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Theatre History II

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02 May 2019

**My Mind Playing Tricks On Me: An Analysis of Hip Hop and Black Mental Health**

“Hip-hop is our therapy. I can’t see myself sitting here talking to somebody like, ‘Hi, we’re going through this and this.’ Like, what are you going to tell me? There’s nothing that you could tell me. My experience told me more than what you going to tell me.”

- Prodigy, Mobb Deep

Mental health and Hip Hop have always gone hand and hand. Artists like Kid Cudi, J Cole and Vic Mensa are just a few modern artists to admit it. As a Hip Hop enthusiast, Black female scholar, and mental health advocate, it would be a grave disservice to not illuminate the correlation between the two. Specifically, in regards to the African American community. This relationship has always been there, but it has always been the “elephant in the room”. **This analysis will discuss the benefits of hip hop culture on recovery and resilience in the Black community through an examination of the practice of rap therapy, Hip Hop poetics and Hip Hop theatre as a coping mechanism as well as the necessity of Hip Hop culture in the Black community.** The goal is to forge a new outlook on the art form and move forward in using it to dismantle racial discrimination in the mental healthcare industry by advocating for more culturally sensitive practices in treatment.

To understand the role of race in mental healthcare one must analyze the racial and ethnic influences on mental health assessments. “Sociologists generally agree that race and ethnicity are socially constructed and that members placed in these categories vary considerably in the degree

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they identify with these labels. There is also growing scientific interest in the extent to which racial and ethnic discrimination is a psychosocial stressor that can adversely affect mental health. Research is needed to examine how identity (and other potential resources) and discrimination relate to each other and combine to affect psychological health” (Takeuchi and Williams, 234). Those who live at the intersection of Black and American identities are consistently scrutinized by the world around them. The American social climate habitually victimizes the Black community through various psychosocial stressors stemming from past and present traumatic events. “This is of special relevance to the study of race and mental health. The pattern of racial differences in mental health status varies by the indicator of mental health status under consideration, with some racial and ethnic minority groups having levels of mental health that are better than expected” (Takeuchi and Williams, 233). Being Black in America means to be literally and systematically hunted. Being Black and American is to be an innovator. When one is oppressed, they must create safe spaces to offer support, resources, and acceptance.

Hip Hop theatre is a dually impactful source of therapeutic practice for the Black community as it combines two forms of expression integral to the validation of our voice. Hip Hop is considered to be a “voice for those who do not have”. The art of struggle. In the same way, theatre is deemed to be a voice for the voiceless. Both are communicative modes of artistic expression that contribute greatly to the sanity of their practitioners. To understand how both entities successfully operate together to benefit the psychological well being of the Black

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community, one must comprehend how the psychological benefits of the two art forms function separately.

Rap is easily one of the centerpieces of Hip Hop culture. It is the biggest piece of evidence that points to the notion that Hip Hop culture has a psychological impact on people of color. So much so, that it is used as a legitimized therapy practice. Rap Therapy is a culturally sensitive approach of psychotherapy for young African American men whose social development can be attributed to frequent exposure to rap music (Elligan, 27). Don Elligan, the author of the above quote, is a renowned psychologist that specializes in helping clients with relationship difficulties, anxiety/stress, depression, and impulsivity. He focuses his work in African American communities in Chicago, Illinois. Given the fact that "...rap music has influenced a variety of socialization processes of young African American men, ranging from clothing to language" (Elligan, 28), it is not far-fetched to conclude that this culture could be utilized as a psychotherapeutic device amongst the African American community. Although the particular study referenced above focuses on the effects of rap therapy on African American men, rap therapy is proven to be a successful practice for anyone who considers rap and Hip Hop culture to be an influential stimulus in their lives. Essentially, the practice was created for anyone of whom Hip Hop influences their behaviors as well as their world view. With that being said, much of the African American community considers this to be true and thus this culturally

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sensitive practice legitimizes the use of Hip Hop as a form of recovery and resilience within our community.

Rap Therapy was built upon the reactance theory of psychology. “Reactance theory suggests that reactance is a motivational state aroused when a person's freedom of choice has been challenged. In the case of rap music, political attacks have attempted to challenge the freedom of choice of an entire generation. Psychological reactance and rap music is best illustrated by 2 Live Crew, a rap group once based out of Florida. In 1989 Florida's governor began a political campaign attacking the content of the 2 Live Crew's recordings, This campaign led to a federal judge's decision to ban the sales of 2 Live Crew's recordings to minors (George,1998). Furthermore, many of the group's videos were banned as well. Following these political attacks the group enjoyed one of its most lucrative years in total sales. The prohibition on the group's sales to youth created a state of psychological reactance and motivated youth to find means of obtaining copies of the recordings. Clinicians working with young African American men who are influenced by the images of rap music should consider the relevance of the issues discussed above in their treatment. The latter theoretical constructs of social psychology and learning theory provide the foundation for Rap Therapy” (Elligan, 30). As alluded to in the Mobb Deep quote at the top of this analysis, Hip Hop was created out of urgency to overcome. It was created because there were no accessible treatment options for

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underprivileged Black people. Rap Therapy has always existed. It has only been defined, refined and deconstructed; it was and is primarily a form of release.

Theatre was created for many of the same reasons Hip Hop was created. Deriving from the act of ritual, theatre finds its roots in expression and cathartic release. Thus, it makes complete sense that like Hip Hop, the theatre would become a legitimized form of therapeutic practice. Renee Enumah, pioneer of the drama therapy field states the following: “The use of drama as therapy fosters liberation, expansion and perspective. Drama therapy invites us to uncover and integrate dormant aspects of ourselves, to stretch our conception of who we are, and to experience our intrinsic connection with others” (Enumah, 17). Similar to rap therapy, the goals of drama therapy are rooted in psychotherapy. This practice calls upon the intentional and systematic use of theatre processes to result in psychological growth and change. “The element of disguise inherent in theatre is considered by drama therapists to be an invaluable source of psychotherapy. Having something to hide behind is a vehicle, rather than an obstacle, to self-exposure. Illusion in theatre does not lead to elusion of truth but to confrontation with truth.” (Enumah, 7). Essentially this practice allows its patients to grapple with their own internal conflict by utilizing the conventions of theatre and role play to do so.

The synthesis of the two art forms, Hip Hop Theatre, is exactly what it sounds like. Theatre that uses Hip Hop as the mode of communication. The first iterations of Hip Hop theatre surfaced in the late '90s and early 2000s in response to the political attacks on the African

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American community. The most common theme; street violence and police brutality. These themes are still concurrent in new projects created today. Why? This issue is still prevalent and these projects serve as a way to process grief as well as express outrage. Hip Hop, lyrically, is poetry. In that way, this theatrical genre is a lot like Shakespeare in terms of rhythm and flow. It utilizes Hip Hop poetics which by definition is considered to be the lyrical playground that is synonymous with rap. This personalized poetry of experience is what lends itself to the cathartic release present for both art forms. Thus, its unmistakable presence in this relatively novice art form for and by Black people. However, there are white contributors to the Hip Hop theatre movement just as there are white contributors to the Hip Hop landscape such as Eminem, Mac Miller, and Vanilla Ice just to name a few. Since they contribute to the culture, is it unfair to infer that they don't undertake the same psychological experience and/or attachment to the craft as African Americans do? Let's explore.

Cultural appropriation is a popular topic in today's society. For years, white individuals have delighted in imitating a culture that they do not fully understand. "This article examines the strategies used by white artists such as Vanilla Ice, Eminem, and the Beastie Boys to establish their hip-hop legitimacy and to confront rap music's representations of whites as socially privileged and therefore not credible within a music form where credibility is often negotiated through an artist's experiences of social struggle. The authenticating strategies of white artists involve cultural immersion, imitation, and inversion of the rags-to-riches success stories of black

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rap stars” (Hess, 1). Authentic hip hop culture was birthed from Black expression. The appropriation of this culture began as it became globalized and distributed through a record industry influenced by a white supremacist system. Thus it is virtually impossible for white hip hop enthusiasts to share the same experiences as Black people when it comes to interaction with this particular culture. **Some may argue that Hip Hop isn’t exclusively Black, it’s for anyone who is no stranger to the struggle.** Hip-hop’s representations of racial identity are tied to class. Because of this, white artists began to tell stories of their class struggle to counter hip-hop’s representations of white privilege. Thereby authenticating their presence in the hip hop industry (Hess, 372). Stating the African American connection to the craft is not to discount the struggle of existing white Hip Hop contributors. “Rather than imitate a model of hip-hop blackness, Eminem emphasizes the autobiographical basis of his lyrics and his struggle to succeed as a rap artist; he presents a new model of white hip-hop authenticity in which being true to yourself and to your lived experiences can eclipse notions of hip-hop as explicitly black-owned” (Hess, 373).

Although white clients may choose to utilize Hip Hop in their treatment journey, there are many more resources open to white people when it comes to access to mental health services. Therefore, there is no inherent dependency on the craft of Hip Hop. There is no urgent necessity to protect it for reasons of psychological stability. It is merely for “in the moment” expression, amusement, or financial gain. Black culture has often been popularized and transformed into pop culture although that wasn’t the initial intention. We see this in artists such as Vanilla Ice.

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“Vanilla Ice turned his minority position as a white rapper into a point of pop marketability” (Hess, 373). To fully understand the indispensable nature of Hip Hop in the Black community, one must realize that it wasn’t created for marketability, but rather as a form of necessary expression.

Lupe Fiasco once said, “Hip Hop got its RESPECT from rappers who spoke truth to power and struck fear in the comfort zones of oppression and inspired folks to take a look at their surroundings, analyze and OVERCOME.” The artist behind *Hip Hop Saved My Life* makes a beautiful point. Hip Hop isn’t entertainment; it’s functional. It was created with a purpose. It was created to uplift a collective of people who would otherwise be treated as if their voices, bodies, and minds don’t matter. Hip Hop is a call to arms. It’s the inspiration to keep grinding and shining even when it seems like there’s nothing else to fight for.

“He said, "I write what I see  
Write to make it right, don't like where I be  
I'd like to make it like the sights on TV  
Quite the great life, so nice and easy"  
Sí, now you can still die from that  
But it's better than not being alive from straps  
Agreed, a Mead notebook  
And a Bic that click when it's pushed



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And a wack-ass beat — That's a track that's weak

One you never heard of, I

Push it harder, further, the

Grind might feel like murder, but

Hip-Hop, you saved my life”

- *Hip Hop Saved My Life*, Lupe Fiasco

Songs like the above show how Hip Hop is more than lyrics, swag and a dope backing track. Hip Hop’s efforts have contributed to the therapy of countless African Americans since its inception 49 years ago. Countless cases of mental illness in our community have been self-medicated through religion, substance abuse and hip hop. So what’s the take away? Mental health services need more culturally sensitive modes of practice. They need barriers broken in terms of institutionalized racism housed in the healthcare system. Hip Hop is a necessary component of this dynamic industry shift. Hip Hop is love. Hip Hop is life, literally.

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### **Annotated Bibliography**

Howell, Alison. "Introduction: The Politics of Resilience and Recovery in Mental Health Care."

*Academia.edu - Share Research*, 2012,

[www.academia.edu/3366809/Introduction\\_The\\_Politics\\_of\\_Resilience\\_and\\_Recovery\\_in\\_Mental\\_Health\\_Care](http://www.academia.edu/3366809/Introduction_The_Politics_of_Resilience_and_Recovery_in_Mental_Health_Care).

This source is one that I was originally attracted to because of the title. It focuses primarily on patients that deal with severe mental illnesses. The authors of this article are facilitators of research on social justice thus this article looks at mental health through a social justice lens. It's an interesting way to determine the outsets of mental illness as well as track the patterns of certain illnesses in specific communities.

I'm not sure how much of this source I will use. There is one quote on the second page that interested me greatly. It stated that depression in women or schizophrenia in Afro-Caribbean men, are the result of, or exacerbated by, societal unfairness. This trend was interesting to me but I'm not sure if it will help me with the thesis of this particular paper. It could be very likely that I save this source for my dissertation in graduate school.

Hess, Mickey. "Hip-Hop Realness and the White Performer." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 22, no. 5, 2005, pp. 372–389., doi:10.1080/07393180500342878.

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Cultural appropriation is a popular topic in today's society. For years, white individuals have delighted in imitating a culture that they do not fully understand. The thesis of this particular article is the following: "This article examines the strategies used by white artists such as Vanilla Ice, Eminem, and the Beastie Boys to establish their hip-hop legitimacy and to confront rap music's representations of whites as socially privileged and therefore not credible within a music form where credibility is often negotiated through an artist's experiences of social struggle. The authenticating strategies of white artists involve cultural immersion, imitation, and inversion of the rags-to-riches success stories of black rap stars." The argument of my paper is not that white people cannot have successful careers in the hip hop industry but rather that they do not endure the same catharsis that African American people's do when expressing themselves through the art form.

This article is a great supporting article for my counterargument. It discusses multiple white artists in the hip hop industry including Eminem who is the basis of my counter. What is most interesting about this article to me is the author. Mickey Hess is an English professor at Rider University who just so happens to teach Hip Hop studies. He has also authored a book by the title "Is Hip Hop Dead?". I'm interested to see what research he has done and how his view of hip hop differs from mine and other Black hip hop scholars.

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Elligan, Don. "Rap Therapy: A Culturally Sensitive Approach to Psychotherapy with Young African American Men." *Journal of African American Men*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2000, pp. 27–36., doi:10.1007/s12111-000-1002-y.

Don Elligan is a renowned psychologist that specializes in helping clients with relationship difficulties, anxiety/stress, depression and impulsivity. He focuses his work in African American communities in Chicago, Illinois. This source is a case study that outlines how he uses rap therapy to treat a young black man who was struggling with the loss of his father.

I wasn't aware that rap therapy existed. Rap is one of the centerpieces of hip hop culture. This source validates my thesis and will most definitely be used in my paper. It deconstructs the process of rap psychotherapy while also showing the results of this particular case study.

Emunah, Renee. *Acting for Real: Drama Therapy Process, Technique, and Performance*. Routledge, 1994.

Although my paper focuses primarily on Hip Hop culture, this is a theatre history class. Thus the inclusion of hip hop theatre as a mode of treatment for African Americans. This book, written by Renee Enumah is a look into the processes and procedures of Drama Therapy. Renee is a pioneer in the field of Drama Therapy and I believe this source will help me understand how the psychologies of hip hop and theatre work together to form treatment for the complex psyche of the African American brain.

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The book states the following: “The use of drama as therapy fosters liberation, expansion and perspective. Drama therapy invites us to uncover and integrate dormant aspects of ourselves, to stretch our conception of who we are, and to experience our intrinsic connection with others.” This section of the prologue in addition to the topics outlined in the table of contents make it an excellent source for my paper.

Banks, Daniel. “From Homer to Hip Hop: Orature and Griots, Ancient and Present.” *Classical World*, vol. 103, no. 2, 2010, pp. 238–245., doi:10.1353/clw.0.0159.

Daniel Banks is part of the founding board of the Hip Hop education center at NYU. In this article, he discusses the origin of hip hop theatre and its link to orature of the African diaspora. He also lays out the reason for the creation of Hip Hop in the mid 70’s which he attributes to the needs of the black community at that time. He states that Hip Hop was a form of healing for these communities.

I will be using this source because it not only explores hip hop culture but it also explores the development of hip hop theatre. This source could also be used to support my counter-argument in terms of how hip hop is used in the same way that Greek theatre was used in early western culture. It offers me an understanding of the origins of the topic I’m discussing in this paper.

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Travis, Raphael, and Anne Deepak. "Empowerment in Context: Lessons from Hip-Hop Culture for Social Work Practice." *Journal of Ethnic And Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2011, pp. 203–222., doi:10.1080/15313204.2011.594993.

"Resilience and survival are prominent themes within hip-hop culture. In these instances, an individual can express the hardships present for so many youths and families; pain experienced directly or indirectly (Rose, 2008) and subsequent resilience. Resilience has been defined as "the process of positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" " The above quote is an excerpt from the section that I seek to use in my paper. This source concerns itself with how hip hop can be used to promote positive youth development.

My argument is that hip hop culture has a positive psychological effect on African Americans. This source focuses on the positive effect from the perspective of social work professionals which I believe supports my argument. I'm excited to synthesize the information from this source into my paper. If not in this one then the larger dissertation I plan to write in graduate school.

Clay, Andreana. "'All I Need Is One Mic': Mobilizing Youth for Social Change In the Post-Civil Rights Era." *Social Justice*, vol. 33, no. 2 (104), Art, Power, and Social Change, 1 Jan. 2006, pp. 105–121. *JSTOR*,

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[www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/29768373?refreqid=search-gateway:5b7beb73abdedabb0fa9d4d163568362](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/29768373?refreqid=search-gateway:5b7beb73abdedabb0fa9d4d163568362).

Hip Hop's creation is based on creating a voice for the voiceless. Black people in marginalized communities were not privileged enough to have their voices heard in political spheres so hip hop was born. Andreana Clay uses this article to explain how youth use this form of expression to give themselves a platform but also discover who they are through their fight for visibility.

This source is one of my favorites. I hope to use it because it's a collection of interviews; in other words, personal accounts. Clay states the following: I use participant-observation and in-depth interviews to understand and explain how youth of color make sense of themselves and society through activism. A lot of mental health discrepancies in the black communities are products of identity crisis and a lack of expression in society. This source links multiple points of my argument beautifully and I sincerely hope that it makes it into this particular paper.

Alvidrez, Jennifer, et al. "The Experience of Stigma among Black Mental Health Consumers." *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2008, pp. 874–893., doi:10.1353/hpu.0.0058.

"Blacks are less likely than Whites to seek help for psychiatric problems, and are particularly under-represented in outpatient mental health settings. Blacks who do enter

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outpatient treatment receive fewer sessions of therapy than Whites and are more likely to drop out prematurely.” This stigma is the cause of the many coping strategies that exist in the black community including but not limited to church, music, and substance abuse. Jennifer Alvidrez, Lonnie R. Snowden, and Dawn M. Kaiser break down the causes of this stigma and how it affects the black community and their societal interactions.

In order to argue hip hop culture as a positive coping strategy for African American mental health, I have to build a case proving that it is a necessity. This stigma validates the need for other sources of therapy for marginalized communities, in this case, black people. For this reason, I will be using evidence from this source in my paper.

Takeuchi, David T, and David R Williams. “Race, Ethnicity and Mental Health: Introduction to the Special Issue.” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, vol. 44, Sept. 2003, pp. 233–236.

This article is as important as the above article in terms of outlining the link between black people and mental health. Takeuchi and Williams use the critical race theory to argue the correlation between race and mental health care as well as illness trends. I believe this article is important to understanding black mental health and need for treatment resources.

The following quote demonstrates why I want to use this source. “Understanding the role of race in mental health must begin with a comprehensive measurement of the mental health construct and a systematic evaluation of the extent to which there are race and ethnic influences



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on mental health assessment.” Race has a huge effect on mental health operations, especially in the United States. This is an important aspect of my argument and this source will support my thesis statement greatly.

Hoch, Danny. “Towards A Hip-Hop Aesthetic: A Manifesto for the Hip-Hop Arts Movement.” 8 Sept. 2006.

Hoch’s manifesto deconstructs the aesthetics of hip hop. In addition to this deconstruction, it aims to validate Hip Hop an art form, not just a culture. It catalogs the development of the New York Hip Hop Theatre Festival. There are a lot of facts about hip hop culture and its different forms laced throughout this article such as the development of graffiti, b-boying and rap music.

I’m inclined to use the facts from the article as a demonstration of the different modes of expression available in Hip Hop culture. Outside of that, I don’t see myself citing this source much in the paper. It’s argument aims to validate hip hop as an art form and that isn’t the aim of my research.