

HIP HOP, RESPONSIVE TEACHING, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: POETRY LOUDER THAN THUNDER

BY LESLIE DAVID BURNS

“The ways that inequalities are promoted through the curriculum are: (1) It justifies oppression and (2) Different people’s cultures are excluded from the school’s curriculum. Our research is important, because by studying hip-hop culture, people can learn about their own experiences so that they can become critical of the world.” - Camille, a student in South Bay Unified School District, Oakland, CA¹

“It’s just telling the truth.” - Dr. Derrick Bell, on the nature and purpose of Critical Race Theory²

Introduction

Hip hop in American society began as a genre in the early 1970s, particularly via music but spanning media and discourse to generate cultural spaces for (first and primarily) Black culture in the early 1970s. Drawing on the West African idea of the first human (*nommo*) and a supreme creator (*Amma*), hip hop focuses on social connections and issues from personal identity to local community life and topics related to national politics and movements.³ With roots in jazz and blues, African-American narrative and lyrical traditions, and socioeconomic factors,⁴ hip hop culture focuses on five “pillars”⁵ including DJ-ing (using turntables and records to create loops of rhythm, music, and sound), MC-ing (rapping), Bboying (dancing), graffiti art, and knowledge of self and community. Hip hop has always been an art of Naming, a powerful form for exercising agency, building identity, and teaching. Given the roots of MCs’ artistry in the spiritual traditions of *griots*—“purveyors of knowledge”⁶—this essay focuses on both rap and knowledge of self and society as pillars of hip hop that impact relevance along with foundational knowledge of culture, history, identity, and artistry through literacy in secondary-grades social studies classrooms. By using hip hop texts in a responsive environment with learner-centered funds of knowledge and motivations from learners’ communities, home lives, and popular cultures, teachers can use hip hop pedagogically to support not only knowledge of self and community, but also agency through literate engagement in civics, current events, cultural history, and activism for social justice.⁷

Funds of Knowledge and Hip Hop Art as Re-Designed Knowledge

Funds of knowledge⁸ describe the cultural capital students bring into academic spaces from their everyday lives. As Moll et al.’s studies find, such funds are often unused in schools, or used in inauthentic ways that reflect the desires of the institution rather than the needs of the learners and community. Such funds of data may be used with students to co-construct curriculum based on inquiry by learners into their own histories, prior and new experiences, and evolving identities.⁹ When students are positioned as primary knowers who use their own cultural lenses to acquire knowledge that reflects their identities, they become motivated to engage in learning for their own purposes, and are included justly as full, valued members of their classrooms.¹⁰ For many students, inquiry into primary source hip hop documents supplies them with a textual lineage¹¹ and literate identity. This enables teachers to demonstrate the ways hip hop has grown, expanded, and evolved as a powerful form of art for use in society.

Hip hop has entailed both the formation and the documentation of both Black and American identities in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in ways few other media can claim. According to Glover, “black music, speech, and the black audience represents the most refined intellectual production African Americans have created in this country. It is the reservoir of our intelligence.”¹² Hip hop utilizes pastiche and bricolage, particularly via the pillars of breakbeat sampling and MCing, to make meaning by combining lyrics, music, and sounds (especially human speech) to synthesize new texts that re-present meaning in poetic form. Current events are linked to history, self, and community life in MCs’ rhymes by using allusions and historical references, with samples and breakbeats supporting listeners to not just dance but learn.¹³ According to Williams, hip hop is art “as a collage of cultural information” signifying authenticity and truth.

This notion of hip hop as collage is consonant with New Literacy Studies research in which older textual “Designs” constantly evolve in a cycle.¹⁴ In the Design cycle, a text is generated, appropriated for different purposes, and Re-Designed so that new intentional versions constitute a new set of meanings. Reflecting this finding, Williams notes that hip hop art tends to lead to one question: “Did the artist do it on purpose and in a way that builds cultural and/or historic authenticity?”¹⁵

Using Hip Hop as Curriculum to Develop Knowledge of Self and Society

In secondary grades classrooms, hip hop can be a source of cultural information, inter-cultural dialogue, and learning. Hip hop as a reservoir of primary source documents of American culture and African American knowledge offers countless opportunities for learners’ identity construction, cross-cultural exchange toward social justice, and inclusion/equity for all.¹⁶

Teachers of African American students and other groups across diverse contexts can utilize hip hop and New Literacy so that social studies move beyond mere academic historical review. Instead, using lyrics as primary source documents, inquiring into African American cultural knowledge, and using new knowledge and techniques acquired from that study, learners can practice Re-Design to understand relations between past and current societal issues and truly engage with them to make and use new meanings to navigate their day-to-day lives, attain goals, and act in their own worlds for their own purposes based on knowledge of significant historical moments.¹⁷

Few historical moments can be considered more significant right now to American culture, and perhaps to African American culture in particular, than the November 2016 election of Donald J. Trump to the presidency of the United States. Trump’s negative perceptions of African Americans (“You’re living in poverty, your schools are no good, you have no jobs, 58 percent of your youth is unemployed—what the hell do you have to lose?”¹⁸), lack of respect and attention to African American communities,¹⁹ and fervent advocacy for anti-Black “law and order” legislation²⁰ all place African American families and communities at increased risk, especially viewed in historical context. These acts by an incoming POTUS have had broad, negative effects on the behavior of the US citizenry, including criminal violence by Whites and police (also mostly White) against Blacks and other minority groups. Police shootings, arrests, and murders of unarmed and/or innocent Black citizens have reached epidemic

proportions. Asked to comment on Trump’s election, satirist Larry Wilmore wrote that “if making America great again means restoring a history that’s been written with lightning, buckle up—because we’re going to be on a collision course with very loud thunder.”²¹

Wilmore is right that recent social unrest and a fractured electorate, along with an incoming president who expresses racism and bigotry, mean US citizens face an uncertain future that requires knowledge of self and community more than ever, especially for citizens who are not considered by the government to be equal under the law. With the turmoil and violence of this moment comes the need to tell Dr. Bell’s truth now more than ever, and to speak politically to have maximal impact.

As Glover argues, hip hop is always already political due to its Blackness in that,

Whites are still not required to study us seriously, and there is nothing like a dose of black music and black speech to clarify the divide. Black history suggests that the black is almost always political, precisely because it is misunderstood and close to unfathomable for those who do not know our code.²²

And while Glover is correct that non-African Americans require study of Black histories, arts, and cultures, and also to engage the political work of understanding, using hip hop to teach is consonant with national social studies standards and expectations to “assist learners in developing historical research capabilities that enable them to formulate historical questions, obtain historical data, question historical data, identify the gaps in available records, place records in context, and construct sound historical interpretations.”²³ Overall, the study of hip hop, then, reflects the findings cited by Camilla and her peers in Oakland, California, in the epigraph of this article—that the exclusion of Black culture from the school curriculum justifies oppression and also prevents *all* students from accessing the fullest opportunities to study the truths of their society and Re-Design them to create new meanings to advance both Black and American cultures in their totality.

Speaking as a White, male, upper-middle-class literacy scholar at a major university in a state with a history highlighted by racial strife, whether I am qualified to address the impact of hip hop on Black culture is, to say the least, questionable. Following Glover’s comments above, my own positionality seems problematic in terms of offering any authentic statement that avoids misappropriation along the lines of, for example, legitimate criticisms leveled at White MCs such as Macklemore. However, my identity as a White man belies other intersections of my identity as

the author of the first social justice standard for teaching and teacher education in US education history. While I am White, I came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s when hip hop politics exploded into mainstream popular culture and political consciousness. Hip hop changed my life and how I could see the world, even as I will never understand what it means to be Black (nor escape my privileged status). While other music I listened to then by non-Black, non-hip hop artists was sometimes political (e.g. U2, Pearl Jam), the music and lyrics of artists like A Tribe Called Quest, Missy Elliott, NWA and its solo members, Digable Planets, Public Enemy, Nas, Tupac, and others provided me with an education I didn't know I needed until I heard them. Almost immediately, other non-Black and interracial artists and groups began to follow hip hop's example as powerful voices for political, free speech in mass media (e.g., Rage Against the Machine, the Beastie Boys, Eminem). What set these artists apart? They told the truth and embraced the fifth pillar of hip hop: knowledge of self and community.

Teachers must use hip hop not as a treat or a gimmick, but as an honored art form with a well-documented history about not just Black culture, but American culture. Hip hop poetry may be integrated as primary source text in social studies classrooms to present/create a collage of cultural information that reflects how literacy and close-reading can be produced using the New Literacy Design cycle.²⁴ The Design cycle is a neverending process of composition, communication, and meaning-making that involves taking older available texts (e.g., hip hop lyrics and other historical or contemporary texts) and mixing their styles, conventions, voices, and words in ways that extend meaning or create new meaning in purposeful ways. It is never merely the repetition of old words or texts. Rather, the Design cycle results in Re-Design and re-presentation of available texts in an intertextual format that re-contextualizes those texts to offer new insights.

The textual collage of re-presentation in the Re-Design poetic model I offer here utilizes a range of lyrics by hip hop MCs from the 1970s-present, placed in strategic context with samples of speech from President-Elect Donald J. Trump and others to demonstrate the power of hip hop to educate in ways that support and require critical thinking and systematic inquiry into history, culture, and society. Following Williams's questions of authenticity, I studied a wide variety of scholarly, media, and popular culture texts related to Black culture, hip hop, and their manifestations in the present historic and political moment to generate a narrative based on statements from Black artists in Black spaces writing about Black experience and culture in

America. I did so not to claim authority in such matters but to read, listen, learn, understand, and attempt to create meaning using poetry in ways all students can use to study the social sciences for knowledge toward critical thinking about self and society in today's world. This classroom model is titled "Spread the Message," and is dedicated to Kook Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaata, the three DJs considered the grandfathers of hip hop. The title is inspired by the seminal hip hop song "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five.²⁵

"Spread the Message"

For Dr. Bell said it's just telling the truth.

[Sample: Donald Trump—"I have a great relationship with the blacks. I've always had a great relationship with the blacks."²⁶]

[Sample: Donald Trump—"Look at my African American over here. Look at him. Are you the greatest? You know what I'm talking about? Okay."²⁷]

Baby there's a war right outside our window
 Don't you hear the people fighting for their lives?²⁸
 First they stole our body, then they stole our sons
 Then they stole our gods and gave us new ones
 Then they stole our beauty, comfort in our skin
 And then they gave us duty and then they gave us sin.²⁹
 All you Black folks, you must go
 All you Mexican folks, you must go
 And all you poor folks, you must go
 Muslims and Gays, boy, do we hate your ways
 So all of you bad folks, you must go.³⁰
 I'm feeling wounded
 Weeping
 This body bruising
 Living with my head down,
 Hands up
 No, no, don't shoot, don't shoot³¹
 Yes, I know my enemies!
 They're the teachers who taught me to fight me!
 Compromise! Conformity! Assimilation! Submission!
 Ignorance! Hypocrisy! Brutality! The elite!
 All of which are American Dreams!³²
 What we need is awareness, we can't get careless
 You say what is this?
 My beloved, let's get down to business:
 Mental self-defensive fitness,³³
 But mama don't cry for me, ride for me
 Try for me, live for me
 Breathe for me, sing for me
 Honestly guidin' me
 And when they carve my name inside the concrete

I pray it forever reads FREEDOM!³⁴

[Sample: Donald Trump—"You're living in poverty, your schools are no good, you have no jobs, 58 percent of your youth is unemployed—what the hell do you have to lose?"³⁵; "Black guys counting my money! I hate it. The only kind of people I want counting my money are short guys that wear yarmulkes every day."³⁶]

Now hear ye, hear ye, want to see Thee more clearly

I know He hear me when my feet get weary³⁷

Pray the real live forever, man

Pray the fakes get exposed³⁸

Constantly movin', constantly usin'

The Constitution as a form of restitution.³⁹

I ain't trippin' over nothin' (That's right) I count my blessings

Studyin' my words (Uh-huh), steady tryin' to learn my lesson (Yeah)

There's madness in this world, check me out, I ain't stressin' (Word)

Knowledge is the key, joy and peace, the essence (True that)⁴⁰

The rhyme historian exploring everything we got,

And even more so we exploring everything they not.⁴¹

LOVE IS THE ANSWER.

What the question is I don't f***ing know.

We in this together.⁴²

That's right: Spread the Message.

[Sample: Brandon Victor Dixon, cast member of *Hamilton*, to Vice-President-Elect Mike Pence—"We are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents, or defend us, and uphold our inalienable rights, sir. But we hope this show has inspired you to uphold our American values, and work on behalf of all of us, all of us. We truly thank you for sharing this show, this wonderful American story told by a diverse group of men and women of different colors, creeds, and orientations."⁴³]

Conclusion: The Impact of Hip Hop Art on Literacy for Social Justice

Hip hop began locally during the early 1970s, but remains contested by some as a legitimate genre of art. However, history demonstrates that hip hop has continuously developed in response to its contexts consistently over time, and is now recognized as a distinct American art form, producing texts and productions that have dominated national media awards, including bestselling books and sold-out Broadway musicals (e.g., Coates's *Between the World and Me*; the musical *Hamilton*). All of these involved political statements specifically seeking to tell the truth about the world. Hip hop's clarion calls for honesty, unity, and

action for social justice perhaps make it a better vehicle for communicating than any other genre of art today. Wilmore's prediction that loud thunder is coming after the lightning of the 2016 election seems likely, especially as the Trump administration moves into office. But hip hop has always been a megaphone for speaking truth to power across my lifetime. Hip hop has assumed a central position as *the* vehicle for truth-telling in our society, serving as the storm of art that has always chased the thunder and lightning away and helped wash us clean. Through its use educating youth for critical literacy and social action, hip hop has been and will remain an essential body of knowledge for realizing social justice in our nation's schools. Our country echoes with thunder now, and the lightning has been literally deadly for too many, especially our children. But hip hop speaks the truth louder than thunder. With it teachers can spread the message so that one day, social justice in education is the norm rather than the dream.⁴⁴



Dr. Leslie David Burns is an associate professor of literacy at the University of Kentucky. He is the author of the first national standard for social justice in teaching and teacher education to be implemented in US history, and a winner of the Edward Fry Book Award for the advancement of knowledge in literacy. He also

designed the Kentucky Model Curriculum Framework for all grade levels and subject areas, winner of the John I. Wilson national award for innovation in education. His expertise includes education policy, curriculum studies, teacher education, adolescent literacy, secondary-grades pedagogy, and social justice. Dr. Burns's work has been published widely in journals including the *Harvard Educational Review*, *Reviews of Research in Education*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Teachers College Record*, and other prominent academic journals. He may be reached at l.burns@uky.edu.