

ACADEMIA

Accelerating the world's research.

Review of Hip-Hop's Lil Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip-Hop Identities and Politics in the New South by Bettina Love

Emery Petchauer

**Want more papers like
this?**

[Download a PDF Pack of
related papers](#)

[Search Academia's catalog of
22 million free papers](#)

Hip Hop's Li'l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South

reviewed by Emery Petchauer —February 08, 2013

Title: Hip Hop's Li'l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South

Author(s): Bettina L. Love

Publisher: Peter Lang Publishing, New York

ISBN: 143311190X, **Pages:** 152, **Year:** 2012

Search for book at Amazon.com



The phrase “wardrobe malfunction” was imprinted with new meaning on the evening of February 1st, 2004. In what is now remembered as a definitive pop culture moment for millions, Justin Timberlake revealed Janet Jackson’s right breast during the Super Bowl XXXVIII halftime show. Groups moved quickly after the incident. The NFL apologized, “family values” organizations filed lawsuits, and cultural critics deconstructed the real and symbolic meaning of a white man exposing a Black woman’s breast before millions. Ten days after the Super Bowl, the House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved the Broadcast Decency Enforcement Act of 2004 that would increase FCC penalties for such incidents by ten-fold. (The act was introduced prior to the Super Bowl, but it and the final version that became law are remembered as a direct response to the incident.). Comedians spun the nexus of freak-out into variations of the same punch line: never before had a Black woman’s body inspired the swift movement of so many white men.

No incidents similar in magnitude have happened since the Broadcast Decency Enforcement Act, but despite the Act, Black women’s bodies and lives have grown to comprise a specific genre of mass media entertainment with deeper implications than what took place during the Super Bowl halftime show. The usual suspects remain: the popular and explicit genres of hip-hop that depict women (of color, most frequently) in hypersexualized roles. But, there is also a cadre of reality television shows where the unifying thread is the “ratchet behavior” of women of color. These shows include *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *Basketball Wives*, *Love and Hip-Hop*, and the immensely popular *Flavor of Love* and their spinoffs.

Hip Hop’s Li’l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South by Bettina L. Love is a timely and necessary work that takes readers into this tsunami of media that young Black girls swim in, with, and against. The setting is a community center in Atlanta, and the players are six Black teenage girls, or as Love calls them, hip-hop’s li’l sistas. Concerned with the commercial hip-hop entertainment industry, Love states the context of her study precisely:

In the backdrop of Hip-Hop stand young women of color who are cast as video vixens, strippers, hos, baby mommas, groupies, bitches, and models—each a mere accessory to a male rapper. . . . Within the climate of rap, women of color—and their bodies—are a vital part of a radicalized fantasy world. (pp. 19-20)

In a year-long ethnography (her dissertation), Love explored how girls understand the images presented in rap music and rap videos, how rap’s messages contribute to girls’ construction of racial and gender identities, and how rap music shapes the girls’ lived experiences.

According to a comprehensive review of hip-hop education scholarship (Petchauer, 2009), there are three major strands of work in the expanding body of education research devoted to hip-hop: 1) work that looks at the use of hip-hop texts (mostly rap music) for different educational purposes; 2) work that explores the meanings that youth construct of hip-hop videos and songs, particularly as they relate to identity; 3) and work that explores how the aesthetics, sensibilities, and worldviews of hip-hop culture and its expressive elements can be used for educational purposes. *Hip-Hop’s Li’l Sistas Speak* falls into the second of these strands. Additionally, the book can be viewed as part of a

recent surge in scholarship examining the intersections of Black girlhood, hip-hop feminism, and pedagogy (e. g., Brown, 2008).

In situating *Hip-Hop's Li'l Sist'as*, it is important to note that Love's work does not directly address the full culture of hip-hop that includes rapping, DJing, b-boying/ b-girling and other forms of dance, and writing graffiti art (i. e., the four elements) that thrive around the world today, nor does her work directly concern the knowledge, worldviews, or sensibilities at work in hip-hop culture. Her work focuses on the commercial entertainment industry that creates the most widespread representations of people of color. This industry—which includes music, videos, television shows, and more—is neither fully inclusive of nor exclusive to hip-hop culture. It is simply that the term *hip-hop* is used as a rubric to classify Black-directed entertainment. This distinction is in no way a criticism of Love's work but simply a necessary one to make because the term hip-hop has multiple meanings.

Although not organized as such, the eight chapters of *Hip-Hop's Li'l Sist'as Speak* naturally divide into two sections. The first four chapters provide background for the study, including a brave chapter in which Love unpacks her positionality and obstacles (some of them self-made) as a queer, lesbian researcher as they relate to working with young girls and a project that delves directly into gender and sexuality. The last four chapters draw from data to analyze the relationships between the girls and hip-hop. The contents of these chapters should remind educators and administrators that it is educational malpractice to ignore the media that students encounter.

In the opening chapter, Love frames her research as paying back a debt. Like many members of the Hip-Hop Generation, hip-hop culture for Love was a form of edutainment: a conjoined source of entertainment and education, an agent that moved her body as well as her mind. Where formal schooling left out lessons of empowerment and critical history for many young people of color, the diverse cannon of hip-hop music in the 1980s and 1990s often times provided it. While these lessons may not have been comprehensive, they have been educational starting points for many listeners. For Love, part of maturing through hip-hop, too, was developing a critical lens to consume and deconstruct the deeply sexist, misogynistic, materialistic, homophobic, and violent themes that exists alongside messages of racial pride and gender empowerment. In these ways, Love's personal journey as one of hip-hop's li'l sist'as (albeit older than the girls in her study) is parallel to the line of inquiry that guides her study.

Love also unpacks some of her analytical lens as a Black feminist, hip-hop feminist, lesbian researcher. While the lines between these identifications are blurred, one solid quality is "critiqu[ing] the patriarchal power within Hip Hop while finding pleasure in the music as a Hip Hop feminist" (p. 22). This politics of pleasure, and the related focus on the agency that women of color have in the midst of hip-hop's patriarchy and sexism, might be read as a contradiction by some. But, pushing against this contradiction has been a fundamental contribution of hip-hop feminism.

Love's attention to some of the boundaries that she negotiated as a northerner conducting research in the South and as a queer, lesbian researcher is a strength of the first half of the book. Bravely, Love reveals how she unintentionally down-played her sexual orientation in the early stages of the study due to decades of experiencing fear and shame associated with being a lesbian. Explaining how this is the product of internalized homophobia, Love describes how this tendency created a boundary between herself and the girls—a boundary that she tacitly set up. This boundary began falling when the girls started signaling to Love that they knew she was a lesbian and they were not homophobic. This chapter stands out as a powerful example of how personal history and positionality shape research. It illustrates the rigor of reflexivity that all researchers (not just queer ones) must address up front.

Chapters Five through Eight unpack how the six girls make sense of popular hip-hop videos and songs that they encounter—unavoidably—through the inescapable media around them. Readers get a sobering picture of how the girls can conclude that Black women are inferior to White woman vis-à-vis the content of popular hip-hop videos. Seeing Black women consistently depicted as strippers, freaks, and hoes (and seeing White woman largely absent from videos or not subject to these representations), the girls make sense of this contrast through the idea of choice. They conclude that Black women *chose* to represent themselves in these ways, thus making "bad decisions," and that White women *chose* to have successful professional careers, thus making "good decisions." These sweeping ideas about Black women were often in contrast to real lives around them unmediated by the entertainment industry. That is, many of the girls in the study made perfectly good decisions in their personal lives, and Love (as a coach, scholar, and teacher-mentor in their lives) was one of the many examples in Atlanta of successful, professional Black women. Yet, the videos worked as a selective filter, shaping what the girls saw as normal behavior for Black women.

Love identifies that this selective filter and thinking process (and it's conclusion about the inferiority of Black women) hinges upon a lack of awareness about a key feature of the hip-hop entertainment industry: the roles prescribed for Black women are most frequently as flat accessories to adorn men. Patriarchy and sexism are the scaffolding upon which this industry hangs. Without awareness that what they see in videos and hear on songs is the product of an industry, the girls rationalize what they see as the product of individualism and choice.

Through the subsequent chapters, Love charts how this line of reasoning continues to other topics about gender and sexuality for the girls. From the images that the girls see in videos, they conclude that a characteristic of Black women is that they have hips and big butts. As with the conclusion about bad decisions referenced above, this biological essentialism conflicts with the reality that the girls see around them. Some of the girls do not have bodies like the women in the videos, yet they do not question their own Blackness. Not surprisingly, these views of Black women's bodies have relevance to their interactions with young men. Though generally content with their own bodies, the girls were displeased with the images of women in videos because they perceived that boys their age expect and desire a girl who has such a body.

Similar to Love and many other sensible people who enjoy music that they simultaneously find problematic, the girls focus on the beat and dancing to it when lyrics prove vulgar, offensive, and dehumanizing. The girls articulate an important point that is essential to this tension: there is a negative social cost for ignoring, confronting, or not dancing to the music that the rest of your peers like. As the girls say, "Nobody wants to be lame." Bigger than the social pressure to consume media that dehumanizes them, this type of media is unavoidable. Young girls cannot simply turn off what is broadcasted, streamed, Youtubed, downloaded, iPhone apped, ringtoned, Facebooked, Tweeted, Tumblred, Snapchatted, and painted on billboards in Atlanta. You can't stay dry while swimming against a tsunami.

While the bulk of the text is a sobering account of how the girls interact with the media, Love gives some attention (albeit a comparatively small amount) to the ways that the girls resist these images and narratives in hip-hop. Love found that the girls resisted some messages about Black men in the hip-hop industry, but not those about Black women. The girls understood to some degree that what they saw in videos and on record, such as rappers tethering their images to violence and guns, is a performance manufactured to sell music. It's not real. This recognition raises questions about why this critical lens concerning men did not transfer over to the corollary narratives and representations of women. The ability to deconstruct one message would seem to be a natural starting point to deconstruct another message created by the same system. In the shortest chapter of the book, this disconnect deserved a deeper exploration.

Despite the relative lack of attention to the girls' resistance, Love takes the girls at their word. She does not use cultural criticism to bend their experiences into some abstract form of resistance or empowerment. This is refreshing, considering that there is a strand of scholarship (particularly with hip-hop) that starts with the same questions that Love does but makes a subtle analytical leap, substituting a researcher's reading/ experience with a text for participants' readings/ experiences with the text. The analytical logic goes as follows: *While X seems to be problematic at first, upon a closer reading of X, it can be subversive and empowering for young people.* Love does not make this error. Her conclusion is not a bright one, but it is a real one: there is much work to be done to arm young women of color with the analytical tools to defend themselves in the midst of media onslaughts that would insidiously teach them to think less of themselves. There is no act of Congress or the FCC that can do this.

Love recommends hip-hop pedagogy as one tool to accomplish this. The different aspects of hip-hop pedagogy, however, become conflated in this recommendation. At times, hip-hop pedagogy is critical media literacy happening with hip-hop texts. At other times, drawing from the full elements of hip-hop and the recent shift toward their aesthetics, it is a form of pedagogy that "recognizes and celebrates how youth move, speak, think, create, and related to the world" (p. 109). These tensions in the book surrounding hip-hop pedagogy as well as the ways it overlaps with and separates from other approaches such as critical pedagogy and culturally responsive pedagogy are emblematic of the larger tensions in the field of hip-hop based education that scholars are currently working out. To be fair, Love does not set out to resolve these tensions, but implementing her recommendations to the fullest extent means having a clearer resolution to them.

References

Brown, R. N. (2008). *Black girlhood celebration: Toward a hip-hop feminist pedagogy*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Petchauer, E. (2009). Framing and reviewing hip-hop educational research. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(2), 946-978.

Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: February 08, 2013
<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 17019, Date Accessed: 2/13/2013 9:58:24 AM

[Purchase Reprint Rights for this article or review](#)

2019. Hip hop's li'l sistas speak: Negotiating hip hop identities and politics in the new South. BL Love. Peter Lang, 2012. 176. 2012. Hello professor: A Black principal and professional leadership in the segregated South. VS Walker. Univ of North Carolina Press, 2009. 118. 2009. See Trayvon Martin: What Teachers Can Learn from the Tragic Death of a Young Black Male. BL Love. Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South ? Note: Before I apologize, here I am not offering it for free, but you have to join our service, and get a trial period of 14½30 days, you can cancel it if it is uncomfortable. Thank you so much .. Hope you are pleased to join our service, and you can read all the books you want .. Hip Hop. Counterpoints publishes the most compelling and imaginative books being written in education today. Grounded on the theoretical advances in criticalism, feminism and postmodernism in the last two decades of the twentieth century, Counterpoints engages the meaning of these innovations in various forms of educational expression. Committed to the proposition that theoretical literature should be accessible to a variety of audiences, the series insists that its authors avoid esoteric and jargonistic languages that transform educational scholarship into an elite discourse for the initiated. Scholar Find many great new & used options and get the best deals for Hip Hop's Li'l Sistias Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South by Bettina L. Love (Paperback, 2012) at the best online prices at eBay! Free delivery for many products! Hip Hop's Li'l Sistias Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South by Bettina L. Love (Paperback, 2012). About this product. Best-selling in Non-Fiction. See all. Through ethnographically informed interviews and observations conducted with six Black middle and high school girls, this book explores how young women navigate the space of Hip Hop music and culture to form ideas concerning race, body, class, inequality, and privilege. Product Identifiers. Publisher. Hip Hop's Li'l Sistias Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South. Love, B. L. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2012. 137 pp. \$141.95; \$40.95 [Book Review]. Antonio Duran. Kinship and Politics Robert J. Littman: Kinship and Politics in Athens 600-400 B.C. (Studia Classica, 2.) Pp. Xi + 274. New York, Berne, Frankfurt Am Main and Paris: Peter Lang, 1990. Sw. Frs. Helen Ruth Andretta, Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde: A Poet's Response to Ockhamism. (Studies in the Humanities: Literature-Politics-Society, 29.) New York: Peter Lang, 1997. Pp.