

Doing It for Themselves: Women Graffiti Writers Past, Present, and Future

BY ALEXIS L. PAVENICK

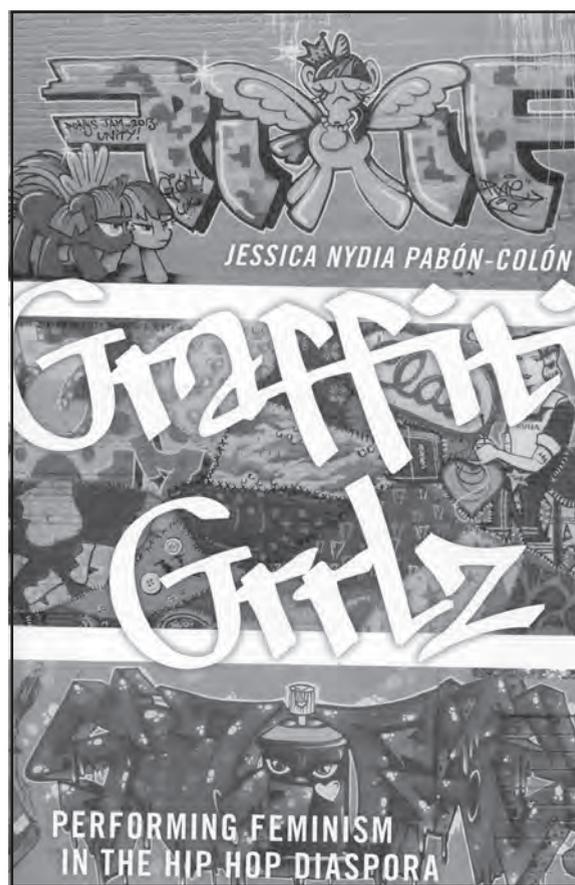
Jessica Nydia Pabón-Colón, *Graffiti Grrlz: Performing Feminism in the Hip Hop Diaspora*. New York University Press, 2018. 320 pp. bibl. index. pap., \$30.00, ISBN 978-1479895939.

Pabón-Colón successfully shows that women graffiti writers are fundamentally important to the development of the art, despite their exclusion and omission from historic and contemporary discussion of graffiti art and practice. The book blends several areas of content: feminist and queer feminist theory and praxis, analysis of graffiti culture derived from hip hop culture, and ethnographic interviews with over 100 women graffiti writers from 23 countries. Combining these areas, Pabón-Colón contemplates women's performance of graffiti as an expression of feminism. She suggests that women writers articulate a "feminist masculinity" in their use of graffiti writing as artistic expression, identity-making, personal empowerment, and community building. In making this claim, she refutes the notion that women writers are subjugated by participation in what has been historically and even currently seen as a cisgender masculine art. Pabón-Colón's "feminist masculinity" also reveals how women writers express themselves as strong and passionate about their identity as women without necessarily identifying as feminist. Lastly, she shows how many "graf grrlz" have moved the record of their writing into online communities, creating herstory to present the women missing from the graffiti record, while also complicating notions of the ephemeral nature of graffiti itself.

The book gives strong, clear evidence that the exclusion of women from graffiti history and culture was and continues to be based on sexism and the masculinized nature of graffiti subculture. Pabón-Colón compares and contrasts previous theoretical studies on hip hop and graffiti and on feminist and queer theory with the women writers' experiences of developing their craft and negotiating, as well as fighting, for respect and space to create among male writers. Race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and

location all come into play in this analysis. Using all these layers, Pabón-Colón effectively shows how women writers perform and promote their self-empowerment through their writing, their ability to create alone or in groups, and their ability to take risks and create joy and pleasure for themselves and others.

Pabón-Colón says in the introduction that she uses a "mashup methodology" she believes works well with her own interdisciplinary work in queer feminist and hip hop studies (p. 17). As much as I deeply appreciate and want more mashups in academia, this approach at times feels slightly disjointed. If we do not know all the authors she cites in her address of feminism, queer feminism, and hiphopography, the discussions feel heavy and slightly detached from the excited, open, and vibrant record



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of the women's words recorded from interviews. For scholars who share Pabón-Colón's interests, though, the breadth and depth of her intellectual contemplation are powerful and convincing.

The interviews are what shine in the book. Pabón-Colón's in-person and digital ethnographic work over a long period of time enables her to give these women a space to be heard, not just in her research but also in events and forums she conducts and supports. Her sincerity and love of her work with these women is obvious and engaging. She lets the women speak to us, proudly and often, and we see a diverse and deep expression of women writers who each define women's power on their own terms. And sometimes they change their minds about it, too.

This book would be an excellent addition to a collection used by experienced scholars familiar with Pabón-Colón's multiple fields of interest, including feminism, queer theory, graffiti art and culture, hiphopography, and performance art. It likely will work best for third- and fourth-year undergraduates as well as graduate students in specialized programs. On the other hand, the interviews — which are beautiful ethnographic records of women who daily act on their own behalf and on behalf of other women — could be read by college students at any level. These personal accounts of self-reflection and creativity reveal the women's experiences of danger, competition, ownership, and development of their public identity, as well as the record of that identity across states and nations. The book overall is a rigorous, loving take on women's empowerment in a high-risk art.

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