

**BODILY DICHOTOMIES: PERFORMING REPRESSION AND FREEDOM IN
BRAZILIAN FEMINIST HIP HOP**

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Abstract: This paper highlights the growing feminist hip hop movement in Brazil. While women have always been present in hip hop culture, this article analyzes two contemporary “texts” that illustrate the ways that current artists are using break-dance to combat gender oppression. The July, 2009 Hip Hop Mulher Forum held in São Paulo, Brazil and the 2006 Tata Amaral film *Antônia* provide examples of how contemporary female artists struggle to reconcile the ways that they have been socialized to perform their gender with the freedom that hip hop culture facilitates. This paper presents the “mis-performance” of gender and the possibilities for disciplined artists to improvise within a highly disciplined cultural context and artistic culture.

Keywords: Hip Hop, Feminism, Bodily Repression

In a context where bodies are devalued through homicide, poverty, and plastic surgery, expressions of bodily freedom are extremely powerful. In the wake of a political and social transition, wherein Brazil defended its culture through affirming images of an eroticized female and a competitive male, analyses of disciplined and improvisational bodies are especially relevant. Hip hop culture carries with it the legacy of making space for marginalized and devalued bodies. An art form born of ethnic and musical fusions, diverse histories, and a shared quest for community, b-boys and girls use their bodies to claim physical space and gain a sense of citizenship within oppressive contexts.

The postcolonial context of the Americas is characterized by legacies of slavery and the African diaspora, both of which profoundly influence contemporary culture. Specifically, recent studies of Brazilian culture have focused on the important roles that popular culture and narratives of miscegenation play in the construction of national identity. At the turn of the 20th century, attempts to create a positive and unified national image necessarily eliminated some of the nation’s diversity. With early images of Carmen Miranda traveling the globe and launching a pan-American aesthetic, Afro-Brazilian women were slotted into a very limited and repressed role.² While recent decades have seen a dramatic increase in minority right’s activism and

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² See Shari Roberts, “The Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat’: Carmen Miranda, a Spectacle of Ethnicity” *Cinema Journal* (Spring, 1993) 32.2: 3-23.

collectives, subtle forms of corporeal repression sustain colonial dynamics of power.³

Hip hop culture's emergence (including rap, dj-ing, graffiti, and break dancing) in New York in the early 1970's was characterized by African-American youth culture and their need to create a space for artistic expression and an outlet for their frustrations. With its origins in the streets, alleys, and parks of the city, hip hop performance and artistic expression depend on a sense of spectacle and an on-looking audience. Hip hop dance (breaking) and mc-ing elicit complex interpretations of the performing bodies. While usually presented as subversive and rebellious in nature, its components require dedication, training and discipline in order for the performers to accomplish their goals of making their voices heard and their bodies seen. This paper looks at hip hop performance and culture in contemporary Brazil and the ways in which dichotomies of bodily repression and freedom are danced and expressed within the growing feminist hip hop scene. The particular performances analyzed here are powerful examples of the living struggle of contemporary female artists seeking to denaturalize corporeal repression and confront the institutions that have perpetuated violent images of women for centuries.

Like many other forms of artistic production within popular culture, hip hop emerged as a highly masculinized form where female performers were a small minority. These b-girls embody the dichotomy of bodily repression and freedom though being simultaneously engaged in rigorous artistic discipline and yet located within a highly masculinized form and society. Feminist hip hop performers contrast oppressive structures of violence and sexualization and break away from strict notions of femininity and beauty. This paper puts into dialogue Tata Amaral's film *Antônia* (2006) and the growing Hip Hop Mulher movement in São Paulo and highlights how increased attention to gender within Brazil's hip hop movement illustrates how performance is an important place for expressions of un-repressed bodies.

The fictional film *Antônia* recounts the stories of four women trying to combat gender and racial oppression through hip hop performance and culture. Each of the characters introduces conflicts and challenges for black women living in the favelas of São Paulo. The narrator, Preta, is a single mother of a four-year-old daughter, Barbarah's gay brother is the victim of a hate crime, Lena becomes pregnant and must contend with a machista boyfriend, while Maya is ostracized for being "promiscuous". Throughout the film the four women

³ See Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro. "Autoritarismo e transição." *Revista USP*. n. 9 (1991) for further discussion.

negotiate their friendships, poverty and, most importantly, their race and gender within contemporary Brazilian society as they pursue their collective dream of establishing a hip hop performance group “Antônia”. Tata Amaral worked with local artists, instead of professional actors, in order to capture authentic dialogue and more accurately portray the contradictions that female hip hop artists work within. The consistent motif of machismo and financial struggle within the film highlights the multiple oppressions suffered by women’s bodies. In an environment where images of female bodies are highly sexualized, and are the minority in hip hop performances, these women illustrate the importance of vocal and physical assertiveness. Cultural theorist Joanne Hollows discusses the ways that women have struggled to insert their bodies into spaces dominated by men: “Subcultural theorists in their emphasis on deviant youth have tended to see ‘the street’ as ‘the home’ of the subculture...however, ‘the street’ has never been seen as a safe or respectable place for women to hang out. In this way, the gendering of space means that girls are less likely to participate in many subcultures”(2000, 163). Amaral’s film captures contemporary society and black women’s struggle to create a space where their bodies can be seen and not objectified and their voices can be heard as powerful, not weak.

There is a growing number of female artists around the world who have identified with hip hop culture and established a community space where their concerns can be voiced and their bodies can claim space. The Hip Hop Mulher movement, organized by Tiely Queen in São Paulo, is just one of many movements in Brazil that seeks to bring together women and other artists concerned with gender within hip hop culture.⁴ Though there has been a noted increase over the last decade, the lack of audience, space and respect for female artists within the culture continues to challenge organizers and performers. With the objective of organizing a space for dialogue, performance, and evolution of the hip hop movement, Hip Hop Mulher held its first *encontro* in July, 2009. Through round-tables and workshops this event brought together female artists from around the São Paulo state and culminated in an evening performance open to the public. Tiely Queen, in a blog forum following the event, remarked,

Não tenho vergonha de ser feliz e desenvolver meus projetos, de dançar de “Nega Du Samba” numa balada de mulheres pra suprir minhas necessidades, de até vender meu corpo, de fazer novela, de fazer teatro, de cantar, de tudo!!! Ele é meu!!! Faço com o meu corpo o que bem entender...O estado capitalista não tem nada há ver com isso. Isso é feminismo, é atitude, é ação, todas têm a liberdade de

⁴ For example the *Encontro de Gênero e Hip Hop da Bahia*

fazer suas correrias!!! E pra isso que eu existo enquanto pessoa e depois enquanto instituição dar a idéia e apoio no que for possível. E só chegar.” (2009)

This public announcement reflects her commitment to claiming her body as her own and to confronting the contradictions of being a female performer in a male-dominated culture. One of the key components of the discussions that took place at the *encontro* was finding a way to understand the diversity of experience among the women. Race, gender, sexuality, class and ability differences were topics of debate with the end goal being to strengthen collective feminism within the movement. Queen stated that it was imperative for women to understand one another in order to comprehend each other’s art. Emphasizing the individual within the collective contrasts the homogenizing tendencies of a repressive society.

A key concern for both the protagonists in the film *Antônia* as well as for the artists in the Hip Hop Mulher collective revolves around representations of the female body. In a culture whose primary images of women are those seen on the daily novellas, in the *carnaval* samba schools or in music videos such as those of È o Tchan, the urgency for producing new images is unmistakable. Contemporary scholarship on hip hop feminism produced in the U.S (Gwendolyn Pough, 2004) as well as that which deals with Brazil (Derek Pardue, 2008) recognizes the discrete lack of female hip-hoppers. In his recent study of hip hop in São Paulo Pardue admits that his research is conspicuously male dominated. He found that “virtually all Brazilian hip hoppers are invested in retelling periphery ‘reality’ through narratives of marginality, with the aim of both legitimating the *periferia* as a potentially empowering space of identity, and revealing problems of mainstream Brazilian views of social difference, mostly around the markers of class and race (to a much lesser extent, gender and sexuality)” (2008, 6). I would argue that it is precisely because hip hop has been male dominated that gender and sexuality have not, in past decades, been the principal problems hip hoppers have confronted. However, it is clear from the increase in both pop culture representations like Amaral’s film, and on-the-ground cultural movements, that female and queer hip-hoppers are making space to insert their bodies and concerns into the hip hop agenda.

The “hips” of hip-hop: reclaiming the female body

For the remainder of this paper I will discuss the ways that the female dancing body, particularly b-girls dancing “break”/ *dança da rua*, embodies a contradictory position that plays on dichotomies of repression/freedom or

discipline/improvisation. These performers' danced improvisations illustrate the freedom and sense of strength in community that hip hop culture has to offer; yet, simultaneously, breaking is not an inborn skill—it requires extreme discipline and dedication. Just as sexualized dancing female bodies appear to effortlessly swivel their hips and roll their stomachs, b-girls whose hips accentuate musical beats and whose fists pump up past their heads have trained their bodies to respond to the music in a way that, at times, appears to happen naturally. This erasing of effort, sweat, and training, serves to disappear the dedication and human-aspect to the performing bodies. Bodies are rendered objects to be gazed upon, not complex sites of multiple identities and skills. When presented as only shaking hips or undulating stomachs, the violent oppression of a machista society becomes evident. B-girls use their break and their voices to perform against dominant images of sexualized female bodies.

How do women's bodies (hips) establish a “hip-ness” that men can never be a part of? Dance scholar Jane Desmond argues that dance provides a “privileged arena for the bodily enactment of sexuality's semiotics” (2001, 3) and should therefore be at the center of sexuality studies. I am interested in the intersection of diasporic hip hop culture in Brazil and the performance of gender and sexuality through break dance. “Gender is one of the most important categories of social differentiation, and as a social construction it must be continually asserted and reproduced, thus always subject to contestation, realignment, and negotiation” (2001, 311). I question what ways gender is being “reproduced” through hip hop performance. In what ways are dance practices gendered? How is gender “misperformed” in specific texts (productions, acts, movements) to destabilize gender categories? The closing act to the Hip Hop Mulher gathering inspired a debate among participants, artists and supporters. Poetiza, one of the contracted performers, was criticized by another group, Pão e Rosas Brasil, for her hyper-sexualized movements. Bianca, a member of the latter group, expressed her discontent:

Por fim aconteceu o show da Poetiza o qual consistia em letras egocêntricas e despolitizadas que reproduziam um machismo escancarado em que a única forma para que a mulher seja “valorizada” é através da exposição de seu corpo como um produto de mercado, tal como vemos nos shows de axé e funk carioca. O que se mostrou foi uma imensa incoerência para com o que se havia tido anteriormente como postura assumida pelas demais MCs que se mostravam avessas à banalização e mercantilização do corpo feminino.” (9, agosto, 2009, Hip Hop Mulher forum).

This type of dance, whereby she imitated traditional sexualized images of women, was upsetting to some of the other artists who claimed that it was a step backwards given the recent discussions taking place within the feminist hip

hop collective. The controversial and powerful possibilities of the dancing female body for signifying, and for being read through multiple lenses, illustrates the precarious position of women within hip hop. Trained improvisational dance, ability, and performance of femininity all complicate analyses of gender and sexuality and, at times, create ideological divides within the movement.

Debates within feminist hip hop culture revolving around the valorization of women's bodies highlight the profound saturation of societal machismo. As the aforementioned forum conversation illustrates, female artists and activists are preoccupied with promoting alternative images to sexualized women. Tata Amaral's films tell the stories of women at various stages of their lives and confronting a variety of challenges.⁵ One of the recurring themes in *Antônia* is the difficulty the women have in coordinating their schedules in order to rehearse. The women are only portrayed in two instances all together going over dance movements and lyrics and have only one actual concert performance together; the majority of the film follows the individual stories of the women as they contend with their personal struggles living in poverty, within machista society and trying to create and care for their families. While the film de-emphasizes the dedication and discipline being a b-girl takes, it certainly illustrates a diverse range of obstacles and challenges that women confront in the pursuit of their non-traditional dreams(for females). Lena's boyfriend, for instance, is initially very unsupportive of her participation in the group Antônia as he fears her bodily display will somehow reflect on his (dis)possession of her. Though he eventually comes around to support her passion, his initial reaction and behavior at the quartet's concerts reflects the general context many women face as they develop their art.

Any art that puts the body on display has the potential for inspiring controversy and, particularly for women, is vulnerable. Feminist scholars over the past two decades have argued over the notion of whether women can/should “re-claim” their sexuality. Tiely Queen touches on this point when she emphasizes, as quoted above, that her body is her own, to do what she wants with, be it dancing, prostituting, acting, or performing. If it is her choice, she claims, then it is her right. In analyzing Amaral's film I was also confronted with questions regarding performances of femininity and the power of the female hip. With their short skirts, tight fitting shirts, or generally scantily clad bodies, the four protagonists convey sometimes-contradictory images. Their physical aesthetic combined with their voices and performances incite spectators to question gendered stereotypes and expectations. If the female

⁵ Her two earlier films *Um Céu de Estrelas* (1996) and *Através da Janela* (2000) both focus on female protagonists and the changing roles and challenges of women in Brazilian society.

performer draws a particular gaze due to her dress and movement is the content of her fighting lyrics then rendered void? In their song “Nada pode me parar” Barbarah presents herself and her mingled identities. She sings: “Peraí, deixa eu chegar olha pra cá, vou me apresentar. Em meu nome já me mostro: tenha medo pois sou Barbarah! Forte, corajosa, curiosa, envergonhada. Índia, africana, européia, miscigenada. Mas não confunda pois eu não sou leviana. Te mostro minha adaga de lansã. Essa é minha fama”⁶ She draws attention to her mixed identities and ethnicities and proudly asserts her simultaneous courage, curiosity and shame. Her verbal introduction is accompanied by her bodily introduction. She steps forward and signals towards her body, calling for the audience gaze. She invites the onlookers to take in her body and to see it in all of its miscegenation and spirituality. Though vulnerable as they make their way through the streets of the *favela* where they live or onto the stage where they are performing, the protagonists assert their strength through their bodies, not in spite of them.

Amaral’s film focuses on the day-to-day conflicts faced by the protagonists and highlights the complex debate of gendered performance. While she consciously chose artists and non-professional actors for the film, her four protagonists are beautiful women who, during their debut performance in the film, consciously perform their femininity. They discuss which shoes and clothes to wear and rehearse their movements. Maya exclaims that she will wear a mini-skirt and then directs the others to be more animated in their body movements as they sing: “uma voltinha...mais sensual”. She encourages a particular aesthetic that draws upon accentuating her femininity and, once they are on stage for their solo performance, the audience response emphasizes the contradiction of repression and freedom experienced by sexualized female bodies. During Lena’s introductory verse a man from the crowd interrupts by asking her for her phone number. The initial audience response represents the male gaze and societal expectations of female bodies on display. By the end of their song the crowd is chanting for more and the four voices sing out in harmony, “não vou desistir, ninguém vai me impedir. Sei que é difícil prá viver, se eu ‘tó aqui é prá vencer”. The seemingly contradictory message of their self-affirming words accompanied by their sexualized bodies encourages audience reflection on gendered expectations of performance and repression of female sexuality. As the group asserts, if they are present on the stage it is to overcome/win, “vencer.”

⁶ The actresses for the film were: Negra Li, Leilah Moreno, Quelynah, and Cindy Medes.

Hip hop's characteristic of “attitude” is central to the idea that women can overcome hyper-sexualized images and stand on their own. As part of the hip hop aesthetic having *attitude* means that one projects a confidence and grounding that signals strength and determination. While attitude can be expressed through song lyrics, it is the enacted posturing that ultimately signals this attribute. Attitude, like all other performative expressions of self, is gendered. The ways that the four protagonists assert their bodies on stage indicate the impact that the disciplining and repetitive rehearsals of day-to-day life and organized training have had. As I previously mentioned, often times the sweat, injury, and training that goes into hip hop performance is erased and only the bodies are left to betray the efforts or human aspect of their art. Some of the disciplining that goes into such performances is institutional and other parts are done on the streets and socio-culturally. One of the unique aspects of hip hop movement is its capacity to combine institutionalized and socialized disciplining. The four protagonist's performances mix aspects of ways they have been socialized on the streets and as well as within their own community to portray confidence and attitude. To some degree their performances seem to portray self-objectification; however, their experiences in hip hop culture and their draw to this form of expression make simple analyses of their movements insufficient.

Just as the protagonists in *Antônia* perform a complex mix of socially constructed femininity and hip hop attitude, the female artists who gathered for the Hip Hop Mulher *Entontro* expressed their concerns over women's hyper-sexualization and fervently located hip hop as the locus of social change. As self-reflexive performers, these artists are aware of the power of improvisation. In rap battles and breaking circles artists invent new lyrics and new movement combinations to both converse and pay respect to one another. In the context of the growing feminist hip hop movement and interest in women in hip hop in Brazil, highly disciplined and repressed performances of gender is contrasted by freedom of bodily expression through improvisation. Hip hop culture at its core is an avenue for making space and calling attention to race, gender, and class inequalities. The growing community of female artists, supporters and performers illustrate the reality that hip hop is not only a male-centered culture where women stand in as back-up. Though the protagonists of Hip Hop Mulher and *Antônia* are confronted daily with attacks on their mis-representations of gender, the strength of their collective disciplining is at work to dismantle the socialized inner-discipline that tells dictates machista repression of their bodies. Though improvising on their own terms this developing community is spinning the “hip” into something feminine.

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