

# “Start the Revolution”: Hip Hop Music and Social Justice Education

by

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## Abstract

This paper argues that Hip Hop represents a potent resource in the conceptualization of social justice pedagogy in urban communities. It seeks to conceptualize a Hip Hop pedagogy that also answers the challenge of African-centered education wherein Hip Hop becomes expressive of the intergenerational legacy of social critique and activism in African communities. Herein Hip Hop's utility as a vehicle of critical literacy is explored, seeking to answer the question of how Hip Hop pedagogy can inform resistance to the political-economies of racism, white supremacy and neoliberalism.

## Introduction

The collective effect of school closures, population displacement via gentrification, and mass incarceration have resulted in dislocations and disruptions of African American life in major cities in the U.S. This suggests that the urban milieu that W.E.B. Du Bois identified as contested space in his early Sociological field studies, remains such today. This confluence of crises challenges institutions to respond forthrightly to the evisceration of urban African American communities, or to position themselves as facilitators of Negro removal. This paper argues that Hip Hop, a music genre formed in the U.S. during the early 1970s by African-American, Caribbean, and Latino youths in the South Bronx section of New York City that became popular outside of the African-American community in the late 1980s that consists of a stylized rhythmic music that commonly accompanies a rhythmic and rhyming speech that is chanted (rapping) defined the stylistic elements of: MCing/rapping, DJing/scratching (turntablism), b-boying (a style of street dance that originated primarily among African American and Puerto Rican youth during the mid-1970s), break dancing, and graffiti art/writing, sampling (synthesis), and beatboxing (a form of vocal percussion primarily involving the art of mimicking drum machines via a person's mouth: lips, tongue, and voice) represents a potent resource in the conceptualization of social justice pedagogy in urban communities.

It seeks to conceptualize a Hip Hop pedagogy that also answers the challenge of African-Centered education, wherein Hip Hop becomes expressive of the intergenerational legacy of social critique and activism in African communities. Herein Hip Hop's utility as a vehicle of critical literacy is explored, seeking to answer the question: How Hip Hop pedagogy can inform resistance to the political-economies of racism/white supremacy and neoliberalism.

*They ain't fighting poverty, they fighting the poor/And every couple of years they just declare a new war/Cold war, drugs, gangs, terrorism, et cetera/Man I been seen it coming got my vision ahead of ya/They be BSing me because I didn't enlist/That be their hatred boy that I refuse to resist/That be they hate a brother because of this black fist/But nah, they probably just chasing young Muslims for kicks/Ya know same story brothers face and constantly chanting/Meanwhile in my brain I'm thinking about Fred Hampton/Geronimo, Mumia, and Assata Shakur/Imam Al-Amin plus a whole lotta more/But waiting for the opportunity to settle the score....*

-Capital D, "Start the Revolution" (2004, track 2).

## **A Confluence of Crises**

Chicago is illustrative of the contested nature of space within the global political-economy of neoliberalism and white supremacy. The technocratic forms of governance that led to the closure of 50 schools in 2013 (Ahmed-Ullah, Chase, and Sector 2013) is both a hallmark of neoliberal forms of governance (Lipman 2011) and illustrative of the paucity of African American political power. In both contexts political participation is deemed intrusive or disruptive to the process of policy formulation, and African Americans' voices and their vociferous demands are ignored, meeting the ambivalence of an unresponsive school board (Lutton 2013). This suggests that the demographic representation of African Americans within America's major population centers does not necessarily equate to proportional representation in terms of their ability to make policy.

The preceding point is underscored by the mass displacement of African Americans over the last decade, as former public housing residents are moved about within (Moser 2014) and outside of the city. (Lipman 2011). As a matter of policy, these dislocations have served to stimulate the city's housing market, create new upscale neighborhoods, and bolster the city's image on the world stage as an urban destination for tourists. The inverse is that these processes have priced many residents out of their former communities, exacerbated the racialized containment of low-income African Americans, and destabilized already struggling areas by injecting hundreds of new residents newly displaced from public housing.

The dispersal of public housing residents merely echoes previous initiatives that have resulted in the removal or reconfiguration of African American and other communities of color (Fernandez 2009). Central to this process is the racialization of space. That is, the attribution of racial and class features to physical spaces. Within a racist and white supremacist context, the consequence of this process can be quite profound.

Due to the totalizing nature of white supremacy, space is never neutral. It is inscribed, by default, as *white space*, a quality of possession that is either actual or potential. Spaces either lie within the direct possession of the white community, or they are spaces that are in the process of being appropriated by the white community. In both instances space has already been designated as space to which whites are entitled, therefore the act of acquisition is secondary to the reality of possession, which is assumed, whether acquisition is extant in a present or future reality. This poses severe challenges to the idea of a *Black community*, and the personhood of those who inhabit said communities. (Rashid 2014)

Resulting in a super ordination of the interests of the white community, the racialization of space creates conditions of fundamental insecurity for African American communities in terms of their political enfranchisement, institutional viability, and spatial integrity. And also, linked to this is the process of mass incarceration, which has resulted in a profound disruption of the cultural and institutional processes of African American communities. Whether driven by failed drug enforcement policies (Alexander 2012) or processes of racialized containment (Lipman 2011), communities of people of color in general, and African Americans in particular have been perennially impacted by policing as a method of control and suppression within the largely inequitable political-economy or urban America. We are reminded by this in W.E.B. Du Bois's early community studies of African American communities offer vivid portraits of the imperiled nature of black life in America's metropolises. His 1901 study of the Black community of New York City...offers a portrait that is at once compelling and tragic. While he notes the burgeoning nature of the community--driven by migrations from the South--he also comments upon the challenges faced by these communities such as incarceration and discrimination in housing and employment. Du Bois's findings are apt, as they capture the tension inherent in the constitution of space within a white supremacist context. (Rashid 2014)

Succinctly stated, the city represents a frontier of African American life whose promise has been simultaneously bountiful and tragic. As African Americans have sought to shape these spaces in dynamic ways leading to community empowerment, education and the cultural arts that have been a recurring tools of struggle (Danns 2005; Neckerman 2007; Stovall 2005).

## Hip Hop and the Politics of Black Liberation

Hip Hop's emergence as a cultural form parallels its application in the vein of social justice (Ards 2004). This social justice dimension has gained expression in varied contexts (Kitwana 2004). Perhaps most prominent among these has been the emergence of socially conscious Hip Hop in the late 1980s. Born of the latent African American nationalist movement, socially conscious Hip Hop mirrored Black Nationalism's three core thrusts (Karenga 2001; Lusane 2004): *political*--as in the music of Public Enemy, Paris, KRS ONE, or Sister Souljah; *religious*--as reflected by artists such as Poor Righteous Teachers and Brand Nubian; and *cultural*--as in the case of X-Clan, Queen Mother Rage, and Isis.

This political movement within Hip Hop can be looked at in a number of ways. In one respect it reflects a reappropriation of the ideological tenets of Black radicalism from the late 1960s-1970s. In other ways it may also signal the totalizing nature of capitalism, as Hip Hop's voice of opposition was effectively commoditized for the mass consumer (Lusane 2004). In any event this political movement did represent a potential shift in the ideological and ideational dynamics of the African American community insofar as it signaled an intergenerational movement around crafting solutions which were artistic, organizational, and institutional to the structural malaise of postindustrial, urban Black communities (Kitwana 2004; Neal 2004). Within this vein Hip Hop became a platform for social criticism, often articulated a vision (though sometimes deeply conflicted) of social transformation, and was employed as a tool of social activism (Ards 2004; Boyd 2004; Hall 2009; Kitwana 2004). Hip Hop also became a new social canvas upon which the failures of the civil rights movement, the violent suppression of the Black Power movement, the sweeping changes of postindustrial society, and the painful dislocations of urban transformation and mass criminalization might be reconceived and reconstructed as the signifiers of a new social possibility—one wherein Hip Hop, as a cultural composite, might also reflect this new cultural moment (Alexander 2012; Neal 2004; Walker 2003).

If media exists as an agent of socialization, by the late 1980s Hip Hop had become a critically significant element in the social-construction of reality, particularly as it pertains to Black identity (Coates 2004; Ogbar 2007). As an agent of socialization, situated within a political-economy of African American marginalization, Hip Hop became a contested terrain of ideas in a struggle of grossly unequal, yet partially concordant interests. Whereas viable commercial Hip Hop artists had to fulfill the profit imperatives of a capitalist industry, artists who sought to infuse social critiques into their works had to navigate the liminal space of commercial viability and social relevance.

Herein Hip Hop's emergence as a form of social criticism which reflects dual traditions. One tradition is bound within the historical malaise of Black artistry within a White supremacist society, wherein Black artists are expected to don the minstrel's guise and placate the seemingly insatiable White American appetite for Black caricature (Ogbar 2007).

The second tradition draws more substantively upon the Black Power era's insistence upon self-determination for African Americans regarding the constructions and representations of their identities (Smethurst 2005; Widener 2010). Just as the second principle of the *Nguzo Saba Kujichagulia* (Self-Determination) asserts, African Americans were compelled *to define, name, and speak for themselves, instead of being defined, named and spoken for by others* (Karenga 1997, 59-60). This tradition certainly echoes earlier calls from the Harlem Renaissance for more holistic portrayals of the African American community (Du Bois 1996). Thus Hip Hop's conflicted representations articulated both the emancipatory ideals of Black liberation struggles historically, as well as the vapid iconography of Black deviance and dysfunction, which had become a staple of American popular culture going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Ogbar 2007).

Despite the enduring tragedy of this perennial conflict, Hip Hop's significance with regards to socialization is undiminished. Asa Hilliard (1998, 2002) has argued that socialization is an organic and essential process in the cultivation of human consciousness. This is especially true with regards to the development of a critical worldview. In this vein, Hilliard and others have noted the role of a myriad of social contexts vital to this process. These include the family, schools, peers, media, and so forth as agents of socialization. In discussing the significance of socialization as a cultural process, Hilliard (1995) maintains that it is bound within the power relations of society. Turning to the context of colonial Guinea-Bissau, Hilliard quotes Amilcar Cabral, a principle leader in Guinea-Bissau's independence struggle against Portugal. Cabral stated, "it is generally within the culture that we find the seed of opposition" (Hilliard 1995, 57). Elaborating upon Cabral's contention, Hilliard states that European colonizers sought to achieve domination by annihilating or subverting the cultures of their intended subjects. Cabral recognized the role of culture as an instrument of oppression, particularly via its capacity to shape the worldview of the oppressed. Therefore Hilliard insisted upon the construction of cultural practices that seek to simultaneously disrupt the domination of the oppressed; in addition to facilitating the reconstruction and reinforcement of their culture and its attendant social systems as a means to end oppression. With regards to Hip Hop, Hilliard's analysis compels us to consider the deeply contradictory nature of commercial Rap music within the process of socialization given that its locus of control is situated outside of the domain of its consuming masses, (particularly working class and poor people of color) and thus the thrust of its cultural production is beholden to the interest of profit, not liberation.

This process of socialization becomes critically important in a number of respects according to Hilliard (1998, 2002) and Mwalimu Shujaa (2003), both of whom emphasize not simply *what is taught*, but also *why it is taught*, and *at whose insistence*. Shujaa elaborates upon this when he states, "The elite members of the politically dominant culture strategically impose knowledge and worldview priorities on the less politically powerful culture groups in U.S. society. This process of cultural imposition is a function of schooling-at all levels. Schools are places where people are sorted and slated for particular roles in the society" (Shujaa 2003, 180). Thus Shujaa contends that *knowledge* is constructed relative to the social interests of those who wield power. In this case, we are speaking of power in its political, economic, and cultural dimensions.

The issue of power and the process of conceptual imposition, which Shujaa notes, are certainly applicable to the contested nature of schools. But it is also directly relevant in a critique and analysis of mass media. Hilliard (2002) argues that similar to schools, media represents a potent site of socialization. He contends that the concentration of media in the U.S. vests unparalleled power in the hands of corporations. He states, “This arrangement affords the owners of the corporations with the power to disseminate any message that they choose. And choose they have. Using the endless resources of the powerful corporate conglomerations, they have shaped the public’s view of reality” (34). Thus if we are interrogating the nexus of political power and education, we must situate these queries within the broader social milieu, reflecting on the media climate and its relationship to the systems of power that often constrain the agency of communities.

Hence the three queries that have been posed by both Hilliard and Shujaa - *what is taught, why is it taught and at whose insistence* can be rephrased as *what are the symbols contained within this particular object, image, or idea?, why is this particular image being transmitted?, and whose interests does this image serve?.* These questions are critically important in critiquing mainstream media, and also in terms of interrogating Hip Hop’s utility within educational settings. Moreover, its utility as an educational tool has been underexplored, particularly as it relates to the rich diversity of independent socially conscious Hip Hop. This paper will examine the varied ways that Hip Hop informs the process of critical education. It will answer the following queries: How can an analysis of Hip Hop holistically express the conceptual and structural dynamics of society? What is the nature of the social criticism that emerges from Hip Hop music? What are some practical approaches to employing Hip Hop in the classroom? How can Hip Hop be useful in encouraging critical reflection and analysis? How can a Hip Hop pedagogy inform resistance to the political-economies of racism/white supremacy and neoliberalism?

## **Hip Hop Pedagogy**

These queries are crucially important, as Hip Hop and social-justice education have been the subjects of a growing body of recent scholarship. Much of the literature on Hip Hop and education focuses on Hip Hop’s utility as a curricular instrument in K-12 settings (Hallman 2009; Hill 2009; Stovall 2006). Hallman (2009) discusses how educators use Hip Hop as a bridge between the literacies possessed by students, which emerge out of their day-to-day lives, and the *formal* literacies of schools. Hallman notes how educators used Hip Hop as a tool to stimulate students’ writing and critical reflection upon the complexities of their lives, and to give them a sense of agency derived from their capacity to understand and reconstruct their realities. Hill (2009) takes a similar approach, examining the complex utility of what he refers to as “Hip Hop Based Education” or HHBE. (10). He reflects on his utilization of rap lyrics as literary texts in a school setting.

His journey reveals a number of reflections about constructions of authenticity, one-way narratives that privilege teachers over students, silences regarding race, the subjectivity of notions of heroism, conceptions of intergenerational discontinuity, and the capacity of a Hip Hop literary *canon* to connect in meaningful ways to students' narratives, identities, and lived realities. Additionally, Stovall (2006) offers an example of how the analysis Hip Hop lyrics can complement social studies texts in a way that illuminates the omissions and distortions of American History. He also demonstrates how students' reflections upon Hip Hop, often creates viable connections to their lived experiences, bolstering their capacity to critically evaluate society via the symbolism and messages embedded (encoded) in Rap music.

Other scholars have noted Hip Hop's utility within teacher education programs, in addition to reflecting on how Hip Hop can lend itself to transformative praxis by in-service teachers (Akom 2009; Irizarry 2009; Rodriguez 2009). Akom (2009) argues that Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy (CHHP) is essential in crafting culturally relevant modalities of student engagement (54). The pervasiveness of Hip Hop culture, coupled with the imperative that students acquire the theoretical tools to understand their realities necessitates a reevaluation of Hip Hop's relevance in suburban and urban classrooms. Akom argues that CHHP requires that students are given a range of sources including texts, video, artifacts, oral histories, and the like as a means to develop complex, community-based, and action-oriented analyses of the structural problems that beset their communities (55) Akom argues that youth-constructed knowledge empowers and positions them as agents of change in their communities. Akom offers examples of how Hip Hop informed his teaching. In one instance he assigned students to conduct case studies of local communities. This project was designed to facilitate students' engagement with the residents of local communities, develop their assessment and analysis of community problems, and provide a platform for them to explore the utility of Hip Hop as a tool to educate people about social issues. In short, Akom argues that CHHP can facilitate engagement with students and communities in ways focused on critical analysis and social transformation.

Similar to Akom, Irizarry (2009) discusses the pedagogical and political implications of *Representin'* as a Hip Hop value that compels participants within Hip Hop culture to authentically reflect a particular set of lived experiences, beliefs, or spatial contexts. In this vein Irizarry notes that educators who *represent* seek to express solidarity with the communities they serve (500). This commitment of solidarity necessitated that they look critically at the policy frameworks that impeded their capacity to effectively serve their students, such as prohibitions against the use of Spanish as a language of instruction. In other instances teachers sought to develop curricula that went beyond cultural competence, but also they endeavored to promote critical literacy among students. Irizarry contends that teachers who *represent* did not perceive their role as being bound to the school itself, but saw their commitment to their students as a commitment to the eradication of the structural forces that constrains their students' life chances and quality of life. Irizarry's contribution integrates a core element of Hip Hop epistemology, *representin'*, and demonstrates how social justice educators in under-resourced schools of students of color enact this value.

Inherent in Irizarry's discourse of *representin'* is the idea of dialog between subjects' context, experiences, and beliefs. Rodriguez (2009) explores the failure of teachers and teacher education programs to ground their work in dialog with the voices of low-income communities of color through Hip Hop. Rodriguez argues that educators often fail to value the existent cultural capital of the communities they serve. This is particularly acute when they are set apart from these communities by racial, ethnic, class, or generational differences. Focusing on Hip Hop's utility within the classroom, Rodriguez argues that students' engagement with Hip Hop, and their localized epistemologies provide a ready-made context for teachers to create situations of mutual dialog, wherein students' knowledge is valued and their lived experiences take a central place in the classroom. This is in contrast to the practice of students' realities being pushed to the periphery; whilst standardized instruction, standardized curricula, standardized testing, and zero tolerance discipline polices occupy the center of classroom life. Rodriguez maintains that part of the key to generating this dialog is in reconceptualizing teacher education programs, centering Hip Hop and the narratives of urban youth as core elements of curricula.

Other scholars have used Hip Hop as a vehicle to examine the identities and social contexts of urban youth. Baszile (2009) looks at Hip Hop and education through the lenses of Curriculum Theory and Critical Race Theory. She posits that Hip Hop is often blamed as the reason for a cultural disconnect between students and schooling. Baszile maintains that schools have historically operated in ways that were antithetical to the cultures and identities of urban students of color. She also contends that Hip Hop may in fact express this oppositional stance in ways that have cultural resonance. She argues that Hip Hop embodies a form of counter-storytelling that resists the process of schooling, one that is not simply alienating, but argues for the invalidity of students of color as subjects who diverge from the assumed norms of Whiteness, maleness, middle classness and so forth. Additionally, Baszile compels us to consider the educational spaces that lay beyond the school that can be utilized to advance social justice pedagogies that engage the cultural knowledge of students and their communities, and that can serve as vital sites of resistance against a culture of psychic coercion and the structural arrangements that necessitates it.

Also drawing upon insights from Critical Race Theory Pulido (2009) looks at how Hip Hop music reflects the complex identities of Latino/a students in and around the Chicago area, in addition to how Hip Hop informs their social beliefs about racism. Pulido argues that Hip Hop provides a rich textual discourse which resonates with many Latino/a youth, often providing counternarratives to the intolerance, racism, imperialism, and class subordination which reflects their lived experiences. In this sense Hip Hop represents a de-centered locus of power, apart from the seemingly monolithic corporate media or the *official knowledge* of the schools (Apple 1995). It diverges from these centers of power, instead capturing the struggles of those who live outside of the American dream, who in the words of Malcolm X are the "...victims of Americanism." (1964). Pulido's work argues for a critical reevaluation of Hip Hop as body of social criticisms that stands as a vital counternarrative to the racialization of Latino/a students, and thus, the containment and policing of Latino/a communities, and the suppression of students as makers of social change.

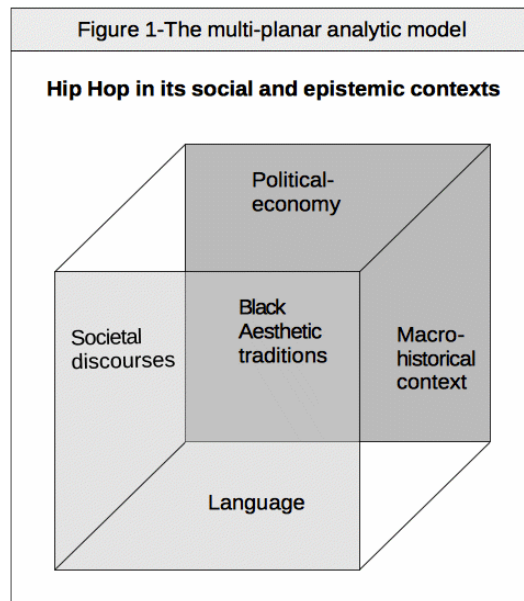


## **Framing Education as an Act of Resistance**

This paper is an attempt to explore Hip Hop's utility in the vein of critical education. Herein, critical education is defined as an educational process which is guided by three principle goals: the cultivation of a critical world view, the development and expansion of a comprehensive and relevant knowledge base, and an attempt to apply this education towards the goal of social transformation (Shujaa 2003). At its core critical education is concerned with disrupting “The tendency of conformist thinking...”, which compels, as Shujaa states “...inaction when action is needed” (180). It demands that we acquire the capacity to discern the embedded interests inherent in any particular configuration of structural arrangements, and to disrupt the pattern of *schooling*, which seeks to imbue “...the members of a given social order... with the idea that their interests are aligned with those who hold political and cultural authority within that social context” (181). *Critical Education* should not only provide a framework for critical thinking, but should also reinforce the cultural bonds of communities (181-182). It should affirm the indigenous ways of knowing, create continuity from one generation to the next, and inform the construction of social spaces that allow for the expansion of life and the resistance to hegemony (186-188). Hence this work is informed by Hilliard's (1998, 2002) and Shujaa's (2003) concepts of oppression, which critiques the racialized hegemony of U.S. society, and the efforts to render this hegemony invisible via society's instruments of socialization.

This work also draws upon the multi-planar analytic model (Figure 1), which requires that the analysis of a particular social phenomenon be reconciled with the attendant social and epistemic influences that are central to its development and functioning. This model is readily applicable to Hip Hop or any other cultural phenomenon and may be useful in illuminating the social contexts that Hip Hop is embedded.

Lastly, I draw upon my experience of using Hip Hop as an educational tool in three areas: Chicago, Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, and St. Louis, Missouri. In each of these contexts I compelled students to reflect upon Hip Hop as a sociological and historical phenomenon. I also attempted to solicit students' personal narratives as a means to contextualize their own experiences with and within Hip Hop alongside the prevailing contextual dynamics.



## **Towards a Critical Hip Hop Discourse**

Part of the challenge in formulating a paradigm of critical education centered around Hip Hop lies in decoupling Hip Hop's mediated and communal domains. Herein Hip Hop's mediated persona refers to Hip Hop's existence as a media commodity. This commodification of Hip Hop expresses varying degrees of commercialization and/or commercial exploitation (Bennett 2004; Negus 2004). This domain parallels and in some instances contrasts Hip Hop's communal expression, particularly "the underground" and local enclaves of Hip Hop artists and fans. This decoupling is necessary to explicate the varied ways that Hip Hop manifests itself as a critical social discourse.

In this section I will explore the relevance of Chicago's independent Hip Hop scene of the late 1990s and early 2000s as a space wherein this critical discourse comes to the fore. This analysis will draw from the musical content of various artists from this era who attempted to use their music to promote social critiques. These critiques were expressed in three basic ways. They were generally political critiques, cultural critiques, or artistic critiques. Political critiques were generally directed at the state and its policy apparatus; cultural critiques focused on the ideologies that legitimized and sustained oppressive systems; and artistic critiques interrogated the reality of Hip Hop as an object of consumption. Though each of these critiques had different foci, each concentrated upon the role of power in fashioning Hip Hop and/or the larger society. It should be noted that although these categories are provided in order to establish a conceptually discreet schemata for engaging these artists' music, some artist's music spanned these relatively fixed categories.

## Political Critiques and the Chicago Hip Hop Laboratory

Political critiques involved artists who used their music to engage in criticism of the state and its policy apparatus. This was most clearly expressed by Frontline Magazine's Black Fist Collective (2002) who released various CDs during this period. These CDs featured independent artists like Amen Ra, Kazi and Diggs, and others. These artists' songs engaged a cross-section of topics including the War on Terrorism, U.S. drug policy, and African American political prisoners. This form of criticism was joined by other artists including Primeridian (2005), who (on their album *Da All Nighsta*) engaged in a lengthy critique of U.S. foreign policy in Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, Capital D (2004) uses his solo album *Insomnia* to critique a range of issues including U.S. foreign policy, racism, and class inequality.

Amen Ra (Black Fist Collective 2002, track 8) offers a counter-narrative to the Bush administration's emerging War on Terrorism in his song "Son of a Bush".

*See you can trick the people, but you can't trick a thug/I know the Bushes and Bin Ladens invest in oil and drugs/Afghanistan gives the world 70% of its heron and opium/So don't get tricked by the lies coming from Bush's podium/The U.S. and Saudis both helped to set-up the Taliban/So that they could have easy access to the dope from Babylon/That's right, these thugs that are dying in the streets/are dying for corporate thugs, politicians, and sheikhs.* (Black Fist Collective 2002, track 8)

Amen Ra's critique goes considerably beyond the supposedly *acceptable* bounds of critique often engaged in by journalists and academics of Bush-era policies. His position may be underscored by a disbelief in the legitimacy of the Bush administration itself, and certainly a disbelief in its rationalizations of its foreign policy. Thus Amen Ra's critique is not constrained by any notion of "shared values", "social good", or "democratic ethos" that exists within the upper echelon of the U.S. state apparatus. His perspective is that the United States is governed by criminals, whose power and prestige are used to mask their true intentions.

Moreover, Amen Ra situates this war on terrorism as a campaign to secure the geo-political interests of the U.S. government, corporate interests, and select foreign interests (i.e., the Saudi royal family and the administration of Tony Blair). His central thesis is that the Taliban do not represent a diametrically opposed force to the U.S., but rather they are former allies, whose cooperation ceased to be worthwhile in furthering U.S. interests in the central Asian region. Thus whether one accepts or dismisses Amen Ra's critique, it is a compelling example of Hip Hop music being brought to bear on the policy process and its impact in the world.

## Cultural Critiques and the Chicago Hip Hop Laboratory

Cultural critiques consisted of artists who used their music to problematize society's dominant ideology. These artists carried out a two-part agenda. Their first agenda was to critique acceptance of the status quo, and to trouble any notions of its inherent legitimacy. Secondly, they sought to pose alternative frameworks for viewing society, primarily through a critical lens. Artists who employed this approach included the aforementioned group Primeridian (2005), who used their songs "Tatduhendi (Boogie Men)" (2005, track 8) and "Social Studies Pt. Two" (2005, track 10) to deconstruct what Baszile calls "the curriculum of the hero (2009, 9), which valorizes the supposed democratic virtue of the American society, and in doing so renders invisible the complicated and challenging histories of racism, colonialism, patriarchy, class inequality, heterosexism, and the like which have been in indelible part of the social fabric of American society.

"Tatduhendi (Boogie Men)" begins with a verse by Primeridian member Tree, (also known as Jaime Roundtree) who offers a scathing critique of the inextricable links between the state, capital, and human suffering. "Stop leading me on. We need to be strong/They're stringing us along saying things ain't wrong/with their democratic way of life that they must preserve/so they rape and rob countries leaving people on the verge/of war, as long as the profit is secure/the means to the end is justified by their laws" (Primeridian 2005, track 8). This segment is important in several ways. First, it clearly operates in both the realms of policy and cultural critique. Secondly, it begins with Tree's insistence to "Stop leading me on", referring to the dominant discourse that seeks to mask oppression by dismissing it as an unfortunate byproduct of an otherwise equitable social structure. He follows this by invoking the agency of the masses stating, "We need to be strong", an idea that recurs in this verse. He moves on to an appeal to the masses based upon the objective nature of their subordination. This subordination is characterized in two ways. First is the subordination of the masses to the dominant ideology. This is reflected in his line "They're stringing us along saying things ain't wrong". Here he argues that the dominant ideology is used to obscure the masses' critical awareness of the objective conditions that produce their subordination. The second type of subordination is that which is antidemocratic in practice, which is masked as democracy. He says, "With their democratic way of life that they must preserve", which suggests that what is actually being preserved is not the supposed freedoms of the masses, but something more sinister. This is confirmed in the next line in which he continues, "so they rape and rob countries leaving people on the verge/of war, as long as the profit is secure/the means to the end is justified by their laws". Thus, behind the veil of *democracy* is the reality of imperialism, neocolonialism, and destabilization--a host of processes that, though morally objectionable, are "justified by their laws".

Tree's critique continues as he moves on to a corrective. This corrective returns to the line mentioned earlier which states "We need to be strong". As this song continues he delineates the particulars of why this strength is required:

*We must supply the force, revolutionary course/Our source of inspiration is taking back the source/Never to be defeated if the people are united/the power of the people that's how we have succeeded/Those who have succeeded used the power of the people/The people united will never be defeated/The people united will never be defeated/The people united will never be defeated/The people united will never be defeated.* (Primeridian 2005, track 8)

Thus Tree concludes this verse with a call to action--mass action, a cultural transformation of sorts, wherein democratic praxis gains expression in the masses playing a direct role in the reconfiguration of society. He argues that a corrupt and exploitative system must be overturned by the same masses upon whose backs it rests.

### **Artistic Critiques and the Chicago Hip Hop Laboratory**

Lastly, some artists employed Hip Hop to initiate critiques of mainstream Hip Hop music. I have called these critiques *artistic* in nature. Groups such as Rubberroom (1999) used their music to challenge the formulaic nature of popular Hip Hop music. This form of critique may be informed by a rejection of the core relationship that exists between art and a capitalist system. Here I am referring the idea that art's highest value is its value as an object of conspicuous consumption within a capitalist society.

Within a capitalist system art does not exist for its own sake, or to express the creativity of the artist. Instead art facilitates the acquisition of profit (Benjamin 1936; Coates 2004; Duffy and Jennings 2008). But the profitability of art requires a degree of certitude in its mode of production and delivery. Capital D (1998) has attempted to convey the nature of this relationship when he states that for Hip Hop to be profitable it must be held in stasis, meaning the art's dynamic potential must be suppressed so that its movements can be carefully directed along the lines deemed most profitable by the music industry. This results in the preponderance of redundant themes in the Hip Hop music. These themes include the incessant portrayals of African American male criminality (Coates 2004; Watts 2004), the hypersexualization of African American women (Keyes 2004), and the interweaving of minstrelsy and conspicuous consumption in Hip Hop symbolism (Muhammad 2009). Therefore what is being referred to herein as *artistic critiques* are not simply critiques of style, but critiques of the process and product inherent in the commodification of Hip Hop music.

Rubberoom's 1999 album *Architechnology* is an artistic departure from much of the aforementioned formulism. One of the first releases off the album, "Smoke" (1999, track 2) provides a contrast between underground or independent Hip Hop and commercial Hip Hop. In one verse, Rubberoom member Lumba says, "Commercial artist lose sleep/feeling the presence of Brothers like me/Hungry MCs who can't wait carve their names in the brains of stars why they camp up in cars/Mr. one-line be like bonsoir". The physical assault captured in this line mirrors the conceptual assault that Rubberoom attempts to embark on. This is also expressed on the song "Architechnology Nine" (1999, track 11), where Lumba says "Diluted forms of art are uprooted/consecutive with rhetoric and measurement/its only all for a quarter/in eternal slaughter/equate another three eighths/and seal fate/Don Poetic the war epic/utopia blowing minds...." In this verse Lumba conveys Rubberoom's attempt to demarcate their Hip Hop project apart from the corporate Hip Hop project. Similar to the other verse that was quoted, Lumba emphasizes Rubberoom's music as an assault, or a "war epic" narrating their campaign to reconceptualize Hip Hop along more emancipatory lines, that is, in a direction that is both creative and critical in essence.

These critiques demonstrate the varied ways that Hip Hop music has been employed to advance various social critiques. Moreover they demonstrate Hip Hop's existence as a living social discourse, one that informs and is informed by the over-arching political-economy and ideology of society. From an educational standpoint, this critical Hip Hop discourse can be employed as aural text, one that attempts to challenge society's dominant discourse and pose alternative perspectives and solutions.

## **Hip Hop in the Classroom**

In addition to the social critiques within the music, there are also many benefits that Hip Hop lends to a process of critical education. In this section I will discuss my own experiences in bringing Hip Hop into the educational environment.

From 2001 until 2004 I facilitated several Hip Hop workshops in Chicago, Illinois and in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. These workshops taught the history and political-economy of Hip Hop. In some instances participants learned how to pursue a career as independent Hip Hop artists. Most recently, I co-developed and co-taught a class on Hip Hop titled "Exploring Hip Hop: The Fate of Art in Post-Industrial America", a collaboration between myself and Professor Dorian Brown of Saint Louis Community College-Forest Park in the spring of 2009.

These classroom experiences provided us with the opportunity to examine Hip Hop's utility as an aural, historical, and sociological text. The applications were multiple. They included discussions about media consolidation and concentration, the impact of neo-liberal economic policy on urban communities, the ascendance of the private prison industry, the criminalization of African American youth, social movements, urban decay, gentrification, globalization, et cetera.

In these areas we utilized Hip Hop music as a text. Students listened to the music, and then analyzed and discussed its meaning and implications for people of color, the poor, the working class, and for society in general. In other instances we deconstructed the political-economy and ideology of a specific historical moment that framed and shaped Hip Hop culture. Students would then discuss the interaction of these factors, utilizing the basic elements of the multi-planar analytic model.

We challenged our students to examine Hip Hop as a sociological and historical construct through a variety of exercises. This included comparing and contrasting the political-economy of their localities with those present during certain stages of Hip Hop's early history in the South Bronx of New York City in the 1970s. In one assignment we required students to interview someone who lived in St. Louis as an adult during the 1970s, and to record their respondents' recollections of the political and economic dynamics that shaped life in St. Louis during this period. Particular emphasis was placed on uncovering the salience of Black Power era remnants, as well as understanding the scale and significance of urban decay and deindustrialization. Students interviewed family members, community elders, and college faculty and staff. Their reflections revealed a number of points of convergence and divergence between St. Louis and the South Bronx in New York in the 1970s. Additionally, the diversity of the students' respondents illustrated the various ways in which history is complicated by juxtapositions of race, gender, social class, social context, ideological constructs, and the limitations of memory as a historical record (White 1998).

Beyond this assignment we attempted to parallel the emergence of postindustrial cities as a key factor that shaped both the aesthetic sensibilities and thematic content of Hip Hop. Relevant contexts included New York City from the middle to late 1970s and Los Angeles in the late 1980s. Students often noted the shared structural arrangements of inequality and stratification in these spaces and their own lives. This led to richer and more nuanced perspectives of Hip Hop, economic transformation, public policy, and the city.

In other instances students were asked to draw a representative sample from each of Hip Hop's three leading sub-genres: *socially conscious*, *traditional*, and *gangster*. While *socially conscious* Hip Hop is focused on the critical analyses of society and providing recommendations for social transformation, *traditional* Hip Hop reflects many of the themes that have been at the core of Hip Hop music since its inception. These often include statements of bravado by lyricists expounding the depth of their skill, narratives of leisure and consumption, and storytelling. Lastly is the *gangster* subgenre, which often discusses the interrelated phenomena of gang life, drug trafficking, sex work, theft, and retributive violence. This sub-genre is often believed to represent the day-to-day realities of low-income urban communities, and often employs storytelling as a lyrical device.

This assignment compelled students to see the salience of social criticism inherent in many of these works, even works that did not have an explicitly political orientation. This assignment also allowed for them to investigate the varied ways that Hip Hop artists respond to the structural determinants of society. Students were required to choose Hip Hop music from the years of 1988 to 1994, a period considered by many to be the *golden age* of Hip Hop. Students selected artists included Tupac, N.W.A., MC Lyte, X-Clan, and so on. Most students clearly illuminated the points of divergence and convergence across sub-genres. Their analyses suggested that the categories of sub-genres that were being employed by the instructors may have been too rigid to capture the range of variability inherent in the works of individual Hip Hop artists, meaning Hip Hop artists' works did not always fit neatly within the three categories that we provided. Instead their works may have flowed somewhat freely from sub-genre to sub-genre. This point was a critical insight that had implications for how we thought about the structure of the course, as well as the unquestioned ideas and insufficiently analyzed experiences that informed our own thinking about Hip Hop.

The final project that students completed required that they answer Nas's declaration that Hip Hop is dead (2006). They were required to examine the current status of Hip Hop's four elements (DJing-MCing, breakdancing, graffiti, and knowledge) and its five principles (peace, unity, love, having fun, and knowledge). They were also encouraged to examine the global and independent expressions of Hip Hop to determine whether they were consistent or inconsistent with the core content of mainstream American Hip Hop music.

This assignment was devised with the hope that students would demonstrate an understanding of the dynamic ways in which culture evolves over time. It was also hoped that they would express an understanding of the inextricable links between cultural transformation and the broader social milieu. Moreover, students were expected to reflect on how Hip Hop's contemporary expressions constructed essentialized notions of African American culture and identity. This assignment came at the end of course, and was situated within contiguous lessons on the commercialization of Hip Hop in the 1990s, the proliferation of independent Hip Hop, the globalization of Hip Hop, and a cursory discussion of Hip Hop music during the 2000s

Over the course of two class sessions, we were forced to deal with something that had been a lingering source of tension in the class. Many students' conceptualizations of Hip Hop were restricted to Rap music that aligned with their personal tastes. This was also a limitation that I brought to the class, as my own formative experiences in Hip Hop were informed by a separation of *real* Hip Hop from commercial and *gangster* rap. My colleague Professor Dorian Brown was helpful in pushing me beyond these ideological strictures, but it was also interesting in seeing a similar tendency among our students, who to a large extent were younger than us, and thus shaped by a different set of contexts pertaining to this notion of *realness* and Hip Hop.



Also, there was a certain degree of defensiveness in the class as it pertained to criticisms of violence, crime, and misogyny in Rap music. Much of this came to a head following a viewing of the Byron Hurt film “*Beyond Beats and Rhymes*” where I suspected that some students felt that their personal tastes, their personal investment in Hip Hop was being attacked without due consideration for the freedom of individual artists, or a greater appreciation for the diversity of themes inherent in the works of rappers who are generally considered *gangster*.

In one lesson I emphasized that despite the existence of Hip Hop’s four elements (DJing, MCing, Breakdancing, and Graffiti), much of Hip Hop’s expression in the United States had been reduced to a single focus on Rap Music, and to a lesser extent the art of DJing. I contrasted this with the lingering interests in the all four of Hip Hop’s elements in various underground (non-commercial, local Hip Hop communities) and in many manifestations of Hip Hop from abroad. One student, who was seemingly frustrated with what I suspect he believed was a certain degree of romanticism about Hip Hop’s four elements, challenged me with “What does it matter?” Was it such a tragedy that there has been a decline of the holistic expressions of Hip Hop in American popular culture? Or did this simply reflect an inevitable change in the expression of the art. I responded that the four elements mattered because they comprised part of the foundation of Hip Hop, and that their absence in some settings, and presence in others was an opportunity for us to enrich our understanding of the economic and cultural processes which have contributed to this situation. I added that while some of us as individuals may not feel an affinity with the four elements, this does not negate the importance of recognizing them within the changing nature of Hip Hop.

This final incident stimulated a shift of sorts in the last weeks of the class. We slowly moved beyond our mutual defensiveness about *realness* and Hip Hop. We also began to think about the art in ways that enabled us to think less one-dimensionally about its expressions. Hip Hop was no longer simply what any individual student or I liked, nor was it simply what is broadcast on television or radio in the United States. Hip Hop was considerably larger than any of our preferences and us. It was vaster than what is narrowly represented in corporate media. It transcended the territorial borders of the United States. Hip Hop didn’t belong to any of us. We, the instructors and students, were simply mutual participants in a global culture, and finally after fourteen weeks partners in a journey of exploration.

The last two classes were dominated by student presentations answering the question of whether Hip Hop was dead. The presentations exceeded the expectations of both Professor Brown and I. We expected a certain degree of recalcitrance and lingering defensiveness, but the students, some of whom had been most resistant to at earlier points in the class, presented nuanced analyses of the current state of Hip Hop, and well-reasoned arguments for its apparent status as living or dead. This was a moment of discovery for all concerned, as many of us moved beyond the strictures of our previous assumptions and knowledge and began to engage in a multi-dimensional analysis of Hip Hop.

## Conclusion

Urban communities are in the grip of a myriad of crises. These crises compel activists, educators, and artists to martial their craft in service of the self-determination of communities that have historically been maligned by the interrelated systems of White supremacy and neoliberalism. The role of art in particular is notable in its capacity to facilitate a revisioning of society, one wherein the unfettered ideals of African American liberation gains expression. Likewise, educators' work must go beyond the prescriptive mandates of banal policy reforms that show little vision beyond ameliorating achievement gaps, incessant test-taking, and the coercive disciplining of Black bodies. Educators' work must express a shared vision of liberation, one that emerges from the indigenous knowledge production of those most affected by oppressive processes. Educators' work must serve this vision, creating a vital link between past, present, and future; between the historic and on-going initiatives of African people to be architects of their collective future. To be sure, this is not a calling that all educators are prepared to answer. Most have not been prepared to do this (Du Bois [1933] 2002). Thus, this requires a recommitment to developing comprehensive systems of socialization. In Du Bois's view (1973), these systems had to emerge out of the self-conscious efforts of a broad cross-section of the community to preserve and refine African American culture as a tool for advancing our struggle for freedom.

In closing, social justice education compels us to use the classroom as the space to discuss, explore, and prepare to engage the mechanisms that sustain inequality in society. An orientation towards social justice must embrace Freire's (1970) notion of students as historical beings. In this way, one approaches students as social actors, whose actions can contribute immensely to transforming society. Hip Hop offers much to this process. Its music and social context is replete with material that can illuminate social issues, as well as the varied ways that people mobilize to positively shape the world. Moreover, the music itself abounds with critiques of the American social structure that are both compelling and relevant to students.

Finally, as a mirror of society's varying cultural and social tensions, Hip Hop becomes an apt descriptor of contemporary social change. Therefore its discourse on hypermasculinity, urban decay, criminal deviance, misogyny, and so forth, reflect the preponderance of these themes within the broader cultural domain of Western societies in general, and the United States in particular. Conversely, its critical discourse provides a vibrant body of analyses that lend themselves to the process of social exploration.

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