulen 2000), have argued that hip-hop's misogyny has gone too far, making a relationship between

it and feminism impossible. Roberts writes of an earlier time in her life, "I would smile seductively at the brothers in jazzed up VW bugs who passed me on the corner, though I knew what was blaring on their systems was in no way good for women. I am tired of being conflicted" (Roberts and Ulen 2000, 70). For Roberts, attempting to reconcile her conflicted relationship with hip-hop and feminism became more cumbersome than it was worth. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting also rejects the label of hip-hop feminism on the grounds that, unlike Morgan, she thinks feminism, unmodified by qualifiers, is sufficient to address the realities of black women's lived experiences. Though she does identify herself as a "feminist writer of the hip-hop generation," Sharpley-Whiting claims to remain hesitant about identifying herself "with, in the words of social critic Mark Anthony Neal, 'a dying musical genre'" (Sharpley-Whiting 2007, 155). Whereas writers such as Roberts and Sharpley-Whiting hold fast to their feminist locations while distancing themselves from hip-hop, there are also women who fully, and at times critically, embrace hip-hop but maintain a distance from the label of feminism.

The legacy of feminism's racist, homophobic, classist, and xenophobic beginnings unfortunately colors many women's hesitation to explore feminism's possible benefits. Aisha Durham addresses this when describing a scene at a hip-hop conference sponsored by her university. Durham argues that though all of the individuals participating on the "Women in Hip-Hop" panel were women, they "wanted nothing to do with feminism because of the presumed negative connotation, but they boldly pledged their allegiance under a bubble-letter banner blaring 'Women in hip-hop'" (Durham 2007, 309). Additionally, the ambivalence to the label "feminism" expressed by many female rappers whose lyrics have been read by some as expressing feminist sentiment also speaks to the contested nature of the term "hip-hop feminism" (see Rose 1994, 176). I highlight these different approaches to and reasons for resisting the label "hip-hop feminism" as a way to note that the creation and circulation of the term does not signify an uncomplicated acceptance and usage in either the hip-hop or feminist community.

THE SOCIOPOLITICAL AGENDA OF HIP-HOP FEMINISTS
In her controversial debut as a cultural critic, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, noted hip-hop feminist writer Joan Morgan argues, "the focus of

black feminists has got to change. We can't afford to keep expending energy on banal discussions of sexism in rap when sexism is only part of a huge set of problems" (Morgan 1999, 76). The writers and activists who self-define as hip-hop feminists claim to expand the focus of the U.S. black feminist agenda toward hip-hop. Shifting the "feminist" approach to hip-hop has taken the current form of a sociopolitical agenda of uplift aimed at self-empowerment for women and girls through political education based on feminist modes of analysis.

With an agenda once premised solely on critiquing the misogyny of male rappers and the exploitation of female artists and industry performers, hip-hop feminists are turning an eye toward how to make women within hip-hop culture the subjects of the movement. The agenda of some feminists toward hip-hop has shifted from one aimed primarily at critique to one of uplift, not of the music, but of segments of the population who consume it, specifically young African-American women and girls. Uplift, in this instance, is taken to mean a movement directed at uplifting or bringing toward self-actualization an individual or group of individuals taken to be in need of such assistance. The overarching hip-hop feminist agenda of uplift is to be achieved specifically through the dissemination of political education and efforts at institution-building.

Yet in any agenda premised on uplift there will always emerge issues of division based on class and cultural capital; the hip-hop feminist agenda has not escaped such fissures. It is in the split between hip-hop feminism's constituency and its target audience that the movement could end up being counterproductive to its own ends as it takes on a somewhat paternalistic attitude toward the former group of women and girls. In much of the literature written by hip-hop feminists, feminism emerges as something of a savior for all of the "lost souls" represented by young women and girls listening to rap music and living the culture of hip-hop without the critical eye that feminism promises. To this end Eisa Ulen argues, "we must be brave enough to enter this cave in Babylon and help light the fire that will generate some warmth, heal, then resume the journey to the mountaintop, together. And a groovy black chick like you can radiate enough estrogen to embrace our estranged girls, love them back to themselves, strong, high, looking out on tomorrow" (Roberts and Ulen 2000, 71). Working from the writings of hip-hop feminists such as Ulen, Morgan, and Pough, I contend that hip-hop feminists follow what Kevin Gaines calls "popular meanings

of uplift, rooted in public education, economic rights, group resistance and struggle, and democracy . . . " (Gaines 1996, 2). However, such a politics can nevertheless be a slippery slope into traditional uplift ideology, as hip-hop feminists have argued that "[w]e are losing a whole generation of young women of color" (Pough 2003, 243). While this statement might seem benign, and even truthful, it runs the risk of painting hip-hop feminists as "caped crusaders" come to "save" the masses from themselves. While I might agree that black women are in danger of losing ourselves if left to see our reflection only via the images presented in pop culture, I suggest that whatever plan is formulated must bear in mind that the young women whom "we" purport to save have agency in their own ways, and, by their own means, do exercise that agency.

In his book, *The Hip-Hop Generation*, Bakari Kitwana asks, "'what do we mean by politicizing the hip-hop generation?' Is our goal to run hip-hop generationers for office, to turn out votes for Democrats and Republicans, to form a third party, or to provide our generation with a concrete political education" (Kitwana 2002, 206)? Those writing and acting under the label "hip-hop feminists" have chosen Kitwana's last option, that of providing a political education and tools of critical analysis. Writers and activists self-defined as hip-hop feminists appear to be engaging feminism as a mode of analysis through which to critique the social, political, and economic structures that govern their lives and that give rise to the conditions that produce some of the violent and misogynist lyrics that dominate much of mainstream rap music. When interviewing a female rapper resistant to the label "feminist," Tricia Rose, author of *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, demonstrates the aforementioned engagement by offering the following definition of feminism as a way to bring the wary artist into dialogue with feminism,

> I would say that feminists believed that there was sexism in society, wanted to change and worked toward that change. Either wrote, spoke, or behaved in a way that was pro-woman, in that she supported situations (organizations) that were trying to better the lives of women. A feminist feels that women are more disadvantaged than men in many situations and would want to stop that kind of inequality. (Rose 1994, 176)

Rose's purpose appears to have been served, as she goes on to write, "once feminism was understood as a mode of analysis rather than a label for a

group of women associated with a particular social movement, MC Lyte [a pioneering and popular female rapper of the 1980s and early '90s] was much more comfortable discussing the importance of black women's independence . . . " (Rose 1994, 176). The current sociopolitical agenda of hip-hop feminism appears then to be focused on the dissemination of the tools of critical analysis offered by a feminist mode of analysis. In her article "Do the Ladies Run This . . . ? Some Thoughts on Hip-Hop Feminism," Gwendolyn Pough (2003) writes about the establishment of what she terms a "public pedagogy"[5] through bringing together feminism and hip-hop. Pough argues that "[r]ap is the contemporary art form that gives voice to a part of the population that would not have a voice otherwise . . . I think rap has political potential—potential that should be honed by the feminist movement in general and by third-wave hip-hop feminists in particular" (Pough 2003, 237). The responsibility of feminists, per Pough, in cultivating the potential of hip-hop is ultimately to "give young women the tools necessary to critique the messages they are getting" from the lyrics and visual expressions of rap music (Pough 2003, 241). Again, hip-hop emerges as the common cultural ground, the generationally relevant vehicle through which to circulate and within which to employ the "feminist" tools of critical analysis.

Consequently, the current political agenda of hip-hop feminism appears to entail a contemporary manifestation of the consciousness-raising method of organizing used in the liberation struggles of the 1960s and '70s. In the essay "Face-to-Face, Day-to-Day—Racism CR," Cross, Klein, Smith, and Smith describe consciousness-raising as a "format [that] encourages personal sharing, risk-taking, and involvement . . . it encourages the 'personal' change that makes political transformation and action possible" (Cross et al. 1982, 52). Within hip-hop feminism political education is employed as the means to achieving "the personal change," the self-empowerment that must precede political mobilization and action. The self-empowerment that is hoped to be achieved through the dissemination of a feminist political education is critical to the creation of a challenging and productive dialogue, which comprises the second component of the hip-hop feminist's agenda that centers on community institution-building.

Initial works (Keyes 1993; Goodall 1994; Roberts 1994; Rose 1994) about the intersections of hip-hop, feminism, and women often focused on the

responses of women to the male domination, misogyny, and cultural practices of hip-hop rather than ignoring, denying, or excusing those practices. Women writing in the early '90s on the relationship between hip-hop and feminism, such as Tricia Rose (1994), were quick to point to the dialogue that was occurring in rap music between men and women as consumers, community peers, and artists. Furthermore, the arguments of writers writing as hip-hop feminists and those who simply write about women in hip-hop do not romanticize the existing dialogues present in rap; rather their goal appears to be concerned with not discounting those dialogues and their subsequent importance either. Rose argues that she was better able to understand how female rappers can be both complicit with and disruptive of racism and sexism once she understood them "as part of a dialogic process with male rappers (and others), rather than in complete opposition to them . . . " (Rose 1994, 147). The existing dialogues in hip-hop culture in general and rap music in particular become important to hip-hop feminism as the initial sites in which to employ hip-hop feminism's "public pedagogy," to borrow Pough's term.

The call for an expansion of the dialogue between and among women and men of the hip-hop generation is inherently a simultaneous call for a concerted effort at institution-building; institution-building in the sense of creating the spaces for these dialogues and discussions to take place. Eisa Davis writes in her essay "Sexism and the Art of Feminist Hip-Hop Maintenance," "I would love to see hip-hop battles, conference panels, and articles and essays . . . that talk about issues of sexism in hip-hop supplemented by other formats for dialogue" (Davis 1995, 139). Davis's words suggest that African-American women writing between the worlds of hip-hop and feminism and within the points of their convergence recognize that young black men and women need forums and other spaces in which to have crucial conversations between and among themselves. Gwendolyn Pough makes a similar argument: "we need to create a space in which young women can critique these harsh realities and rap music's glamorization of them" (Pough 2003, 242). For hip-hop feminists it appears that political education and the space in which to employ such an education (i.e., communal institutions) go hand in hand in the forging of a sociopolitical agenda. As a result of making provocative claims about their own political agenda, hip-hop feminists have encountered sharp critiques from some of their second-wave black feminist counterparts. In the next

section, I will explore the tensions and points of convergence between second-wave black feminists and their contemporary counterparts, hip-hop feminists.

In his resource book cataloguing hip-hop vernacular, Alonzo Westbrook defines the hip-hop concept of "battling" as "war between or among rappers, dancers, DJs, or emcees for prizes or bragging rights and to see who's the best.... When lyrics are involved it's what's said and how it's delivered—the cadence and complexity of the lyrics . . . " (Westbrook 2002, 8). I begin with the concept of battling as it operates within hip-hop and Westbrook's definition thereof because it is instructive for understanding the generational and substantive debates occurring within black American feminism. Battling within hip-hop is more than a competition between artists for "bragging rights" or mere prizes; it is an exercise that stresses a kind of dialogue that eventually moves the art form forward. In a battle between two emcees, for example, one feeds off and responds to the other. At each stage of the "battle" the performing emcees are expected to continue to "up their game" through increasingly complex lyrics and delivery. Because each emcee is pressed to bring his or her best work and to work collaboratively, in a sense, with others in the competition, battling begins to look a lot like the process of critical theory-building. The process of critical theory-building, however, differs from a battle in that it is not a simple competition but a critical and challenging dialogue between two parties, where the end goal is not the emergence of a winner or loser but the creation of a stronger, more relevant theory with which to engage the world.

The conversation occurring within black American feminism on the compatibility and utility of hip-hop to the feminist project and the theoretical viability and sustainability of hip-hop feminism is not a sensational, contentious debate. Rather, it is a dialogue, and in any dialogue, the lines between "camps" are easily blurred, as each side is able to simultaneously disagree and concur with one another. Though I use terms like "generational," "second-wave," and "third-wave," these distinctions present a sense of clarity and division that does not always exist in reality. There are second-wave black feminists who think hip-hop is fertile ground

in which to plant seeds of feminist resistance, while there are also third-wave black feminists who find hip-hop culture irredeemable and completely unsuited for coalition work with feminism. I try to unmask these false distinctions, even as I will continue to employ them, because to leave them unquestioned is to proceed into my analysis with a narrow and simplistic foundation. However, though the groups I engage are not infallibly defined, there are real substantive conversations occurring about the current and future state of black American feminism, and those conversations do include interesting generational dimensions (see Guy-Sheftall 2002; Radford-Hill 2002; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003; Collins 2006). Below I will engage the discussion about current and future directions of black American feminism by analyzing the specific dialogue about the relationship between hip-hop and black American feminism. This dialogue encompasses three main issues: the constitution of black feminist identity and praxis; the black feminist approach to engaging hip-hop; and the relevance of contemporary black feminist activist strategies.

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Broadly defined, feminism is the political movement and the mode of analysis aimed at addressing the social, political, and economic inequities that plague the lives of women and girls worldwide. In the American context, feminism began with the task of proving women's equality to men as a means to lobby for women's right to education, fulfilling work, and political participation. Yet the movement grew into more radical and substantial critiques of patriarchal power and privilege with the arrival of feminism's second wave during the 1960s, '70s, and early '80s. American feminism of the second wave was marked by its use of mass-movement organizing via marches, protests, and the establishment of national and local organizations aimed at lobbying for and serving the needs of women.

Despite the gains made by the feminist movement, the much-debated issue of the past several decades seems to center on whether it still exists and if so, in what forms. While these debates and questions are not without merit, I concur with a number of other feminist theorists and practitioners that they have been co-opted and caricatured by the American mass media to look more like an ego trip than a substantive and potentially productive dialogue (see Hogeland 2001; Jervis 2004; Purvis 2004). As others have previously pointed out, the sensationalism that pervades characterizations

of the feminist generational debate renders it both over-rated and over-determined. Feminist scholars such as Lisa Hogeland (2001) have argued that an over-determined conception of generational schisms within feminism obscures the more fundamental issue of theoretical and strategic differences that says more about the future direction of American feminism than do squabbles over age and seniority. I agree with Hogeland's analysis, yet I would add that the generational divide might just be foundational to producing the theoretical and strategic shifts that she prioritizes.

The "generational divide" speaks to material and discursive differences in the make-up of the America of feminism's second wave and the America of the contemporary moment. These differences include, but are not limited to, the legality of abortion complicated by the issue of access (as defined via economic class, geography, etc.); the emergence of crack cocaine and the subsequent U.S. "war on drugs"; and the development of the new or "color-blind" racism (Collins 2004) that defines the current era. While the afore-mentioned issues are simply old dogs with new tricks, meaning that they are not unique to the current moment, their contemporary manifestations most certainly make them specific. It is their specificity that produces a sense of generation, and in turn gives rise to the theoretical and strategic shifts that constitute the contested terrain of debates regarding American feminism. Understood in this way, generational schisms are not simply diversions from more important feminist discussions; they are, rather, the very sites of production of the issues at hand within pressing debates about the current and future directions of feminism.

As I have described above, some second- and third-wave black feminists are engaged in dialogue with one another about the relationship between black American feminism and hip-hop. Moreover, in addition to conversing within the boundaries of black American feminism, these scholars and activists are also speaking to a larger hegemonic feminism. American feminism has long been pervaded by turbulent racial and class relations as well as issues of heterosexism and xenophobia. Much of what is commonly understood as black American feminism was a response to the racism of mainstream American feminism and mainstream media portrayals of the feminist movement. Patricia Hill Collins notes that "[d]espite considerable ideological heterogeneity that operates within the term feminism, unfortu-nately ideologies that accompany it typically obscure that plurality" (Collins 1998, 66). In the late 1970s and early '80s feminists of color spoke back to the

monolithic notions of women that circulated within mainstream feminist circles (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Smith 1983; Lorde 1984; Anzaldúa 1987). In her essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Audre Lorde calls white feminists to task for routinely ignoring the diversity of the term "women" and its implications for building a feminist agenda. Lorde castigates white feminists for engaging racism, arguing that it is counterproductive to their work against sexism; she asks, "[w]hat does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable" (Lorde 1984, 110–11). Though the contributions of feminists of color and concerned white feminists of the second wave were not without effect, the racial tensions that have provided the historical context for American feminism continue to inform feminist debates. Feminists of color in the contemporary moment find that just as the mainstream social, political, and economic landscape has not rid itself of racism, neither has feminism. In addition to responding to these tensions within feminism in general, black American feminists are also addressing the tensions emerging in their specific space concerning generational nuances, hence the debate around the viability of a working relationship between feminism and hip-hop.

Many of the same debates around generation that play out in the larger arenas of American feminism emerge in the context of black American feminism as well. For instance, Joan Morgan's conception of feminist privilege, as discussed earlier in this essay, works to obscure her ability to comprehend the continued necessity of second-wave black feminist politics. Analysis of her work reveals the ways in which Morgan sees the notion of female victimhood as the linchpin of second-wave feminist politics. For Morgan, feminism has overstated women's status as victims to the point that it has failed to substantively explore women's agency and the ways in which they strive to and successfully do empower themselves. Yet Morgan's arguments presume that actively claiming a victimized status precludes black American women from assuming responsibility for their lives via their own actions and thoughts. She argues, "[h]olding on to that protective mantle of victimization requires a hypocrisy and self-censorship I'm no longer willing to give. Calling rappers out for their sexism without mentioning the complicity of the 100 or so video-hos that turned up—G-string in hand—for the shoot . . ." ultimately means "fronting" (Morgan

1999, 60). "Fronting," means to represent oneself falsely. To accuse second-wave black feminists of "fronting" by acknowledging black women's roles only as victims and not their roles as victimizers or their complicity in their own marginalization means accusing them of not fully doing the work they claim to do. While Morgan's arguments admittedly lack a structural analysis of women's positioning via race, class, and sexuality, they nonetheless provide some insight into third-wave contentions with second-wave black feminism. Placing Morgan's work in conversation with Patricia Hill Collins's work on marginalized groups' strategic use of victimhood produces a fruitful dialogue in which the source of tension between second- and third-wavers comes further into focus.

Collins, in the course of her critique of postmodern theories, argues that claiming a marginalized/victimized identity was an important sociopolitical strategy for traditionally disadvantaged groups, important because it allowed them to break "long standing silences about their oppression . . . effectively challenging false universal knowledges that historically defended hierarchical power relations" (Collins 1998, 127). Collins makes it clear that claiming a victimized location signaled progress, not defeat, and a challenge to the status quo, because it meant gaining voice in the face of a repressive silence through which oppression facilitated itself. Second-wave black feminists operated in a context that denied the existence/importance/tragedy/trauma of their lived experience. In the face of such silence, it was impossible for black women to make claims to rights specific to their location at the intersection of race and sex oppression if no one acknowledged they were there or that such a location even existed. In her article "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology," Deborah King (1995) speaks to this theoretical invisibility and the ways in which it informed matters of progressive praxis in social movements.

King argues that the widespread use of the "race-sex analogy," which draws parallels between systems of race privilege and oppression with systems of sex/gender privilege and oppression, concealed the experience of black women who were not subject to *either* race oppression or sex oppression but to *both*. King contends that "[w]e learn very little about black women from this analogy. The experience of black women is apparently assumed, though never explicitly stated, to be synonymous with that of either black males or white females; and since the experiences of

both are equivalent [under the rubric of race-sex parallelism], a discussion of black women in particular is superfluous" (King 1995, 295–96). This notion of superfluity is precisely what second-wave black feminists challenged. The emphasis on both race *and* sex oppression was critical in making a claim for their distinct position. Bearing this in mind, Morgan's limited conception of victimhood leads to critical ruptures in building a contemporary black American feminist agenda.

For Morgan, as a "daughter of feminist privilege" (Morgan 1999), the case had already been made for the importance of her life as a woman by the feminist activists of the second-wave who came before her; thus her inability to see the importance of naming and claiming a marginalized identity is in itself a privilege acquired by the very strategies she criticizes. Yet we should not misunderstand the notion of privilege as used here to denote a sociopolitical and economic landscape in which women, and particularly women of color, participate as full and equal players. In fact, this is precisely the moment that the nature of marginalization and oppression as simultaneously static and dynamic should be fully explored. Oppression is static in the sense that it has not dissipated and shows no signs of doing so, yet dynamic in that it morphs in order to adjust to the contours of the contemporary moment. The privilege that Morgan writes of is an orchestration, an instance of power, understood here as representative of oppressive systems, reorganizing itself to operate more efficiently; power effectively achieves efficiency if it can minimize resistance to its efforts. We cannot resist what we cannot locate; again, if power can operate under the proverbial "radar" then we cannot identify it in order to actively resist it.

In the contemporary moment, relations of power appear to be masking themselves in the hyper-visibility of black American women. A black feminist agenda predicated on claiming victimization as a means to combat invisibility does not easily translate in the contemporary moment when black women appear to be hyper-visible. Instead of being relegated to invisibility, black women appear to have command of the national spotlight with pop culture icons like Oprah, Queen Latifah, and Tyra Banks and with black women in positions of national and international power, such as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. With gains like these coupled with the fact that more and more black women are graduating from four-year colleges and universities and securing professional employment, it seems as if our days as

invisible victims have ended. Yet the hyper-visibility of black women achieved via heavy circulation of images and personas in pop culture presents its own set of problems. The visibility of black women in the current cultural marketplace is often predicated on their willingness to conform to already existing ideas of black womanhood and femininity, ideas that easily resemble Collins's notion of controlling images that work to serve as ideological justification for the material violence aimed at black women (Collins 2000).

The hyper-visibility of black women in the current moment via pop culture icons is the case only because of its safety. Collins argues, "under conditions of racial segregation, mass media provides a way that racial difference can safely enter racially segregated private spaces of living rooms and bedrooms" (Collins 2004, 29). Black women's visibility as pop culture icons is permitted because it occurs at the safe distance of a television screen or compact disc. However, when black women are removed from the "intimate yet anonymous terrain of CDs, music videos, movies, Internet websites and other forms of contemporary mass media" they are no longer tolerable and, in response, their hyper-visibility is yet again replaced with their invisibility (Collins 2004, 29). Issues of hyper-visibility and invisibility are two sides of the same coin; being rendered invisible relegates black women to a subhuman status, while hyper-visibility renders black women as almost superhuman. In either formulation, black women are battling for recognition of their subjectivity or, as the Combahee River Collective stated, "to be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough" (Combahee River Collective 1995, 234).

Lest we forget that hyper-visibility and invisibility are intimately connected, we need only pay attention to the regular reminders that the days of black women's invisibility have not yet passed and are still producing dire effects. Reminders like those offered during the 2004 Presidential election when Vice-President Cheney claimed, in regard to a question about the AIDS epidemic and black American women, that he "was not aware that it was —that they're in an epidemic there."[6] The fact that America's vice president claims that he did not know that African-American women were in an epidemic with regard to HIV/AIDS after it was the number one cause of death for African-American women aged 25–34 in 2002[7] confirms the continued invisibility of and subsequent disregard for the lives of black American women and girls. The above discussion of the differing agendas and strategies that arise out of different historical contexts and the

tensions they produce provides the context within which the debate between generations of black American feminists is occurring. Below I will discuss the arguments of both hip-hop and second-wave feminists with regard to themselves and one another.

Much of the explicit criticism of second-wave black feminist theorizing has come from self-defined hip-hop feminist Joan Morgan. Morgan's 1999 debut book offered a telling critique of second-wave black feminism and its relevance to the contemporary moment. However, while Morgan's book might be the most explicit in its criticism, other women have echoed her sentiment (jamila 2002; Pough 2002; 2003; 2004a; 2004b). Hip-hop feminists have expressed at least three critiques of second-wave black feminism fundamental to the development of their own feminist politics. The three critiques that surface repeatedly are (1) second-wave black feminists' preoccupation with hip-hop's misogyny at the expense of exploring its potential; (2) the seemingly narrow and static conception of feminist identities emerging out of second-wave theorizing and activism; (3) the outmoded and subsequently ineffectual strategies for outreach to and empowerment of young black women and girls employed by second-wave black feminists.

One of the major critiques to emerge from hip-hop feminist literature resembles the old axiom about not being able to see the forest for the trees. The hip-hop feminist claim is often that many second-wave black feminists are too preoccupied with hip-hop's blatant misogyny. Moreover, the claim is furthered by the argument that such a preoccupation bars feminists from exploring other aspects of hip-hop culture and from exploring what the character of hip-hop's misogyny might be able to tell feminists about contemporary gender relations. Some offer that this preoccupation is a result of ignorance, of not understanding that rap music, which is often most scrutinized for its misogyny, is only one piece of the larger culture that is hip-hop. Others opine that the alleged preoccupation is simply a result of an outright refusal to consider hip-hop as anything but a disappointment and a nuisance.

Whatever the rationale, the consensus is clear that the current engagement of hip-hop by feminists is considered narrow, and that such a narrow engagement diverts time and attention from critical theory-building. As Gwendolyn Pough argues, "[a] new direction for Black feminism would aid in the critique and exploration of the dialogue across the sexes found in

rap music and hip-hop culture. . . . Rap music provides a new direction for Black feminist criticism. It is not just about counting the bitches and hoes in each rap song. It is about exploring the nature of Black male and female relationships" (Pough 2002, 94). Pough references "a new direction for Black feminism," which necessarily means that there is a current direction that, in some ways, is insufficient. This presumed insufficiency has implications, per hip-hop feminists, not only for the formation of the feminist agenda toward hip-hop but also for the criteria for what constitutes a "good" or "true" black feminist. Hip-hop feminists argue that in a space so hostile to engagements with hip-hop and the real context of women's lives, those who seek to forge such engagements are dismissed as not being feminist enough. This charge of alleged inauthenticity led hip-hop feminists not only to challenge the second-wave black feminist approach to hip-hop, but also the very definition of feminism it abides by.

Hip-hop feminists' second fundamental critique concerns core understandings of what constitutes black feminist identity and praxis. Growing up in the wake of the extraordinary impact made by feminists of the second wave left many young women to see their feminist "foremothers" as little more than larger-than-life personas more akin to saints than everyday activists. In the introduction to the anthology *To Be Real*, editor Rebecca Walker argues, "for many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories" (Walker 1995, xxxiii). To be a feminist based on the above characterization was, for Walker and others, a goal they might never attain. Challenging traditional understandings of what constitutes a "good" or "real" black feminist prompted Joan Morgan to ask "some decidedly un-P.C. but very real questions" such as,

> would I be forced to turn in my "feminist membership card" if I confessed that suddenly waking up in a world free of gender inequities or expectations just might bug me out a little . . . Are we no longer good feminists . . . if the A.M.'s wee hours sometimes leave us tearful and frightened that achieving all our mothers wanted us to . . . had made us wholly undesirable to the men who are supposed to be our counterparts? (Morgan 1999, 57–58)

While Morgan's questions decidedly privilege heteronormative assump-

tions of feminism and womanhood, they nonetheless challenge very basic tenets of feminism about gender equality and the needs and wants of "liberated" women. These kinds of critiques create space for the ambiguities that many third-wave black feminists in general, and hip-hop feminists in particular, claim constitute the context of their lives for, as Walker offers, "we find ourselves seeking to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and our multiple positionalities ..." (Walker 1995, xxxiii). The ambiguity and positionality referenced here is what makes the seeming oxymoron of hip-hop feminism ring with perfect clarity to a contemporary cadre of black women.

Some second-wave black feminists' responses to the above interrelated critiques of their approach to feminism center on their understandings of the nature of politics and political change. Second-wave black feminists argue that the response of many self-pronounced hip-hop feminists to the misogyny of hip-hop in particular and of the larger society in general is altogether too personal and too local (Guy-Sheftall 2002; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003). Such a critique, particularly coming from second-wave feminists, might seem ironic given the well-known feminist principle of the "personal is political." However, upon closer investigation we find that the issue is produced via different understandings of what constitutes the personal. Hip-hop feminism argues for the right to self-define feminist identities and praxis, yet the right to self-define, without a larger systemic strategy, can become an isolated and individual solution. Even as celebrated feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins applauds the politics of personal (re)definition of hip-hop feminism, she also warns that "it is obvious that these new personal identities can never occur without the fundamental structural change that makes such identities possible for everyone" (Collins 2006, 196). While self-definition is both a political and personal right and necessity, some second-wave feminists claim that hip-hop feminists are creating identities under the banner of feminism that are out-and-out rejections of fundamental feminist principles and reflect a lack of historical knowledge about the significance of feminist politics. Beverly Guy-Sheftall expresses this very sentiment in a brief article about third-wave black feminists: "[w]hat bothers me about [Joan] Morgan's statements, however, is an explicit rejection of fundamental feminist principles that I believe are cross-generational and still relevant" (Guy-Sheftall 2002, 104).

Guy-Sheftall's criticism connects to the idea of specificity vs. uniqueness

explored earlier in this essay. Second-wave black feminists, while recognizing the changing social, economic, and political landscape of America, also recognize that the changes are simply new manifestations specific to the current historical moment of issues that have plagued marginalized communities in previous historical moments, meaning that the issues themselves are not unique to the current historical moment. In this regard, the politics of second-wave black feminism can still be seen as relevant and applicable to contemporary problems. However, even as some hip-hop feminists concede that the work of second-wave black feminists is not without use or merit to the hip-hop feminism project, they still argue that the strategies used by second-wave black feminists to enact their theories of social, political, and economic oppression need to be updated in order to capture the attention of contemporary black women and girls.

Hip-hop feminists posit that the strategies of second-wave black feminists are failing when it comes to capturing the attention of black women in the contemporary moment. Joan Morgan is correct when she writes, "let's face it, sistas ain't exactly checkin' for the f-word" (Morgan, 1999, 52). Morgan, among others, would argue that black women's ambivalence toward the "f-word" lies in the inability of feminism to present itself as relevant to their everyday material realities. Eisa Davis and Gwendolyn Pough identify female rap artists of the 1980s and early '90s as their first feminist role models (Davis 1995; Pough 2002). Rappers like Queen Latifah and MC Lyte are quite a departure from traditionally defined black feminist icons such as bell hooks or Audre Lorde. Yet they spoke to many young black women and advocated black female power and resistance not only to racism but to black men's sexism as well. Long before college and women's studies classes, young people are introduced to hip-hop culture and rap music; using hip-hop as a platform would allow feminists to connect with women at an earlier age and would allow for a connection with the thousands of women who never make it to college campuses for an Introduction to Women's Studies course. Where hip-hop feminists claim second-wave black feminists are suffering from outmoded social and political strategies, second-wave black feminists argue that hip-hop feminists lack social and political strategies altogether. While hip-hop feminists might possess a theoretical approach to hip-hop, they have yet to produce a clear example of their theory in practice.

As established earlier, second-wave black feminists' argument that hip-

hop feminists' focus on the personal at the expense of an explicitly traditional feminist political agenda has led to an additional charge that hip-hop feminism is apolitical. As a critical social theory, black feminist theory has always considered its work to be intimately connected to real-world activism aimed at addressing the inequities suffered by black women. Praxis, the integration of theory and activism, is a core tenet of black feminism. As such, the question for second-wave black feminists becomes where does the proverbial rubber meet the road, or how do the claims and strategies of hip-hop feminists translate to material changes in the lives of black American women? Barbara Smith adopted poet Sonia Sanchez's simple question of "how do it free us" as her yardstick for measuring the usefulness of academic literature and theory (Smith 2000, 172). Second-wave black feminists seem to be measuring the politics of hip-hop feminism by this same yardstick, and hip-hop feminism perpetually comes up short.

LOCATING HIP-HOP FEMINISM WITHIN THE TRADITION OF U.S. BLACK FEMINIST PROTEST

Though they offer critiques of them, hip-hop feminists have not abandoned historical manifestations of black American feminism. On the contrary, they build quite extensively on the work of second- and first-wave black feminists in their own theorizing. In the few works available by hip-hop feminists, there exists the undeniable imprint of second-wave black feminist theorizing. Major themes that resonate in hip-hop feminist writing can also be found prominently in the theorizing of older generations of black feminists. Themes such as empowerment, the importance of images and representation, and black women's involvement in coalitional politics continually emerge as key concerns across generations of black feminists in the U.S. Gwendolyn Pough, like black women of the nineteenth century as well as those operating in the black and feminist liberation movements of the 1960s and '70s, theorizes issues of the representation of black womanhood (Pough 2004a). Though Pough is not responding to the wide-scale rape and lynching of black women and men, as did the clubwomen of the early 1900s, she is responding to crises such as increased incarceration of young black women and girls in light of the U.S. "war on drugs." Pough's work on representations of black womanhood in popular fiction and cinema draws extensively

on Patricia Hill Collins's theorizing on controlling images, which links the discursive treatment of black womanhood to the material violence and marginalization that black women experience. Collins argues that controlling images or stereotypes serve as ideological justification for systems of domination (Collins 2000). Pough applies this idea to her work when she argues, "from the demonized single mother to the ghetto girl trio, the representations of these Black women on the margins of [black] films turns out to have wider meaning. . . . If the general underlying message throughout the culture is that Black womanhood is a threat to Black manhood, then the negative images take on a different light" (Pough 2004a, 136). Pough, much like Collins, identifies the discourse that surrounds black women's lives and bodies and facilitates their material marginalization both within their immediate racial/cultural communities as well as in the larger American society. While Pough builds upon Collins, she nonetheless rearticulates the work to respond to the specificities of black women's experience in the contemporary moment.

Black women's involvement in coalitional politics has long been a priority of black feminist theorizing. Black women's capacity to work across boundaries is important because, in the words of the Combahee River Collective, "our situation as black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race. . . . We struggle together with black men against racism, while we also struggle with black men about sexism" (Combahee River Collective 1995, 235). Black women's location at the intersection of a variety of identities necessitates that they be able to work with communities that at some point or another they may have to struggle against on another issue. Hip-hop feminists are an excellent example of this as they build bridges between hip-hop and feminism, two spaces that appear wholly antagonistic to each other. The fact that hip-hop feminists are organizing and theorizing within both of these spaces, given the potentially volatile nature of their intersection, puts hip-hop feminists firmly in the tradition of second-wave feminists like Bernice Johnson Reagon and the women who continued to engage black nationalist and liberation discourse of the 1970s, even as those discourses were not only patriarchal and sexist but also homophobic. Reagon famously argues that coalitions are not necessarily supposed to feel good; on the contrary she contends that coalitions are volatile and unstable, and "the only reason that you would consider teaming up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay

alive" (Reagon 1983, 345–46). Reagon goes on to admonish activists who look for coalition work to be comforting as opposed to disconcerting and challenging; she says "some people will come to a coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They're not looking for coalition; they're looking for a home" (Reagon 1983, 346). Hip-hop feminists are in the midst of constructing a coalition of sorts between hip-hop and feminism, in line with Reagon's theory, in an effort to devise a new set of politics and/or strategies. Such a coalition can be dangerous because it is not clear to everyone implicated therein that those two spaces desire to be together. Nevertheless, hip-hop feminists are creating these potentially volatile liaisons because that is the most effective way they currently see to reach their communities. The potentially volatile and, at times, unwelcome coalitions that I described above are made possible by the dynamism that lies at the heart of U.S. black feminism.

Patricia Hill Collins identifies six components, which she calls "distinguishing features" (Collins 2000), that she argues are foundational to black feminist thought.[8] For this project, the most important component that Collins identifies is the fifth distinguishing feature, which states "in order for Black feminist thought to operate effectively within Black feminism as a social justice project, both must remain dynamic. Neither Black feminist thought as a critical social theory nor Black feminist practice can be static; as social conditions change, so must the knowledge and practices designed to resist them" (Collins 2000, 39). As Collins points out, social conditions change, giving rise to new impediments to just social relations. In order to continue to be a driving force in black women's lives, U.S. black feminism must, as Collins states, "remain dynamic" (Collins 2000, 39). Hip-hop feminists further locate themselves in the theoretical and activist traditions of black feminist thought by continuing with that legacy of dynamism that will allow them to effect change in the material realities of young black women and girls by placing feminism in conversation with hip-hop.

Conclusion

I began this essay with three main goals: identifying the sociopolitical objectives and strategies of hip-hop feminism; tracing the varied black feminist arguments regarding the relationship between hip-hop and feminism; and,

finally, finding the points of commonality between generations of black American feminists. Ultimately, what I found was that different generations of black American feminists have more in common than not. The debates and dialogues around political agendas and partnerships with hip-hop reveal a common understanding of ends but a difference of opinion about means. The overall objectives of black feminism, which include empowering black women and creating systemic change to allow for social justice, resonate from generation to generation, yet each group constructs its own understanding of how to achieve those objectives.

Black American feminists, however, must consider the value of academic and feminist explorations and engagements with hip-hop in terms of the questions and directions that those explorations might offer us. The yardstick, then, that measures the utility of hip-hop in feminist political and theoretical production might be better understood as a question that asks "what might exploring this culture tell us further about the position of black women in America?" Hip-hop feminist Aisha Durham, for example, responds to this question by suggesting that we consider investigating the hip-hop music video "as a kind of virtual sex tourism for the United States where rap music and the ideas about black sexuality that are enveloped within it serve as one of our leading cultural exports" (Durham 2007, 309). Using hip-hop and its products in the way that Durham has positioned them in her argument could allow feminists to make connections between the domestic treatment and use of black women, the economic value of said treatment, and the larger global (capitalist) market, among other things. In the beginning of this essay, I presented a brief exploration of the political economy of hip-hop in order to highlight what Durham offers us in her suggestion for potential feminist research in hip-hop. Feminist investigations of hip-hop offer more than the opportunity to critique the culture's misogyny alone; they also offer the opportunity to examine the racial and socioeconomic politics of the marketing, production, and consumption of hip-hop, both domestically and internationally, and how those processes are always gendered. The critiques and investigations that hip-hop feminists are developing out of their engagements with hip-hop are wide and far-reaching, and should not be dismissed as simple contentions over personal choice and the politics of naming alone. They should also be read as critical and fundamental challenges to, reformulations of, and concur-

rences with the theories and principles of second- and first-wave black feminists that serve to strengthen the entire black feminist agenda because they push black feminists of all types to be reflective and to rethink both our individual and collective practice.

While the legacy of feminism is being both reformulated and reaffirmed by feminists of the current generation who are creating unlikely partnerships between feminism and entities like hip-hop, their reformulation should not be read as an out-and-out rejection of historical manifestations of black American feminism; rather they represent the creativity and dynamism for which black feminism is traditionally known. Just as other black American feminists have chosen to engage other modes of cultural production that are inimical to the development of black women's subjectivity, hip-hop feminists refuse to turn away from difficult and volatile engagements with hip-hop. Bell hooks, for example, argues that the mainstream American film industry has long produced images of women, people of color, and specifically women of color, that have negated the humanity and subjectivity of black women. Hooks, however, does not advocate that black women abandon film. On the contrary she, like Pough in the case of hip-hop, says that the value of mainstream cinema lies not in the images it produces but in the critique of those images. As hooks argues, "identifying with neither the phallocentric gaze nor the constructions of white womanhood as lack, critical black female spectators construct a theory of looking relations where cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation" (hooks 1992, 126). The hip-hop feminist agenda is one that takes its cue from hooks and others by using the critique to fashion an individual, social, and political agenda of inquiry and action for the contemporary moment.

Using culturally and generationally relevant frames of reference, hip-hop feminists are able to make large systemic issues such as racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, etc. intelligible to black women and girls, just as second-wave black feminists were able to do in the 1970s and '80s with mainstream white American feminism. It's the legacy of unmasking the specificity of women's experiences with marginalization at the intersections of race and sex that continue to make black American feminism an indispensable mode of analysis and activism for many women today. Hip-hop feminists draw on the strength of that legacy while simultaneously drawing on the strength of movements of the contemporary moment such as hip-hop.

If nothing else, it is my hope that my work here will add to the growing endeavor that seeks to fully explore the heterogeneity and dynamism at play within black American feminism, for exploring these issues is key to discovering critical information for the growth and sustainability not only of hip-hop and other third-wave black feminisms but all black feminisms.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Dr. Annulla Linders, Dr. Michelle Rowley, Dr. Lisa Hogeland, and Dr. Irma McClaurin for their comments on earlier versions of this essay.

2. Throughout this piece I use the terms "young" and "generation" to refer to a new cadre of feminists and activists in general. I do loosely follow Bakari Kitwana's definition of the hip-hop generation as "those young African Americans born between 1965 and 1984 who came of age in the eighties and nineties . . . " (Kitwana 2002, 4). I am not convinced, however, that Kitwana's designation of the 19-year span between 1965 and 1984 is not arbitrary and as such my use of the terms "generation" and "young" are much more metaphorical than indicative of a strict social demographic category.

3. The term "third wave" was initially introduced when U.S. feminists of color began writing about and challenging the racism they experienced in the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. These women called themselves the "third wave" as a way to denote the substantive differences within their feminist agendas, which included anti-racist politics, from second-wave white feminist politics (Springer 2002). More recently, however, the privileging of the wave model as the primary means to organize histories of U.S. feminism has eclipsed this critical use of the term "third wave." The wave model has in turn used the term "third wave" as a means to denote differences of time and generation rather than difference in political priorities and objectives. In my work, I use "third wave" in both of its meanings. It operates in this essay as a marker of historical generation but also as one that signals a shift in the substantive make-up of black feminist politics and activist strategies.

4. Within the scope of American rap music, which is the limit of this project's engagement with hip-hop, there is a great deal of variety between and within regions of the country, various sub-genres or schools, what is considered mainstream vs. underground, and of course the different eras of hip-hop's 30-plus year history in the U.S. There is, for example, the classic debate about mainstream or commercial rap music versus underground or "true" hip-hop. The charge is often made that what is readily accessible in the way of rap music on major radio stations, in mass music retailers, and from the likes of MTV and BET is often a less radical version of rap—less radical in that it represents less of a threat to the American status quo as opposed to the work of lesser known, or

what might be termed "underground," groups who often have more explicitly political lyrics. Groups such as Black Star, The Coup, or Dead Prez, who do not find a solid standing with the majority of the hip-hop listening public, nevertheless maintain a loyal following among a smaller, more politically minded constituency by offering rhymes that examine everything from the prison–industrial complex to the racist and classist biases that pervade American public education, all in explicitly radical and political terms.

5. Pough characterizes public pedagogy as a mechanism that bring issues into the public sphere and combines the energy of an MC "moving the crowd" with political education and organization. I would expand on her characterization by arguing that public pedagogy is a means of knowledge production and transmission that draws its resources from both inside and outside of traditional sites of knowledge production and dispersal. Within public pedagogy the meanings of identities such as teacher/student and spaces such as classrooms are redefined to encompass more communal and public characteristics whereby teaching is a more democratic process no longer marked by the necessity for degrees, special training, or certificates, and in which spaces such as community centers, dance halls, concerts, and street corners become classrooms.

6. Commission on Presidential Debates, "Transcript of the Cheney–Edwards Vice-Presidential Debate," http://www.debates.org/pages/trans2004b.html. Accessed April 12, 2006.

7. "HIV/AIDS Policy Fact Sheet: Women and HIV/AIDS in the United States." 2006. Published by The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. http://www.kff.org/hivaids/upload/6092-03.pdf. Accessed May 28, 2006.

8. Collins argues that black feminist thought is characterized by (1) the particular experience of living and resisting in the context of the United States; (2) the tension between acknowledging the heterogeneity of black women's experience and the commonality of their experiences of race, gender, sexual, and class oppression; (3) the creation of group or communal knowledge from the aggregation of individual experiences; (4) the centrality of the contributions of black women intellectuals to U.S. black feminist theorizing; (5) the investment in change as a critical part of black feminist theory building; and (6) the recognition that black feminism is one of many social justice frameworks that aims to address worldwide marginalization and inequality (Collins 2000, 21–43). The convergence of these six distinguishing characteristics, Collins argues, marks the distinctiveness of U.S. black feminist theorizing.

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