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Towards a Bad Bitches' Pedagogy

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Abstract: In this paper, I present a personal narrative approach, grounded in Connelly and Clandinin's ontological and epistemological stance that "humans are story-telling organisms"¹ to discuss my construction of a uniquely working class Black feminist educator identity. This narrative inquiry is an adapted counter-methodological researcher approach that was born out of an interlinkage of my explorations into the histories of Black women educators, hip hop feminisms, and Higginbotham's respectability politics,² as it is understood in popular cultural terrain, and as the concept contrasts with and complements notions of (dis)respectability. I situate the paper within a critical hip hop feminist framework and access raunch aesthetics' use of the sartorial and performative bad-assedness to understand how I have come to craft a transgressive teacher identity. By embracing a vernacular transgressive archetype of the *bad bitch pedagogue*, I analyze and complicate my own intersectional identity as a working-class Black woman who navigated an adversarial bourgeoisie traditionalist educational system as a teacher, unwed custodial parent, cultural worker and advocate for Black youth.

Keywords: Black feminist pedagogy, narrative approach, black education, black parents, black teachers, educational philosophy, cultural work, teacher identity, counterstory, hip hop pedagogy, critical race feminism in education

I just took a D.N.A. test; turns out I am 100% that bitch!
— "Truth Hurts" Lizzo (by way of Mina Lioness' Tweet)

Bitches. Rats. Hoodrats. Chickenheads. Pigeons. Welfare-Queens. Hood Bitches. The ruination of the Black community. In 2019, a Texas mother arrived to enroll her child in an oversized t-shirt emblazoned with Marilyn Monroe's likeness, a bonnet, and flip-flops. She was promptly asked to leave due to a parent dress code policy instituted by the high school's Black female principal. The officials disregarded the mother's concern for her child that caused her to appear in school in the first place. I can remember being poor. As a young single mother myself, school felt antagonistic. I used to wrap myself in a black curtain, like a lapa, instead of an oversized t-shirt; other times, I would wear fabric from my mother's African Dutch cloth remnants that I would fashion into wrap skirts, dresses, or headwraps. Often, I would grab this fabric and wrap myself in one to do my chores, as was the thing in my bohemian days of the early aughts. One morning, I had to go inside my eldest son's elementary school — it was sudden; I was dropping him off. My car was a busted up 1992 Nissan Maxima, silver, that we named Nisa, that had no power steering fluid (one positive side effect of which was that my biceps were Ms. Olympia level cut). I was summoned into

¹ Connelly and Clandinin 1990.

² Higginbotham 1993.

the school because, at that time, I was a vegan anti-vaxxer, the latter stance I no longer hold, but at that time in rightest Black Nationalist circles, there was and continues to be a deep distrust of government-mandated medical intervention — and I firmly distrusted vaccines, fluoridated water, and “flesh” foods.

Instead of rationally and respectfully discussing why my children had a religious exemption on file, the principal and a peon met me in the hallway. The Black female principal looked me up and down in disgust. My sandals and my bright yellow Gyame symboled fabric around my body seemed vulgar to her. Her Condoleezza Rice style — dull semi-relaxed bob, sensible Naturalizer kitten heels, and dated power suit was in stark contrast to my bohemian braless swag. What felt like an attack on my 23-year-old self began with a stern, “Ms. Ali, we need to talk to you about the meals you requested and your son’s vaccine record [*my child was on Title 1 free lunch and the school had to accommodate his diet, begrudgingly, and the state of Georgia upheld my refusal of vaccines due to a religious exemption, they could not challenge that either*].” Leadership did usher me into an office. The pair pulled me to the side in front of other parents. I was met with sternness and admonishment, which only reinforced my beliefs and further pushed me out of participation in the schoolhouse. I listened to two elders chastise me and imply I was harming my sons, but the state was on my side. My exemption stood. It long stood, even after I course-corrected and had my children vaccinated and abandoned what I now understand were chauvinist far-right beliefs.

I held beliefs antithetical to an aspirational bourgeois, accommodationist ethos that governed Blackness in Atlanta’s suburbs. I was poor, braless, “scantly” dressed, and a young Black single mother (with a quick mathematic calculation, one could determine I had been a teen mother), and I imagined I had stunk to them — not my frankincensed body, but me — the reminder of the Black underclass — the kind Talented Tenth identified Negroes, who ignore later Dubois, believe keeps Black folks back. A drag on the system. The kind Shahrazad said needed a sound open-handed slap on the mouth. I felt I did not belong. My beliefs were alien. My food was alien. My body was alien. Moreover, all this read to me as a problem to be solved. Unwanted. Not a part of. Antagonistic.

Although I was in flip-flops, I was not in box braids, leggings, or any of the other stereotypical trappings of hood aesthetics; I was vermin nonetheless. Something these types desire to eradicate and to extinguish from the collective identity politic — like a pigeon. A rat. A parasite. No, a hoodrat, chickenhead, welfare-queen, hood bitch. A po’ nigga. A single mother on welfare. The albatross around the Black neck of America. I stayed away from the school — to my children’s detriment — but I thought I was helping them. In my young mind, I believed I was not embarrassing them with my alien repulsive young, poor, Black-body, and my raggedy car and thereby making their navigation of elementary school more difficult — I disassociated from public school life.

A year or so after this, I began teaching, in the same predominately Black Georgia county, for two reasons. The first reason was a provisional teaching credential was all I could do with an English degree — so I thought, but the second was because a social justice version of hip hop and Five-Percent Islam, which so governed my work as an emcee, supported my belief that the poor righteous teachers the ‘teachas,’ to borrow from Poor Righteous Teachers (P.R.T. and K.R.S., had a duty to educate the deaf, dumb and blind. Although I have complicated and refined my stances, for example, I do not believe the masses of Black folks are deaf, dumb, or blind; this ethos forced me into public service. I had committed to being approachable and comfortable to students and

parents. I committed to incorporating liberatory frameworks into my practice — I had students reading in 8th grade the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Carter G. Woodson's *The Miseducation of the Negro* and the young-adult novel *Monster*, by Walter Dean Myers — that addressed youth incarceration and unfair sentencing practices. I rejected the cannon for progressive young adult readings. Texts that were not Black authored, such as Spinelli's *Stargirl*, addressed difference and disability; students loved the democratic discussions or “ciphers,” we had in class. Again, I have grown over time, and with more ingestion of more scholarship, I now have a better understanding of power and how it plays out in schools, but I think my early aughts teaching experiences provided some serious food for thought. And to quote my style icon of the era, Erykah Badu, “I have some food in my bag for you. . .since knowledge is infinite, it has fell on me. . .so. . .”

Hip Hop, feminisms and (dis)respectability

I did not know what equity education or a liberatory praxis was at the time — I had not even read Freire, let alone Ladson Billings, but my lived experience as a hip-hopper shaped my pedagogy and praxis. Toni Cade Bambara, in the seminal 1980 Black Feminist anthology *The Black Woman* argued, Black women as theorists and intellectuals, especially cultural workers, are underappreciated in sanctioned artistic and philosophic landscapes. Following Bambara's intellection, I ask: What then is the role of the Black woman artist-educator as reluctant (willing?) public intellectual or Culture Worker, to lean on Black Feminist terminology, and what is the radical potential of her work? What theoretical potential does hip hop possess for analyzing cis-hetero-patriarchal capitalism's effects on the everyday lives of Black women? Rap music, the most noted aspect of hip hop's elements, has justifiably been critiqued for how it upholds materialism, violence, and misogyny. The derogatory language hurled at Black women in lyrics has certainly further contributed to the proliferation of controlling archetypes of Black women. However, hip hop culture can also be a liberatory subaltern culture, even though it is rife with contradictions. Hip hop feminists have made vital contributions to theory building and illuminating the intersections of gender, race, and class within the subculture and the larger society in which it is situated. Such is evinced in by Pough, Richardson, Durham, and Raimist's seminal *Home Girls Make Some Noise!: Hip-Hop Feminism Anthology*, Joan Morgan's *When Chickenheads Come to Roost*, Tricia Rose's *Black Noise*, and more contemporarily, Bettina Love's and the Crunk Feminist Collective's work. An underappreciated aspect of the feminist labor these works provide is the situating of hip-hop culture as a subaltern counterpublic that both challenges and replicates dominant notions of personhood. Hip hop feminists have theorized about the resistive aspects of hip-hop's aesthetic artifacts that poor and working-class hip-hoppers produce in the face of neoliberalism and trickle-down-economics' chokeholds.

On the heels of Cardi B's “W.A.P.”, a licentious celebration of the glory of the feminine anatomy, lay scholars and academicians alike have renewed the hand wringing about Hip-hop's deleterious whore-making effects on young women and girls. While feminists have celebrated her brand of hypersexuality as a rejection of the respectability politics that litter the cultural landscape. Other social media lamenters squabbled, much like they did on my college quad when Trina and Trick Daddy dropped “Nann” in 1998, over ideas including empowered sexuality, the radical potential of porn, sex work, and the whole feminist subject-versus-object debate. What is less interrogated in these conversations is the artist's role as a public intellectual, the Agitprop potential

of any pop culture artifact, and the “illocutionary force” of art and its ability to ignite social conversation.

Sonia Sanchez declares Black folks a “baddD people”; with that phrase, the poet and educator asserts that *bad*, in Black folks’ vernacular, is a synonym for good. Emcees Run D.M.C. further elucidate the poet’s point in the following lines, “not bad meaning bad, but bad meaning good.” Extending that context to contemporary rap, in order to be a *bad bitch*, a woman must, according to Miami rapper Trina, in “The Baddest Bitch,” be “ahead of the game.” Megan Thee Stallion in “B-I-T-C-H” further confirms that a bitch is “on game,” when another person “can’t control me, baby.” In the rap “Lil’ Thot,” rapper Cardi B extends the idea vacillating between the term bitch and *lil’ THOT* (an acronym for That ‘Ho Over There) to affirm further her self-determination, autonomy and ability to recognize and thwart others’ “games,” (or unstated, yet understood and implemented agendas and hustles that conflict with her own). Cardi goes on to employ a motif often accessed by rappers in which she elevates her “hood,” or community and its ways of knowing to craft a “gangsta bitch” identity that privileges her communal self. Invoking this vernacular transgressive archetype of the “bad bitch” to talk about my own intersectional identity as a working-poor queer black single mother teaching black youth who are also poor and working-class in the south, I am engaging in linguistic reappropriation, as feminists and women/femme hip-hoppers before me have, and I am reclaiming the term “bad bitch.” I argue that we embrace a liberatory (“can’t control me baby”) *bad bitch pedagogy* in order to “get ahead” of the “game,” i.e., the whitestream hidden curricula (unstated, yet understood and implemented agendas) that permeates all aspects of American life, certainly from an educational context, and degrades working-class Black American communal ways of knowing. Because black women are progenitors of the culture as well, many women hip-hoppers have done the work around maintaining their voice in an often masculinist subculture. Therefore, hip hop is a fertile space for feminists or womanists to interrogate how race, class, and gender intersect. Thus, a *bad bitch* pedagogue 1) complicates respectability politics, not through affirming par for the course hyper-sexualized performances, but by “gaming” gendered and racialized archetypes that deem poor and working-class women as ratchet and irredeemable, 2) reclaims problematized tropes in her art and praxis via sartorial aspects of those tropes (tattoos, dress, hair, affect, postures) to challenge the “game” or hidden curriculum that pathologizes Black communal funds of knowledge in both formal and informal educative settings; 3) and challenges and exposes hidden curricula, and reshapes them into a liberatory educational project.

The first aspect of the bad bitch pedagogue’s identity complicates respectability politics and accesses it to historicize class struggle for Black women, but is respectability a viable place to start, or would other starting points around identity politics be more suitable to theorize about survival and resistance for Black Women? Poor Black women feel the burden of failing to live up to standards of respectability violently inculcated into their foremothers — this unease and sense of failure is rooted in notions of what constitutes proper acquiescence to the norms of a superimposed dominant central value system. Our armor is forged as part of the violent inculcation of a post-reconstruction era call to reject African savagery and the indignities of enslavement and convert it into reformed personhood. In an essay published in *Dissent*, Harris elucidates how modern respectability politics reflect neoliberal dreams; he argues, “What started as a philosophy promulgated by black elites to ‘uplift the race’ by correcting the ‘bad’ traits of the black poor . . . today’s [Obama era] politics

of respectability, however, commands blacks left behind in post-civil rights America to ‘lift up’ thyself.”³ The post-Civil Rights and Obama eras’ racial language depends on the conviction that since all of the statutory impediments of America’s racialized hegemony have little legal voracity, it is all about deportment. Mikki Kendall’s essay “Parenting While Marginalized” in *Hood Feminisms* perfectly encapsulates how mainstream neoliberals and feminists ignore the lives of poor Black mothers who subsist off inadequate wages and experience housing insecurity.⁴

In the same way, modern-day neoliberal Black apologists have no platform to address the peculiar effects of systemic inequity on Black women, these issues that shape how they parent are also often ignored by mainstream glass ceiling white feminists who do not create platforms to address these issues. Poor Black mothers are instead blamed for their attempts to mitigate their circumstances, such as labor with little social capital or downright illegal, such as sex work. What is also missing from the current conversation around the politics of respectability is how early iterations of these ideas exposed by Negro women and Black temperance organizations are the activism that followed these beliefs about the Black poors’ irascibility; they did not merely admonish and blame them.

Hortense Spillers’ classic “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” illuminates the (un)gendering of Black female flesh through an ‘American grammar,’ or symbolic substitution, that deems the Black female body as innately pathological: “African-American female’s ‘dominance’ and ‘strength’ come to be interpreted by later generations—both black and white, oddly enough—as a ‘pathology,’ as an instrument of castration.”⁵ Such “tangle of pathology” rhetoric is infamously employed in the 1965 report on the Negro family authored by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, which charged black women in the U.S. with inflicting on their communities a matriarchal structure which kept black family life “far out of line with the rest of American society.” Moynihan contended that poor Black women and their refusal to adopt white patriarchal notions emasculated Black men is what relegates Black folks to the permanent underclass and not white supremacy. Thus, loud, crude, promiscuous, Black women, who were contradictions to mythical docile white women, were at fault for the destabilization of Black homes. Ronald Reagan further villainized the welfare queen — a cheat who became rich off the dole of public service roles. Since that time, Black women, particularly Black mothers, have been demonized in popular discourse, and policies have continued to be justified by these stereotypes. What’s most important to schooling in the states is that many homes with children are women-led, and these women are the decision makers of what occurs in schools. These women’s needs, concerns, and hope for their children are often ignored, and schools create policies and environments that further render these women’s concerns moot and, therefore, their children’s wellbeing ignored.

Since Black women’s forced migration to the Western world, our bodies have been legally and socially constructed as “differently gendered,” according to Saidiya Hartman, yet still sexualized sites of public property.⁶ In the aftermath of slavery and even during the Jim Crow era, Black women challenged the extant discourse on Black womanhood as sexualized public property by using their bodies to reimagine the Black female body as a discursive and material space worthy

³ Harris 2014.

⁴ Kendall 2020.

⁵ Spillers 1987: 74.

⁶ Hartman 2019.

of public scrutiny in various ways. For Black women, the bulk of modern public chidings relate to sexual behavior and dress. Cosby, in his “Pound Cake Speech,” regurgitated such admonitions. Dr. Cosby argued all would be well in the hood if sistas were to stop getting pregnant and be “respectable.” The relationship between the politics of respectability, or “respectability politics,” and the sartorial requires a reference to Patricia Hill Collins’s controlling images of the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire.

Although my own experiences as a young English teacher provides the foundation for this writing, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined the term politics of respectability or respectability politics in her seminal work *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. The researcher used the term to describe the Women’s Convention of the National Baptist Convention’s moral activism. Much of these women’s advocacy was rooted in identifying and calling for moral behavior as a spiritual mandate and a political project. Higginbotham contends, “They [women of the Women’s Convention] felt certain that respectable behavior in public would earn their people a measure of esteem from white America, and hence they strove to win the black lower class’ psychological allegiance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual morals.” As if the rejection of Black cultural markers could eradicate the pervasive racial barriers that surrounded Black Americans. Higginbotham also points out underemphasized and less corrective facets to the Women’s Convention’s social justice efforts. They emphasized and agitated for change utilizing petitions, boycotts, and litigious apparatuses through the discourse of respectability, manners, and morals. Ultimately, Higginbotham concludes that the Women’s Convention’s rhetoric combined both a conservative and a radical strand.

Despite access to this pivotal work, a new generation of activists’ and public thinkers’ articulation of respectability politics may have little to do with Higginbotham’s research. Her idea of respectability politics comes from a larger concept that tells a specific narrative about Black women’s lives in a particular historical context and their engagement in the public sphere and their fight for decency, greater freedoms, an end to racial segregation, and greater rights for women. The zeitgeist may have appropriated politics of respectability to mean something Higginbotham did not intend and applied to contexts she did not imagine. I may also be participating in some reframing, but I agree with Higginbotham that the politics of respectability are not divorced from the white supremacist gaze, sexism, or market forces. The phrase has resonated with many young activists who reject the identity politics, conservative rules, and traditional tactics of the church-led movement of the 1960s. Clergymen, who are depicted in the annals of history as the community’s traditional leaders, no longer head the frontlines of the fight for civil rights; they did not really lead the movement then — women activists were written out or wholly underemphasized.

Moreover, many female civil rights activists were not genteel luncheon ladies. We can tell by the iconography: From Fannie Lou Hamer’s emphatic cadence; to the Black women of the early labor and agriculture movements’ temerity; to SNCC’s Joyce Ladner’s overall fierceness; to Gloria Richardson’s (head of the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee) fearlessness when pushing a bayonet aside in her button-down and jeans — our grandmothers’ era activists were not these refined smartly dressed church ladies we imagined them all to be.⁷ Beyond the students, activists, workers, and churchgoers’ stories — the everyday lived experiences of Black folks — echoed in field hollers, jazz, blues, and now hip hop — reveals a vivid panorama of Black American life

⁷ Ford 2015.

replete with hustlers, pimps, whores and general ne'er do wells. The group of ordinary folks outside of waged labor whom Marx determined were the lumpenproletariat — those the Black Panthers thought were best to radicalize.

Higginbotham acknowledges the class tensions this created among Black people themselves. One can argue the Baptist women Higginbotham studied understood that rejection of white middle-class values by poor Blacks was both strategic and resistive, albeit different from their own. Higginbotham acknowledged the fraught tensions between middle-class Black Baptists and working-class black women, who mobilized different strategies and constructed different spaces. Higginbotham's emphasis on the public — the Black church and its public dimensions—does not offer reductive critiques of the women's actions in her study as accommodationists engaged in a mindless mimicry of whiteness. Higginbotham herself constructs the politics of respectability as the complicated, racialized, classed, gendered side of meaning and space-making. A site in and on through which Black women grappled. Overall, many early Black women activists advocated for respectability politics and supported the rules and strictures of traditional middle-class decorum and propriety. Respectability politics then, some argue, come out of an early Black feminist tradition. However, much of its current public usage lacks a feminist or a cross-gendered historical framework.

Today, most proponents of respectability politics do not generally call for petitions, protests, and racial challenges to racism, which were keystones of the Baptist Women's Convention. Both defenses and repugns of respectability politics lack state demands. Instead, defenders rely almost exclusively on the idea that appropriate Black behavior is the key to Black success. While opponents argue acquiescence to it demarks assimilationist co-optation of white supremacist thinking. Respectability politics has the effect of steering the disrespectables away from making demands on the state or ask the state to intervene on their behalf. Instead, if one embraces respectability politics as a political strategy, one bows toward the false belief that rightist decorum and engagement with the market economy will lift them out of their plight. Today's respectability politics acolytes do not adequately tether their politics to any critique of the state or neoliberal racial politics.

Paisley links respect to sexual propriety, behavioral decorum, and neatness and argues respectability serves as a gatekeeping function and establishes a sort of access fee to full citizenship: Respectability was part of 'uplift politics,' and had two audiences: African Americans, who were encouraged to be respectable, and white people, who needed to be shown that African Americans could be respectable. African American women were particularly likely to use respectability and to be judged by it. Moreover, African American women symbolized, even embodied, this concept."⁸

Paisley's feminist reading also parallels Fred Harris' non-gendered racialized argument about the work respectability politics does in the Obama era. Critical Race Feminists (C.R.F.) would add that any discussion of respectability politics is incomplete without an intersectional examination of the legal system's intertwining of global capitalism with gender, race, and class.⁹ Marx's failure to think systematically about gender and race, theorize about the intersections of them, and conceptualize them as significant dimensions of capitalist society has been rectified primarily through Marxist feminist, Black feminist and C.R.F. scholarship. Marx does offer a perspective around the value of labor to the market economy that we can retrofit to interrogate

⁸ Paisley 2003: 212.

⁹ Harris 2014.

respectability politics further as it relates to the monetization of human labor as capital. Because the working classes and the poor often do not have the disposable income to pay for items beyond those necessary for subsistence, they destabilize neoliberalists’ brands of consumer capitalism. This form of capitalism that is a financialized globalizing form of capitalism has hollowed out the living standards of working people, the majority of whom are finding their living standards compromised. In this era, marked by rising inequality and declining economic mobility for many Black Americans, the 21st-century version of the politics of respectability works to sustain illusory meritocratic Black neoliberal flights of fancy when data concerning the egalitarianess of “laissez-faire’s-awesome-let-the-market-sort-it-out” propaganda does not. Black neoliberals continue to frame self-correction as a virtuous strategy to lift the Black poor out of their conditions because, although they cannot control the market, they assuredly can, in the least, ape a white midwestern affect, shine their shoes, shear their ‘fro, and shake out a Brooks Brothers’ suit. Indeed, according to adherents of the post-Black respectability politics paradigm, middle-class values are the pathway to full citizenship for Black people — not legal or political challenges to the behemoth corrupt racist profit-based labor system.

Respectability politics has much less cultural currency in mass media, the real Black mass culture currency is not decorum and manners, the currency of respectability politics, but instead, it is very opposite. Black vernacular culture, an often-expressive culture with vulgar parts like most globally, toys with notions of what is acceptable and unacceptable. To locate these outside-the-usual expressions of racism, but instead in the idea that Black culture is by divine design this inferior deviant cultural Black space that naturally reproduces itself, works for structural-racism deniers. This contention that the culture is itself dysfunctional is exemplified in the predominant Black cultural product nonblack folks consistently consume — music and other creative articulations of Black life and vernacular culture. Early on during the Women’s Convention, there was a bit of consternation about jazz’s and blues’ immorality and how these artforms portrayed Black people negatively. The movement from these earlier iterations of youth culture into hip hop and R&B signifies this thought extension. Rap music is the most recent Black vernacular expression laid on the pyre for debates about urbane behavior or the lack thereof. When rap lyrics are virulently misogynistic or homophobic, as some are, any critique is framed as an admonishment of all Black folks. Indeed, respectability politics has always focused on vernacular style as an indicator of inferiority in everyday life. For Black women specifically, the sartorial is also attacked and attached to sexual excess and perversion. Nonblack consumers’ focus on sex work, and other unsanctioned market economies, grows partly out of an awareness of a relationship to the economic conditions that poor Black communities face; it also is related to U.S. mass media’s obsession with subversive sex born out of puritanical shame. Artists such as Nikki Minaj or Jungle Pussy are fascinating case-studies of those artists who play with notions of sexual excess in lyrics and style despite the efforts of conservative Blacks’, in keeping with puritanical tradition, attempts to shame or hide them. However, as these female artists work, perhaps consciously, to revise dated hypersexual tropes, i.e., the Jezebel or Sapphire, such artists simultaneously reinforce updated ones — the ratchet Black woman.

Although neo-respectables ignore the activist impulse of 20th-century proponents of the politics of respectability, adherents to disrespectability can fail to agitate for meaningful systemic change also. Much of the theorizing around Black disrespectability focuses on normalizing public

performances of what has been deemed “hood” or “ratchet” behavior—A very benign example would be normalizing wearing a bonnet to the grocery store. Mass media culture (think WorldStar Hip hop) is fueled by these failures of Black women to meet the standards of respectability and domesticity. Narratives that highlight Black women’s failures in the domestic sphere, performances of criminality, and sexual excess are the most popular and most profitable. Sure, some of this is a part of vernacular culture, but the marketplace has played a significant role in constraining and redirecting Black vernacular practice to parodic stereotypes of Black female excess and dysfunction. Vernacular culture plays a role, but at the same time, there’s such dramatic consolidation of the representations of Black people around the very stereotypes that have historically been understood by many, succinctly explained by Patricia Hill Collins. Scholars have made this case that there’s been a kind of collapse onto those tropes in the most visible and most profitable Black themed productions — music or reality television. Tricia Rose explains that commercial hip hop creatives failed to consider whether the source of these representations was authentically Black. Few challenged those representations that were not from our imaginations, and fewer still realized the manipulation that the market itself is doing to construct us as consumers of our own expiry. Of course, those Black consumer artifacts that Black artists sell possess vernacular nuances and offer a modicum of truthful representations, but the way that the collapse of the market’s control of Black vernacular practices and the way it works to accommodate neoliberalism has rendered Black women utterly marginal. Behind the sheer curtain, these artists appear as resistant figures, our outlaws, because they reject the constrictors of respectability politics. However, by focusing all our efforts on rejecting respectability politics’ prudishness, we defend artists who traffic in controlling images. Worse, we are unable to articulate any real revolutionary politic.

The generational divide among Black feminists is going on, because respectability politics has become for many our primary framework for resistance. It is much easier to read younger Black artists like Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, Mulatto, and Saweetie as Girl Power post-feminist and “post-raciality” figures.¹⁰ Although they do have feminist aspects, their feminism is mediated through the politics of respectability. Therefore, acts of self-expression that seem freeing may only be resistive in an intracommunal context, but there is no respectability politics governing what happens for Black women’s sexual-racialized performance for mass consumption. While a white woman’s sexual transgressiveness may defy cult of true domesticity white female purity paradigms, a sexualized Black female body does not destabilize the whitestream metanarrative—it actually supports it. Further, what constituted respectable was an intracommunal conversation about the best way to safely move in and out of the white gaze. Black conservatives, who pray to access a mythic meritocracy of white America, and whose incessant moral attack on the Black poor are absent any valuable structural critique, periodically recycle the Black deplorables trope to satisfy their delusion. This idea that an uncouth batch of impudent Blacks holds all Black folks back is vital to neo-respectability politics theory, but it holds no cultural cache for whitestream media consumers and offers no strategy for radical systemic change. On the other hand, those railing against respectability politics fail to access a nuanced intersectional lens regarding Black women’s bodies as capitalist products and sometimes stay stuck in dismantling respectability as their primary vehicle for activism.

Black women artists’ claims at controlling their sexuality could, on the surface, be a political

¹⁰ Nur-Amin 2017.

challenge. However, if hypersexuality is required for access, what makes exposure of a bare Black female body a radical project? Further, since hypersexuality is a prerequisite — that is to say if Young M.A. forgoes her tomboy swag and adopts one that catches the male gaze, would she change her career trajectory, in the same way an artist with a problematic name Mulatto has? Perhaps but M.A. does not have to because her masculinist stance too hypersexualizes Black women — She, then, too, is a tool. The war against respectability politics may have hidden the corrupting influences of mass media’s exaltation of controlling images. The neoliberal effort to privatize and consolidate the popular terrain confuses us as we exponentially consume mass-mediated Black cultural artifacts as though they are counter-cultural and subversive. Adherents to the winds of the market often co-opt the language and sheen of Black radicals of Black feminist, as Beyoncé has with Chimamanda Adichie, but not their activist work.

Scholars have explored the liberatory potential of whore and ratchet aesthetics in popular culture and implore us to understand that, in all cases, Black hyper-sexuality is not acquiescing to dominant notions of Black female debauchery. There is liberation in the erotic. However, because over-sexed vapidly is the price of admission to pop’s marketplace, commodified Black hypersexuality lacks subversiveness. Such performative tropes of Black deviance are indeed a prerequisite for success. The empty Girl-Power liberatory feminism of these artists ignores the everyday freedom work of Black women and in some ways mocks the pleasures of fetish and the erotic. Beyoncé does Afrofuturism-femme shallow without profound articulation about the violence, and the economic discrimination Black women experience. Because of this, I no longer believe in the liberatory potential of mainstream rap and R&B. The nonblack consumer of our Black vernacular artifact is the problem; and as Rosenblatt contends in transactional theory — texts live beyond their creators. Audiences are meaning-makers, and if her theory holds, the audience has made a plum mess of our creative oeuvre and used it to shore up the metanarrative of white cis-heterosexual patriarchal supremacy — not challenge it. Though pop rap has shown itself irredeemable as a bottom-up project, hip hop culture as a whole has liberatory potential. A bad bitch pedagogue can harness this and craft a culturally responsive pedagogy that situates academic knowledge within the lived experiences of the community members they serve and to which they belong. Ladson-Billings describes culturally relevant pedagogy as practice “that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities schools (and other institutions) perpetuate.”¹¹ Similarly, Qualls describes culturally responsive pedagogy as an approach that “recognizes and validates the varied experiences of diverse students.”¹² The ability to develop culturally responsive pedagogies is central to supporting marginalized learners. When educators and change agents enact such pedagogies, interactions with the schoolhouse are more welcoming and affirming for community members.

By engaging in linguistic reappropriation, reclaiming the phrase “bad bitch,” and contextualizing respectability politics, I center a “can’t control me baby” pedagogy that does not rely on mass media mitigated hypersexualized controlling images of women like me; I hope to “get ahead” of the “game” fashioned and mastered by oppressive forces. I had to consider what kind of teacher or school community would have spoken to me and provided me and my children safety

¹¹ Ladson-Billings 1995: 469.

¹² Qualls 1998.

as a working-class single parent with three jobs and as a pregnant student mom and how I could embody that — this starting point informed my decision to theorize what that would look like. Jamilah Lysicott describes oppression as “being trapped in someone else’s narrative with no power of authorship.”¹³ For me, adopting a bad bitch pedagogical perspective allows me to examine the historical terrain of the collective experience of Black women and reclaim and reauthor my own story. This standpoint is a way to look at my own cultural work as it is rooted in the epistemological situatedness of hip hop culture. It follows the trajectory of critical and culturally relevant pedagogies that access and validate Black folks’ cultural assets. I do not take for granted my community’s ways of knowing, nor do I seek to ‘normalize’ every ‘problematic’ aspect of our lives. The naming of myself as a bad bitch is designed to provoke, to remove the sheen — -not to privilege the ratchet freely without interrogation or to simply take the punch out of the word ‘bitch’ (‘bad’ has already enjoyed its semantic change), but to make us uncomfortable about whom we deem disrespectable, ratchet or hood and why we do it. To uncover the reprehensible caste system that chucks poor women and children of color to the margins. So, I named the elephant in the room and unshackled her.

Lamentations around respectability politics are really our shame around the ways in which the Black female body is excoriated and commodified by the wider public sphere. Adherents and detractors alike are masquerading. The “waywardness,” to again invoke Hartman, of poor and working-class women, girls, and femmes is deemed as a rejection of the quasi-religious, dignified and just world that offers meaning and survival for many of those Black folks who MUST accept “the game” is fair. Those Black female principals’ focus on that Texas mom’s t-shirt dress and my Lapa were not uplifting two downtrodden Black womenfolk or providing solutions to the problems both our children were facing. It was their shame informed by a dated delusion that the disresponsible among us keep the collective from progressing, and that they are safe from the worst of the system because they assimilated into it. Those right-acting Black women administrators’ vicarious embarrassment was rooted in powerlessness — powerlessness to face a system that insists that communities and schools in which they inhabit are strangled. It is easier to finger point at the vulnerable than the behemoth of structural racism in which we are inured. Such slights of hand and misdirects do provide a momentary reprieve and feeling of empowerment; but unlike the politics of respectability pushed by the 20th century Baptist Women’s group, neo-respectables’ fixation on the urbane offers no real challenges to the system. They stay trapped in someone else’s narrative — but we can rewrite it.

¹³ Lysicott 2019.

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