

Killing Me Softly or on the Miseducation of (Love and) Hip Hop: A Blackgirl Autoethnography

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Robin M. Boylorn¹

Abstract

In this bluesy poetic prose, the author engages poetry, personal narrative, and performance to reflect on how hip hop served as a soundtrack for her transition to womanhood in the rural south. She uses lyrics from *Killing Me Softly* (originated by Roberta Flack in the 70s and repopularized by The Fugees in 1996) and other songs from the 90s to tell stories about growing up, love, loss, depression, and abuse situated within her race, culture, sex, and social class. She muses how the cadences of sound and the words of songs helped her become a writer and feminist. She also reflects on how her formal and informal education has informed and been informed by her relationship to hip hop, which at times has fluctuated from fixation to disillusionment.

Keywords

hip hop, autoethnography, black feminism, identity, narrative

“We need a voice like our music—one that samples and layers many voices, injects its sensibilities into the old and flips it into something new, provocative, and powerful.”

Joan Morgan (1999, p. 62)

Intro (On Hip Hop and Feminism)

In this essay, I chronicle and examine 90’s hip hop and R&B artists and songs that influenced my coming of age narrative and introduction to feminism. While my hip hop and R&B repertoire included male artists, I concentrate on black women’s artistry that had a direct or ongoing influence on my life as a blackgirl and my transition into grown womanhood. Layering poetry, song lyrics, memories, and reflections alongside hip hop feminist scholarship, I discuss the intellectual, spiritual, and emotional implications of the genre on the formation of my feminism and self-concept. I also reflect on what I learned from the soundtrack of my childhood and how it both challenged and clarified what I know about being a blackgirl.

When Joan Morgan (1999) coined the term *hip-hop feminist* she did so in a climate that found the two terms indiscriminately incompatible. Unwilling to relinquish her love-hate relationship to hip-hop and feminism, she wrote about her allegiance to both, demanding and creating a space that allowed both to breathe. Morgan sought

a feminism that would allow [her] to explore who we are as women—not victims. One that claimed the powerful richness and delicious complexities inherent in being black girls now—sistas of the post-Civil Rights, post-feminist, post soul, hip-hop generation. (pp. 56-57)

In reaction to Morgan’s call, academics began to define and include hip hop feminism in their scholarship and pedagogy (Clay, 2008; Durham, 2007; Lindsey, 2015; Peoples, 2008; Pough, 2004), particularly in their work with young black girls (Brown, 2009; Love, 2012; Taaffe, 2015). For example, Pough’s theorization of “bringing wreck” speaks to the resistance and negotiation black women make with the problematic practices of hip hop to gain visibility and space in the public sphere (Lindsey, 2015; Pough, 2004). Despite the often restrictive and masculine-occupied spaces of hip hop, black feminists refuse to relinquish their complicated relationship (Day, 2009) and engage hip hop in their personal, private and political lives (see Cooper, Morris & Boylorn, forthcoming). Grounded in Morgan’s phraseology, Durham (2007) broadly defines hip hop feminism as

a cultural, intellectual, and political movement grounded in the situated knowledge of women of color from the post-civil rights or hip hop generation who recognize culture as a pivotal site for political intervention to challenge, resist, and mobilize collectives to dismantle systems of exploitation. (pp. 305-306)

Furthermore, Brown (2009) defines hip-hop feminist pedagogy as

a space created to employ ways of being, knowing, and questions that are unique (though not exclusive) to our

¹University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, USA

Corresponding Author:

Robin M. Boylorn, Department of Communication Studies, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, USA.
Email: rboylorn@ua.edu

generation's experiences about what it means to be and grow in-between the intersections of race, class, gender, age, and sexuality as mediated by hip-hop, feminism, and education. (pp. 139-40)

In her primer on the foundations of hip hop feminism, Peoples (2008) understands hip hop feminists to be

writers and activists . . . [who] . . . engag[e] 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. (p. 29)

While I self-define as a hip hop feminist, I also identify as an autoethnographer. I see my role as an autoethnographic storyteller to be similar, if not identical, to that of a hip hop feminist and in some ways hip hop artists. As a black feminist, I have the tools to critique hip hop while also participating and living in it, and recognizing its faults while celebrating its strengths (Cooper, Morris & Boylorn, forthcoming; Durham, 2014; Durham, Cooper & Morris, 2013; Love, 2012; Morgan, 1999; Pough, Richardson, Raimist & Durham, 2007). Not many black women in hip hop have been checking for the f-word, but they recognize hip hop as a vehicle for storytelling and performance, something we could claim ownership of as women who have our own versions and stories to tell (see Durham, 2014).

Despite the traditional focus on black men and masculinity (Dyson, 2007), women in hip hop refused to be denied access or opportunity to tell their own stories (McBride, 2015). Although some female artists in hip hop adopted masculine performance scripts (Pough, 2004), in the 1990s, they also began to use their femininity to genderfuck our notions of hip hop. Suddenly, women were talking back to men, speaking up for ourselves, and demanding a place at the table. This version of womanhood, consistent with the matriarchal community I was being reared in, helped me see and conceive of women in hip hop as existing outside the desires and whims of men. Female emcees were bearing witness to their own experiences and flipping the script on the misogyny of the culture. Every crew had a leading lady (Mia X was a No Limit Soldier, Eve was a Ruff Ryder, Foxy Brown was with The Firm, Li'l Kim was with Junior Mafia, Remy Ma was with Terror Squad) and she held her own and held it down (Lindsey, 2016). Suddenly, hip hop was like a clarion call to me as a blackgirl and aspiring writer, teaching me the possibilities of what it might mean to be a grown black woman (in hip hop culture).

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1992. The year I started high school. TLC (Ooooooh on the TLC Tip) and Mary J. Blige (What's the 411?) are for me what Salt n' Pepa, MC Lyte and Queen Latifah had been for my older cousins. Vocal, no-nonsense and brave. TLC's colorful, baggy, condom-decorated clothes and pop lyrics over a Def Jam beat offered songs like "Ain't 2 Proud to Beg" and "What About Your Friends?" From sexual

liberation I had not yet experienced to the backstabbing of fairweather friends, their songs told the blackgirl coming of age stories of the 90s.

On What's the 411, Mary J. Blige's back and forth banter with Grand Puba taught me what to say if and when a man would inevitably step to me disrespectfully. I knew all the words by heart.

*Yeah nigga, what makes ya different from the next nigga?
Seen ya last week and ya couldn't even speak
Ya try ta play like Mr. All of that
But now ya wanna come to me with some chitchat?
I don't have no time for no wam bam thank you ma'am
Gas me up, get me drunk and hit the skins and scam
The same ol shit you pulled last week on Pam
I'm not havin that, no I'm not havin that
Ya gotta do a lot more and that's just how it be
I'm Mary Blige and you just ain't runnin up in me
I need a man whose lookin out with some security
So come correct with some respect and THEN we will see
So if you wit it then drop the 7 digits
And I might just give you a call
If you ain't wit it then don't waste your time at all
So what's the 411 hun?!*

*

In **1994**, I played Da Brat's *Funkdafied* every day on the way to and from school. I wore my hair in a wrap with the part down the middle and sagged my pants just below my hipbone like Aaliyah. You couldn't tell me shit.

*

In the fall of **1996**, the following cassette tapes were in heavy rotation in my Walkman and stereo, Lil Kim's *Hard Core*, Mary J. Blige's *My Life*, Foxy Brown's *Ill Na Na*, and The Fugees's *The Score*.

*

In **1998**, Lauryn Hill's masterpiece, *The Miseducation*, haunted me with her heartbreak and genius, singing about love, faith, betrayal, and motherhood, directing me to global issues (McBride, 2015).

*

In **2000**, Jill Scott's newly released album, *Who is Jill Scott?* and Erykah Badu's second album, *Mama's Gun*, made hip hop sound soulful and bluesy. I became all of a sudden conscious (or as Badu would say, "woke"), and started writing poems again.

*

Back to **1996**, the year I graduated from high school

*Strumming my pain with his fingers
Singing my life with his words
Killing me softly with his song*

*Killing me softly, with his song
Telling my whole life, with his words, killing me softly
With his song²*

The exegesis of the lyrics for Killing Me Softly (Gannon, 1997) is not widely known. The song was written by Charles Fox and Norman Gimbel, and popularized by Roberta Flack in the early '70s. My introduction to the song happened during my senior year of high school. I was unaware and uninterested in the song's history, but was compelled and intrigued by the song's words. In 1996, I was less self-conscious than I had been in my early teens, but still insecure. I had learned to temper my emotions, disguise my depression, and smile when I wanted to cry, a skill I mastered from years of being teased and taunted in school. Lauryn Hill's melodic contralto on the track lulled me out of complacency and made me pay attention to the lyrics. Although I didn't know who the song was about, I understood what the song was about, the ways in which music as an art form can capture our desires and secrets and then tell them out loud, while you shrink in the corner, hoping not to be exposed or seen.

In an effort to be a "good girl" I had absorbed the unspoken expectations to be seen and not heard, to disappear in public, resist visibility, and wait to be chosen or called on to speak. Hip hop, the center of my fascination, seeped in blackgirlhood, rebellion and representation refused to be silenced or ashamed. It stood in the spotlight and demanded to be seen, heard, and reckoned with. It took up space and unapologetically replenished itself on the strength of words, of truth, and metaphorical murder. As Lauryn sang about succumbing to the words of a songwriter, I was learning how to creatively craft prose on the page.

Largely populated by men, the genre of hip hop had always had women emcees, but in 1996, there was a chorus of us (Lindsey, 2016).

And I locked myself in my mama's bedroom, headphones on, bumping parentally advised explicit lyrics about falling in and out of love, demanding respect and freedom, and getting my *pussy eaten by buffoons while I watched cartoons*³ before I really understood what any of that meant or had the audacity or urgency to expect or desire it.

I was sacrificially seduced by hip hop, and the black women who looked like me and were telling me I deserved to be all of who I was, and that while most hip hop was hard and hardened, misogynistic and manly, I could adopt a piece of it for myself, find myself, and express myself. *Because I don't need a man's wealth, but I can do bad by my damn self.*⁴

The lyrics demanded respect, good sex, and security, while expressing self-love, independence, and confidence. These women weren't needy or clingy, they were clear about how they deserved to be treated and were disinterested in settling (down).

*No more waitin to exhale, we takin deep breaths
Ladies, take this over, I be Fox, so peep this*

*Love thyself with no one above thee
Cause ain't nobody gon' love me like me
If he, don't do the right thing like Spike Lee
Bye bye, wifey, make him lose his Nikes⁵*

1998, the year I was no longer a teenager

As a teenager in rural North Carolina not much music was reflecting my everyday existence or experience down unpaved dirt roads and oblivion. However, music was my salvation, capturing my attention and emotions as I navigated my way through girlhood to adulthood, negotiating my race and sex identity alongside fear, shame, and low self-worth.

It wasn't the blues that told my blues, but rather 90s hip hop, a version of which feels old-school, throwback, or decidedly outdated in the 21st century, but whose hooks and beats told versions of my truths and stories I buried deep down in diaries. Somewhere between blues and baritones I escaped depression with fantasies of grandeur and acceptance, I pretended that I was

*a queen (bitch) supreme bitch killa nigga for my nigga
by any means bitch⁶
and in control like Janet, dammit⁷*

but that was all a ruse, a performance I pulled off behind closed doors

where I practiced but never "made perfect"

Hip hop sistas spat braggadocio I didn't have the nerve to display in public, I spoke

in whispers, mouth mouthing so that only I could hear

mouth moving so that trembling lips were never visible from a distance

I started and stopped the cassette tape a hundred times to write down lyrics and memorize them, reciting the words like I wrote them, retelling the stories like I lived them.

I knew what heartbreak felt like but I didn't know what being a bad bitch was

Because at the time all bitches were bad

telling their stories, their lives, like they were mine, and they were. I was too young and unsure of myself, I was too insecure, to naïve, too scared of myself to be myself.

But I still had moments of resonance. When I was on the verge of womanhood, and desperate for an expression and voice that felt like me, I used the words and voices of black women artists to find myself and reckon with my consciousness, to be a play play version of myself that was badass and brilliant, desired and desirable, fearless and fuckable. I was a wordsmith,

Like me, the language of my life, hip hop was easily manipulated and misunderstood

While my church girl image was muted, I laid lips on lyrics on blue lines of white paper expressing my fear, joy, pain, and fakeassness

Because tear-stained pages in my notebook was not what was up

And there were only so many ways and words you could use to say the same old song over and over again

Blackgirl falls in love with an asshole.

Asshole lies.

Asshole cheats.

Asshole captures every ounce of esteem and destroys it.

Asshole gives you weed for free because you find it damn near impossible to be mad and high at the same damn time, and he keeps you supplied so he can keep you from leaving. From even seeing the door. And hip hop made it cool to be a down ass chick even when he threatened to put you six feet under, but being down all the time was also not what was up

And like a friend who slaps you awake after a deep sleep
You listen to the words,

*Men who lack conscience will even lie to themselves*⁷

And finally walk out the door.

2000, I graduated from college

The man of my blackgirl dreams walked into Spanish class speaking English

And before I knew his name, I had decided what we would call our children

He felt out of my league but I couldn't get the thought of his lips touching my lips out of my mind

He gave me my first orgasm, my first slow, intentional, take your time like you got time kiss

But he never held my hands

In public

Only in my dorm room when my legs were wrapped around his waist

I felt Dizzy, Sonya, Heaven and Miles between my thighs

Better than love, we made delicious

He me had, had me he

He had me tongue tied

*I could hear his rhythm in my thoughts*⁹

Like any other novice lover I was convinced that my sex was the end all to be all

I was so caught up in playing the part and making plans
That I missed the signs

Now me non-clairvoyant and in love

*Made the coochie easy and the obvious invisible*¹⁰

The obvious being the other woman he was seeing

And I blamed myself for not being experienced, or mysterious, or enough of a freak

I was too shy and insecure to take off all my clothes to have sex, or my socks

And I would have just as soon died as to have said pussy out loud (or in my mind)

I wasn't so much a prude as I was a might-as-well-be-virgin,

Inexperienced, too afraid to ask for what I liked or know what I wanted

It didn't take long for me to become convinced that sex was for white girls, and as a blackgirl I was relegated to fucking

Face down ass up

With no kisses or caresses

no whispered I love yous

Even an in the moment

Slow jam to slow grind

cottdamn lie

The promises, unspoken, and the hurt from that heartbreak made me feel insane

I cried for months waiting on him to love me

I saved myself for seven years waiting on him to come back to me

*"Been such a long time, I forgot that I was fine . . ."*¹¹

And then the words reverberated like an echo

"I guess nobody ever told you,

*All you must hold onto, is you . . ."*¹²

This wasn't my older cousin's hip hop, or my mama's gospel, or my grandmama's blues.

This female-centered hip hop was a soundtrack to my as yet lived life

With the promise that if you drop some fresh lines on a dope beat

Anything could be beautiful, even, or especially pain

The songs of my teenage angst and early twenties anxiety, of insecurity and independence, of trying to figure out how to be a good woman when men was acting like was no such thing as one

I was searching for my identity and using music to trace the possibilities of what it (might) mean to be a black woman and enough. The soundtrack to my coming of age was a group of black women, around my age, who were writing and performing their way around issues of injustice, inequality, hustle, and heartbreak. And love. And sex. And possibility. In their lyrics, I learned an empowered, intellectual, spiritual, and political perspective that led to what I now know and understand to be my hip hop feminism. Although none of these women were claiming to be black feminists or autoethnographers, their songs were a backdrop not only of my becoming a woman but also of my becoming a black feminist (Durham et al., 2013; Peoples, 2008) and a writer.

Outro (All Around The World Same Song)

To let the men tell it black women's worth was tangential and based on their relationship to black men

To let the men tell it they were the only ones doing real hip hop, the only ones anyone was really listening to

As much as I was enamored with the storytelling of black male artists, and as much as I was sometimes intrigued by the lovehate love that fell from the lips of black men who seemingly didn't know what to do with love, especially romantically and with black women, I have a decades-worth of ballads, beats, and rhymes from black women artists talking back to misogyny and teaching me how to recover, how to love, how to forgive, and how to survive. Their songs were lessons that taught me how to speak back to myself and to the misconceptions about black women's lived experience that claimed our pain was not palpable, that the lies and myths told about us, was us.

Self-definition was followed by recognition, and I listened for the ways black women artists were speaking to me in their lyrics, and perhaps talking to themselves as well. Hip hop in the 90s was the soundtrack to life lessons that taught me how to be a feminist. I fell in and out of love with hip hop then and even now it comes and goes like an on again, off again lover. I rationalize our relationship because we grew up together, shared our love like folded notes passed back and forth under classroom desks. Hip hop was my parallel mis/education, my love language, my platform, 4 or 8 bars of a hot beat leading to my rehearsed verse pretending to be a worthwhile freestyle. There is something deeply personal and vulnerable about learning to love (yourself) and then loving (hip hop) again.

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Notes

1. Lyrics from Killing Me Softly, as performed by Lauryn Hill for The Fugees
2. Lyrics taken from Queen Bitch by Lil Kim
3. Lyrics taken from Ill Na Na by Foxy Brown
4. Lyrics taken from Ill Na Na by Foxy Brown
5. Lyrics taken from Queen Bitch by Lil Kim
6. Lyrics taken from Funkdafied by Da Brat
7. Lyrics taken from Forgive Them Father by Lauryn Hill
8. Lyrics taken from Love Rain by Jill Scott
9. Lyrics taken from Love Rain by Jill Scott
10. Lyrics taken from Kiss Me on My Neck by Erykah Badu
11. Lyrics taken from Bag Lady by Erykah Badu

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Author Biography

Robin M. Boylorn is associate professor of interpersonal and intercultural communication at the University of Alabama. Her research centers the lived and storied experiences of black women.