

Love and Hip Hop: (Re)Gendering The Debate Over Hip Hop Studies

Sounding Out! Authors

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Abstract

Today's post from Cornell professor Travis Gosa (Africana Studies) marks the return of our "Sound and Pedagogy" Forum for a spring semester refresher course. It's a hard time of the school year—fatigue can creep up in exponential relation to the sudden increase in sunshine.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Curation, Diasporic Sound



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Today's post from Cornell professor [Travis Gosa](#) (Africana Studies) marks the return of our "[Sound and Pedagogy](#)" Forum for a spring semester refresher course. It's a hard time of the school year—fatigue can creep up in exponential relation to the sudden increase in sunshine. We at SO! want to put some spring back into your classroom with Gosa's discussion of the relationship between hip hop and the university classroom—to sample De La Soul, stakes is high—followed up next week with **Emmanuelle Sonntag** and **Bronwen Low**'s (McGill) exploration of hip hop pedagogies in the urban classroom in their joint post on "The Student as Broadcaster and DJ of Her Listening," and rounded out with a hands-on self-assessment of how sound media can be a productive classroom tool in teaching black political history by **Carter Mathes** (Rutgers). Grab a new notebook, sharpen some pencils, and enjoy some (funky) fresh perspectives this spring. And now, I pass the mic to Dr. Travis Gosa—**Editor-in-Chief Jennifer Stoeve-Ackerman**

The [three-year appointment](#) of DJ Afrika Bambaataa at [Cornell University](#) has caused me to think about the sexual politics of sound created by the artist-centered hip hop studies movement. College students have been reading hip hop textbooks since the early 1990s, and Arizona University students can now earn a [minor](#) in hip hop studies. However, the recent professorial appointments of artists like Bambaataa, Bun-B of UGK ([Rice University](#)), M1 of dead prez ([Haverford College](#)), Wyclef Jean ([Brown University](#)), and 9th Wonder ([Harvard University](#)) is shaping how hip hop is heard.

The embodied collision of instrumentation, lyricism, and experience in the artist-centered classroom can create spaces for empowerment and emancipatory learning. There is also a risk, however, that the artist-professors trend will reproduce the same sexist logic about hip hop and women that recirculates in mass-mediated rap music.

Since Common's 1994 song "I Used to Love H.E.R.," the bodies of women of color have served as the sonic battlefield for wars over the authentic boundaries of hip hop culture. On the track, Common falls out of love with H.E.R. ("hip hop") when White corporations and West-Coast emcees gangbang his once virgin, "untampered" girl, and turn her into a promiscuous, weed-smoking "gangsta bitch."



<https://youtu.be/C99iG4Ho01c>

Compared to Lil' Wayne's [lyrics](#) about "beating the pussy up like Emmett Till," or Rick Ross' molly-infused [date rap anthem](#), Common's nostalgic back-in-the-day rhymes are tame. The love affair is sonically wrapped in the thick intertextuality of [George Benson's](#) mellow jazz guitar of "[The Changing World](#)," timeless emcee clichés like "yes yes ya'll," and classic quotables like Easy-E's "[Easily I approach](#)..." (minus the punchline about having sex with your momma).

Rap legends Scarface and Nas use the H.E.R. trope to frame the appropriation of hip hop by colleges. On the DJ Khaled assisted track "Hip Hop," they describe hip hop as a "middle-aged cougar," and threaten to murder the "bitch" for being a gold digging "whore."

***I doubt I'll ever be the same,
hallowed be thy name
Give me strength so I don't do
this dame like Orenthal James
Brad warned me while driving
this auburn Ferrari
Never follow in her games, I
fuck around and I'll be sorry
But I tried her, used to ride her,
for dollars not the fame***

<https://youtu.be/FkGHxcLy-cM>

According to Scarface, he has fallen out of love with Ms. Hip Hop because she is sleeping around with everyone, including college professors:

Now you all in the lectures

Being studied by the college's professors

Now I regret the day I met ya, Bitch

I'll be the first one to say it

She ain't the one you want to play with

I fucked Hip Hop

When the imaginary borders of hip hop are expanded or violated by academia, Scarface defends hip hop by [slut shaming](#) Black women. The hegemonic masculine frame perpetuates the virgin/whore dichotomy of womanhood, justifies violence against women, and evaluates women (“hip hop”) according to their ability to fulfill the needs of men. DJ Khaled’s production reinforces the message by sampling Mott The Hoople’s “[She Does It](#).” The 1975 British glam rock song is a [little ditty](#) about cocaine and/or rough sex with groupies.

Too often, loving hip hop involves remaining uncritical about sexualized violence and the silencing of women in the culture. “Sentimental attachment” to music, as [Barry Shank](#) described at the [2013 IASPM conference](#), is not the same as “interrogative listening,” the recognition that musical pleasure can involve dominance and oppression. Interrogative listening begins by acknowledging that being a member of a musical community comes with responsibility.

Hip hop studies professors face the monumental task of reeducating students in the art of interrogative listening. As scholar Tricia Rose noted in her [keynote address](#) at the opening of the [Cornell Hip Hop Collection](#) in 2008, the commercial rap industry has trained young people to nod to the beat while passively accepting misogyny and oppression. Rose writes in her book [The Hip Hop Wars](#) that pointing to real life “tricks” and “hoes” is often a strategy used to absolve male hip hop artists of their culpability in profiting from rape culture.

I have been impressed by the ability of pre-rap, 1970s hip hop artists to demonstrate a love for the culture without reproducing the woman-hating narrative found in rap music. The South Bronx DJs (i.e., [BreakBeat Lou](#)), graffiti artists (i.e., [Carlos “Mare 139” Rodriguez](#)), photographers (i.e., [Joe Conzo, Jr.](#)), and break-dancers (i.e., [Richard “Crazy Legs” Colon](#) and [Jorge “Popmaster Fabel” Pabon](#)) who make guest appearances in my courses explicitly disassociate themselves from the logic of commercial rap industry. Not surprisingly, it has been most intriguing to listen to the sexual politics created by the Afro-futuristic DJ Bambaataa.

Bambaataa is known for transforming the notorious Black Spades gang into the fledgling 1970s South Bronx hip hop scene. His Universal Zulu Nation has forcibly removed drug dealers from neighborhoods, rallied around political prisoners, and just last month, [warned](#) WorldStarHipHop.com to stop pandering violent and sexual images to youth.



Image by Pete Best, Courtesy of Cornell News

Less obvious is Bambaataa's political work through sound performance. His signature soulsonic soundspace mocks the boundaries of music genre and the specificities of race, social class, and place, in favor of the universal. For example, when asked to explain early hip hop to my undergraduate class last fall, he sat back and played Ray Steven's 1969 hit "[Gitarzan](#)" and *The Music Man*'s "[Ya Got Trouble](#)." Hilarity and cognitive dissonance ensued, as the country-rock and Broadway tunes shattered the commonsense of hip hop as "rap music," "black," "youth," or "urban."

His universalism is not meant to obscure the contributions of women with a generic masculine narrative. Bambaataa has spent the first year of his appointment mapping out the centrality of women's role in creating hip hop culture. Like [Kyra Gaunt](#) in [Games Black Girls Play: Learning The Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip Hop](#), Bambaataa traced rap and dance to double-dutch, hand-clipping, and rhythm games played by Black girls. To demonstrate how women pioneered rapping, he played Shirley Ellis' [The Name Game](#) and [The Clapping Song](#). During his first official sound lecture, a DJ set at an Ithaca nightclub, the music of Aretha Franklin and Miriam Makeba were interwoven into the more recognizable hip hop staples like James Brown.

Observing Bambaataa's musical performances at Cornell gives me hope that sound and listening can be used to disrupt dominant modes of gender politics in the hip hop classroom. However, the ability of Black male artists to articulate the contributions of women is in no way a replacement for creating spaces which are actually inhabited by those who are not Black, male, or heterosexual. There is nothing universal about male bodies, thoughts, or voices. Unfortunately, this new trend of artists in the classroom is being constructed almost exclusively around Black/Brown, heterosexual men.

To date, no "b-girls," "femcees," or "flygirls" have been appointed to high profile positions in the academy. I struggle with this at my home institution, as Cornell's "Born in the Bronx" archival project risks perpetuating the myth of a woman-less birth. This gender-limited vision of hip hop's roots has been compounded by the silencing of legendary battle emcee Roxanne Shanté, whose relationship with Cornell ended after a [witch-hunt](#) surrounding her academic credentials back in

2009. MC Sha-Rock, an early [female emcee](#), will end the four-year estrogen drought when she participates in Cornell's 2013 [Unbound From the Underground](#) hip hop celebration on April 4-7, 2013.



MC Sha-Rock in 1982's Wild Style, Charlie Ahearn/Cornell Hip Hop Collection

Our efforts to connect academic hip hop studies to its cultural practitioners must honor women and empower female agency. The critical praxis has already been constructed by Black feminist scholars, such as [Tricia Rose](#), [Joan Morgan](#), [Patricia Hill-Collins](#), [Gwen Pough](#), [Kyra Gaunt](#), [Ruth Nichole Brown](#), and countless others. Hip hop feminism or “[Crunk feminism](#)” dictates that academic spaces support emancipatory gender politics, which starts with teaching and celebrating a truthful history focused on the agency of women of color. It does not involve participating in Black male violence under the guise of loving hip hop.

Every university that claims to teach or “preserve” hip hop should appoint female/feminist/queer artists. No doubt, fierce emcees like Yo-Yo, MC Lyte, Missy Elliott, and Lauryn Hill should be on the short list at many colleges. Still, we have to be wary of gender tokenism; the end-game should not be finding a honorary female artist to provide “a woman’s point of view.” Rather, the goal should be to create opportunities for women to narrate history, redefine the spaces occupied by hip hop, and to rearticulate the logic of critical listening.

Regendering hip hop studies will require a paradigm shift and a new soundtrack about love. Perhaps we can begin the work by replacing the H.E.R. tracks with Akua Naru’s “The World is Listening.” It is a dope, feminist homage to women’s journey through hip hop history, without all the slut shaming.



<https://youtu.be/AyVbOFLkOw8>

Featured Image by Flickr User LizSpikol

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