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Book Review: Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere

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Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere. Gwendolyn D. Pough. 2004. Boston: Northeastern University Press. 265 pp. (photographs and index included). \$US 21.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Matthew W. Hughey¹

Most women rappers did not begin a career in hip-hop because they envisioned themselves as feminist warriors. Rather, many of those women consciously distanced themselves from even the perception that they might be feminist. Besides a basic desire for self-expression, most female rappers appear to be driven by the same thing that drives most male rappers – the wish to demonstrate lyrical prowess, the desire to control audience responses, and the impulse to translate the cultural capital of urbanite street sophistication into tangible economic rewards.

However, that attempt to be like “one of the boys” and boys’ resistance to such inclusion, actually resulted in a specifically feminist ideology. From the earliest generation of hip-hop aficionados, boys and men in every aspect of hip-hop’s “four elements” (graffiti, break-dancing, MC’ing and DJ’ing) proved rather obstinate in their unwillingness to share with their female counterparts. Thus, the first commercially female hip-hop stars broke into the industry by directly responding to their male peers through polemical lyrics. Now decades after the recording of Roxanne Shante’s “Roxanne’s Revenge” and Salt & Pepa’s “Showstopper,” women hip-hop artists, especially rappers, are still struggling with full inclusion in the genre.

Gwendolyn Pough’s work *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* continues in the tradition of earlier scholarship like Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994) George’s *Hip-Hop America* (1999) and Dyson’s *Holler If You Hear Me: In Search of Tupac Shakur* (1999) and *From God to Gangsta Rap* (1995). Yet, Pough transcends this tradition by noting that “Much of the work currently being done by Black feminists and feminists on rap focuses on the sexism and misogyny of Black men rappers...the work of women rappers is being ignored.” It is this tendency to ignore the narratives of women in hip-hop that Pough challenges. Citing a passage from George’s *Hip-Hop America* in which he wrote that hip-hop produced “no Bessie Smith, no Billie Holiday, no Aretha Franklin” and that if no “female artists had ever made a record, hip-hop’s development would have been no different.” Using this passage as inspiration for the book, Pough writes, “Those words have troubled me for some time, and I see this project as a way to correct these kinds of misguided statements. Hip-hop may be a uniquely testosterone-filled space, but to say that women have not contributed significantly to its development is false.”

Pough’s text is composed of seven chapters. Each chapter is a different inquisition of women’s role in hip-hop. Chapter one begins by comparing notions of the public sphere as defined by Jürgen Habermas with that of various theorists of black public culture in order to understand how intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality further complicate understandings of the public sphere. Pough argues that

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because of the racialized aspects of U.S. history (spectacles, modes of representation, and the public/private or frontstage/backstage split of black culture) the general theory of the public sphere must be rethought to account for the production and consumption of racial meanings. Chapter two follows in this line of thought by tracing the history of black female participation in the public sphere.

Chapter three examines the role of black women in hip-hop. Specifically, Pough expounds on the concept of “wreck” as advanced in her title. Though this hip-hop inspired linguistic device, Pough means to theorize the ways in which black women’s presence and rhetoric in hip-hop cultures wrecks or disrupts dominant masculine discourses. Chapter four thus builds on the female coming of age in hip-hop by probing the implications of women telling their own stories via rap music through mapping black female participation onto the tradition of black female autobiography in the U.S.

Chapter five develops a deeper inquisition of black female hip-hop representation through an examination of the trope of the inner-city, hip-hop acquainted, young black female she dubs the “ghetto girl.” Specifically probing the recurrence of this trope in American literature and cinema as a means of representational caricature for the essentialized ‘grit’ of the black inner city, Pough problematizes the dominance of this iconography for its real life usage among young black girls. In chapter six, Pough directly challenges black feminism’s general dismissal of hip-hop as musical misogyny and then advances how hip-hop can be an effective disruption of patriarchy.

The final chapter examines how the black female presence in hip-hop can be used as a pedagogical device. Of note in this chapter is Pough’s dabbling with postmodern theory and third wave feminism. Pough questions hip-hop’s critics and their “answer” that hip-hop should provide more “positive images.” In her use of postmodern feminism, Pough discussed how representations of black femininity have often been cast into simplistic binary oppositions of a positive/negative, good/bad scope that privileges dominant ideology *vis-à-vis* white masculine aesthetics and normative discursive frameworks. The black female hip-hop artist is thus seen as grappling with a postmodern crisis of identity—the tension between a quest for white male approval and the push to move past internalized racism and sexism and feelings of inferiority.

Overall, Pough links the ignoring and silencing of black women’s voices in hip-hop to larger societal issues: “Black women’s speech and expressive culture have been limited in the public sphere due in part to circumstances...such as maintaining community, promoting Black manhood at the expense of Black womanhood, and constantly vindicating Black womanhood against misrepresentation.” Pough adds that black women’s voices have also been “limited because the places in which they have been allowed to thrive have been devalued.” However, Pough also chides the feminist movement for its failure to take seriously the voices of black women in hip-hop. “Black feminism needs to be accountable to young Black women, saving their lives and widening their worldview and the choices they feel they can make... In order to accomplish this – in order to reach young Black women – feminism needs to come down from its ivory tower. Young black women, like it or not, are getting their life lessons from rap music.” Perhaps it is because the world that hip-hop occupies and mirrors is one that is so loud and irritating to older white sensibilities, that many have tuned it, and its answers, out. Pough outlines that such an approach is both scholastically and morally

irresponsible and reprehensible, and she advances a theoretically sophisticated yet accessible text that poses pragmatic alternatives.

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