

Research Article

Adeerya Johnson*

Hella Bars: The Cultural Inclusion of Black Women's Rap in Insecure

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2022-0144>

received January 30, 2021; accepted February 24, 2022

Abstract: The musical supervision of HBO's *insecure* sonically maps various representations of Black women's connections to hip-hop music as a site of autonomy, agency, and authenticity. Importantly, the variety of Black female rappers who are featured in seasons 1–3 of *insecure* connects nuanced and contemporary representations of Black millennial women's understanding of Black womanhood, sex, friendship, love, and relationships. I argue that the influence of Issa Rae's perception and connections to hip-hop and the placement of songs in *insecure* supports a soundtrack that takes on a hip-hop feminist approach to Black popular culture. I explore contemporary female hip-hop artist as an emerging group of rappers who support nuanced narratives and identities of Black millennial women. Furthermore, this article highlights the connectedness of Black popular culture and hip-hop feminism as an important site of representation for Black women who use hip-hop as a signifier to culture, self-expression, and identity. I recognize the importance of *insecure*'s soundtrack and usage of Black women in hip-hop to underline the ways hip-hop sits at the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender for Black women's everyday lives.

Keywords: hip-hop feminism, popular culture, Black Studies

When the 2020 Emmy nominations were revealed, HBO's *insecure* received eight Emmy nominations, one for Kier Lehman for *Outstanding Musical Supervision*. This particular nomination recognizes *insecure* for its distinctive music selection that's paralleled with a seasonal soundtrack. The show's unique score and soundtrack features an array of alternative R&B and contemporary hip-hop music and the frequent usage of underground and emerging Black women rappers. Music supervisor Kier Lehman and show creator Issa Rae have collaborated to provide a refreshing soundtrack with songs that the audience and characters of the show can connect and relate to. The specific musical supervision on *insecure* has taken on the role to support the storyline of the main character's complex relationships, sexual tensions, and emotional frustrations that support similar experiences felt by the show's Black audience. Lehman's and Rae's curation of *insecure*'s soundtrack highlights the importance of nuanced and contemporary representations of Black millennial women's everyday experiences while utilizing a detailed musical pairing to extend narratives of the storyline (Penrose *ELLE.com*). It's important to note that the formation of music added to the show underscores the ways in which an inclusive and selective soundtrack produced a noteworthy musical archive of Black woman hip-hop artists who reflect, support, and enhance the sentiments of Rae's own love for hip-hop and R&B and fans of the show (Framke *Vox.com*). With a Black woman in control of the narrative and representation of Black women on television, the contemporary components of Black popular culture have become a nuance site of relatability. Importantly, there is a critical site of narrative expansion, storytelling, and clarification with *insecure*'s musical curation that spotlights the complex lives of Black millennial women.

* Corresponding author: Adeerya Johnson, African American Studies, Valdosta State University, United States of America, e-mail: adeeryaj@gmail.com

Insecure's use of hip-hop music not only draws on the current rise of contemporary Black female hip-hop artists like Kari Faux, Rico Nasty, Dreezy, TT the Artist, and City Girls, but also supports the many concepts and theories in which hip-hop feminism operates as a framework to analyze the music curation process and contemporary cultural impact. *Insecure* contributes to modern representation of Black womanhood and subjectivities within hip-hop music that are carefully catered to enhance the emotional positionality of the main characters while also exploring the complicated sociohistorical connection between Black women and rap music. It's useful in this context to critique notions of Black sexuality and autonomy in *insecure* and its use of hip-hop music. This arrangement potentially disrupts historical notions of hypersexuality and misogynoir¹ that are omnipresent in hip-hop culture while challenging sociocultural spaces within Black popular culture and redefining hip-hop's presence on cable television. Therefore, this essay takes a hip-hop feminist approach to explore the usage and impact of hip-hop music on *insecure* by highlighting the importance of rap music as a background tool for narrative enhancement for Black women's experiences, the sociocultural relation of Issa's rap character "Mirror Bitch" as a site for therapy and sexual expression and investigating the impact of Black women rappers as the cornerstone of musical symbolism of the show. Collectively, hip-hop feminism works in this analysis to situate the complexities of Black women's connection to hip-hop, but also exploring the politics of gender, race, and sexuality to contextualize and shape the narratives and stories that are told with hip-hop music. The particular usage of Issa's rap alter ego assists to situate contemporary hip-hop feminist literature and the application of rap music in the ways the show positions the personal experiences as a mode of self-expression and character growth. Through this analysis, I engage in the contemporary conversations of women in rap and their usefulness to outline the intricate and complex relationship Black millennial women possess with hip-hop music and culture.

Hip-Hop Feminism and Messiness of it All

Hip-hop feminism emerged in the late 1990s as a feminism for everyday Black women that "fuck with the grays," (Morgan 59) by highlighting the duality in Black women's cultural connections and contributions to hip-hop and their ability to challenge hip-hop's misogynistic, heteropatriarchal, and sexist history (Morgan 60). Hip-hop feminism is coined by writer, scholar, and journalist, Joan Morgan, who presents the potentiality for Black women to live in the messiness and contradictions of hip-hop music coming out of the hip-hop generation (Durham et al. 727, Morgan 56). Many of the contradictions often validate traditional gender roles or expectations of men being chivalrous, macho, or dominant. Additionally, the foundation of hip-hop feminism makes way for accepting women's autonomy, power, and creativity as producers and fans of hip-hop who explore patriarchal power structures, cultural practices, and identity politics (Durham et al. 730, Love 418). The hip-hop generation is birthed out of a post-civil rights era that centralizes a group of individuals that grew up benefiting from their civil rights foremothers and witnessing the rise of hip-hop (Durham et al. 730, Love 1, Morgan 53). Other hip-hop feminist scholars add that one of the most important concepts within hip-hop feminism is it allows space for Black women to critique and question the patriarchal, misogynistic, and sexist aspects of hip-hop while simultaneously connecting and relating to cultural notions of hip-hop culture that go beyond the music (Cooper et al. xviii, Durham et al. 731, Lindsey 58).

Historically, conversations of Black women's sexuality centered around the Jezebel and the Sapphire tropes in relation to the subjectivities and stereotypes of Black women's bodies as grotesque and hypersexual. These stereotypes progressed into conversations of concern within hip-hop culture in the ways Black women are represented in music videos and lyrics where the Black woman's body is positioned as an object of exploitation and commodification (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 195, Coleman et al. 1169, Miller-Young 145).

¹ Misogynoir describes the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience. See Bailey and Trudy 762–768, Johnson MA thesis.

Furthermore, with the growth of women rappers in the mid-1990s like Lil Kim, Mia X, and Foxy Brown, these women rapped about topics on power, sex, and wealth, which were comparable topics that leading male artists also rapped about. Additionally, various tensions surfaced about the place and validity of women in hip-hop where conversations were positioned around self-expression, femininity, and sex appeal in terms of marketability and relevance (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 193, Perry 179). Many of the topics of critique discussed images of hypersexuality, sexism, and misogynoir, which positioned women's social-cultural connections to hip-hop music as damaging and monolithic. These frustrations with the presence of Black women in hip-hop culture did not provide flexibility in nuanced identities and characteristics who live within the hip-hop community as artists and consumers. Nevertheless, the disagreements impacted Black women rappers' ability to establish narratives and disrupt heteropatriarchal notions of masculinity, manhood, and the public gaze. Hip-hop feminism helps here by establishing the reality and range of Black women's sex and gender politics and representation as members of the hip-hop community, and by asserting creative control over their sexuality and identity formation. It's important to recognize the existing identities of women in hip-hop culture to help clarify and articulate Black womanhood that operates not only in the public sphere of hip-hop but in the private. Original representations in hip-hop can reflect hip-hop's innovative roots that move, shift, and operate as an expressive and political culture. This is important considering how Black millennial women like Megan Thee Stallion, Yung Baby Tate, and Jucee Froot, who are a part of hip-hop culture, are shaping the public gaze for themselves to redefine representation and articulating personal experiences and complexities from the south, which is supported in *insecure*'s soundtrack.

With the range of Black female characters on *insecure*, Rae's show has hip-hop feminist sensibilities in the ways she redefines the public gaze of Black womanhood as the show's creator, director, and writer, which allows her creative control over Black women's representation and identity (Lindsey 67). Through the use of hip-hop feminism, we see an extension of Black womanhood within Black culture that operates in the complexities of sex, race, and class but showcases a distinct perspective of Black women's agency and self-definition within these sociopolitical spaces. Hence, *insecure* gives viewers a more contemporary and extended perspective of Black millennial women living in the messiness of hip-hop and Black popular culture as the main characters filtering through respectability politics.²

Mirror Bitch and The Politics of Issa's Raps

Beginning with the pilot episode of *insecure*, we meet a unique and awkward character by the name of Issa Dee who uses rapping to cope with life's social ills like dating, sex, and relationships. The particular analysis used in this section explores the first three seasons of Mirror Bitch's manifestations, the lyrics and contexts in which she appears, and how Issa has a private but special connection to rapping.

From the first episode, viewers get an introduction of Issa's freestyle rap abilities when she publicly performs "Broken Pussy" (Rae et al. *Insecure*) at a club in hopes to rekindle a relationship with childhood lover – Daniel King. However, through the progressions of the series, it appears that Issa's raps are a consistent performance we witness in the privacy of her bathroom or in various mirrors she finds when she is alone (e.g., her car, at work). Throughout the show, Issa turns to a mirror, usually when she finds herself in a complex or confusing situation. What makes Issa's raps unique to the show and her character are the satirical and witty rhymes that she spits within each episode that speak to many of the difficult and awkward situations that play out in her life. It isn't until season 3 that viewers learn Issa's rap persona is called "Mirror Bitch" (Rae et al. *Insecure*). I argue, Issa's raps in the mirror target a particular location of

² Respectability was part of "uplift politics" and had two audiences: African Americans, who were encouraged to be respectable, and white people, who needed to be shown that African Americans could be respectable. See Higginbotham; Harris 213–20.

self-reflection (talking to her reflection), which helps her navigate through complicated emotions and moods through reflective thought and rap. This is evident when Issa finally gets a new mirror after living with Daniel and not having a private space in the earlier episodes of season 3. Once Issa finds a new home, she is elated to see Mirror Bitch and raps about her new home and new job and compliments herself by calling Mirror Bitch a queen. Issa's connection to the mirror reveals her ability to critique and assess her behaviors and feelings through rap but also to seek her reflection as a site for motivation and affirmation. With *insecure*'s usage of this private exchange in a mirror, the showrunners tackle the notion of Black women's self-reflection while targeting Black women's connection to hip-hop as an expressive multigenerational culture through contemporary imagery (Brown 187, Lindsey, "One Time for My Girls" 22–34, Morgan 78).

The variety of rap topics Issa presents in the privacy of a mirror allows viewers to see how the main character deals with a more nontraditional way of processing her issues that is not normally captured on television. The unique locations in which we see Issa rapping support a hip-hop feminism framework that addresses the notion that Black women have culturally familiar connections to hip-hop as a form of creative thought and expression (Henry 139–155, Pough, "What It Do, Shorty?" 78–99). Some examples are when Issa offers rhymes where she releases sexual frustration with new sex partners and contemplates relationship woes and self-empowerment, such as tackling new objectives at work. We see an example of this in season 1 where Issa battles returning home to her boyfriend Lawrence as she raps in the mirror in Molly's bathroom; "Do you want your man or nah? Do you have a plan or nah? You gon' come back home or nah, you gon claim your throne or nah, is you Khaleesi or... nah" (Rae et al. *Insecure*). Here, Issa is utilizing rap to find confidence in the uncertainties of her current relationship, which has proven to be stagnant in a time where Issa is looking for something more out of her partner. While Issa isn't a professional rapper, her raps provide insight into the ways Black women work through and identify their feelings in a public space, but also adds unique relevance of Black women's uses of rap in private.

Issa's Sexual Visibility and Reflectivity

Within hip-hop and Black feminist studies, Black women's connection to hip-hop is minimized to their victimhood as hypersexualized and objectified women who are components of hip-hop music for the public male gaze as objects (LaVoulle and Ellison 70, White 610). This is seen in the ways the meticulousness of respectability politics hampers various spaces within hip-hop that shame Black women for their choices to discuss or engage with pro-sex topics for capital or personal satisfaction (Durham et al. 721–737). In the pilot episode, we meet Issa's old love interest and "what if guy" (Rae et al. *Insecure*), Daniel, who encourages a very awkward Issa to perform a freestyle rap at an open mic night. Hesitant at first, Issa decides to perform one of the hit songs on the season 1 soundtrack, "Broken Pussy," in light of Molly's troublesome dating life over the instrumental beat of "Bossy" (Kelis and Too \$hort), a rap song by a Black female artist, Kelis. I argue the possibility that the instrumental of Kelis's song was selected because it centralizes a Black woman who has agency over her sexual life and claims her power as a boss woman in control, which positions Issa's rap as a contradiction about the opposite – Molly's sexual insecurities and instability. However, "Broken Pussy" illuminates the real challenges of Black women's sexual lives and trials that come along when it becomes difficult to find the perfect partner. It also highlights several of the insecurities that come along with sexual dissatisfaction, "Maybe it's dry as hell, maybe it really smells, broken pussy. Maybe it's really rough, maybe it's had enough. Broken pussy" (Rae et al. *Insecure*). While "Broken Pussy" gives insight to Issa's creative ability to freestyle about her friend's sexual complications and her own, viewers begin to learn that causal sex and sexual confidence are important to the Black woman, which is not often expressed in the storylines of Black women in mainstream television. Considering a postfeminist position in popular television, the presentation, discussion, and insertion of Black women's sexual lives and subjectivities on *insecure* reveal the dynamics of Black women's sexual lives that were silenced or privatized amongst characters like Clair Huxtable from *The Cosby Show* or Harriet Winslow

from *Family Matters* (Levy 3). The act of silencing Black women's sexual tensions and sensibilities on television was present to protect the potential of Black women's historical hypersexualization and sexual stereotyping to be commodified on television (Levy 8). In Issa's performance of "Broken Pussy," she raps about a relatable perspective by sharing Molly's private sexual frustrations. The rap is met with social acceptance that's generated by the crowd's celebration and support, but also the possibility that since the song was a freestyle, audience members found the rap entertaining because it joked about a woman's sexual mishaps. Additionally, this pushes the boundaries in the ways the sexual pursuits of female rappers are impacted by respectability politics and sexual shaming.

Within hip-hop, the dynamics of respectability impacts social norms of how women in hip-hop should carry themselves and tell specific stories to model a Black womanhood that's respectable and doesn't bring shame onto the Black community (Hollander 105–122, Lindsey, "One Time for My Girls" 22–34, Pickens 41–58, Warner 129–153). Thus, there is the production of sexual scripts such as the Queen Mother vs the Bad Bitch or the historical Madonna/Whore dichotomy³ that places values of respectability on one female hip-hop identity over the other (Coleman et al. 1165–1179, Levy 1–13, White 607–626). Many familiar dynamics of respectability of Black women in hip-hop as rappers are the comparisons of artists like Queen Latifah and Lauryn Hill vs Lil Kim and Nicki Minaj. In Morgan's ("Why We Get Off" 36–46) politics of pleasure, she takes a Black feminist approach to identify Black women's sexual desires, agency, and understandings of pleasure as a theoretical paradigm. Furthermore, the history of Black women's historical sexual subjugation presents the ramifications of Black women's complex sexual lives and the importance of Black women's abilities and recognitions to various engagements of pleasure (Bailey 164). Through Issa's performance and various situations within the show, she displays the existence that Black women care about their sexual pleasures. Therefore, this recognition of sexual pleasures in Issa's raps highlights Black women's pleasure politics while situating hip-hop feminist theories by creating an avenue to express a Black woman's sexual subjectivities through rap. This reality is further exemplified in season 2 in the raps Issa creates such as "Go Low" and "Ho for It" (Rae et al. *Insecure*).

With the raps "Go Low" and "Ho for It," there are insertions of agency and nuance in the way that Issa is sexually liberated by demanding a "Ho-tation" or to have a *ho phase* during season 2. As Issa deals with her breakup, we see a distinctive way in which the "ho phase" is incorporated as a process to get over her ex-partners through sexual conquest and exploration, which is more likely and socially acceptable amongst men. Issa's raps place Black women's sexual ventures to the forefront as an autonomous act in their sexual pursuits. It's important here to consider the double standard where male rappers in hip-hop are often celebrated for describing their misogynistic and degrading sexual desires within their lyrics without the shame or subjugation of moral respectability (Miller-Young 178). The double standard highlights how often in hip-hop Black men's sexual pursuits are seen as a mode of social capital, wealth, and power, which is often not socially applicable for Black women rappers (Clay 1346–1358, Cooper et al. xviii, Love, "Complex Personhood of Hip Hop" 414–427, Pough, "What It Do, Shorty?" 78–99). *Insecure* demonstrates the potential to see the lives of Black women who are comfortable in their sexuality and act on their sexual urges or simply feeling good in the bedroom. Issa's desire for a ho phase further supports a politics of pleasure, but also the assertion of Issa's agency and engaging in casual sex and temporary pleasures, which has been reserved as a form of expression for male hip-hop artists. In contrast, as a marker for controlling Black women's sexual narratives, Collins presents the ideology of "controlling images" (69), which is often presented in traditional Black feminist frameworks to highlight how dominant white power structures manipulate notions about Black womanhood in the arts and media. These controlling images often placed relevance and validity of Black women's sexual exploitation as the Jezebel, Mammy, and Sapphire. Therefore, the opportunity Issa takes on to freely explore her sexuality with a ho phase challenges notion of racially manipulated media, which then becomes a nuanced narrative that introduces viewers to the depth of Black women's sexuality as Rae being a writer and director builds sexual pleasure and conflicts into the storyline.

³ See Young 257–288, Easterling MA Thesis.

With Issa's "Ho for It" rap, she is encouraging herself to step out of her comfort zone and have sex with one of her neighbors whom she hardly knows but is sexually attracted to. Within the rap, Issa calls herself a ho and is persistent in trying to convince herself she should go have sex with her neighbor. Issa's rap and character reflect notions of Black women's erotic sensibilities that allow her control, agency, and power without letting sexism and coercion dictate the sexual narrative (Crosley *ParlourMagazine.com*, Morgan "Why We Get Off" 36–46). Here, we see Issa reflect that as she motivates herself to engage in casual sex:

Put your doubts to the side, get his ass in the bed. Even if it's whack, you could still get some head. Go for it, go for it, go. Ho for it, ho for it, ho. Do you want that dick or no?

You better go for it, go for it, ho. (Rae et al. *Insecure*)

The nuance that comes from this rap supports the concepts and themes of hip-hop feminism that allow women to fluctuate in the gray areas of hip-hop, but also centralizes Issa's comfort as a self-labeled ho, which makes this point of Black women's sexuality complex. Miller-Young discusses the politics of Black women's labeling of ho and explains that hoes are normally described as women who "trouble the notion of Black collectivity that rests on ideologies of racial uplift and moral citizenship" (163), where their perceived sexual deviancy harms racial uplift, moral citizenship, and personal responsibility. The ho disrupts hetero-sexist efforts that place Black women in nonsexual spaces in the church, at home, and with their husbands, which eliminates the potentiality of Black women's sexual pleasures (Miller-Young 178). With "Ho for It," Issa challenges the social meaning of the ho that minimizes and devalues Black women's sexual freedom in the context of "life after a break-up." Through this rap, she is committed to having sex with someone new, lacks shame in calling herself a ho and claiming agency as a sexual woman while also remaining hopeful that even if the sex is bad, she could still receive oral sex.

Ultimately, the use of "ho" disrupts the confounds of respectability, where a term that is used to subject and shame Black women as sexually deviant is now an opportunity to reclaim the self and reshape a Black woman's sexual life (Bailey 161–169, Durham et al. 721–737). Issa used her raps in season 2 to assert her "erotic power" with her sexual autonomy to pursue her freedom of choice while presenting a new perspective of storytelling through her sex-based rap. With the focus on Issa's pleasure, this perspective highlights the control that Issa has on her sexual desires that's not grounded in a male-dominated perspective or influence. Considering Issa's awkward nature and often apprehensive tendencies, with her raps, we see the way that Issa is confident and clear about her sexual urges and that she is keen to accomplish and satisfy her needs.

Rap as Therapy

Further into season 3, during a game of Truth or Dare between Issa and Nathan, we learn that Issa has a deeper connection to rapping, which is something she has not revealed to any other character on the show besides Daniel. But most importantly, Issa raps for herself, which hints at how her rhymes are sacred to her, considering how frequently we see interactions with her and Mirror Bitch from season 1 to season 4, where Mirror Bitch is featured in the teaser trailer. While viewers recognized that Issa has a history with her raps, season 3 takes a small but interesting perspective into the possibility of how much rapping meant to Issa in her teenage years. This reflection of teenage Issa as a rapper potentially highlights a particular sight of Black feminism and hip-hop through the politics of Black girlhood and youth hip-hop culture.

Brown (48) explains that hip-hop can be a tool to inform the ways Black and Brown girls "create" through performance-based methods of expression. In forms of hip-hop therapy, lyric writing and rap music is seen as a catalyst to identify and discuss emotions (Kruse 101–122, Levy 219–224). Moreover, music theorists explain their use of hip-hop therapy as a tool to help clients "living in an insecure world to living with a mindset of high self-esteem" (Levy 220), therefore, we see women like Issa who are engaged in rap to mobilize toward therapeutic formations of female empowerment in times of anxiety and insecurities

(Kobin and Tyson 343–356, Levy 219–224). Here, it can be understood that Issa’s usage of rapping in the mirror acts as a site of music therapy. The audience learns that Issa and her connection to rapping dates back to her teenage years when we see she has held onto her high school rap journals, which highlights the importance of rap throughout her life. For Black women and girls, hip-hop is used as a tool for expression and empowerment and is integral to their self-schemas and identity construction (Brown 191, Lindsey, “One Time for My Girls” 22–34). The creative potential that arises from Black girls is personal due to the invisibility of Black girls and how often their issues with misogynoir, sexism, and racism impact how their voices and narrative are told. Thus, rapping as a Black girl is a prerequisite to Issa’s creative potential as she establishes her voice and situates herself through rapping. While Issa never formally puts out an official record, her connection to making music supports Black girls’ connection to hip-hop as music makers and their music experiences are “ubiquitously musical” which hinders the possibility of capitalist consumptions.

While hip-hop has always been a site of self-expression within the Black community, *insecure* positions Issa’s use of rapping as self-expression and parallels to forms of hip-hop therapy and creativity. The politics of Issa’s raps allude to how she utilizes her freestyling sessions not only to encourage herself, but also to work through many of her personal issues that she doesn’t share with her friends that allow her to be more honest and transparent with herself. This is important considering Black girls’ ability to create through various avenues of hip-hop highlights their experiences and nuanced expression as a site for knowledge production of Black girlhood. Issa’s connection to rap reflects an important site of representation on television that publicly validates Black women and Black girls’ creative connections to hip-hop music. This is unique, as the show’s understanding of Issa’s personal thoughts and feelings extends the normative representations of how Black women think and associate with hip-hop privately. Rae’s use of *Mirror Bitch* helps emphasize the various intersections of autonomy and sexual agency within Issa’s sexual life. But also centralizes the narratives of Black women who have a special connection to hip-hop as a site of self-expression in the private where Issa confronts personal issues while engaging in the duality of self-empowerment, affirmation, and self-reflection.

Girls Just Wanna Turn UP

One of the many reasons *insecure*’s music presentation is unique is that the show puts out a weekly playlist from each episode and a soundtrack for each season. The soundtrack is composed of various independent and emerging artists such as Jucee Froot, Yung Baby Tate, Megan Thee Stallion, Kari Faux, and City Girls; however, what makes the soundtrack significant in the context of this analysis is the repetitive and inclusive selection of female rap artists that supports the many undertones and themes of the show. What is exceptional about *insecure* is that this is a show that bridges Black women’s connection to hip-hop through the curation of an inclusive soundtrack that supports and reflects Black women’s feelings of self and identity while also extending and enhancing the narratives for the storyline.

Insecure’s musical collaborators include Issa Rae, Melina Matsoukas, Solange Knowles, Raphael Saadiq, and Keir Lehman. The collective of these creators, directors, singers, and songwriters collaborated to produce a score to serve as an aid for the series dialogue and character support. Particularly, Lehman was hired to be the music supervisor after being introduced to the pilot episode and worked with Knowles and Saadiq to support Rae’s musical vision for the show that supported her music taste, major themes of the show, and contemporary Los Angeles/West Coast sound while featuring Black women rappers and singers (Lehman *Variety.com*, Lehman *Billboard.com*). Furthermore, Saadiq supports Lehman and Rae’s direction to play on “the flow of LA and each character” (Harris *Vulture.com*). Additionally, this collection made it important for Rae to include emerging women rappers from California like Saweetie and Kamaiyah, who had multiple songs featured on *insecure* to place emphasis on the location as an LA-based show. As the show evolves, the music proves to be a fundamental component of the show as fans look to expand their music catalogue as the *insecure* music playlist on Spotify is updated weekly after each episode. This practice

ultimately helps artist gain exposure where music artists and managers reach out to Lehman to create new songs specifically for the show or use *insecure* as a medium to debut new music. There is a consistent emphasis that the show works to include independent women artists but also understanding that the musical curation underscores the main character's emotions and adds depth to the storylines. I chose to explore the artist Kari Faux, City Girls, Erykah Badu, and Kamaiyah to capture the range of musical selection that added in the nuance of representation for main characters in *insecure*.

Little Rock Meets LA

One exceptional female rap artist whose songs appear frequently on *insecure* is Kari Faux. Faux is a native of Little Rock, Arkansas, and is a new voice in hip-hop with her conversational style of rapping and soft, mellow flow. We are introduced to Faux's music with "No Small Talk," which plays in the pilot episode in the title sequence. While the song could have started from the beginning, we get a genuine introduction to both Issa and Faux, in which Faux raps assertively that "she isn't taking no small talk" right after Issa has an uncomfortable and embarrassing conversation about her personal life to a group of middle schoolers. The placement of this song suggests that Issa doesn't want to engage in small talk about her personal life with a group of adolescents, considering the questions were inappropriate, and she has more important things to do, like encourage them to participate in her job's after school program. Also, this leads to Faux's songs being featured three more times within one season, which include "Top Down," "Supplier," and "Lie 2 My Face" (Rae et al. *Insecure*).

Additionally, many of her songs used in the show were specifically crafted for *insecure* (Faux *Genius.com*). One song in particular that was crafted for a scene in *insecure* was "Top Down." This song was used in the final episode of season 1 to support and amplify a girl's trip with Issa, Molly, Kelli, and Tiffany. In the scene, the women are driving on the highway as "Top Down" is playing on the radio. Issa and her friends – except Molly – are dancing and singing along due to the excitement for their weekend getaway in Malibu. In an interview with *Genius*, Faux explains her reasoning for creating the single: "I made a song about driving top down on the freeway, having a good time, and being a star. It gives you the space to stretch, and not be so focused [on whether] this is true to who I am." With the placement of this song in this particular scene, it annotates a carefree moment amongst Black women celebrating life and friendship. Faux's ability to create a song specifically for that scene merges the imagery of Black women having fun with the support and approval of Rae, keeping the importance of Black women's friendship as a major theme. This also explains the great working relationship between Rae and Faux in which they both support each other's artistic expressions on *insecure* (Faux *Genius.com*). With the use of Faux's music and other up and coming female rap artists, Rae is unique in her musical approach to not use many mainstream artists but help elevate and promote new voices and styles of rap coming from Black women that reflect her own love for the music genre.

City Girls in LA

Rae explains that the foundation for the soundtrack and the origin of the storyline in season 3 is based on the influence of the Miami-based rap duo, City Girls (Hampp *Variety.com*). The Miami rap duo consists of members Yung Miami and JT, who are known for presenting familiar representations of self-fulfillment, empowerment, and sexual freedom in their raunchy but confident lyrics that focus on money, power, and sex. This curation speaks to hip-hop feminism in the ways that certain embodied experiences refuse respectability politics and create alternative narratives of Black womanhood (Halliday 1–18, Pickens 41–58). With the season 3 opener, Issa is seen with a new part-time job as a Lyft driver. One night, she picks up two Black women and "Where the Bag At?" by the City Girls comes on the radio. Here, we instantly

see the excitement of the two Black women and their praise of the song, while the placement of the rap serves as support for the narrative for a girl's night. Since hip-hop is celebrated for its cultural relevance amongst artists, the use of this Miami-based Black female rap duo in this scene supports hip-hop feminist ideologies where Black female rappers are now sexual entrepreneurs and can leverage sex and money for personal gains (Evans-Winters and Esposito 3–6, Miller-Young 148, White 610). While this notion situates the complexities of Black women's narratives in hip-hop, utilizing songs from the City Girls supports Rae's musical curation, which validates why Black women potentially listen to the City Girls as a means to claim control in a sexist, patriarchal world.

In season 3, Issa picks up a Black couple and they ask her to turn up “One of Them Nights” by the City Girls. The repetitive use of music by the City Girls is one example of how the group defined that season, as Rae explained. The theme of the City Girls in season 3 also speaks to the new way we see Issa and Molly take on work and relationships. Notably, the City Girls' unapologetic and confident persona is central to their music (Hampp *Variety.com*). We see the reflection of these new instances of fulfillments and confidence in season 3 as Issa and Molly gain the ability to assert themselves not only sexually but as they both take on new challenges and creative goals while staying true to themselves. This is evident in the way both women have taken on new career goals. For Molly, she begins working at a Black law firm, and Issa confidently quits her job and works to establish a Black community-based block party in the heart of Inglewood. As the City Girls are positioned as the musical support for season 3, we see contemporary understandings of Black womanhood in which both the City Girls and Molly embrace a form of ratchetness, agency, and confidence.

Dating Molly

We see the continuous insertion of Black female rappers as an extended narration, especially in Molly's dating life. While Molly is looking for the perfect partner to match her lifestyle, she jumps for the opportunity to go on a date with a man she meets on an elite dating site. As she prepares to go inside the restaurant for her date, she is on the phone with another man whom she is dating, who didn't get a college education and works at a car rental dealership and explains she cannot see him anymore. This is not explicitly stated, but it is implied this current guy doesn't match her professional lifestyle, considering Molly has been struggling to find a Black man that matches her career goals, finances, and academic background. We see this throughout the show through many failed dating attempts, including the man she is on the phone with. Once she finishes her phone call, artist Erykah Badu's “I've Been Going Thru It” begins to play. While Erykah Badu is noted as a neo-soul artist, her artistry includes her connection to hip-hop music as a rapper and supporter, which is seen in songs with rap artists like Common, Andre 3000, and Black Thought (Hollander 105–122). With the song's heavy bass, Badu raps about how she has been going through tough times, including dating woes, similar to Molly. This connection is important to note in the ways that Black women are capable of telling stories that are relatable but also highlight very normal dating misfortunes. Hollander (105–122) presents hip-hop sensibilities as a framework for Black women outside of the genre to utilize hip-hop as a space for creative expression and romantic identities in hip-hop. The inclusion of Erykah Badu as a rapper situates the impact of hip-hop sensibilities amongst neo-soul artists, further extending the range in which hip-hop and rap flow as a site for culture and expression amongst Black women (Hollander 105–122). The ability to shift between hip-hop and neo-soul genres can hint at similar shifts Molly makes as she navigates the complexities of class and race barriers with her own dating experiences and expectations (Hollander 105–122, White 607–626).

The expectations in Molly's dating life are extended in the last episode of season 1 when Kamaiyah's “Niggas” is played when Molly returns to the Airbnb with a younger man during a girl's trip. The pairing of Kamaiyah's song is best suited for this scene but also supports Rae's method of centralizing West Coast rappers to extend Molly's dating woes that were present in season 1. As Molly begins to have intercourse with the man she met at the club, the chorus begins to play: “He said that he wanna be my boyfriend, but he

can't tie me down/cause I don't wanna be his girlfriend, at least not right now" (Rae et al. *Insecure*). The impact this song has on this scene dives into another perspective of Molly's dating life and promiscuity to engage in a quick, no strings attached form of intimacy but also an act of dealing with personal dating frustrations after Issa mentions Molly cannot keep a "nigga." Ultimately, this song's usage hints at a range of perspectives of Molly's character and feelings toward Issa's comment since the song is called "Niggas" and the theme of the song discusses Kamaiyah's lack of a boyfriend because she has multiple dating partners, and she can't be intimate due to her current circumstances. The flexibility in Molly's sexual life and no strings attached one-night stand also plays on mainstream conceptions of the ho and Issa looking to Molly as a person who is familiar with a ho-tation or ho phase, which becomes a task for Issa in season 2. The songs that annotate Molly's tough dating life validate her experiences with songs that are applicable for single, working Black women who are also struggling with dating and relationships who can see sex solely as good time. Furthermore, the practice for inclusion and visibility of women rap artists hints at the politics of location for how Black millennial women living in LA navigate friendships and dating, and what musical parings center those experiences and sentiments in a contemporary Black popular culture context.

Conclusion

With Rae being the creator, executive producer, writer, and one of the music supervisors of *insecure*, she uses her creative influence to script a show that not only reflects her connection to hip-hop music, but also elevates and promotes new voices of female rap artists. While hip-hop feminism seeks to expand the aesthetics of the everyday lived experiences of Black women and their ability to control their representation within hip-hop, Issa Rae elevates this within the inclusion of rap politics and sensibilities in *insecure*. Her position provides opportunities to extend language through selected artists' music to talk about Black women's pleasure and identity without the influence of patriarchal powers that historically dominate television and rap as a method of therapy and self-reflection. What is exceptional about *insecure* is its nuances of Black womanhood in a millennial context. The power of script writing in this context extends the importance of agency and self-definition, which Rae does to assist in reinventing imagery of Black women on HBO (White 607–626). Collins asserts that self-definition helps Black women resist "[...] negative controlling image of Black womanhood [...]" (10) by the dominant racial group. Validating the needs of a distinctive standpoint for Black women in *insecure* helps build knowledge on everyday behaviors and conversations within music and film. Issa and Molly's characters reflect contemporary social identities and gender relations that take on a new perspective that challenges respectability and highlights realistic perspectives of what it means to be a Black woman. Considering the creative accomplishments of Rae with *insecure*, she fundamentally supports an unapologetic and authentic representation of contemporary Black womanhood and what hip-hop feminism defines as a specific generation that aims to "keepin' it real" (Morgan 62). Whether it's seen in the language where both Issa and Molly call each other "bitch" and "ho," or when both Issa and Molly filter through their respective dating pools to satisfy their sexual urges, the particular scripting and curation of a hip-hop soundtrack within this hit show addresses Black women's management of identity, agency, and intimacy. The musical interactions support the framework of hip-hop feminism as a theory to highlight a sociocultural relationship Black women have with hip-hop. This is exhibited through the show's use of African-American Vernacular (AAVE), hobbies, music taste, fashion, and the ways that they think about themselves in relation to their self-worth and agency. The selection and inclusion of female rap in *insecure* pushes Black pop cultural boundaries that support the foundation of hip-hop feminism. Thus, the soundtrack and score support the framework of hip-hop feminism as a framework to underline sociocultural relationships Black women have with hip-hop, but as a complement to experiences and events within the show. *Insecure* is a refreshing show that caters to Black millennials as a collective, but viewers can appreciate the details that enrich the experiences and expressions of Black women's everyday lives as they deal with love, relationships, friendship, and professional careers.

Conflict of interest: Authors state no conflict of interest.

Works Cited

- Bailey, Marlon M. "Whose Body Is This? On the Cultural Possibilities of a Radical Black Sexual Praxis." *American Quarterly*, vol. 71, no. 1, 2019, pp. 161–169. Project MUSE, doi: 10.1353/aq.2019.0009.
- Bailey, Moya and Trudy. "On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, and Plagiarism." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2018, pp. 762–768. doi: 10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395. Jun 2020.
- Brown, Ruth N. *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*. University of Illinois Press, 2013. JSTOR. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt3fh5xc>.
- Clay, Andreana. "Keepin' It Real: Black Youth, Hip-Hop Culture, and Black Identity." *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 46, no. 10, June 2003, pp. 1346–1358. doi: 10.1177/0002764203046010005. Jul 2020.
- Cole, Johnnetta B., and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality In African American Communities*. Random House Publishing Group, 2009.
- Coleman, M. N., et al. "In and Out of Love With Hip-Hop: Saliency of Sexual Scripts For Young Adult African American Women In Hip-Hop and Black-Oriented Television." *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, vol. 18, no. 10, 2016, pp. 1165–1179. doi: 10.1080/13691058.2016.1175029. Jun 2020.
- Collins, Patricia H. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Psychology Press, 2000.
- Cooper, Brittney C., et al., eds. *The Crunk Feminist Collection*. The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2017.
- Crosley, Hillary. "Joan Morgan On Black Sex, Identity and the Politics of Pleasure." *Parlour Magazine*, 27 Feb. 2013. <http://parlourmagazine.com/2013/02/joan-morgan-on-black-sex-identity-and-the-politics-of-pleasure/>. 12, Jun 2020.
- Durham, Aisha, et al. "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay." *Signs*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2013, pp. 721–737. JSTOR. doi: 10.1086/668843.
- Easterling, Michael H. *Unity Addressing Misogyny and Transcending the Sista-Ho Dichotomy in Hip Hop Culture*. MA Thesis. Brigham Young University, 2016. <http://hdl.lib.byu.edu/1877/etd8711>. 12, Jun 2020.
- Evans-Winters, Venus, and Jennifer Esposito. "Introduction to Lemonade: Black Womanhood, Identity, & Sexuality." *Taboo: The Journal of Culture & Education*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2017, pp. 3–6.
- Faux, Kari, and Leikeli47. "Top Down." *Insecure*. RCA Records, 2016. Soundcloud. <https://soundcloud.com/karifaux/top-down-feat-leikeli47>.
- Faux, Kari. Interview by Erika Ramirez. "Kari Faux Talks Recording 'Top Down' for HBO's 'Insecure.'" *Genius*, 28 Nov. 2016. <https://genius.com/a/kari-faux-talks-recording-top-down-for-hbo-s-insecure>. 24, May 2020.
- Framke, Caroline. "'I Just Wanted It to Be a Regular Story About Black People': Issa Rae On Creating and Starring in HBO's Insecure." *Vox*, 7 Oct. 2016. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2016/10/7/13176104/issa-rae-insecure-hbo-interview>. 24, May 2020.
- Halliday, Aria S. "Twerk Sumn!: Theorizing Black Girl Epistemology in the Body." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 34, no. 6, 2020, pp. 1–18. doi: 10.1080/09502386.2020.1714688. 13, Jun 2020.
- Hampp, Andrew. "Songs for Screens: 'Insecure' Music Supervisor on Why City Girls are 'The SZA of this Season.'" *Variety*, 15 Aug. 2018. <https://variety.com/2018/music/news/insecure-music-supervisor-city-girls-are-the-sza-of-this-season-1202906484/>.
- Harris, Paisley J. "Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women's History and Black Feminism." *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 213–220. Project MUSE. doi: 10.1353/jowh.2003.0025. Jul 2020.
- Harris, Hunter. "Raphael Saadiq on Insecure, Solange, and His New Album." *Vulture*, 14 Sept. 2017. <https://www.vulture.com/2017/09/raphael-saadiq-on-insecure-solange-and-his-new-album.html>.
- Henry, Wilma J. "Hip-Hop Feminism: A Standpoint to Enhance the Positive Self-Identity of Black College Women." *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2010, pp. 139–155. doi: 10.2202/1949-6605.6065.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn B. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*. Harvard University Press, 1994. May 2020.
- Hollander, Pamela. "'Elevate My Mind': Identities for Women in Hip Hop Love Songs." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2013, pp. 105–122. JSTOR. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23610154>. May 2020.
- Johnson, Adeerya J. *Spill The Tea Sis': Misogynoir's Problem and Black Women's Support, Narratives and Identities Found in Love & Hip-Hop's Reality Tv Franchise*. MA Thesis. Georgia State University, 2019. https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/aas_theses/62.
- Kelis, and Too \$hort. "Bossy." *Kelis Was Here*. Sony Music, 2006.
- Kobin, Caroline, and Edgar Tyson. "Thematic Analysis of Hip-Hop Music: Can Hip-Hop in Therapy Facilitate Empathic Connections When Working With Clients in Urban Settings?" *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2006, pp. 343–356. doi: 10.1016/j.aip.2006.05.001. 13, May 2020.

- Kruse, Adam J. "‘Therapy was Writing Rhymes’: Hip-Hop as Resilient Space for a Queer Rapper of Color." *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, vol. 207–208, 2016, pp. 101–122. JSTOR. doi: 10.5406/bulcouresmusedu.207-208.0101. 25, May 2020.
- LaVoulle, Crystal, and Tisha L. Ellison. "The Bad Bitch Barbie Craze and Beyoncé." *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2017, pp. 65–84. doi: 10.31390/taboo.16.2.07.
- Lehman, Kier. Interview by James P. Herman. "Inside the Soundtrack to ‘Insecure’ With Music Supervisor Kier Lehman." *Variety*, 15 Jun. 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/insecure-soundtrack-music-supervisor-kier-lehman-interview-1234635839/>. 18, Jun 2020.
- Lehman, Kier. Interview by Shea Lenniger. "Kier Lehman Talks Using Music to Compose the Vibe of Los Angeles in ‘Insecure.’" *Billboard*, 4 Oct. 2018. <https://www.billboard.com/index.php/articles/news/television/8477486/kier-lehman-inesecure-music-supervisor-interview>. 13, Jun 2020.
- Levy, Ian. "Hip Hop and Spoken Word Therapy With Urban Youth." *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2012, pp. 219–224. doi: 10.1080/08893675.2012.736182. 14, Jun 2020.
- Levy, Yael. "A Sexual Subject: Black Women's Sexuality in *Insecure*." *Feminist Media Studies*, 2020, pp. 1–13. doi: 10.1080/14680777.2020.1722723. 14, Jul 2020.
- Lindsey, Treva B. "'One Time for My Girls': African-American Girlhood, Empowerment, and Popular Visual Culture." *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2013, pp. 22–34. doi: 10.1007/s12111-012-9217-2. 25, Jul 2020.
- Lindsey, Treva B. "Let Me Blow Your Mind: Hip-Hop Feminist Futures in Theory and Praxis." *Urban Education*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2015, pp. 52–77. doi: 10.1177/0042085914563184. 25, Jul 2020.
- Love, Bettina L. *Hip Hop's Li'l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South*. Peter Lang Publishing, 2012.
- Love, Bettina L. "Complex Personhood of Hip Hop & the Sensibilities of the Culture That Fosters Knowledge of Self & Self-Determination." *Equity & Excellence in Education*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2016, pp. 414–427. doi: 10.1080/10665684.2016.1227223. 25, May 2020.
- Miller-Young, Mireille. *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*. Duke University Press, 2014. doi: 10.1215/9780822375913.
- Morgan, Joan. *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip Hop Feminist*. 1st ed., Simon & Schuster, 1999.
- Morgan, Joan. "Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2015, pp. 36–46. doi: 10.1080/00064246.2015.1080915. 25, May 2020.
- Penrose, Nerisha. "A Scene-by-Scene Breakdown of the Best Music Moments From *Insecure* Season 4." *ELLE*, 14 Jun. 2020. <https://www.elle.com/culture/movies-tv/a32852087/insecure-season-4-soundtrack-explained/>. 13, May 2020.
- Perry, Imani. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Duke University Press Books, 2004.
- Pickens, Therí A. "Shoving Aside the Politics of Respectability: Black Women, Reality TV, and the Ratchet Performance." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2015, pp. 41–58. doi: 10.1080/0740770X.2014.923172. 25, May 2020.
- Pough, Gwendolyn D. "What It Do, Shorty?: Women, Hip-Hop, and a Feminist Agenda." *Black Women, Gender Families*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2019, pp. 78–99. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/blacwomegendfami.1.2.0078. 25, May 2020.
- Rae, Issa. Interview by Caroline Framke. "HBO's *Insecure* Has One of the Best Soundtracks In the Game, Thanks to Solange Knowles." *Vox*, 6 Nov. 2016. <https://www.vox.com/2016/11/3/13457574/insecure-soundtrack-solange>. 25, May 2020.
- Warner, Kristen J. "‘They Gon’ Think You Loud Regardless: Ratchetness, Reality Television, and Black Womanhood." *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1(88), 2015, pp. 129–153. doi: 10.1215/02705346-2885475. 24, May 2020.
- White, Theresa R. "Missy ‘Misdemeanor’ Elliott and Nicki Minaj: Fashionistin’ Black Female Sexuality in Hip-Hop Culture – Girl Power or Overpowered?" *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 44, no. 6, 2013, pp. 607–626. doi: 10.1177/0021934713497365.
- Young, C. "The New Madonna/Whore Syndrome: Feminism, Sexuality, and Sexual Harassment." *New York Law School Review*, vol. 38, 1993, pp. 257–288. 13, May 2020.