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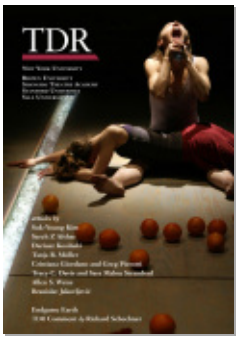
Graffiti Grrlz: Performing Feminism in the Hip Hop Diaspora by Jessica Nydia Pabón-Colón (review)



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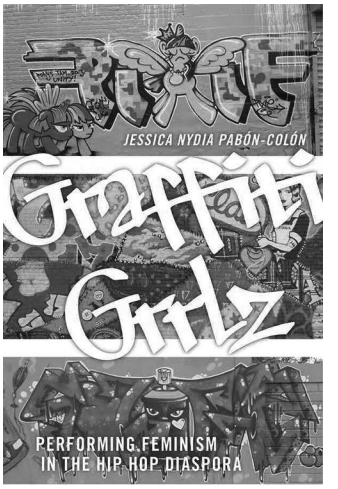
Graffiti Grrlz: Performing Feminism in the Hip Hop Diaspora. By Jessica Nydia Pabón-Colón. New York: New York University Press, 2018; 320 pp.; illustrations. $89.00 cloth, $30.00 paper, e-book available.



In *Graffiti Grrlz: Performing Feminism in the Hip Hop Diaspora*, Jessica Nydia Pabón-Colón argues that women and girls who write graffiti activate a visual call-and-response in hip hop culture as a refusal to be silenced by heterosexism and heteropatriarchy across the globe. She traces the history of women and girls who have participated in the hip hop element of graffiti writing, also known as the act of getting up and over (getting up a tag, piece, or production; and getting one over on the authorities). Pabón-Colón traces the history of women in graffiti back to the late 1970s starting with Lady Pink who began to write graffiti in 1979 and is considered the "godmother" or "first lady" of graffiti (5). While the majority of scholarly works on graffiti writing have centered on male writers, Pabón-Colón intervenes by focusing on the knowledge produced, performed, and shared among women graffiti artists as physical and digital sites of feminist community-making.

Importantly, *Graffiti Grrlz* underscores the significance of self-naming in public space by women and girls in the form of a graffiti tag, throw-up (usually a bubble letter piece designed in one color), piece, or production (a larger piece that is highly stylized and elaborate; sometimes created with a crew of artists) (2). A tag, usually a name done very quickly with one color and one line, claims an ontological and physical presence for women and girls since they are often rendered invisible in public spaces through the capitalist logic of property. The act of selecting one's own name to tag "establish[es] the writer's identity, and writers perform this identity—ideally distinct from their government-issued identification card—repetitively in order to proclaim their presence: I am here" (2). The more elaborate graffiti throw-ups, pieces, and productions operationalize graffiti women writers' knowledge of the art form, through a practice known as "bombing science" (3). It is often assumed only men who write graffiti are skilled in the science of bombing, but this collection of artists and images curated by Pabón-Colón troubles this patriarchal assumption, showing the nuanced and complex skillsets of these women writers.

In order to elevate the work and artistry of women graffiti writers, Pabón-Colón utilizes what she calls a "mashup methodology" that focuses on queer studies and hip hop studies. Working at the intersection of these disciplines, which are already inherently interdisciplinary, Pabón-Colón situates herself as a queer feminist ethnographer conducting interviews with over 100 graffiti women across the globe in 23 geopolitical sites such as Brazil, Mexico, Australia, Chile, and South Africa (27–28). As a result of this methodological framework, the book is poignantly polyvocal, providing many firsthand accounts of experiential knowledge and hip hop culture from women graffiti writers that other published books or volumes on graffiti art have yet to accomplish.

One of Pabón-Colón's theoretical interventions is her detailed assertion of a feminist masculinity, distinct from the ways other gender studies scholars have defined this identity. For instance, one scholar in particular who uses the phrase "feminist masculinity" is bell hooks. However, in *Feminism Is For Everybody* (2000), hooks deploys the term to suggest male-identified people can and should also invest and identify as feminists to move the human condition toward greater liberation. Pabón-Colón's usage of the term differs from hooks's quite significantly; this is an astute move because graffiti writing has been a hip hop element "conventionally and ideologically secured for cisgender male bodies" (43). Pabón-Colón's theoretical intervention is also significant because women graffiti writers face particular forms of degradation such as being

called lesbians/dykes or being accused of sexual activity with male graffiti writers as a path to self-promotion. The feminist masculinity that Pabón-Colón articulates seeks to recognize the performance of their graffiti work as a "constant negotiation" with the complexity of gender variance, gender expression, and is intended for "any *body*" (47). Pabón-Colón argues that graffiti women "exemplify feminist masculinity because they play with the gender binaries influencing our perceptions of color choice, letter style, and embodiment" (47).

Moreover, *Graffiti Grrlz* details the ways in which women graffiti writers collectively and individually work to self-archive their art. Since graffiti art is most often not permanent, Pabón-Colón records how digital archiving has helped to preserve and witness the 21st-century collection of women graffiti writers and their graffiti pieces and productions. She contends:

> digital ups complicate notions of ephemerality because they are not always or "wholly" disappeared, nor are they always or "wholly" remaining. Graffiti art online actuates a different kind of ephemera, one that transgresses normative understandings of presence and materiality, time, and space. (142)

This assertion about ephemerality is further complicated as Pabón-Colón coins and employs the term *transephemera* to more fully explicate the self-archiving of women graffiti writers. Namely, she builds on the work of trans studies scholars such as Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore who have moved toward a more expansive understanding of "trans" where the term signifies not just a gender identity, but a critical crossing of time, space, and material. A critical understanding of trans also extends beyond the historic use of the term where one must *trans*ition into a cisgender body. Pabón-Colón's critical usage of trans centers a multivalent critical crossing that includes time, space, and material, and these are all important aspects of graffiti writing. Thus, transephemeral graffiti writing by women productively destabilizes how, why, and when a graffiti piece or production will be seen.

Graffiti Grrlz introduces readers to a history of women graffiti writers who have not been afforded representation in hip hop studies or feminist studies by foregrounding their own agency and voice. Using a multitude of interviews with women graffiti writers and illustrations of their work, Pabón-Colón presents a compelling argument that these visual works are purposefully incomprehensible to power, often literally unreadable by outsiders, in a generative effort for women to engage in skill sharing, community building, and documentation of their own work on their own terms. This is perhaps best witnessed at the end of the book when Pabón-Colón shares messages from over 40 women graffiti writers of advice to younger girls who aspire to also write graffiti. These letters are a transmission of experiential knowledge from one generation to the next and a means of disrupting heterosexist messages that girls are likely inundated with in regards to their artistic talents, such as girls do not belong in public spaces or do not have the physical strength to get "up and over." The notes from experienced graffiti women artists encourage girls to persist and provide them with a genealogy of other women who have come before them and produced great art.

—Jenell Rae Navarro

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