Ruth Nicole Brown and Chamara Jewel Kwakye
(eds), *Wish to Live: The Hip-hop Feminism Pedagogy Reader*

New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012, 296 pages

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- 1 More than ten years after *No Child Left Behind*, the flagship aid program for disadvantaged students, the United States is still being left behind, academic performance-wise. According to a 2009 report, out of 34 countries, the United States ranks 14th in reading, with almost 70% of its eighth graders lacking proficiency.¹ The glaring dropout crisis points to the urgency of re-engaging students with learning, and a new wave of educators and cultural workers, influenced by hip-hop culture, technology, and globalization, has emerged in recent years and reassessed teaching methods and pedagogy.
- 2 Aiming to disseminate hip-hop educational practices and to dispute the bias that hip-hop culture is not an appropriate medium through which to engage youth in learning, *Wish to Live: The Hip Hop Feminism Pedagogy Reader* provides essays, poems, scholarly papers, and performances to effectively incorporate hip-hop culture into current educational practice. In contrast with the vast majority of hip-hop education courses and programs that are meant to serve youth, especially in low-income, marginalized, and chronically violent communities, the authors of this reader, Ruth Nicole Brown and Chamara Jewel Kwakye, offer a “*new jack*” (p.xi) feminist agenda and explore hip-hop through a critical feminist lens.
- 3 Their book, which blends hip-hop pedagogy, gender analysis and LGBT studies, presents diverse, inter-generational and multi-dimensional hip-hop pedagogies. The contributors are varied, from women working within the hip-hop sphere to on-the-ground hip-hop feminists, alongside activists, students, writers, and scholars. Drawing on scholarship from Women's studies, African American studies, and education, *Wish To Live* joins poetry, autobiographical vignettes and observations into a wholehearted celebration of black girlhood and womanhood in a context of hip-hop feminism and critical pedagogy.
- 4 As a Reader, *Wish to Live* is primarily a book for instruction and practice. It argues that hip-hop, given its importance and aura in the lives of youth, has great potential to influence their educational experiences and provides instances of how it can be used as a critical and culturally relevant pedagogical tool. It is divided into five parts (1: Miseducation; 2: Justice; 3: Performance; 4: People; 5: SOLHOT). The first part, *Miseducation*, lays the foundation for the rest of the Reader. Consisting of five chapters, it presents and promotes a feminist agenda from a black hip-hop perspective and passionately illustrates, through inspirational essays (chapter 1) or spoken word performances (chapter 2) why the celebration of black girlhood and womanhood is to be considered essential. Just as importantly, it highlights the necessity for the recognition of present female and queer voices in hip-hop (chapter 3), rejecting

negative stereotypes and counterhegemonic discourse against what Ruth Nicole Brown referred to as “hip-hop porn” in her 2009 book *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Pedagogy*.²

- 5 Part two of the book, entitled *Justice*, starts with an essay which documents and identifies the harsh realities black girls face as a result of sexual terror (chapter 6). Chapter 7, in my opinion the book’s best researched and most interesting entry, examines a biased justice system where blacks are inherently criminal and brings to light its chronic criminalization of the black body (male and female). Part two also includes a study of social mobility and class tensions within the black population and provides, through the social trajectory of its author - a scholar/ dancer -, a thought-provoking illustration of cultural hierarchies (ballet versus African dance....) (chapter 9). This part ends with an essay on pedagogy that advocates a fluid and interactive relationship between students and teachers (chapter 10).
- 6 Part three, *Performance*, includes a spoken word performance about the commodification of the black female body (Chapter 11), an empowering play and dialogue for black women (Chapter 12), and a film project around the concept of the cypher as a space of hip-hop feminist knowledge production (Chapter 13). These performances are followed by inspirational poetry for lonely black girls (Chapter 14) and an essay promoting poetry and theatre to express the complexity of human interactions (Chapter 15).
- 7 Part four, *People*, consists mostly of portraits of hip-hop feminist personalities. Chapter 17, which deals with the appropriation of the term “bitch” as part of the hip-hop feminist discourse raises interesting questions about self-love and the sense of community while chapter 18 to 20 discuss hip-hop feminism in a male-dominated culture and outlines its objectives (using elements of hip-hop culture to transform traditional relationships and beliefs that may be oppressive).
- 8 The last part, SOLHOT (an acronym for Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths) presents practical applications of hip-hop feminism through a collection of texts celebrating black girlhood and womanhood and encourages the building of leadership skills in black girls and women while organizing to alter the relations of power.
- 9 Overall, the goal of this Reader is to highlight the sociopolitical platform of hip-hop feminism and to provide examples of how that platform, through pedagogy, can impact the history and future of black American feminist thought. With critical essays, interviews, personal narratives, poetry, and artwork, it succeeds in complicating understandings of hip-hop as a male-only space. While examining how performances of everyday black girlhood are mediated by popular culture, personal truths, and lived experiences, and how the discussion and critique of these factors can be a great asset in the celebration of black girls, *Wish to Live* also provides several templates to produce scholarship likely to lead to purposeful social action. Finally, it clearly succeeds in repositioning feminist and queer perspectives in hip-hop from the periphery to the center in bringing to light alternative lifestyles that mainstream hip-hop has had a difficult time accepting for anything other than visual stimulation for men in rap videos. Yet, in spite of these qualities, the book fails on several levels.
- 10 The biggest problem one could have with *Wish To Live* is how it occasionally fails to clarify how feminists and women can actively participate in a phallogentric culture that seems to despise them so violently. The term “hip-hop feminism” itself conjures up an enigma. Even though Joan Morgan, in her book *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*:

My life as a Hip Hop Feminist argued that women could in fact be feminists and rap fans at the same time,³ *Wish To Live* reveals some of the possible incongruities hip-hop feminists still have to deal with when loving an art that is reluctant to include them. For example, in chapter 3 Ruth Nicole Brown presents herself as a teacher of hip-hop while rejecting its constitutive elements. Also, while dismissing the use of “bitch” she nevertheless embraces the equally divisive “nigga” (48).

- 11 Moreover, the authors, while underlining the necessity of gender-progressive politics in urban cities often brush over the subject and present hip-hop discourses as responsible for gender politics in urban communities. Yet several sociological and ethnographic studies have revealed the complexities of gender dynamics in the ghetto. Majors and Billson for example, in their book *Cool Pose, The Dilemmas of Black Manhood*, have examined in detail how African American inner-city youths adopt a misogynistic mask of “cool” to defend themselves against the indignities, inequities, and injuries of ghetto life.⁴ This cool pose has been identified and reproved prior to the emergence of rap music, which has certainly conveyed and commodified it, but which cannot reasonably be blamed for it.
- 12 A pluridisciplinary approach could also have helped bring some nuance to the sometimes simplistic and biased arguments presented in the Reader. Oversimplifications can be found in the multiple subjective histories of the hip-hop movement presented in some entries and according to which hip-hop was largely about the self-esteem of the black community and a discussion about societal problems by artists engaged in positive, political and intelligent dialogue about America’s inequality.
- 13 To conclude, although some readers may find it difficult to wrap their heads around the sheer amount of topics covered in various forms, *Wish to Live* welcomingly discusses topics that are often overlooked in the rap scholarship. Instead of being reduced to an anti-misogyny movement or to a rallying cry, it incorporates a women-centric worldview, where the realities of the hip-hop generation’s women are taken into consideration at every turn. For this reason, students and scholars interested in gender and feminist studies will certainly be won over by the efforts of the authors and editors to make it a one-stop shop, while hip-hop scholars at large will find very good up-to-date bibliographies in some of its entries.

NOTES

1. Re-Imagining Teaching and Learning: A Snapshot of Hip-Hop Education <http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/hiphopeducation/Research>
2. Ruth Nicole Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Pedagogy*, NY: Peter Lang, 2009.
3. Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My life as a Hip Hop feminist*, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1999.
4. Richard Majors & Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose, The Dilemmas of Black Manhood*, New York: Lexington Books, 1992.

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