

Wrecking¹ rap's conventions: the cultural production of three daring Detroit emcees

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Abstract

This article profiles the music of three politically motivated hip hop emcees. It combines textual and musicological analysis with ethnographic data to examine the ways in which these women use music to empower themselves and to contribute to meaningful, positive change in post-industrial, post-bankruptcy Detroit. These narratives are significant because they combat the dominant, hegemonic two-dimensional representations of African American women that are epitomised in commercial hip hop and popular culture at large. Further, in a context where art and activism are connected, their work challenges the current controlling images and sexual scripts that dominate both commercial music industry representations and scholarship on women in hip hop. The artists we profile exemplify a new kind of musical movement where women are agents and creative solutionaries. At times, they are explicitly critical of the narrow range of black womanhood presented in popular culture and in other instances, they focus on issues such as the environment, race relations, racialized bodies, poverty and abuse, all the while challenging the hip hop industry and popular culture norms that communicate who black women are and who they should be.

The last 30 years have yielded an abundance of hip hop scholarship, enough to effect the formation of a canon. In addition to a plethora of books and articles, there also exist anthologies and readers that document hip hop's history as well as its worldwide impact on music and politics. Befitting most canons, to some extent research has examined the sexism, misogyny and gender politics that permeate both commercial and underground hip hop culture; however, for the most part the categories through which both men and women have been examined up to this point have been narrow, leading to a worldview governed by a restricted set of practices and tropes. As Regina N. Bradley recently concluded, 'discourses surrounding women in hip-hop are in desperate need of renovation' (Bradley 2015, p. 187). Additionally, while we do not deny the importance of the formative scholarship that has addressed the intersections of black feminist politics and hip hop cultural production, it is important to acknowledge that much of this work has focused on the production and reception of women in the commercial hip hop arena. When

¹ In this essay we invoke Gwendolyn D. Pough's (2004) use of the term 'wreck' to define 'moments when black women's discourses disrupt dominant masculine discourses, break into the public sphere, and in some way impact or influence the U.S. imaginary, even if that influence is fleeting' (p. 176).

one studies women in hip hop outside of the commercial industry a different set of practices, ideas and identities emerges.

This essay examines the cultural production of women in an independent arts movement who not only wreck the sexist practices that circulate in hip hop culture, but also redefine the cast of characters that dominate the ways in which women have been understood in hip hop culture. In the analysis that follows we showcase the music and lyrics of three daring Detroit emcees who provide an alternative framework for understanding the ways in which women create spaces for themselves in hip hop culture in both the male-dominated commercial market and the hip hop underground. The subject positions examined in this ethnographic study traverse earlier understandings of archetypes like the Mammy, the Matriarch and the Jezebel (Hill Collins 2000 2006; Ogbar 2007) and even more progressive categories like the Flygirl, Queen Mother and Sista with an Attitude (Keyes 2004; Rabaka 2012). The topics these emcees address and the identities they forge serve as productive, complex, intersectional routes that reveal the deep layers of subjectivity that women making hip hop live. The subjective particularities that constitute their individual and collective consciousness include elements such as their faith and their lived experiences as black girls/women and as Detroiters. Embodiment is a force that undergirds their aesthetic and political drive. It shapes their 'fyness' or style as well as their commitment to addressing physical and sexual abuse in their lyrics. It is the ground where cool beats and clever rhymes meet social critique.

Tapping into women-centred art we focus on our conversations with three Detroit based emcees and their recently completed works – two albums that were released prior to our interviews in 2015 as well as one EP which was in post-production at the time but has since been released: Nique Love Rhodes *Against All Odds: The Epic* (2013), *Pure* (2014) by Mahogany Jones and Insite the Riot's EP *Girl Meets Beat* (2015). The music we analyse here is a contemporary extension of the work of politically motivated emcees from hip hop's early years in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as classic women blues and jazz artists. These emcees combat the dominant, hegemonic two-dimensional representation of African American women that is epitomised in commercial hip hop and popular culture at large. Moreover, the music, imagery and counter-narratives that these women create are significant because they defy and traverse the dominant existing stereotypes, scripts and controlling images of women in hip hop that dominate commercial and academic spaces. Additionally, while it is becoming increasingly common and acceptable for men to give voice to their emotional selves, their faith and vulnerabilities in the commercial hip hop arena this space does not afford the same possibilities or profitability to women rappers. The analysis that follows examines these complex narratives and gives insight into the artists' lived experiences as well as the issues that motivate their work. Doing so enables us to map discourses revealing 'how they are involved in forming various aspects of shared knowledge and relations of power' (Krimms 2001, p. 42).

Studying cultural production

In the analysis that follows we take up feminist cultural critic Aisha Durham's (2010) call to make visible alternative visions of hip hop and encourage consumption of more diverse hip hop representations. We believe that the most productive and

fruitful approach to this analysis is to resist choosing between a focus on aesthetics or social relationships and to instead begin from the position that aesthetics are socially grounded. In an essay that considers the ways in which research studies treat the material and discursive practices of cultural producers, Maureen Mahon (2000) stresses the importance of viewing media and popular culture forms as both cultural product and social process. As Mahon explains,

expressive culture has been a way for people with limited access to mainstream institutions to produce political critique, but if we ignore the aesthetic dimension – the creative and artistic choices, preoccupations, and goals that inform their work – we risk producing a one-sided and mechanistic view of complex artistic productions. (p. 479)

To acknowledge the legitimacy of the discourse going on within this artistic community and in an effort to take seriously hip hop's own intellectual principles, we do not limit our analysis to the final products – the recordings – at the expense of the processes that created them. Thus, in addition to our own analysis of the recordings, we also conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with all three artists. Each interview lasted from one to two hours. We had previously interviewed the artists at least twice and benefited from the strong rapport we had developed with them. In the interviews cited here we focused our questions on their most recently completed works to gain insight into what issues were on their minds and how they fit into a Detroit (and) hip hop context. At the time of our interviews their ages ranged from 27 to 35. All three are college educated. They all currently live in Detroit and their music is deeply embedded in the city.

Our attendance at dozens of events where these artists have performed live also informs our analysis. Drawing on these various and rich research sites is useful to understand how they 'negotiate the constraints of the particular material conditions, discursive frameworks, and ideological assumptions in which they work' (Mahon 2000, p. 468). Combining textual analysis with interviews gives us a three-dimensional representation of African American woman that is virtually non-existent in contemporary commercial hip hop culture and popular culture in general.

Detroit and The Foundation

The underground is a precarious space, often conflated with what 'conscious rap' is supposed to be. In his ethnographic study of hip hop in the San Francisco Bay Area, Anthony Kwame Harrison (2009) complicates this one-dimensional notion. He describes the underground as local, aesthetic, relational spaces where the lines blur between fans and artists. Without the backing of a major label underground artists have to hustle – both on the street and on social media – to build their fanbases, and they rely on websites and streaming services like Spotify, iTunes, Bandcamp and YouTube to deliver their content. Despite the close relations between artists and fans in the underground and the lack of industry interventions, the spaces cultivated are not necessary progressive, especially when it comes to gender politics and women's participation in particular. Harrison credits men's attitudes toward women in the Bay Area underground as a major factor for the lack of women emcees in the Bay Area at the time of his fieldwork in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As opposed to being seen as equals and/or collaborators, women were perceived to be distractions that got in the way of men's artistic pursuits.

The lack of female participation both on and off the stage in places like the Bay Area and Detroit speak to the ways in which the hip hop underground is stymied by the same forms of misogyny and sexism that shape the commercial hip hop industry and the broader culture. In turn, women in hip hop face a double layer of misogyny, one that comes from the extreme local and the other emanating from the commercial music industry and the patriarchal conditions in which these spaces are steeped. Some information about Detroit and the women-centred collective established to combat this misogyny and propel the cultural production of women in hip hop provides context for the analysis that follows.

For decades, journalists and film crews from across the globe have descended on Detroit to document its destruction. In the 2000s the phrase ‘ruin porn’ was introduced to define these commonplace images and videos that revel in the city’s devastation – a climactic moment of a post-industrial narrative serving as a warning to cities and communities worldwide. Over the course of our fieldwork, Detroit – a city that is 83% black – has declared bankruptcy, been under emergency financial management, had a previous mayor convicted on two dozen federal felony counts, and suffered from high unemployment, poor public transportation and failing public schools. Nonetheless, these conditions have also nurtured robust food and digital justice movements and community organizations focused on ‘putting the neighbor back in the hood’. After decades of this kind of community work national publications are starting to take notice. Ager’s recent article in *National Geographic* (2015) titled ‘Taking back Detroit’ highlights rebounding neighbourhoods and hopeful, committed citizens. This is the environment – both the good and the bad – in which the rappers we feature here compose their rhymes.

In the summer of 2011, we attended a weekly event in Detroit called ‘The Foundation: Women in Hip Hop’ for the first time. What we experienced was unlike anything we had ever witnessed at a hip hop show. On stage the hosts encouraged people in the audience to sign up for the open mic portion of the night. Before any of the willing participants took the stage they announced the rules that artists had to follow, one of which was no misogyny of any kind and especially no talk of ‘bitches’ and ‘hos’. It was surprising and refreshing to witness a community-based hip hop event that featured so many women and in a space that did not tolerate any misogynist content from men or women. In the rare instances where an emcee daringly or obliviously defied the rules and expectations the DJ would cut the music and publicly remind the artist what the space was about. The event fostered an alternative perspective to the dominant hegemonic hip hop norms wherein black women’s sexual self-exploitation for male viewing pleasure is a near requirement for female visibility (Rose 2008).

Over the next few weeks we learned that The Foundation was not only a weekly event dedicated to women and hip hop but also a local, politically motivated, women-centred collective. In 2009, Piper Carter returned to Detroit from New York City where she had lived and worked as a fashion photographer for many years. Frustrated by the lack of women both on stage and in the crowd at local hip hop shows she took it upon herself to create a women-centred hip hop space in the city, which she named The Foundation. The most recent iteration of The Foundation’s mission statement at the time of this writing declares:

Encouraging freedom of expression, healthy competition, independent thought, & positive self-identity, this weekly event as a movement focuses on redefining the vital role of women in hip hop. Our mission is to educate and empower the community through sharing love of the arts, inspire change and growth, build leadership, and influence the perceptions and roles of women in hip-hop for current and future generations. (The Foundation of Women in Hip Hop)

From 2009 to 2014 The Foundation hosted one of the longest running weekly open mic events dedicated to women in hip hop. As both a weekly event and a collective there were approximately a dozen or so women, most of whom are African American, involved at any given time. The majority of the participants were emcees but the group also included singers, painters, breakers, poets and DJs. Educating and empowering individuals and communities to battle hip hop's misogyny are key to Piper Carter's vision for the group and its purpose. As such, criteria for securing a feature slot at a Foundation event and performing as an open mic artist had more to do with the degree to which one's art evoked critical thinking or politically motivated messages than with one's sex or gender identity. Most Foundation members were also involved in youth activism, mentoring, food justice and other projects focusing on reimagining a healthy, sustainable community. The collective's mission statement and actions are also deeply influenced by the Universal Zulu Nation's hip hop sensibilities. While the weekly event ended in 2014, The Foundation continues to organize and produce a range of events including women and hip hop conferences and youth workshops. They also network with the Eastern Michigan Environmental Action Committee to advance a black perspective on environmental sustainability in Detroit; partner with the Allied Media Project to cultivate media strategies for social justice; and use stimulus money to bring hip hop education into Detroit public schools. Denim Day is one of the most high-profile events Foundation members' host and support. The annual event that Mahogany Jones organizes features panels and performances dedicated to raising awareness about sexual abuse and funding for the processing of untested rape kits in Detroit.

Black musical social movements

The connection between art and activism has a rich history among African American communities. In her ethnographic study of the Black Rock Coalition, Maureen Mahon (2004) details the ways in which this linkage that the Black Rock Coalition enacts 'echoes the connections between artistic production and racial identity that characterised the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s' (p. 27) that inspired heart-aching blues, cutting poetry and gritty art. In his historical analysis Rabaka emphasises African American women's engagement with musical social movements beginning with the blues. Their early contributions to the blues are especially significant because they served as a counter-herstory and counter-narrative to the Eurocentric and bourgeois conceptions of womanhood that the Black Women's Club Movement espoused. Writing about African American blues artists from the 1920s, Angela Y. Davis (1999) argues that these artists' radical and subversive cultural production is important in forging a black feminist consciousness. Similarly, Hazel Carby (1988) argues that through this music women articulated a cultural and political struggle over issues including sexual relations. Claiming ownership of one's sexuality speaks to the impulse in hip hop feminism to claim and redefine sexual agency. Writing about the jazz age Patricia

Hill Collins (2006) informs readers that through their lyrics women opened up the symbolism of motion and travel for women. Commenting on the ways in which the past informs the present Rabaka (2012) argues that 'rap music and the Hip Hop Movement are continuing the African American movement and African American 'movement music' tradition' (p. 2). Home of Motown, Techno and new styles of improvisational jazz, Detroit is a route and a destination city in black music movements.

For decades, scholars (Dyson 1997; Rabaka 2012; Rose 1994) have been defining hip hop music and culture as a social movement. In its nascent years in the 1970s, Afrika Bambaataa established the hip hop awareness group Zulu Nation² to combat gang violence in the streets of New York City. Besides men like himself wanting to see change, Bambaataa boldly explained that '*women* got tired of the gang shit' (Bambaataa, as cited in George 2005, p. 18, emphasis added). Thus, from the beginning women were a part of Zulu Nation's worldwide movement with chapters across the globe. Despite the power that has been fostered through musical movements, fans and the commercial music industry operate from their own, often competing, agendas. Rap music and imagery are packaged through a range of controlling images and sexual scripts that have not been lost on hip hop aficionados, scholars and pundits. That is, between movements and markets the poetics of rap rocks on, but the politics rarely include the worldviews of women.

Controlling images and sexual scripts

The majority of research on women and hip hop examines the representation of women in male-centred and controlled hip hop images, music and culture. The commercial hip hop industry constructs and justifies particular social arrangements that embody a hegemonic masculinist social order in which women are represented as passive objects and men as agentic subjects and artists. Numerous scholars (Adams and Fuller 2006; Bradley 2015; Hill Collins 2006; hooks 2003; Hunter 2011; Perry 2004; Rose 2008; Sharpley-Whiting 2008) have commented on the problematic and sexist state of contemporary hip hop culture. Tricia Rose has declared hip hop to be 'in a terrible crisis' because it 'has increasingly become a playground for caricatures of black gangsta, pimps, and ho's' (p. 1). Shifting the focus to black girls' and women's relationships to hip hop, in *Pimps Up, Ho's Down* Sharpley-Whiting (2008) explores hip hop's increasing alliance with the sex industry and the ways in which it traffics, publicly celebrates and normalises images and behaviours of sexual violence, sexism and anti-lesbianism among others. Adams and Fuller (2006) argue that the commonly deployed terms 'bitch' and 'ho' in misogynistic rap are the modern day equivalents of the Sapphire and Jezebel scripts of the past. The label 'Sapphire' was used to describe a socially aggressive woman who uses manipulation to try to control her man and 'Jezebel' a loose, sexually aggressive woman. They argue that these images provide a rationale for the history of sexual assaults on

² Afrika Bambaataa is a former Black Spades gang leader in the South Bronx, New York who established the Universal Zulu Nation in the 1970s in an effort to combat violence in the community. In addition to the known four elements of hip hop – DJing, emceeing, b-boying (break dancing) and graffiti art – he added a fifth element, knowledge. The knowledge element is often what distinguishes politically motivated hip hop from profit-driven cultural production. In 2016, Afrika Bambaataa was accused of sexual assault, leading to an identity crisis for Zulu Nation chapters, some of which decided to secede from the Nation and create new affiliations.

African American women. With some exceptions, the lyrics and images of women in commercial hip hop uphold these representations.

When they are acknowledged, examples of agentic female emcees continue to be women whose popularity peaked in the 1980s and 1990s, with the most commonly referenced artists including Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Salt-N-Pepa, Roxxane Shante, Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Lauryn Hill and Missy Elliot (Bonnette 2015; Keyes 2000; Rose 1994). In their exploration of the sociohistorical development of sexual scripts of African American women, Stephens and Phillips (2003) argue that hip hop narratives have directly influenced the evolution of the foundational Jezebel, Mammy, Welfare Mother and Matriarch images into the Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangster Bitch, Sister Savior, Earth Mother and Baby Mama. Male-centred and controlled images in hip hop culture define most but not all of these scripts. Stephens and Phillips ascribe many of these categorizations to the emcees listed above and all but the Mother Earth script are understood to be negative. For example, Lil' Kim and her track 'How many licks' are used to illustrate the Freak – 'a bad girl who gains male attention, appears empowered, and is obviously sexually satisfied. However, admitting this attraction or associating oneself with the Freak is undesirable' (p. 21). In another example, they explain that the Dyke script is often ascribed to women who reject men's sexual advances as in the NWA hit 'Straight outta Compton' where Ice Cube concludes, 'dumbass hooker ain't nuttin' but a dyke' (p. 23). In contrast, the Earth Mother is described as someone who 'celebrates the diversity of body sizes, natural hair texture, and skin colors' and whose 'consciousness takes her out of the sexual context that exists within Hip Hop culture' (p. 31). Lauryn Hill is the quintessential example here. Stevens and Phillips are rightfully concerned with the impacts these images have on adolescent African American girls. Nonetheless, their choice to couch these representations as almost exclusively damaging fails to illuminate the nuances of the dynamic, powerful, complex and at times contradictory representations of many female emcees; much is lost when hip hop culture as a whole is reduced to a sexual context.

Based on interviews she conducted with African American female performers, audience members and music critics in the mid-1990s, Cheryl Keyes identified four distinct categories of women rappers. They include the Queen Mother, Fly Girl, Sista with Attitude and Lesbian. The Queen Mothers comprise African-centred icons such as Queen Latifah, Sister Souljah and Yo-Yo. Fly girls such as Salt-N-Pepa are adorned with chic clothing and fashionable hairstyles and jewelry. 'Moreover, they portray via performance the fly girl as a party-goer, an independent woman, but, additionally, an erotic subject rather than an objectified one' (p. 260). Keyes categorizes female emcees who value attitude as a means of empowerment as Sista with Attitude, a type that includes the likes of Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown. Rabaka (2012) extends the application of the category to include contemporary female rappers as well as neo-soul sisters who share classic blues women's 'myriad expressions of *black and blues womanhood*' (p. 75). Rabaka adds that in this sense 'attitude' refers to 'their critical posture or oppositional stance toward the established order' (p. 75). Imani Perry complicates the category with the addition of the phrase 'bad women' to refer to these powerful women in hip hop (Bradley 2015, p. 188). Lastly, the Lesbian category includes the likes of Queen Pen, who stresses her play in image in her performances.

Commenting on Keyes's four dominant figures within female hip-hop performance, Mark Anthony Neal (2012) singles out the Fly Girl as the most provocative and

makes a point to note that hip hop feminist Joan Morgan is also a fan of the category and the erotic power that the Fly Girls exudes. Neal goes on to explain that 'it is in the context of black female sexuality that Morgan posits a hip-hop feminism that champions both a critical discourse around gender in hip-hop and the pleasure associated with flaunting the very female sexuality that some hip-hop artists regularly objectify' (p. 346). For Morgan there is room for critique, pleasure and artists who embrace seemingly contradictory positions. The promise that scholars like Morgan and Keyes find in the Fly Girl image in particular goes back to the 1990s when women were a celebrated and productive part of hip hop culture and regularly featured on television in shows like the Wayans Brothers' sketch comedy series *In Living Color*.

These controlling images and sexual scripts are the main frames of the commercial industry, seeping into the ears and eyes of those fans who consume hip hop exclusively from commercial outlets. Scholarly work that critiques these representations is valuable and necessary but it is not sufficient as it leaves unexplored the productivity of a diverse range of women engaging in the cultural production of hip hop. The work that women in Detroit's hip hop underground produce reflects and intervenes into the scripts that hip hop scholars have critiqued and coined. The analysis that follows concentrates on independent artists who offer alternative subjectivities and more productive routes for forging identities and spaces from which to circumvent, dismantle and develop the state of the industry. Their work captures the ethics underneath the steadfast feminist axiom 'the personal is political'. It begins from the personal, the ground from which social and political forces are confronted, wrecked and reimagined. The power to overcome begins with re-examining sexual abuse, addiction, racial reasoning and nihilism. As a result, alternative women-identified spiritualities and worldviews emerge in the music and cultural production of Foundation artists.

Spirituality, empowerment and black womanhood

Insite the Riot's *Girl Meets Beat* brings both her personal experiences and political message to the fore. While her music has always been socially conscious, the tracks on this EP are more personal than in her previous work. Commenting on the writing process Insite states, 'On this album . . . I wanted to look behind the curtain a little bit. 'Cause I had people tell me, "I love your message, but I don't know who you are"' (personal communication, 27 July 2015). The weaving of the personal and political is most apparent on 'Winner' as she moves from recounting her childhood experiences to explaining the meaning behind her name. The track opens with a sample from Detroit-based R&B singer Anita Baker's track 'Sometimes'. It's opening lyric, 'Everybody wants to be a winner and take their place at the top', is looped twice. As Baker's vocal lines kick in so do sparse, syncopated drumbeats. The second time around a synthesizer adds an additional layer to the original track, giving it a funky edge before we hear from Insite. On top of these musical elements, in what Krims (2001) describes as a speech-effusive emceeing style characterised by enunciation and delivery that is closer to spoken language, Insite raps about her childhood in post-industrial Detroit and overcoming significant life challenges that especially affect people of colour in urban areas in the United States. Citing a historical sample of African Americans who fought for freedoms, the chorus in particular emphasises the track's message. Encouragement, determination and self-love are primary themes

that course through the song. Fuelled with hope, Insite endeavours to uplift listeners. She raps,

For Dred Scott, for Harriett
Overcome obstacles, face more barriers
My mission I accept and I choose
Either way you go we all win, draw or lose
Lick off your wounds

Insite grew up in Detroit in the 1980s and 1990s at the peak of the city's industrial decline, which meant excessive job loss, increased poverty and flight from the city whose population haemorrhaged during these decades. Writing in 1993, Jerry Herron summarized the state of Detroit at the time as 'the one place that everybody else can agree on by agreeing they no longer want any part of it' (2003, p. 13). In addition to the challenges that living in Detroit poses for many of its residents, Insite lost her mother at age 15 and raised her younger brother. She also attended college on a basketball scholarship and earned a Master's degree in Public Policy. The introspective tracks on *Girl Meets Beat* are born out of Insite's experiences as a black woman whose consciousness has been shaped by growing up in post-industrial Detroit. In 'Winner' she pays homage to African American freedom fighters who have shaped her consciousness.

While quick and dense rhymes dominate the verses, towards the end of the song Insite breaks away from rapping to clarify her identity:

I go by the name of Insite the RIOT and I encourage everybody within an earshot of my voice to incite your own riot. And what do I mean by that? I mean to incite the revolution in your thinking. To recognise that anything you wanna be is possible. To recognise that anything you wanna have is possible. Don't let nobody else tell you different. So in a nutshell I'm telling you to do three things: One, know yourself, love yourself, and three, let your light shine, shine, shine.

The strength and perseverance that dominates Insite's music encourages audiences to elevate their consciousness in order to empower themselves and incite positive change in the world. For Insite, empowerment begins with the self before it affects the social.

Mahogany Jones' album *Pure: Volume I* also addresses empowerment; however, she often examines it through the lens of Christianity. In her words,

I was inspired to record *Pure* by God at the height of wanting to distance my gender from my art, and seeing that I only wanted to do that because of the discrimination I consistently came up against – and what better way to use my art, than to use my heart to do something to create a change for myself and prayerfully other women, whether emcee or astronaut. (Personal communication, 28 May 2015)

As for the themes it privileges she lists,

Forgiveness, women giving themselves permission to take up space, women recapturing agency over their bodies and not being conditioned to make choices to be overly sexual, domestic violence, sexual assault, colourism – it's not just a black thing.

For Mahogany in particular, Christianity is a significant part of her identity that she brings to bear in her music even though she does not identify herself as a Christian rapper.

I don't ever want to be like, 'you need Jesus!' even though I think people do need Jesus. The reason I make my music is because I grew up in church and I grew up in a cult really. So when I was 18, I was done with Christianity. Done. Done and done, like done. And I just came back to it, and when I came back to it, it was one of those moments. I want to make music and media that never felt like they fit into church ... which is why it's also difficult to label myself as a Christian rapper. For a while when females wanted Christian rappers my name would come up. Then this thing sort of happened where my content wasn't explicitly Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, and the Christians were like, 'yeah about that'.

Further along she added,

Christian hip hop and Christianity is extremely patriarchal to the point where at times it feels like it hates women. Christian hip hop is just super condescending, super dark ages when it comes to the role of women. It's subtle. It's like when women in Christian hip hop get billed for concerts it's like the token black girl or the token white person. It's the token girl. 'Oh you're here for the girls' ... Christian hip hop unfortunately is a reflection of Christianity or American Christianity in this very patriarchy and very misogynistic environment.

Mahogany opens the double-sided tinge of identification. Her spirituality is a powerful calling, but even in those sacred spaces closest to home and heart, the pull of patriarchy is deeply felt and expected. She can claim Christianity, but it only claims her on terms that contradict her well-being as a woman and an artist. Instead of being pigeonholed, she renounces its label and in doing so defies the script it seeks to uphold.

Nique Love Rhodes is a self-proclaimed 'everyday revolutionary' who has been rapping on stages since she was 13 years old. Growing up, attending a black church in Detroit made a particularly strong impression on her:

It was a non-denominational church and they would let me perform on Sundays. People would give me good feedback. And you know in Detroit, every good musician came from the church. Most musicians will probably play at church somewhere. The musicians were like you should do stuff like this and gave me a musical background in it. If it wasn't for my mom getting me into church and giving me a notebook, I would be a completely different person. I lived off Joy Rd. and it wasn't a good neighborhood. I would come home from school and my dad would be on drugs, and there would be drug dealers at the corner of the neighborhood, but it was that spirituality [that got me through]. (Personal communication, 26 April 2015)

As she explains it, the church was Nique's condition for possibility, the space that gave her a stage and a community that offered safety, even – or rather especially – when her neighbourhood did not. The experience of church is existentially different for each artist, but all of them feel deeply shaped by Christianity.

It is significant that empowerment, revolution, and spirituality are intertwined for all of these artists, albeit in diverse ways and to different extents. Jones's music rarely addresses these concepts one at a time. The track 'Skin deep'³ featuring Insite the Riot and Ozara Ode, questions the privileging of light skin, highlights the experiences of girls and women living in black bodies, and emphasises the need for black girls and women to love themselves unconditionally. Musically, it is somber from the start. Jazzy saxophone and piano melodies overlay a light and

³ The video for 'Skin deep' is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrckVMb1mkQ

slow percussive beat throughout. In a speech effusive rhyming style that in this case is characterised by an especially crisp delivery Mahogany Jones raps:

They say I'm so black in the evening I'm invisible
 Must live life in the night
 The only visuals of me that I see are individuals
 Who are slaves
 Who are maids
 Who are criminals
 Only worthy of wages minimal
 Blatant in they programming messages subliminal
 For every black princess there's a black president
 There's only been one for the years we been residents
 Too far right on the spectrum of the color wheel
 To get equal rights so our true beauty we conceal
 Cause Black and ugly have always been synonymous
 Not to mention what this does to my confidence
 Black girls rock but really what's more common is
 We're put under rocks and made to be anonymous
 Rarely celebrated
 Why is it a great occasion
 When someone on the cover of *Vogue's* not a caucasian
 (Chorus, sung by Ozara Ode)
 They say, beauty is only skin deep
 Play it for the little brown girls on repeat
 They say, beauty is only skin deep
 Play it for the little brown girls on repeat
 They say, beauty is only skin deep
 Play it for the little brown girls on repeat

The track's instrumentation and tempo, as well as Ozara Ode's vocals, invoke the music of famous 1930s jazz musicians such as Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald. The juxtaposition and layering of this jazzy sound and Jones's and Insite the Riot's rhymes create a multi-generational opening that signifies a new sensibility. The music and lyrics call on us to reflect on the history of whiteness and colonization and call into question its prolongation while illustrating the impacts of its continuation, especially on girls and women of colour who continue to be exoticised as well as seen and treated as less than white women.

Mahogany explains the genesis of the track saying,

'Skin Deep' is essential because it's important for people to take in different shades, shapes, configurations of what beauty is. 'Skin Deep' exposes how as dark women struggle with colourism and how lighter complexioned women struggle as well with being pegged a certain way. So either you're dark and you're a mammie and undesirable or you are fair skinned and the object of every man's sexual fantasy. Both are unfair, not balanced, and 'Skin Deep's' role is to expose it and remember no matter where you are on the colour wheel you are fearfully and wonderfully made by God – you are not less than.

Discussing the track, Insite the Riot explains that it expresses her beliefs that 'vulnerability is a strength, self confidence is a necessity and recognizing our own beauty is vital'. All of the artists discussed in this article articulate the correlation between vulnerability and self-confidence. We elaborate on this relationship in some depth further below.

Mahogany Jones' track 'Never again', featuring singer Gwenation, is about one woman's courage to break free from patterns of domestic violence. In contrast to 'Skin deep', 'Never again' features driving guitar and synthesizer sounds that are punctuated by digital strings and brass instrumentation. Digital mallet percussion beats drive the track; a string stab echoing a Middle Eastern flavour provides an additional layer of sound. Tape hiss gives the track an analogue sensibility. This timbral quality is fitting given that the lyrics also take us back in time. A subtle echo effect marks several of the lines and signifies the reverberation of childhood memories in the mind of the narrative persona. As identity is conjunctural, so too is Mahogany Jones' narrative structure. Mahogany Jones raps:

When I think back
 Dig into my knapsack
 of childhood memories when mama used to rock ice packs
 Eyes blue black lips drip bloody red
 Used to think up in my head all the ways to kill him dead
 Instead I just cried aloud
 Try to drown out all the sounds
 Especially the ones where mama's body thumped to the ground
 Didn't make another round
 That one was a straight K-O
 Mad because I figured that my mom was wise enough to know
 This is not what love is like
 Mama say that lovers fight
 Mama won't you fight to win
 Kiss me on the head good night
 Tell me with the strangest grin
 Everything'll be alright
 Everything was all wrong
 We shoulda been long gone
 How you figure lettin' somebody beat on you is being strong?
 She was right though
 I didn't comprehend
 Cause when you think that you're in love the rules tend to bend
 Reality and fantasy all begin just to blend
 Easier to play pretend
 Friends start to recommend I leave him
 He tells me that he loves me I believe him
 How can I leave him?
 How can I leave him?
 Tells me if I try that he'll kill me – I believe him.

As the track moves into the chorus – sung by Gwenation – the drum beat changes, the sound is fuller, and more upbeat:

Never Again
 Never will you play with my mind
 Never will you waste my time
 Never Again
 Never will you break my soul
 Never will you take control
 Never Again

'Never again' gives voice to the complex context in which abuse plays out not only between victims and abusers but also the latent affects it has on the children who witness it. It reveals the multi-faceted conditions that entrap women but we also see the

layers of resistance that lead women to overcome these conditions. In commercial hip hop women are rarely afforded the opportunity to explore such a dynamic and dialectical articulation of abuse and recovery. Whereas men are extended the luxury of being complex and contradictory, women's voices and concerns continue to be represented as two-dimensional if not silenced altogether.

Spirituality, love and empowerment are also resonant themes throughout Nique Love Rhodes's album *Against All Odds*. On the track '5.20.88' Nique is especially personal and effectively uses herself as living proof that hard times can be overcome. The first and second verses illustrate this point:

They say you don't have a story
 'Til you've been through something
 When you see how I live you think I've been through nothing
 But naw, that ain't the case
 Here's a pic, here's a snapshot
 Now take a freeze frame and let that beat drop
 'Cause I'm giving you my life in this song
 See how I am, why I am
 All along I've been fully covered by the grace of God
 When you see me upbeat
 Know it's not a façade
 'Cause I got a reason to smile
 A reason to laugh
 I've been through hell and back
 During the days of my past
 But alas, those days came to an end
 This is a portrait of me
 So let the painting begin
 Here's my story
 5.20.88

It was the 20th of May in the year 88
 Anthony became a father
 My mother was Katie Ann
 They truly did love and raise your girl well
 But from 7 to 17 life became like hell
 Dad got addicted to drugs then later he bailed
 Which in turn left mom all alone
 Struggling to raise me as a single parent on her own
 And on top of that pain
 I felt like an outcast, a misfit
 'Cause I always had my own swag
 And different from everybody 'round me
 So 7 to 17 I hated the real me
 But now I'm loving myself and learning how to live free
 5.20.88

Nique embodies what Krims (2001) identifies as a 'sung style' of rapping characterised by 'rhythmic repletion, on beat accents and pauses' (p. 50). Musically, the qualities of the beat are striking. The song begins with digitally produced piano and horns. These melodies are followed by a repeated sample of Nique's voice saying/singing '5.20.88'; at times scratching⁴ effects manipulate her voice. While Nique

⁴ Scratching is a turntablism technique that produces a distinctive sound by moving a vinyl record back and forth. Nowadays this sound is often digitally reproduced.

feels nostalgia when she hears this beat, we feel our pulses rising; our ears are poised to listen and our bodies want to move. The music takes one to an upbeat, positive headspace, even when the narrative reveals struggle.

The soundtrack is upbeat, funky and fast, while the lyrics tap into the play of appearances. Nique appears together, accomplished and secure. It isn't until the second verse that audiences learn that enduring her past is what gave Nique thick skin and the ability to overcome some significant obstacles. Getting below the surface of appearance takes listeners into her father's drug addiction and her feelings of abandonment, as well as the pain of watching her mother live the struggles of single motherhood. The lyrics are direct and poignant; the weight comes through the baseline and her flow. One can feel the raw emotion shining through each beat, bar and rhyme. It contains the seeds of contradictory affect. On the one hand the music makes a body bounce; yet the lyrics takes listeners up and down a spectrum of struggle, strength and success.

Vocalizing vulnerability

While the rappers in our study commonly adopt critical stances, there are additional layers to their rhymes that complicate their identities. In fact, they demonstrate complexity that goes beyond the description of 'sistas with attitudes' that Keyes (2000) and Rabaka (2012) mobilise. Going back to Insite the Riot's comment about her verse on 'Skin deep' and the other conversations we've had with these artists, it is significant that for these artists part of presenting a strong self includes sharing moments of doubt and vulnerability – expressions we do not often hear from women in hip hop and that the conventions of the commercial industry do not invite them to share. Speaking about the production of 'Skin deep', Mahogany Jones's producer, IronicLee contends,

Being a son, a brother, husband and father, I saw the importance of this project. When Mahogany came up with the idea I was on board from the start. Once I had the vision it was easy to find the right production and artists to assist with the process. These issues are frequently experienced and seldom dealt with or even expressed artistically. (Personal communication, 16 November 2015)

It is striking that male rappers such as Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole are praised for exposing their insecurities. However, as IronicLee asserts, women rarely express these ideas artistically but women outside the commercial market are willing to take more risks. Nique Love Rhodes' autobiographical track '5.20.88' is impactful because she discloses the hardships she faced growing up with a drug-addicted father and struggling single black mother.

Like Nique, Insite also goes to that place where the personal becomes political. Commenting on her decision to get personal on 'It's over' – a track about failed romantic relationships – Insite shared,

What was communicated to me and channeled to me is that my best art will come out when you're vulnerable. All of that stuff has always come out. I write poetry and stuff and that's the stuff I don't usually share, but I recognise that people can connect to that in a way they may not be able to with other things.

The first verse and refrain most acutely capture the vulnerability that Insite discloses on the track. It begins dramatically with horns playing melodic sustained high notes that dominate the song's texture. Drums and bass provide the backdrop. An unknown sample of a woman's voice singing 'It's over baby, over. It's over baby,' in an R&B style adds another layer of musical meaning. The horns cut out as Insite begins to rap,

Can smell the plasma on my sleeve from when my heart bleeds
 You interpret what I'm feelin' like the art piece
 But since art speaks I hope your spirit has ears
 Bloodied emotions see I'm tryin' to fight back tears
 I am a light sphere, darkness clashes with my fashion
 And in the past I have confused love with an orgasm
 Thus I've endured patterns of weavin' my own web
 Then act deceptively surprised by the spider's legs
 The question still begs, but I answer not
 I see my skillet, know the color of your kettle pot
 Planting seeds in the soil of a barren lot
 Allergic to my solitude, and anaphalactic shock

Needle marks from the epipen
 Hey, if life must give me lemons I pray that they be organic then
 With an agave blend, vitamixer spin
 If this is a production of life's lessons I must channel in
 (Chorus)
 Shall we forever be?
 But you a memory
 Even though you gone you're part of my history
 Shall we forever grow?
 Sometimes you never know
 What you left for my spirit, I gotta let you go

In subtle metaphors Insite likens bad relationships to a sick body, epileptic and allergic to repeated mistakes. 'It's over' not only demonstrate openness but also the maturity, growth and wisdom that can come with self-reflection; it also articulates darkness and how it can be overcome. It takes strength to reflect on failed relationships and to use these experiences as opportunities to learn about ourselves in the process as we move forward. When we asked Insite what motivated her to share these experiences publicly she explained, 'I wanted to look behind the curtain a little bit; I wanted to have fun. I wanted to just touch on some things that folks can relate to ... folks can relate to having a tough time in relationships'.

Insite is not alone as she pulls the curtain back and makes visible the challenges and rewards that come with not only managing relationships, but also life as a black woman and hip hop emcee in post-industrial, post-bankruptcy Detroit. All three of the artists whose work we analyse here offer lessons about relationship building. Whether they address abuse, misogyny, struggle, racism, drug abuse or poverty, all of their messages lead listeners down a path of relationality. They convey the notion that the self is part of the social. One must begin with the self, before she can empower larger movements. Their music is as dialectical as their ideas about selves in societies.

Musical solutionaries

Past musical movements laid the grounds for daring artists to push boundaries. Rabaka (2012) argues that classic women blues artists merged the spiritual and sexual, personal and political, public and private. Unlike their foremothers, the Foundation artists we examine here do not necessarily couple sexuality and spirituality. Their ideas about sexuality are tied to their sense of self-respect and resistance to industry norms that objectify women in hip hop. At one point or another all of them have expressed their disappointment with the representation or lack thereof, of women emcees. While hyper-sexualised, two-dimensional images dominate the representation of black women in the commercial music industry, these images and expectations are also highly visible in some underground scenes. To this extent, while their rhymes may address sexual themes at times they have all consciously chosen to represent their black bodies on stage in ways that do not call attention to their parts but rather keep the focus on their whole beings. Furthermore, the introspective, spiritually and politically motivated music that these artists create presents alternative ways of being. At times, they are explicitly critical of the narrow range of black womanhood presented in popular culture and in other instances they focus on issues such as the environment (Farrugia and Hay 2014), race relations, racialized bodies, poverty and abuse, all the while challenging the hip hop industry and popular culture norms that communicate who black women are and who they should be.

Individual work never stands outside of social relations. That is, while we examine the cultural productions of three, individual emcees, their work is the result of collaborative processes both inside and out of the studio. These artists have built The Foundation as a musical movement and even it does not operate alone but partners with organizers and activists in the Black Lives Matter campaign, urban farming networks and alternative media outlets like the Allied Media Project. Consistent with the post-soul nation that Nelson George (2005) has so eloquently articulated, Foundation artists turn to the realm of culture to advance social causes. Rhymes are their anthems and beats their building blocks for change.

Commenting on the rampant homophobia, materialism and misogyny that dominate commercial rap music and videos, Ruth Nicole Brown (2009) 'wonder[s] what the world would be like if there were more life-affirming images for me and my girls to run into and to play out on a daily basis' (p. 139). We do not have to wonder. These women, in tandem with their fellow artists and the collectives to which they belong, are committed to producing life-affirming messages and images that enable current and future generations to reimagine hip hop and women's roles within it. In the spirit of privileging artists' voices we turn to Mahogany Jones as we conclude:

The whole purpose of the *Pure* project was to evoke conversation, because I feel like in order to get people to shift their paradigm you have to engage the way they think about things. You have to generate conversation. There have to be certain things that spark it more than entertainment things. I think of *Pure* as a movement for which one day I'll be the curator.

Mahogany Jones, Insite The Riot and Nique Love Rhodes articulate three-dimensional representations of African American women – grounding their thoughts, experiences and material reality in Detroit. They wreak havoc on commercial hip hop and mass-mediated representations of black women, reflecting their complexity in ways rarely seen in pop culture. They create important, complex

narratives that allow audiences to 'pull back the curtain' and understand who they are. Along the way, as they tap into their intuition, experiences and introspective reflections; they illuminate the ways in which socially conscious rap music can be used to construct dialogue rather than dystopia, community rather than commodification. Their work opens up a new kind of musical movement where women are agents and creative solutionaries.

The music of Insite the Riot, Mahogany Jones and Nique Love Rhodes addresses more than individual problems. Collectively, with women at the forefront, their music raises the intellectual bar of contemporary rap as it calls attention to complex, systematic issues, the examination of which is long overdue. They traverse the limited, controlling images – frozen frames – and sexual scripts that shape the literature focused on women in hip hop. A frame does not move; if anything it freezes one's agency. Insite, Mahogany and Nique offer alternative subject positions and depth that invites the study of subjectivity rather than image and tired scripts. They wreck the field of what is known, even forging beyond the Queen Mother, Sista with an Attitude and the Fly Girl; they have fluid sensibilities about womanhood, refuse to be reduced to exposed, objectified bodies, and bring spirituality and vulnerability to the table as forces of political power. They gift hip hop heads with funky beats and industry-standard poetics all the while producing culture that defies what is as yet known.

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