

## 2016 Hip-Hop Literacies Conference: Black Women and Girls' Lives Matter - Viktoria Zerda and Matthew Trevino

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The Hip-Hop Literacies conference is an event held every year at Ohio State University, founded by Dr. Elaine Richardson – professor of Literacy Studies, and author of *PHD (Po H# on Dope) to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life*. The purpose of this annual, two-day conference is to bring together scholars, community activists, students, artists, etc. to discuss and engage issues surrounding social justice for black and brown communities, specifically in regards to dominant institutions, literacy, and identity. In literacy studies, hip-hop pedagogical frameworks are used as way to educate and engage the lived experiences of historically oppressed communities to promote local enrichment, and combat systems of inequality, specifically the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration.

This year's conference was focused around the hashtag #SayHerName, or as the title states, the importance of Black women and girls being a part of the #BlackLivesMatter conversation. The statement of purpose for this year's conference was posted on The Ohio State University's website: "This year's conference illuminates issues in the struggle to engender the fight for racial justice, so that the needs of girls and women are fully addressed as we continue the fight to dismantle institutional racism and promote healing for collective empowerment of Black and Brown communities". The invited speakers were all black women with the exception of four non-black men, and two non-black women. The lectures and panels were aimed at targeting issues of not only racial inequality, but gender inequality, and how we can guide the #BlackLivesMatter movement to be better inclusive of women and girls – specifically when it comes to the issue of abuse and murders of black and brown women and girls by the police-state. Much of the #BlackLivesMatter movement has been a circulation of news stories and protests concerning the murders of young black boys and men by police. Up until the murder of Sandra Bland, which prompted the #SayHerName hashtag, there was little to no mention of the disproportionate rates of trauma that black women, girls and trans women face in comparison to their black male counterparts.

Although the movement has been slow to incorporate the importance of addressing the trauma of black women and girls, it is also equally as slow giving credit to the many ways in which women and girls have participated in and contributed to various resistance movements, like #BlackLivesMatter – despite the fact that it was started by three queer, black women. This causes a pattern of conversations and action to favor and prioritize the struggles of men. Dr. Brittney Cooper, Assistant Professor of Africana Studies, Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies at Rutgers University and author of *Race Women: Gender and the Making of a Black Public Intellectual Tradition*, gave a compelling lecture on the idea of black girl solidarity during the opening plenary panel. She brings up the young girl that was slammed to the ground by a school-resource officer in South Carolina while sitting in a classroom. Cooper mentions that the only other person to speak up in defense of the young girl was a classmate named Niya Kinney who was also arrested for doing so. These forms of "punishment" and failures on behalf of the school is inextricably linked to the national trends of mass incarceration. The second example is the case of

Trayvon Martin and his friend Rachel Jeantel, who “sustained” her friend Trayon through his death by facing the abuse she was subjected to throughout the legal proceedings from the media and the general public. The importance of Black girl solidarity is a concept that has been historically overlooked and dismissed from within political resistance movements. Dr. Cooper suggests that there are multiple roles that can be played within a resistance movement – and it’s not always protesting in the streets, it comes in different forms, like sharing a collective experience and protesting the behavior of dominant institutions in any capacity (i.e. Kinney and Jeantel). In an article written for Salon.com, Dr. Cooper writes that “A Black girl who moves through space on her own terms is a significant threat to white supremacy and patriarchy. She is someone refusing the state access to her emotions, her dignity, or her fear. Whether loud or quiet, when Black women refuse to grant fear as a concession to power, they get violently beaten into submission”, or in Jeantel’s case, psychologically burdened by racial slurs, and words like “ghetto”, “fat”, “ugly”, and “illiterate”.

Dr. Cooper’s lecture was significant to the whole of the conference, and this course because it captured two very important points as to why the conference exists, and why courses like #BlackLivesMatter must exist:

- 1.) Trauma is disproportionately experienced by black girls and women at all levels of institutional power, from classrooms to courtrooms, and there is no policy, law, or curriculum that values their bodies, minds, or potential.**
- 2.) Contributions of black women and representation of black women in resistance movements, historical narratives, politics, and academia are severely limited, and often times, ignored and/or dismissed.**

The conference posed the question: How do we make black women and girls matter? The answer here is to address the issues in the two points mentioned above. Through learning and engaging hip-hop frameworks, young black girls begin to embrace their lived experiences and create ways to enrich themselves and their communities in and out of the classroom. It is a common misconception that the school-to-prison pipeline only effects boys – black girls are the most criminalized population of students in middle schools and high schools across the nation. Dr. Monique Morris, author of *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, outlined some of the ways in which institutions of education harm the livelihood of black girls: in-school and out-of-school suspensions for minor offenses, police presence on campuses, dress codes, and zero-tolerance policies are just some examples of how schools foster hostile, segregated learning environments. Another contributing factor to the school-to-prison pipeline are the major cultural pitfalls in regards to the curricula and education that communities of color are exposed too. Addressing the school-to-prison pipeline is crucial in combating the issues mentioned above and shows the dire need for critical hip-hop frameworks, not only to engage classrooms, but to engage culture, arts, and community. Education builds a collective consciousness and thus allows further liberation for current generations, and generations to come.

**“Have you cited a black woman today?”**