

A PROJECT THAT HUMANIZES: THE ROLE OF HIP HOP IN EDUCATION

By David E. Kirkland & Hui-Ling Malone

James Dewitt Yancey, more popularly known as J Dilla, was a Detroit-based producer and rapper whose hustle in the Black arts community radically changed the direction of hip hop and the underground social movement of Black verse. His contribution to the Black arts scene is unmistakable in its authority and sheer strength of resculpting frames for Black masculinities in ways that might work to resolve complex social and historical hierarchies. Thus, the history of Dilla tells the story of his art, which blossomed the plight of a once great urban American chocolate city, now clinging to beats and broken breaths on life support. Dilla's hip hop, like radical traditions of Black art preceding it, spoke to the crisis conditions of Black people. A turntable and set of verses gave Dilla and others like him tools to assemble a mixture of sounds across a range of African-stirred influences and explore the intricate conditions that inspire social, cultural, and political vulnerability. It is in this backdrop that we take up this work, the backdrop of a relatively new urban Black art tradition, which calls attention to the vulnerabilities that persist in Black communities to call out a need for a new direction in education and beyond.

In its thoughtful and heartfelt honesty, hip hop—known for recognizing the pain and struggle inflicted upon Black bodies—has rearranged the portraiture of Black America, giving us visions of the real—how things actually are—while raising a set of serious questions about the identity politics that, when applied to education, shapes our educational systems and the ethical tensions of being historically vulnerable. Hip hop as Black art—rhythm and verse born of the trepidation of the late 1980s and early 1990s—gets at the fundamental issue that there exist among us the dispossessed—individuals that Marc Lamont Hill has notably labeled “Nobody.”¹

For Hill, to be nobody is to exist in “a constant state of vulnerability, without forms of protection that enhance our lives and shield our bodies from foreseeable and preventable dangers.”² Unfortunately, many citizens, particularly the youth of color who took to turntables and mics to speak passion to power, have been marked as vulnerable. In discounting the elemental sparks sounds to which these sisters and brothers were bearing witness, there are questions as to how in education we do ourselves a disservice by only considering the variable of race or even the intersectional variables of race by gender when considering the suffering of people, particularly in our classrooms.

It has been no historical mistake that the new reach of Black arts expanded into the White world due, in part, to the long, sturdy arms of hip hop, where various communities crisscrossing trans-sectional vulnerabilities were able to ink their own tattoos to declare pains hieroglyphically, as ancient as the etchings of color that tinge cave walls. The hip hop sleeve, if you will, has thus exulted the unifying vocal breath of the oppressed, where the struggles of the multitude are declared in a sound that emanates—defiantly and resoundingly so—from the chorus of the vulnerable. Thus, the pliant and iridescent rhythms of oppression, stilted in the perilous percuss of beats enshrined by vocal lyricism to the backdrop of struggle and resistance, have become as venerably American as they are Black.

Hence, at the center of the Black arts imagery where hip hop exists are enduring considerations of how vulnerability also exists within transactional labeling, those marked as poor, Black, Brown, immigrant, dissident, refugee, queer, trans, etc. And according to Hill, state power and the insufficiencies of schools have “only increased their vulnerability, making the lives of vulnerable people more rather than less safe.”³

To our humble minds, while hip hop elevates a particular conversation on the inadequacies of response to, for example, integrating school geographies and its brands of knowledge, in education we've only explored the surface of the issue. To move toward resolution, one must take the lessons that hip hop is teaching and match those lessons with socially transformative pedagogies (e.g., sampling culture to remix, thus queer, the logics and routines of the classroom). As entry point,

we begin with the critical exercise of pedagogicalizing new Black art, considering the root cause systems of educational inequity revealed in artifacts of the five elements—*rap*, *graffiti*, *breakin*, *deejayin*, and *knowledge*. It is here that we can see the gap between vulnerabilities, the vulnerable and the less vulnerable, and the ways systems of vulnerability increase as students persist in school.

Education scholar and social justice advocate Norm Fruchter has pointed out that, though we see differences in performances early in education, it should jar us that we see greater differences later in school.⁴ This means that over time, the vulnerability that some students face only increases as opposed to decreasing, mostly because schools do not reflect or are not responsive to their hip hop realities. By this, we want to explain how hip hop in relation to education in social studies or beyond it implies that two popular educational concepts, integration and culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogy, are not enough. From a hip hop/Black arts perspective, integration implies that the root cause of vulnerability is separation, yet the thematic messages in the hip hop elemental constellation, the very contents of verse for example, suggest that separation is symptomatic of our devaluing of the vulnerable. Culturally relevant pedagogy, which seeks to, in some way, integrate the knowledge base of education, implies that the absence of relevant culture is at issue when in fact it may not be. From a hip hop/Black arts perspective (see rap lyrics such as those in Tupac’s “Changes”⁵ or Jay-Z’s “December 4th”⁶) the issue is almost wholly representative of our devaluing the vulnerable.

At issue here is not another series of surface constructs: opportunities and access points. What is at issue here is the deeper root cause that is emblematic of the crisis of mass incarceration. It is emblematic of the epidemic of state violence inflicted upon the vulnerable. It is the very reason that vulnerable people experience chronic forms of un- and underemployment, the reason why the vulnerable die too soon in destitute situations, and the reason why campaigns of violence sweep through cities such as Chicago, Baltimore, and Detroit.

At the root of the issue of educational inequity, thus the miseducation of the vulnerable—from a hip hop/Black arts perspective—is the idea that we have so marked vulnerable people at almost every step of their existences as disposable. (Again, see Tupac’s “Changes”⁷ or Jay-Z’s “Murder to Excellence”⁸). Thus, segregation and the ignorance of curriculum in the lives of the vulnerable are

but symptoms of a deeper and more lingering American problem.

Hill has argued, “Underneath each issue is a more fundamental set of economic conditions, political arrangements, and power relations that transform everyday citizens into casualties of an increasingly intense war on the vulnerable.”⁹ Thus, as new Black art, hip hop has so dramatically illustrated that to live in one’s vulnerability is to live in a constant state of crisis—with PTSD (very present traumatic stress disorder). That is, hip hop gets it right: Our children—those who are most vulnerable—are hurting because we have not dealt with the fact that they live in a world that values them less than it does others.¹⁰

Part of the reality of the complex racial/transactional solutions with which we must overlay education are possibilities of hope and healing—themes also found throughout the Black arts and prolifically peppered throughout hip hop verse. This hope is a blunt and sober hope. It is based in something that reaches beyond philosophical pragmatism and cultural realism. It suggests to a world lost in the delusion of post-racialism and other ideological mirages that we cannot send vulnerable children to so-called integrated schools and expect them to succeed if that school, if that very system, doesn’t value them but rather continues to inflict microaggressive penalties upon their bodies.¹¹

The statistics bear this out: In so-called integrated schools, we still see persistent gaps between the vulnerable and the valued. We also know that culturally relevant anything is irrelevant to the hurting—where more than 60 percent of vulnerable students experience some form of depression during their school years.¹² In places like Compton, California—home to Kendrick Lamar and NWA—about one in four students experience two or more forms of severe trauma in any given year.¹³ It could perhaps go without noting that most of these students are Black and Brown, though not all of them. Yet all of them have been cut off from the emerging American future, left behind because we have made them expendable, disposable, and too often invisible.

However, their bodies—or should we say our bodies, for we are among them—are “living representations of other life, older, longer, wiser.”¹⁴ To value us becomes the elegant heuristic for a type of methodology that moves from within our bodies to its realities external, of lives,

younger, perhaps tinier, yet more innocent than we. In a phrase, there is one idea that we think sums up the most fundamental contribution of new Black arts (i.e., hip hop) to education: that the many similarities shared between vulnerable people—even in spite of potential differences in social class, family background, age, and so on—and how these similarities relate to the interaction between them as suggested in the elements of hip hop are central to understanding vulnerable people, particularly those deemed “at risk” or difficult to educate.

Education is a complex process, produced interactively, dependent not only upon the questions of the educator but also on the experiences we share with those we educate—and too often our perceptions of them and our evaluations of their worth. Thus, any practice of education is likely to be influenced by those with whom we are in relationship, those with whom we learn, and vice versa.

A second conclusion that we must draw from the relationship between hip hop and education is that despite the dismal statistics and the growing reality that vulnerable people are literally vanishing from our universities and schools, from the labor market, and from the communities where they are raised, it would be a mistake to treat us merely as victims. In the book *Between Voice and Silence*, Jill Taylor et al. present a “voice-centered” methodology of teaching and learning that makes it possible for us to “build theory from listening.”¹⁵ Listening to “the unspoken,” she writes, to “places where there is no voice,” where people have silenced their experiences or have simply not been heard,” is a profound quest into the soul of the speakers as well as the listener.¹⁶ The most significant contribution of hip hop to education is hip hop’s unrelenting idea that the revolution we seek in education begins with listening to the voices of the vulnerable because it creates a space where the vulnerable can be heard expressing their desires and fears, their pains and their hopes.

In listening—whether to rap lyrics or the echoes of pain that vibrate from broken bodies—an opening is created for us to escape the stereotypical images and all of the layers of baggage that accompany our perceptions of people the world has otherwise deemed as Nobody.¹⁷ Sadly, for some, the prospect of listening to the vulnerable, of taking us seriously enough that they see vulnerable people as members of the human family, with all of the flaws and shortcomings common to other members, remains a frightening dilemma. Yet the provocative efforts of emcees,

deejays, B-girls and boys, taggers, and street philosophers provide us with the opportunity to listen to the voices of people who too often go unheard. This is what Black art is about. This is what hip hop is about.

The impression left is inspiring because hip hop as it continues to reframe education makes it possible for us to see people not as objects of study, but as thinking and feeling collaborators in a project that humanizes and values.

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(Endnotes)

1. Mark Lamont Hill, *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Norm Fruchter, *Urban Schools, Public Will: Making Education Work for All Our Children* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).
5. Tupac Shakur, *Changes*, Interscope Records, 1998.
6. Jay-Z, *December 4th*, Roc-A-Fella Records, 2003.
7. Shakur, *Changes*.
8. Jay-Z and Kanye West, *Murder to Excellence*, Roc-A-Fella Records, 2011.
9. Hill, *Nobody*.
10. For additional discussion, cf. bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Psychology Press, 2004).
11. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Random House, 2015).
12. Deanna Barch, David Pagliaccio, Andy Belden, Michael P. Harms, Michael Gaffrey, Chad M. Sylvester, Rebecca Tillman, and Joan Luby, "Effect of Hippocampal and Amygdala Connectivity on the Relationship Between Preschool Poverty and School-age Depression," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 173, no. 6 (2016): 625–34.
13. *Peter P., et al. v. Compton Unified School District, et al.* (2016).
14. Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Random House Digital, 1982).
15. Jill McLean Taylor, Carol Gilligan, and Amy M. Sullivan, *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
16. Ibid.
17. Hill, *Nobody*.