

Book Review

Graffiti Grrlz: Performing Feminism in the Hip Hop Diaspora

By Jessica Nydia Pabón-Colón

NYU Press, 2018, 320 pages. <https://nyupress.org/9781479895939/graffiti-grrlz/>

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What should academic books do? For whom should they be written? Are ideal audiences always fellow academics, or can academic books reach wider communities? How can our books platform those without the same level of cultural capital—for example, artists and activists whose work may otherwise remain broadly unknown?

Jessica Nydia Pabón-Colón’s wonderfully engaging, important new book *Graffiti Grrlz: Performing Feminism in the Hip Hop Diaspora* locates itself in the midst of these still-urgent questions about how we can ethically and effectively “face” our shared publics. More than 15 years in the making and colored brightly by Pabón-Colón’s own experiences as a writer in feminist hip hop graffiti subcultures, this detailed performance ethnography examines the work and the working practices of *graffiteras* across the Americas, in Europe and the UK, South Africa, and elsewhere. Written in an intentionally accessible style, and wearing its heart on its sleeve, it nevertheless does an outstanding job of asking questions important to feminist performance theory and practice circa 2019. It is, in other words, a book for performance studies academics, visual arts scholars, popular culture scholars, graffiti artists everywhere, as well as a broad public interested in learning more about the communities, the politics, and the social orientations of the stuff our civic leaders typically label vandalism.

The book’s compelling, persuasive academic argument is this: whether or not individual *graffiteras* or all-girl crews “identify” as feminists, they practice feminist principles in the ways they make their work, in the ways they understand and engage with male peers, and in the communities of writers they build. Feminism-as-practice, one that need not be labeled to be legitimate and powerful in its effects, emerges strongly from the evidence Pabón-Colón amasses, though she is always thoughtful as she reflects on the dissonance between her expectations, as an avowed feminist *graffitera* and academic, and the definitions or understandings of feminism her subjects profess. She never looks down on their alternative perspectives, but instead takes full account of what it means for a woman-identified writer to feel that feminism “is not for her” even as

her working practice reflects feminist sensibilities deeply. Throughout the book, Pabón-Colón reflects on how feminism as a label can be alienating for those outside of academia even while feminism as practice continues to be liberating for them; as a feminist scholar, I found this tension provocative. I asked myself: how do I communicate with students who live on the same identificatory line? How do I speak publicly about my feminism? Certainly Pabón-Colón is not advocating that we walk away from feminist theory or political discourse—far from it. Rather, like Sara Ahmed in her most recent book, she asks us to be attentive to what it means to live a feminist life, in a range of ways and across a range of unexpected communities.

In five substantial but speedy chapters—as well as a warm introduction and moving conclusion—Pabón-Colón introduces us to a host of writers and crews, and the issues their letters trace. In “Cultivating Affective Digital Networks,” she explores the ways in which the internet allowed and allows female writers to connect with one another across the globe, thus taking some of the isolation out of the process of being female while writing; in “Re-Membering Herstory and the Transephemeral Performative,” she engages with performance theory’s ongoing interest in liveness and ephemerality, intervening in the discourse as she articulates the cultural value that accrues to graffiti’s central quality of to-be-disappeared (and written over, then written again) while also challenging graffiti’s purported ephemerality by examining *graffiteras*’ online “ups.” In my favorite chapter, “Performing Feminist Masculinity in a Postfeminist Era,” she argues for the deliberately masculine performances of her *graffitera* subjects as feminist practice “in a transnational feminist movement” (p. 72), noting: “when we allow characteristics that are popularly recognized as “masculine” to belong to men, or rather to be understood only through Western heteropatriarchal gender conventions, we relinquish the political potential in aggressiveness, confrontation, deviation, and assertiveness—traits that are requisite in any struggle for liberation” (p. 59).

I have so far dwelled on the strong academic power of Pabón-Colón’s work; the greatest strength of this book, however, lies elsewhere, in the ways in which Pabón-Colón with grace and generosity makes space for the voices of the dozens of women she writes about. Whenever possible she quotes them, fulsomely; she features their art throughout the book (though I wish NYUP had taken this opportunity to produce artists’ pages as a centerpiece—I desperately wanted these images on glossy paper and in full color). More importantly, she honors their gifts to her. Nowhere is this more evident than in the book’s opening and closing portions. The foreword and introduction are a love letter to the women without whom Pabón-Colón’s research would not have been possible; the conclusion gives over its last six pages to words of advice from older *graffiteras* to the younger, the unsure or only-beginning. In the appendix, Pabón-Colón includes a handful of the beautiful tags her subjects gifted her in her “Blackbook,” something every eager graffiti artist carries with to jams, hoping for autographs from the legends.

It will be obvious by this late point to any reader that the gift-giving is mutual, and that while this book is “for” academic readers, it is first, foremost, and above

all for the *graffiteras*. As Pabón-Colón writes in the penultimate paragraph of her portion of the conclusion, “I have offered a new way of looking at graffiti subculture. [...] my hope in connecting the grrlz’ disparate performances of feminism across the diaspora is that they will no longer doubt that they matter, and further that they will not hesitate to cast doubt on those who try to make them feel otherwise” (p. 191).