

Jamie: Welcome to get it right, the new Podcast series from Re-Wire. I am your host Jamie Broadnax the founder and creator of Black Girl Nerds. We're here to analyze pop culture through the lens of justice and today we're going to dive deep into hip hop. Now most of us have seen or heard discussions of the short coming of hip hop as a genre, especially around women and women's bodies, but actually there are a lot of artists and songs that subtly and subversively promote reproductive justice and sexual autonomy. So rather than dwell on the negative we decided we are going to explore who gets it right and to do that we're going to speak with Sesali Bowen.

Sesali's an editor at Feministing.com and she's going to tell you more about herself in a minute, but before we get started a quick warning. Both the songs we play and the conversation we have can get sexually explicit at times so if you're at work or around the kids maybe put the headphones on for this one. Now let's get into it.

Thank you Sesali for coming on our show.

Sesali: Of course. I'm super glad to be here. I'm super excited about this topic.

Jamie: First of all tell us a little bit about yourself. I want everybody that maybe hasn't been familiar with your work and what you do and even Feministing itself. Can you give us a little bit of background about you?

Sesali: Sure. First of all Feministing is one of the few and definitely the largest read independent feminist publication online. We're kind of like OG's of feminist blogging. We were the first kind of major feminist blog. We started back in, I want to say 2002, with Jessica Valenti and those great folks and it kind of grew into what it is now. We really pride ourselves on being a space for young feminists to really learn the intersections and the intersectionality that is so important in feminism. I won, they had a So You Think You Can Blog contest in 2012 and I won. I came on as a columnist and was promoted as an editor and during my time there I covered a lot of pop culture, a lot of Beyonce think pieces, I regret nothing, a lot of just pop culture analysis but I think the thing I'm the most proud of there besides our sex column, shout out to Fucking with Feministing, is actually coining the term trap feminism and starting that as a space to really get into trap music and trap culture and search for those kind of like macro or micro moments that I felt were really radical or just transgressive in the way in which they address gender and sexuality and the way they intersect with race and class.

Jamie: I have to ask this, because I've heard of the term trap music, but I've never heard of the term trap feminism, can you shed some light on that definition for us?

Sesali: Sure, for me trap feminism was a personal, was born out of a personal interest that I had to really look at the role that women were playing in trap culture, which it's the nitty gritty hip hop. It's the difference between the 2% rap of Jay Z and Kanye where they rap about their luxury cars and their luxury lifestyle as opposed to like those who

are like no we are in a strip club on Saturday night and then we flipping bricks on Sunday and then on Monday is the re-up, you know, just this really kind of gritty street hip hop culture that is all about the turn up. It's always considered less dense, like hop hop heads hate trap music. They think it's the downfall of hip hop. It's the kind of hip hop that conservatives on Fox say is the demise of America. I was like, first of all, this is the music that I listen to. I twerk to it and I turn up to it. This is definitely like the music of my generation. I came of age when Cash Money first blew up during that first era of bling right where hip hop was really making the shift into material commodification if you will as far as what was mainstream.

The way they talk about women in particular was also under a microscope about the lyrics just being so misogynistic and being bitches and hoes and strippers and all of these other things. I was like wait a minute, if we're actually doing a dive, basically what I felt like was that there was a very outsider looking in critique of trap culture.

As someone who had the tools of a critical analysis ... For folks who don't know I also have an undergraduate and master's degree in women's gender and sexuality study so I was definitely heavily invested. I feel like I have a couple of tools with which to analyze.

Jamie: You know a little something, something.

Sesali: I know a little about this, a little about that. As someone who had those tools I thought no I think that maybe this means more than what folks are thinking about. We'll also talk a little bit more about this as we go through.

Jamie: In this episode we are talking about reproductive justice. How are you using that term and what does it mean to you?

Sesali: Super important question. Reproductive justice in the context of today in this conversation I think is so important to understand that it moves beyond this conversation about abortion access or even just the right to choose in that particular arena. For me it's about the right to choose not only how you want to build and plan your family but also about the choices that you have and how you perform gender and sexuality, with whom and when you choose to have sex or what your dating practices are.

For me all of that comes out of a certain culture that creates a framework for how we understand justice and who deserves to do what and who doesn't. That's super important within my own reproductive justice frameworks and thinking about that in hip hop and trap culture as well, so I'm thinking about issues of street harassment. I'm thinking about these new kind of hope politics that we're getting into these days and these other figures. I'm thinking about LGBTQ issues and how hetero-normativity is working in these different spaces.

All of that falls into a really broad category of reproductive justice for me.

Jamie: What is the relationship between hip hop and justice in general in addition to reproductive justice?

Sesali: Hip hop has always been a platform for communities to speak out on their own behalf and about their social issues. That is hip hop. That is the history of hip hop. I won't front, a lot has not also been wrong, a lot of the wrong politics have not been included in that but that's definitely just the context of the broader genre. Hip hop has been known to be very male dominated, particularly as I kind of discover more and more rap from the 90s. I hear a lot of the male artists talk about experiences with pregnancy for example that are always framed in this context of tragedy and trauma and loss unless they're speaking about their own children or within the context of marriage.

I'm thinking particularly about Tupac's Brenda Had a Baby which tells the story of this young girl who has a baby and leaves it in a trashcan. That was a narrative that was repeated for me. A lot of the songs that I hear from the 90s, a lot of anti-abortion sentiment, or otherwise just misinformation. I always think whenever I think about getting reproductive justice wrong in hip hop I think about this line from Talib Kweli. I think it's important that this line came from Talib Kweli because he is heralded as a hip hop historian and an activist for black folks and he is so misogynistic to me.

He has this line on Kanye West's Get Em High where he makes a comment about birth control. I'll just play it so you all can hear it.

[Music].

As you can see from a line like that is extremely problematic and just shows that he doesn't actually know how the birth control patch, which is what he is referring to works or why that might be a better option for someone than say a pill or some other form of birth control that is may be a little bit more discreet according to his taste. Those are the kind of things that I think about when I think about hip hop and justice and reproductive justice specifically.

Jamie: Sesali, tell me about female hip hop artists. There's so many out there and some are so underrated, you don't really hear much about them and then you've got the very popular ones. Is there a large difference between songs that bring up reproductive issues from women than the male artists?

Sesali: Obviously reproductive justice affects people across the gender spectrum but we also cannot act like people who identify as women are not marginally more affected than other genders, particularly male genders if we're speaking in binary terms. We have to acknowledge that having women in hip hop is by default going to bring a more nuanced experience with sexuality and with our bodies and just tell a different story than what a man would tell about those same things. I think it's so important to pay tribute to the pioneers of that gritty sexual female rap like Lil Kim and Trina and Foxy Brown for introducing this really explicit kind of unapologetic sexuality into hip hop in a way that's still to this day not completely accepted.

For me those rappers and those really raunchy songs that I had no business listening to when I was in middle school-

Jamie: Me too.

Sesali: And knew every word child, don't get it wrong.

Jamie: Me too. One example of a song that I knew all the words to that I loved was Lil Kim's No Time. Oh my gosh, that was my song. I would put on all of this fake jewelry and just try to dance like Lil Kim did in the video. It was a really empowering song though I think that's why I was so drawn to it.

[Music].

Sesali: Those rappers really modeled active consent and what it meant to voice my desires and prioritize my own pleasure. I think also listening to those songs so young I was getting such conflicting message pretty much from everywhere else that was like no you do not talk about your sexuality, no you are not allowed to have desires, you are not allowed to do any of that so for me it was like but Trina did it and she the baddest bitch.

Jamie: She's the baddest bitch, okay.

Sesali: There's still a lot of respectability politics that dominate the genre of lady rap because hip hop has been so historically male dominated. I do feel like their rap is always reactionary in a response to whatever the dominant narrative is about how women should be using their sexuality.

Jamie: Do you think there were connections between reproductive justice and hip hop in its beginnings?

Sesali: Absolutely. Absolutely. For folks who are interested in what that history might have looked like I definitely recommend The Get Down, which is the new Netflix original about the kind of budding hip hop in New York 70s scene. That show has just been getting heralded for shining a light on this queer history of hip hop and really recognizing the connections between folks who were trying to get their tracks heard and going to these gay scenes in these gay clubs and infiltrating that disco scene in order to do so and how that really not only promoted a space of sexual freedom and exploration but that particular space was quickly shoved under the rug as the mainstream marketing of hip hop moved towards a more hetero-normative patriarchal kind of form.

Jamie: One of the things that I personally love too about The Get Down is someone who's the founder and creator of a space for nerds and geeks is there was something really cool and nerdy about the fusion of martial arts and its influence on hip hop and anime and you hear these artists like Wu Tang Clan which pretty much most of their music is

influenced by Bruce Lee films and several other martial arts films, so I'm glad that the Get Down introduced that and focused on that because that's so true of so many hip hop artists and so many hip hop songs that we've heard throughout the years.

Sesali: Absolutely. Also, obviously, the emergent thinking about this in a historical context of hip hop, the emergence of female rappers and MCs obviously linked hip hop to reproductive justice just because black women like I mentioned earlier are so likely to be on the receiving end of reproductive oppression. I'm thinking of like Salt N Pepa coming out in the 80s and Push It being about a "dance" that obviously having these other sexual undertones. I think that was important in that moment.

Jamie: How is reproductive justice showing up in hip hop today?

Sesali: You know the first thing I think of when I think about reproductive justice in today's hip hop scene, I'm thinking about these fringe rappers like Cakes da Killa and Big Freedia who are openly queer rappers who have these huge followings and mainstream credibility. In the case of Freedia, Freedia has been around forever. She is the queen of mouse music for a reason so she's definitely not a new artist but I think that with her show on Fuse and also the huge shout out that she got from Beyonce in the video for Formation.

[Music].

That is really radical that those artists are allowed, those kinds of artists are allowed to share this mainstream stage with someone like Beyonce. I think that is just super lit but then also as a trap feminist I'm just really interested in dissecting conversations about sex work and other kinds of transactional sex that are really pervasive in trap culture so obviously the strip club and strip club culture is a huge part of hip hop scenes. Not only just in the lyrics but for a lot of artists, particularly artists in the south and emerging artists, they take their music to the strip club to see how audiences are going to respond to it. If it goes hot in a strip club they can say, look, okay I think we got a hit.

That's just like a really important space. I think that makes hip hop unique because it's actually one of the few genres that consistently and publicly affirms sex work in that way. You get a lot of different conversations about strippers in hip hop and not all of them are like these hoes are nasty because they're on a pole.

Usher actually made the song, I think it's called I Don't Mind, where he's like, oh I don't care about you being a stripper, go get your money girl, come home to me and I will love you still. Also just other artists like Two Chains who are like you want this money, I have the money I want to see your ass, let's do it. Even though I will admit it's definitely under a notion of capitalist consumption and success are the ideas, like they can take off their clothes because they're making money and a lot of it so it's okay. I think that's still important in a society that has been capitalist and patriarchal but has said even within that women should not be using their sexuality in ways that they want to or outside of what is dictated to them by men.

All of these conversations about making it rain and tricking off are super important to me.

[Music].

I play that snippet of What's Popping because I think that figures like that really kind of confirm what I just said about what agency looks like in trap culture and doing different kinds of sex work. She was a stripper but now she's a rapper and she also does double duty on Instagram. She really encourages women to make sure they have a level of financial stability so when they have to engage in patriarchy and male dominance as all of us do living in a patriarchal male dominated society, we're in a position to not only negotiate but sometimes benefit from those interactions just because we have our shit together.

I think that is an important conversation that is not only in response to but can only come out of that particular trap culture.

Jamie: We've talked about a lot of artists and songs. What songs, as well as artists, stand out to you for those who actually get it right?

Sesali: This is hard.

Jamie: I know right, it's like trying to pick your child.

Sesali: This is like asking me my favorite Beyonce song. It's like an impossible task, it changes every day.

Jamie: Is that even a question to ask, what's your favorite Beyonce song?

Sesali: Don't ask me that.

Jamie: Yeah, don't, that is like cruel and unusual punishment for me.

Sesali: Crime against humanity. Never ask.

Jamie: Even trying to ask me my favorite Beyonce album is like naw, we'll be here forever. We'll be here all night.

Sesali: Hip hop songs that get it right, there's this song by Paradise and it's called Hoochies Need Love Too. It came out in 1994. It's actually a song that's on the soundtrack for the movie Above the Rim. I just felt like it added so many layers of complexity to what it means to be fast, which is a term that a lot of black girls are familiar with, which basically means being perceived as too sexual or too open and carefree.

[Music].

There's a line where she talks about not needing a father figure, like basically please keep your patriarchal bullshit for me so I have to give a shout out to that song as one of the ones that get it right.

Obviously my personal anthem, people who know me personally can attest to this, my personal anthem is Trina, The Baddest Bitch.

Jamie: Yes.

Sesali: It's, I mean, listen.

[Music].

It's pretty self-explanatory from the title. It's one of the first songs that I remember was so explicitly about female empowerment but also very sexual, so she was really the first person to kind of link those two things for me. I feel like what I was hearing from other folks is that sure you can be a woman and you can be sexual and that's okay, but I think what I heard from Trina was that like, you can be a woman, you can be a black woman, you can be dope, you can be sexual and that sexuality is part of what makes you dope that you are taking time to intentionally define what sexuality looks like for you, that you are taking time to figure out what your own desires are and then being able to demand that from the sexual experiences that you have. That makes you dope.

She was talking about saving up for a condo and she was like oh I'm not interested in anal sex or weed but you know I heard they're great I'm not here to judge. It was just obviously like this very thought out sexuality that she had. I was like this is dope.

Jamie: The Baddest Bitch, that was your first song. The first song I heard with Trina was the Trickdaddy song Nan. That lyric where she's saying Doing five or six best friends, I was like what?

Sesali: Un-apologetically.

[Music].

Even today, even in 2016 if you get on Twitter on Facebook, homey smashing or having sex with different people who are friends with each other is still very much put in that realm of the no list, do not do this, this is against the rules. If you do this you are trash and Trina, it was like 96 and Trina was like oh five or six of them, it's nothing.

Jamie: Right.

Sesali: And then I'm on to something better. Let's go have brunch after.

This is a corny pick. I think this pick is a little corny but I think it's important in the context of this conversation, City High's What Would You Do?

It came out in 2001, do you even remember City High? Do people remember them?

Jamie: I just remember that one song. I don't remember anything else from them.

Sesali: That's fair. The song What Would You DO is about one of them goes to a party and they have strippers at the party and one of the strippers is a girl he went to middle school with. He is like I asked her what are you doing here dancing for money, like, how dare you and she's like listen, my child is at home hungry, I'm raising him along, I've had a really hard life, I've experienced sexual assault and just did a lot of layering about how parenthood and sex work kind of intersect with race and class.

[Music].

I do think that it was a little bit of that kind of sex work trauma troupe at play. I think there's a line where she's like me and my sister ran away so our dad wouldn't rape us anymore or something like that. It's kind of like, um, let's not feed into this idea that anyone who chooses to do sex work is damaged, you know, or has experienced some type of heavy trauma that has got them into that work, or that people who have experienced sexual assault are damaged in the first place, but what I liked is that they put an actual female voice in the song so it was very much a conversation and not just them telling the story from their point of view about what women should and shouldn't be doing.

The next song that I think gets it right, this is actually the song that inspired me to start writing about trap feminism, not a lot of folks are probably going to know this song, it's a song by a trap rapper from Memphis, his name is Yo Gotti, he has this song called I Wanna Fuck. I'll just let you all hear it.

[Music].

Obviously what we're hearing from him is I'm interested in having sex with you, it's the first night, we just met each other, do not be ashamed. I'm with you just like you're with me so I can't judge you for making this decision. He was just really affirming about this woman's choice to have sex with him in a way that I had literally never heard in a trap song like that before.

I think last but not least, this isn't a specific song but there's a local artist from Chicago, her name is Chella H, Michella Obama, I love her so much.

[Music].

What first interested me in her, and the reason I'm including her in this list is that she named a couple of her mix tapes after reproductive health care so the first one was called The Abortion and the follow-up to that was called The Morning-After Pill. I was like wow, just to say the word abortion on the cover of the mix tape, I was like, damn, who is this?

In her songs she also is willing to cross that kind of taboo line. She has this one song called Slipped On It where she is trying to explain to her partner that she's had sex with his friend. That she's still in love with her partner, she still wants to be him, it's a mistake that she made. They were having a rough time in her relationship, she knew her partner was also cheating on her, she was just trying to get back at him but just this really complicated conversation that is super taboo but also sometimes that's a conversation that needs to be had given the circumstances. She talks very candidly about just menstruation, just as a punchline, not even as a plot in the song or anything. She'll just say like the only thing regular about me is my period.

For me it's like damn, we need to talk about this. Women have periods regularly on a month to month basis, like, yes, let's get into this.

[Music].

Jamie: This was such a great discussion, Sesali. I loved this.

Sesali: Thank you, Jamie. Thank you all for having me. This is awesome. This is like one of my favorite topics. This is actually something that me and my home girls talk about just amongst ourselves all the time. We're like you know I bet you people listened to this and they heard such and such but there's more to this.

Jamie: Thanks again to Sesali for joining me. I don't know about you but I've got a long list of songs and artists to check out now. Please make sure to head over to I-tunes and rate and review our show. We would also love to hear from you on any topics you'd like to see on Get it Right. Next week we are going to speak with Gretchen Sisson, a sociologist who has done some amazing research on all the ways abortion providers have been portrayed on television, including everything from Law and Order to True Blood so you definitely do not want to miss this one.

You can hear and read more from me at Blackgirlnerds.com. You can follow me on Twitter at [BlackGirlNerds](https://twitter.com/BlackGirlNerds) or my personal account [@JamieBroadnax](https://twitter.com/JamieBroadnax) and you can listen to the BGN podcast. That's the hashtag that we use on Twitter and you can listen to our show on [Spreaker](https://www.speaker.com), [iTunes](https://www.apple.com/itunes), [Stitcher](https://www.stitcher.com) radio, [Soundcloud](https://www.soundcloud.com) and [Google music](https://www.google.com/music).

Get it Right is hosted by me, Jamie Broadnax. The show is produced by Marc Faletti, Rewire's director of multimedia. Editorial input is provided by senior reporter Jenn Stanley and oversight by Jodi Jacobson, Rewire's president and editor in chief.