

## Romance, Hip-Hop Feminism, and Black Love: From Theory to Praxis

**Julie E. Moody-Freeman**

Published online: May 2022

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

**About the Author:** Julie E. Moody-Freeman is the Director of the Center for Black Diaspora and an Associate Professor in the Department of African and Black Diaspora Studies at DePaul University. She is the co-editor of *The Black Imagination, Science Fiction, and the Speculative* and *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism, and the Speculative*. Her scholarly essays on Belizean writer Zee Edgell have been published in *African Identities*, *Macomeré*, *Canadian Women Studies/les cahiers de la femme*, and *Seeking the Self-Encountering the Other: Diasporic Narrative and the Ethics of Representation*. Her work on African American Romance has appeared in *Romance Fiction and American Culture* and *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*. Moody-Freeman is also the creator and host of the *Black Romance Podcast*, which is building an oral history on Black Romance writers.

**Keywords:** Black feminism, Black romance, Gwendolyn Pough, Gwyneth Bolton

*“An expanded Black feminist theory is needed to contribute to the work of the Black public intellectual, especially the public intellectual dealing with Black popular cultures”*  
(Gwendolyn Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It* 73)

### Introduction

In 2004 Gwendolyn Pough, a Black Feminist, Rhetorician, and Hip-Hop scholar, wrote *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*. In this book, Pough illustrated how Black feminist theory could be “expanded.” She posited

that an intergenerational link between nineteenth century Black women writers and Black women rappers exists. For Pough, each generation used speeches, writings, music, and clubs in the public sphere to challenge society's stereotypical representations of Black womanhood, and, in turn, they reconstructed images about their sexuality. Pough also argued for a link to be made between feminism and rap because "the work of women rappers offers a productive and seldom-utilized platform for the work of feminism and the struggle against sexism" (73).

Six years later, she published a popular romance novel titled *Make It Last Forever* (2010) under the pseudonym Gwyneth Bolton. The setting for this novel centers the romance between Karen Williams, a self-declared Black feminist who loves rap music, and Darius (D-Roc) Rollins, a rap artist. World building takes place in the Shemar Sunyetta Youth Center, which Karen founded and of which she is Director, and in which D-Roc completes community service. The depiction of Karen merges Karen's love of Black uplift work, advocacy of feminist politics, and love for rap. Pough's publication of her Black popular romance novel *Make It Last Forever* continued the expansive project her academic book started with feminism because it engaged in a creative artifact that demonstrated the transformative ways to put into practice Black feminist theorizations about Black women, love, and rap. Therefore, I argue that Pough translates Black feminist activism and feminisms into praxis in *Make It Last Forever*. In doing so, she expands how Black feminist theory might contribute to writing, studying, and teaching Black popular romance fiction.

This paper draws on Black feminist theory and Literature and Cultural Studies to study *Make It Last Forever* (2010), which was written as Gwyneth Bolton. I use Pough's academic book *Check It While I Wreck It* (2004) to examine how she infuses her love for feminism and rap in her romance novel's characterizations of her heroine and hero Karen Williams and Darius (D-Roc) Rollins. In addition, I study this novel through the lens of Joan Morgan's and Darnell L. Moore's theorization about the erotic and pleasure to illustrate how a Black Feminist romance writer employs Black Feminisms in the practice of (re)writing romance. Bolton's deployment of a practice of feminism, which performs what Joan Morgan calls "Pleasure Politics," models how Black feminists might creatively theorize about Black love and about Black people's community work, sex lives and sexuality. In the final section of this paper, I draw on Pough's pedagogical approach to bring popular culture into the classroom in order for students to "practice working with difference" (195). I discuss students' reception to *Make It Last Forever*, as well as Pough/Bolton's response to them, to assess the pedagogical implications of using popular romance to put theory into praxis. I conclude that Pough/Bolton engages readers in the pleasurable messiness of inscribing Hip-Hop feminism in a novel that depicts Blacks loving themselves, each other, and communities most affected by institutionalized race, gender, and class oppression.

## **Part One: Black Feminism, Hip-Hop/Rap, and Black Love**

In *Make It Last Forever*, Gwyneth Bolton's depiction of the novel's heroine Karen merges Karen's love of Black uplift work, advocacy of feminist politics, and love for rap. Karen's feminist politics reflects Gwendolyn Pough's own scholarly arguments from her book *Check It While I Wreck It*, which emphasize her project to highlight the important

ways Black feminism can bridge the gap between those who only love rap or only love feminism and also bring love into the conversation about feminism and rap. To see the convergence of racial uplift, feminism, and Black love taking place at the site of the Center, one must understand how the theoretical underpinnings of Black feminisms and an ethic of Black love is shaping the novel. For that, I will set aside Gwyneth Bolton's romance novel for a moment and turn to her academic writing published as Gwendolyn Pough.

A key argument in *Check It While I Wreck It* is that listening to Black women rappers can tell us a lot about how they challenge sexism and advocate for an ethic of love in Black communities. Pough argues that, "Black feminist criticism and theory can also tell us significant things about women rappers" (73). Her analysis of a number of Black women rappers in *Check It While I Wreck It* does exactly this. According to her, Black women throughout the centuries have faced sexual stereotypes in images from popular culture created by whites as well as from images by Black men. To combat this, Black women have used their speeches, writings, songs, and other public expressions, which disrupted stereotypes and inscribed their own images of black women's sexuality. For example, Black women writers reconstructed Black womanhood against the 'cult of true womanhood'" (Carby qtd in Pough 73). Similarly, women rappers in the twenty-first century challenge Black men rapper's depictions of Black women as the "sexually promiscuous" (Pough 74). Pough, as Black feminist critic, analyzes Queen Latifah's song and video "UNITY" and argues that this song used the public sphere to challenge "sexual harassment, domestic violence, and the influence negative images of Black womanhood have on young Black women" (88). The song's title and lyrics simultaneously critique sexism in the Black community, but the lyrics do not end calling for a polemic in said community. Latifah's concluding lyrics call for love between Black men and women "from infinity to infinity" (qtd. in Pough 88). Examples of analysis like this emphasizes Pough's goal in the book to expand feminist criticism beyond just arguing that rap lyrics promote misogyny. She argues that critics can use the lyrics of Queen Latifah and other women rappers "[...] to note that the Hip-Hop generation does talk about and express love" (Pough 165-166).

Pough's analysis of Black Hip-Hop soul artist Mary J Blige also illustrates her emphasis on an ethic of self-love for Black women as an antidote to sexism. Her analysis of Blige's lyrics and interviews illustrate Pough's argument that, "[...] Hip-Hop culture and rap music provide a starting place for us to begin talking about and implementing an 'ethic of love,' love meant to liberate" (163). Here it's useful to note Pough's definition of Hip-Hop. For Pough, "Hip-Hop is the culture; rap the music" (3). Mary J Blige's soulful R & B "is helping rap evolve to yet another level of crossover appeal.... the love songs on the albums of Hip-Hop soul divas open up the floor for questions about love, thus providing a starting point for dialogue between the sexes" (172). Therefore, Blige uses her lyrics in "Real Love" and "Be Happy" to sing about her search for a loving partner and about the importance of loving oneself when the relationship becomes fraught (Pough 175-176). In her interviews Blige talks about ridding herself of the negative people and influences around her in the music industry, in her family, and friendships (Pough 175-176).

The analyses of Queen Latifah, Mary J Blige, and many other Black women Hip-Hop/rap artists provide an expansive Black feminist critical approach in the early 2000s in which she called for:

[...] feminism [...] to come down from its ivory tower. Young Black women, like it or not, are getting their life lessons from rap music. And because Queen Latifah, Salt-N-Pepa, and Queen Pen are far and few in between, it's up to Black feminism to pick up the slack (192).

*Make it Last Forever*, Pough's 2010 romance novel, takes up this charge by writing a love story centered around the lives of members of the Hip-Hop generation—one who is a feminist and the other a rapper. This novel fulfills Pough's mission to model her visions for Black romance characters from the Hip-Hop generation, for a Black activist/feminist heroine who loves rap, and for a Hip-Hop generation that can and do love themselves, each other, and their communities.

### **Hip-Hop Feminism, Pleasure, and Black Love in *Make It Last Forever***

Reading *Make it Last Forever* through Black feminist frameworks provides insight into the writer's characterization of her Black heroine. For example, she draws on the trope of the "sassy" Black woman to depict a self-loving heroine who confidently asserts her right to pleasure. Her deployment of a practice of feminism, which performs what Joan Morgan calls "Pleasure Politics," models how Black feminists might creatively theorize about Black women's sex lives and sexuality, reimagines how Black women experience pleasure in work, creative endeavors, and in sexual relationships. Darnell L. Moore's theorization about the erotic and pleasure is also useful to discuss Pough's writing practice, which infuses pleasure in the novel's depiction of a heroine who is comfortable in her own sensuality, feminism, and activism.

In the novel, Karen's Black feminism is made visible through her clothing. Karen Williams' Black feminist politics are identified by her T-shirt inscriptions. She literally wears her politics on her chest in the form of T-shirts, one which proclaims "I have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat" (location 155). Origins of the quote have been attributed to Dame Rebecca West, a British writer ("Rebecca West"). Another of Karen's T-shirts advocates prison abolition as the hero notes: "She also wore a black-and-white 'No More Prisons' T-shirt...the T-shirt told him something about her possible politics" (location 453). The novel makes direct references to Karen and the 1970s Black woman's hair aesthetics worn by Black activist women like Angela Davis. Her eventual partner, Darius, while looking at Karen, states: "He could have sworn her auburn and copper locs morphed into a 1970's Angela Davis Afro for a minute" (location 520). The T-shirt reference to prison abolition coupled with the novel's references to an Afro and the locs invoke Angela Davis, who wore both hairstyles, and Davis' life-long work on Black feminism and prison abolition in books such as *Are Prisons Obsolete?*. Therefore, Karen's clothing aligns her with a lineage of feminists who advocate for prison abolition. Coupled with this, Karen shares a love for Hip-Hop music and her community, so much so that she founds and directs a center created to help Black youths in the community.

Karen's clothing, which I have discussed, is meant to reflect her feminist politics, and her character is infused with joy and a comfortability in her own skin, her body, sensuality,

feminism, and activism. Karen is about the serious business of educating children in service to her community, but she is not depicted as a somber heroine so burdened by her tasks that she cannot take pleasures for herself. Throughout the novel, her personality is imbued with a playful sassiness. She gets her funded grant proposals written, manages the daily operations of the Center, and cares for her young charges by providing activities to keep them off the rough streets. I find Darnell L. Moore's discussion of the erotic useful here to talk about the importance of joy and pleasure when I discuss Karen and her activist work, because in his essay "What Freedom *Feels* Like: On Love, Empathy, and Pleasure in the Age of Neoliberalism," he emphasizes the importance of pleasure in activist movements. For Moore, it is important for activists to take time for moments of pleasure to avoid succumbing to the neoliberal "impulses" that value product and production (i.e. marches, policies, etc.) more than the activists' emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being (2). Too often in activist movements, the intimate celebration of human beings coming together in love and service to other human beings are marginalized for the larger neoliberal goal of some measurable goal or policy (Moore 2). Drawing on Audre Lorde's understanding of the "uses of the erotic as power," Moore implores activists to challenge this "impulse" to "rally, as if laborers in the social justice marketplace, for the purposes of merely producing 'goods'" (2). He encourages activists to take time to acknowledge each other and engage in simple pleasures that bring joy and love. Therefore, Moore calls for the infusing of pleasure in the activists' work to transform the world.

Written ten years before Moore's essay, *Make It Last Forever* already reflected Moore's call for pleasure in social activist movements. Bolton's characterization of Karen balances the level of focus and seriousness needed to create a solution by creating a safe space for Black youths with the pleasure Karen gets from her clothing and her sexual relationships with consenting partners. Karen is serious about the business of creating safe spaces for and educating Black youth in her center. She also takes joy in the simple pleasures of a comfortable pair of "Birkenstocks," "purple Converse sneakers," gold tipped locs, and feminist T-shirts worn with either "long crunchy granola crinkle shirts," or "jeans" (location 147).

Examining Karen's character through the framework of Moore's erotics of pleasure for activists and Joan Morgan's "pleasure erotics," which emphasize joy, sensuality, and sexual pleasure, heightens our understanding of the writer's project to construct a "sassy" Black heroine comfortable in her feminist politics, community work for the race, and in her sensuality and sexuality. Joan Morgan argues,

From academia to the blogosphere, we've become feminist fluent in theorizing the many ways in which our sexuality has been compromised. We've been considerably less successful, however, moving past that damage to claim pleasure and a healthy erotic as fundamental rights. Echoing the sentiments of my fellow Pleasure Ninja, Brittney Cooper: 'There is no justice for black women without pleasure' (36).

Gwendolyn Pough draws on her academic theorizing to create a sassy heroine who recognizes her own sensuality and engages in enjoying pleasurable sexual relationships. In *Check It While I Wreck It*, Gwendolyn Pough defines "sass" by using several theorists and writers. She argues: "For theorists such as Sandra Mayo, sassy Black women are strong and

assertive, with a ‘strong sense of somebodyness.’ They know their worth and their significance” (49).

There is a sensual and sassy playfulness in Karen’s interactions with the hero Darius that signal comfort in her body and sexuality. Her conversations and personality are filled with humor and frankness when she discusses her sexual relationship with Darius. This is illustrated in one of the conversations between Karen and Darius on one of their dates:

‘So, would I seem too forward if I suggested a nightcap at my place?’ He hedged slightly, sparing the quickest glance at her and noting the soft squint of suspicion that crossed her face.

‘You don’t quit, do you? I thought dinner was going to be enough for you and you would back off once I agreed. But you are just determined to keep asking for more, huh? You won’t stop until the panties drop, will you?’

His mouth fell open, and he could have sworn he heard his eyes go *ping*.... (location 1021, italics in original)

Here is an instance where Karen’s appraisal of Darius’ sexual intentions and her frankness in calling him out illustrate Karen’s sassiness, her humor, and the pleasure she derives from her interaction with Darius. Before this scene in the novel, it is clear that Karen is physically attracted to Darius, but she is a little suspicious of his intentions for her and for deciding to work at her center. Given her attraction to him, she accepts Darius’ invitation and has an enjoyable time on their date.

Bolton inscribes a certain rhythm to Karen’s bodily movement and to her facial expressions when looking at Darius. Those movements, facial expressions, and dialogue simultaneously signal sass. All three maintain a firm check on Darius’ presumptuousness about their relationship while preserving a lighthearted humor that leaves open the possibility for a more intimate relationship with him. The way Karen looks at Darius with “a soft squint of suspicion” and her words “You won’t stop until the panties drop will you?” emphasize her mistrust of Darius and her “sass” when she calls him out for his behavior. “Sass” is important to Pough’s feminist theorization because she argues: “[...] sassiness is the precursor to bringing wreck for Black women and a large part of the lineage in the Black women’s expressive culture that Black women rappers build on as they cause their own disruptions in the public sphere” (49). In *Make It Last Forever*, while Karen is not a rapper, I find Pough’s articulation of “sass” useful for her re-appropriation of a term that has been used historically to denigrate Black women as “the angry Black woman” with a one-dimensional image of her, “with hand on hip in outrage.” Pough’s use of “sass” acknowledges the necessity of Black women across generations to challenge white supremacy and patriarchy using “hand on hip in outrage.” This is but one tool in an arsenal of sassy strategies they have had to employ.

Understanding the importance Pough gives to the rhetorical trope of “sass” is useful to appreciate her playing with this trope as she depicts Karen’s personality and carefully selects what the heroine, who is clearly attracted to the hero, says to put the cocky hero in check. Karen disrupts Darius’ boldness and cockiness with the words “You won’t stop until the panties drop will you?” Darius’ reaction illustrates the effectiveness of her words to check him, which is signified by the narrative: “His mouth fell open, and he could have

sworn he heard his eyes go *ping*.” Her words equally illicit humor as a surprised Darius is caught off guard when she calls him out and leaves him with his mouth and eyes “open.”

Once Karen names Darius’ intention and disrupts his attempts at seduction, she then sasses him using silence and then humor:

With her left eye slanted and her lips twisted to the side, she appeared to be the picture of seriousness. It was only when she cracked a small smile before bursting into a fit of laughter that he knew for sure she was playing with him (location 1021).

This description of Karen’s visage (“left eye slanted and her lips twisted to the side”) is infused with humor as well as challenge. She tilts her head looking up at Darius not in a coy fashion but in challenging his supposed seduction and, as such, her reaction to him lets him know ‘I got your number/I know exactly what’s up.’ Then Bolton introduces humor as Karen laughs at Darius’ facial reaction (“mouth fell open, and he could have sworn he heard his eyes go *ping*”) and says: “Oh, you should see your face! It’s priceless” (location 1021). Darius recognizes her humor, and they laugh and banter back and forth:

‘You ain’t right. You ain’t hardly right. Here I am trying to come correct and you clowning a brother. That’s not cool.’

She laughed even harder, and he tried to hold his own laughter in and keep his façade of indignation (location 1021).

Pough infuses humor and pleasure in this entire scene in which Karen calls out Darius’ intentions for requesting a nightcap at his home. This dialogue models the erotic possibilities for open honest conversation that bell hooks calls for in *All About Love*. hooks discusses the example of a friend who felt shame in her intimate relationship with men. hooks suggests that she talks openly about “sexual pleasure” over lunch with the new man in her life. The result, hooks argued, was “[...] that the lunch was incredibly erotic; it laid the groundwork for them to be at ease with each other sexually when they finally reached that stage in their relationship” (174). In *Make It Last Forever*, while Karen never experiences sex or sexual pleasure as shameful, the dialogue between her and Darius models what bell hooks calls for in *All About Love*. As one reads the remaining chapter in which Darius asks Karen over for a nightcap, readers experience how Karen’s forthright questions, frankness, and humor introduce the possibility for an open and honest dialogue about her attraction to his “smiling, sexy face” (location 1021).

The depiction of Karen’s healthy embrace of sexual pleasure reflects Hip-Hop feminists’ push for sex positivity and push back against respectability politics. Joan Morgan argues: “I want an erotic that demands space be made for honest bodies that like to also fuck” (40). How does this pleasure politic play out in *Make It Last Forever*? Karen is no virgin, and she is not afraid to discuss her intentions to have sex with Darius or past sexual partners. In the dialogue between Karen and Darius on their date, for example, Karen propositions Darius: “Do you think if we...err...um...had sex, we’d be able to get this out of our systems and put it away?” (location 1095). Furthermore, she is quite frank to Darius that she and one of her co-workers had a FWB relationship (friends with benefits

relationship) and chastises Darius when, upon finding out that she was in an FWB relationship with the co-worker, gets upset. Karen tells him:

‘What’s the big deal? You knew I wasn’t a virgin right? I have had other lovers in this lifetime. Maybe you found me early in the past lives. But you were a little slow showing up this time, and a woman has needs’ (location 2094).

In this humorous scene, Karen playfully but firmly articulates her right to seek consensual pleasure. The scene playfully shows that Karen takes full responsibility for exploring ways to engage in pleasurable sex with men of her choosing. In attempting to represent a character who is comfortable in her body, her sensuality, and her sexuality, Bolton captures Hip-Hop feminism’s approach to openly discussing sex as one healthy and pleasurable aspect of Black womanhood.

## **Part Two: ‘Hood Work’: Hip-Hop Feminism, Black Masculinity, and Uplift Work**

In writing *Make It Last Forever*, Bolton highlights the infinite possibilities already present in Hip-Hop for love and social change. The Shemar Sunyetta Youth Center symbolically represents all Pough intends to convey: Black love, Hip-Hop, feminism, and racial uplift work. The Center is described by Karen as a safe space for youth “exposing them to things and ideas that would help them to stay off the streets” (location 427). It is this site dedicated to youths where the seeds are planted for a romantic union between a rap artist and black feminist. The Center bears the name of Karen’s friend Shemar, a Gangsta rapper whose music included “violent and misogynistic lyrics” and whose life was extinguished due to gun violence. Upon his death, his will bequeathed money and royalties from his music to Karen who then used it to open a center for Black youths and to “uplift the good parts of his memory” (location 732 and 1518). In an interview with me for the *Black Romance Podcast*, Gwendolyn Pough made explicit the link she was trying to make between Hip-Hop and a feminist activist project: “I think her [Karen] grappling with how to reclaim his [Shemar] legacy for good is definitely I think a Black feminist project” (Moody-Freeman). Shemar’s love for Karen becomes transformational. He passes the financial legacy to her that she then passes onto her community that she loves. *Make It Last Forever* therefore engages in a constant remixing of love and care between individuals and community.

Bolton uses *Make it Last Forever* to engage with several Black feminist concerns, one of which is the issue of Black masculinity and Black love in the Hip-Hop generation. In her writing as an academic, Gwendolyn Pough argues that, “Black romance novels perform a kind of activism” because “African American romance novels [...] offer readers and writers a way to rewrite images of black masculinity. For the most part the stereotyped images of black masculinity that populate the larger public sphere are missing for romance novels” (“GwenPough ScholarBlog”). Her depiction of Darius “D-Roc” rewrites one-dimensional popular images of Black masculinity as violent and unloving. Instead, she represents her hero as loving in his intimate relationship, family, and community. Darius, a successful rap



artist, illustrates Bolton's attempt "to break with conventional notions of macho masculinity," which are perceived "[...] as violent and angry, aggressive and threatening or oversexed and criminal" (Bell-Jordan 142), through his advocacy for a community center and through his rap love song for the heroine Karen.

Bolton constructs a hero who is first described by the heroine as a rap artist who produces what is described as "happy" "party" rap music. Karen, the novel's heroine, regards Darius' image as "goody-two shoes" and not "political hip-hop" (location 1935). Because of his music, Darius' masculinity as well as his community allegiance are questioned, and he receives criticism from individuals who feel that his rap is either not tough enough or political enough to qualify as rap. Karen is physically attracted to Darius' body, acknowledging that "She had seen his shirtless, perfectly chiseled torso on countless magazine covers, and it always made her stop and gaze longingly [...at the] photos of the ripples and muscles in his chest and those bulging biceps" (location 500). However, she is not endeared to what she considers his lack of political awareness and allegiance to the Black community when she first meets him, and she dismisses his music claiming that it has "no politics", "no political stuff" like "the rap music of Public Enemy and Dead Prez" (location 645). It's only after watching Darius work closely with the children at the Shemar Sunyetta Youth Center, and after she develops an intimate relationship with him, that Karen comes to realize that she might have been too judgmental of him and the music he created.

Darius' masculinity is definitely questioned by the Hip-Hop community when he writes a love song for Karen. According to his manager Cullen,

'That song is wack [...]. You rapping this lovey-dovey crap won't make them [your female fans] happy. And I noticed you didn't mention your men fans. Because you know the few you do have, the few who don't already think you're not hard-core will think you've completely gone soft after they hear this crap' (location 1985).

His manager Cullen challenged him by arguing that singing about love is not macho and masculine enough.

Bolton challenges the "conventional notions of macho [Black] masculinity" as well as Hip-Hop music as unloving. She does this by depicting a character, who meets his soulmate Karen, and who evolves to rap publicly about his love for her. In the novel, Darius exhibits his willingness to break relationships with his manager and music label in defense of his decision to write and distribute a rap love ballad arguing that his song "[...] was going to be a smash [like LL Cool J's 'I Need Love' and that] this song was about his love for her [Karen], her love for the people and how she made him want to be a better man. It was an ultimate love song" (location 1974). That quote neatly encapsulates Olga Silverstein and bell hooks' articulation of "'A good man [as] one who will be empathic and strong, autonomous and connected, responsible to self, to family and friends, and to society, and capable of understanding how those responsibilities are, ultimately, inseparable'" (*Salvation* 152). In expressing his love publicly for Karen in this song, she comes to see how Darius's song attempts to transform his genre to one where love and vulnerability can be expressed.

Bolton not only constructs a hero who breaks with the convention that masculine rappers are not supposed to sing about love, she creates one who also personally advocates

for the Black community. Bolton's "good" Black man must be a full participant in the racial uplift project through his responsible commitment to working in the community. As readers privy to Darius' point of view, we learn from him that he grew up in the "hood" and when he became successful, he provided money to help his family and to attempt to "keep his cousin out of the street." When his cousin is killed, he realizes that sending money is not enough and that spending time with his cousin may have been just as important as money:

What Frankie needed—hell, what the little thug who had shot and killed Frankie probably needed, for that matter—was someone willing to be there and talk to him and talk him out of foolishness. All the money in the world didn't make up for time (location 268).

Darius recounts that when Frankie called, he was always too busy working on a movie, working in the studio, or partying with a "sexy model" to talk to his cousin (location 296). Therefore, he feels guilty and that he needed to "*Man up!*" (location 268, italics in original). Traditionally, the phrase "*Man up!*" is fraught with different connotations that set expectations for masculinity or masculine traits and behaviors in juxtaposition to what society considers feminine or feminine traits and behaviors. Therefore, when a boy or man is told to "*Man up!*," it's often done said to cajole them into being tough, but to be tough not in a way that empowers people and communities around them. It is meant for boys and men to demonstrate some qualities of braveness, toughness that will afford them a victory, control over something, someone, or a situation. In the novel, one can read Bolton's use of "*Man up!*" as re-appropriating it to mean showing up and actually being present and available for his family, friends, and community. In the case of Darius, to "*Man up!*" is to be in support of his family and community.

Bolton also depicts how conventional prescriptions of masculinity as not soft or vulnerable leaves Darius with conflicting feelings. To do this, the novel complicates what it means to perform a Black masculinity in rap culture that sometimes asks Black men to express street cred by engaging in harmful behavior rather than show vulnerability. As he comforts his grandmother who publicly cries over Frankie's death, Darius hugs her but suppresses his grief because he is fearful that a YouTube video might show up revealing him crying causing him to lose "*Street cred*" (location 290, italics in original). Yet Darius questions his need for living only for the public's approval. He reflects that it is the very notion of masculinity that is grounded in wanting public "*Street cred*" in wanting to always seem "down" with the "hood" that got his cousin killed. Darius argues that "He threw money at the hood the same way he'd thrown money at his cousin" (location 295) and thus resolves that since he had failed his cousin, he could not fail his community. Darius moves beyond the concept of masculinity as just a provider to one that expresses true commitment to family and community by contributing money as well as time. He does this by contributing funds and donating his time to work with youths at the Shemar Sunyetta Youth Center.

Bolton's plot and characterization of Darius is a Hip-Hop feminist's creative engagement with Black masculinity in communion with a Black feminist heroine. In the end, the novel imagines ways Black men and women can hold themselves accountable to the Black community. In the case of Karen, she develops a center for Black youth. For Darius, he commits personal time to help Black youth and publishes a rap song that

expresses love for a Black woman. In turn, the novel proposes one model for representing love in the Hip-Hop generation.

### **Part Three: It's Complicated: Romance and Hip-Hop Feminist Advocacy: A Classroom Debate**

So far in this paper I have discussed how *Make It Last Forever* is a lesson in how a Hip-Hop feminist puts theory to praxis. Pough puts theory to praxis in her romance novel as well as in the classroom. In *Check It While I Wreck It*, she emphasizes why it was important for her to integrate rap in her "Introduction to Women's Studies" course. She argues,

I wanted students to explore the Black feminist critiques and begin to make their own observations. [...] I wanted students to use rap and the critiques of rap music to develop an awareness of the world outside of the immediate surroundings (Pough 196).

I adapted this pedagogical framework in my course on Romance, Gender, and Race when I taught *Make It Last Forever*. In this section, I discuss my students' reactions to one scene in the novel and to Gwendolyn Pough's inscription of feminist praxis in the novel. In the classroom, students raised critical questions about how Pough does this. One question, which I will focus on in this section is: Why does Karen, a feminist, call the police on a youth who is caught selling marijuana in the youth center?

This question – "Why does Karen, a feminist, call the police on a youth who is caught selling marijuana in the youth center?" – provokes classroom debates. The debates center discussions around transformative justice and about Karen thinking about calling the police on a fifteen-year-old youth. In the novel, Karen catches Clarence "trying to sell a marijuana blunt to one of the other young men" in the Center (location 352). Karen emotionally wrestles with what she should do about Clarence selling marijuana (location 352). Her emotion is described as "A familiar sadness began to creep into her heart" (location 352), and readers are told that, "She went back and forth in her mind about the right thing to do and decided against calling the police. She hoped she wouldn't regret that decision" (location 352). Karen experiences "sadness" and conflict over not calling the police because she wants to "save" Clarence but also maintain a safe space and "save" the other youths at the Center. We can see this when she states:

She really invested all of her money and her time in making the center a nice, welcoming space for the youth, a space where they could come and get away from the lures of the street.

Allowing Clarence to remain at the Center would jeopardize everything she was trying to accomplish. And more than just Clarence's future was at stake. So many young people needed the space that the center offered. Still, anytime she had to sacrifice one for the whole it hurt. She really wanted to save them all (location 366).

Karen wrestles with whether she should call the police on the teen but decides against it by arguing that “[...] she didn’t think being sent back to juvenile detention would have helped him [...]” (location 352).

Karen’s decision not to involve the carceral state in Clarence’s life can be linked to her feminist politics that advocate prison abolition. Karen’s clothing reflects her politics toward prison abolition as she wears the T-shirt with “No More Prisons.” In addition, in one of her conversations with Darius, Karen talks about how the “prison industrial complex” is the cause of Black children missing parents at home (location 746). In the end, Karen chooses to make a decision that she feels will help the majority of the Center’s youths. She chooses to expel Clarence from the Center, stating that “[...] more than just Clarence’s future was at stake” (location 366). Before Clarence leaves, Karen attempts to explain to him what he has done wrong and that he needs to take responsibility for his action. In addition, she attempts to offer him other options to being at the Center. However, Clarence, feeling betrayed, storms out of Karen’s office.

While the novel was published in 2010, students’ debates reflect having grown up in the context of the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman for the shooting of Trayvon Martin and in post-Ferguson after 2014. Students have witnessed in live time on social media Darren Wilson’s killing of Michael Brown as well as the killings of Black men and women at the hands of police. They have witnessed the movement to legalize marijuana. They also have watched the formation of Black Lives Matter by Black feminist activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullers, and Opal Tometi. Reading the novel through these contexts shapes some of their beliefs that it was wrong for Karen—a Black feminist who purported to love Black people—to threaten to call the police on a child selling marijuana in her center. On the other hand, a number of students feel that the teen selling marijuana defied the sanctity of a drug free environment and vociferously objected to any discussion that Karen’s choice was wrong. For them, it was enough that she never called the police. They believe thinking about it is not grounds for indicting Karen.

In an interview with Gwendolyn Pough for the *Black Romance Podcast*, I shared students’ responses with her. Pough’s critical self-reflective response reveals her feminist politics when she states:

If I was writing this now I would definitely—it’s not even coming up, a little bit. I wouldn’t even write the Hightowers now. Honestly, I am so over—I don’t wanna write no cop heroes, y’all not heroes. Like, literally (Moody-Freeman).

Her response acknowledged that had she written the novel today, she would never have introduced a plot line that involved calling the police.

Pough, like the students in their debates, highlights how Black communities have been harmed by external and internal forces and the decisions Black people have to make in the face of policing systems and policies that oftentimes don’t work for them and that can potentially be deadly. In the end, Pough argues: “[Karen] is trying to create a safe haven for other Black youth [...]” (Moody-Freeman). She adds that as a Black feminist, she struggles with how to hold accountable those outside and inside the Black community that cause harm to women:

I think the other part of it too that I think we grapple with as Black feminists and as a Black community and the Black feminist part of it for me is that, yes, the cops are killing us. But for Black women, Black men are killing us too. So, if we can't call the cops, what can we do? So that idea of how do we as a community survive if we are not able to really say that sometimes the harm is coming from within our communities and how are we going to deal with this? (Moody-Freeman)

Pough's words reflect a Black feminist articulation of intersectionality that she addresses in her academic work *Check It While We Wreck It* which identifies how "racism, misogyny, homophobia, and class discrimination function, and how they subordinate oppressed people and reinforce one another" (69-70). Her comments hold police officers accountable for racially profiling and violently harming Black people. The comments also hold Black men, who themselves are victims of police violence, accountable for the violence they perpetrate on Black communities. Oftentimes, Black communities, Black women, and Black feminists are asked to be silent about this latter harm done to them to preserve an outward appearance of community unity in a society that devalues Blackness. Black feminists like Pough, as well as her foremothers like nineteenth century Clubwomen, Angela Davis, Alice Walker, bell hooks, and countless others, have challenged how white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and economic disenfranchisement work to oppress Black women. *Make It Last Forever* is a vehicle to address larger pertinent questions about Black feminists' role in anti-Black racism, challenging policing, poverty, drugs, and sexism that continue to persist and affect Black communities across generations.

Students and Karen wrestle with similar questions of policing about whether or not she should have called the police on Clarence or whether she should have kept him at the center and offered additional help to make sure "he didn't move on to other drugs in the future" (location 381). There are no neat answers about policing in the novel, in the classroom debates, and in the lived experiences for Blacks today. Activists' continued advocacy for defunding the police and for abolishing prisons continued to shape protests across the United States in 2020, which was ten years after *Make It Last Forever* was published. It makes sense that the class dialogue and the push for policies outside of the class will continue to rage on.

My analysis of a writer's introduction of feminist praxis into the creative development of characters and romantic plot lays bare the valuable activist work that romance writing can accomplish. Whitney Peoples helps us to understand one dimension of the activist nature of scholars like Gwendolyn Pough. Peoples identifies the important work Hip-Hop feminists like Gwendolyn Pough performs: "The agenda [...] toward hip hop has shifted from one aimed primarily at critique to one of uplift, not of the music, but of segments of the population who consume it, specifically young African-American women and girls" (Peoples, 28). In sum, Hip-Hop feminists advocate for political education and institution building, and Gwendolyn Pough does this with her interdisciplinary book *Check It While I Wreck It* that illustrates the importance of Hip-Hop scholarship to studies in Rhetoric, African American oral and musical traditions, African American activist writing, and feminism. Similarly, Pough engages with this activist work by using her romance novel as a creative platform to envision spaces where humor, sass, pleasure, Black love, and activism can all co-exist for those from the Hip-Hop generation and beyond.

## Works Cited

- Bell-Jordan, Katrina. "Still Subscribing to Stereotypes: Constructions of Black Masculinity in Popular Magazines." *Masculinity in the Black Imagination: Politics of Communicating Race and Manhood*, edited by Ronald L. Jackson II and Mark Hopson, Peter Lang, 2011, pp. 129-145.
- Bolton, Gwyneth. *Make It Last Forever*. Harlequin, 2010. Kindle edition.
- Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete?*. Seven Stories Press, 2003.
- "Gwen Pough ScholarBlog: African American Romance – A Personal History Of Sorts." *Michelle Buonfiglio's Romance: B(u)y the Book*, 25 September 2009, <http://romancebytheblog.blogspot.com/2009/09/gwen-pough-scholarblog-african-american.html>.
- hooks, bell. *Salvation: Black People and Love*. Perennial, 2001.
- . *All About Love: New Visions*. Perennial, 2000.
- Moody-Freeman, Julie, host. "Gwendolyn Pough/Gwyneth Bolton." *Black Romance Podcast*, 6 October 2020, <https://blackromancepodcast.libsyn.com/gwendolyn-pough-gwyneth-bolton>.
- Moore, Darnell L. "What Freedom *Feels* Like: On Love, Empathy, and Pleasure in the Age of Neoliberalism." Audre Lorde Human Rights Lecture Series, The Kennedy School, Harvard University, 7 November, 2012, pp. 1-11.
- 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**.
- Peoples, Whitney. "'Under Construction': Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism." *Meridians*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2008, pp. 22-32.
- Pough, Gwendolyn D. *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*. Northeastern University Press, 2004.
- "Rebecca West." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 17 Dec. 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rebecca-West>.