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ENGL 209.002

18 April 2016

Transcending Tradition: Reaching Students One Bar at a Time

Early one Thursday morning, I was sitting in my high school British Literature class, the day was especially odd because there was no ice breaker on the board like normal, and our teacher Mr. Andrews wasn't waiting for us at the door with his usual grimace. Naturally we are all confused and kind of hoping that we had a substitute, much to our disappointment we didn't have a substitute, something much worse had happened. In walked Mr. Andrews wearing the baggiest pair of jeans he could find, paired with an equally baggy Sean Jean sweater and a clunky pair of timberlands and a sideways baseball cap. Speaking in broken ebonics he strolls in, "Yo Yo Yo class, today we gon' spit about Shakespeare, give me a beat homeboy." We are all frozen, we didn't know what to think. My classmate started to make a beat on the desk and Mr. Andrews began to rap. "Hey Yo, don't be frightened, try to be Enlightened, This is the story about the Bard's true glory. It's unbelievable, But it's true, A phenomena I'm gonna reveal to you."

Just like that, he had our attention, we were more engaged in that unit than with any other. He captured our attention by going out of his way to connect to us. His presentation was meaningful and thoughtful and we really felt that we mattered. He allowed us to write our own shakespearean rhymes, present modern day rap songs that we could critically examine and relate to the readings. We were not only having fun, we were relating, connecting and engaging, which

was not the norm for our class. That has stuck with me, and being a future educator I really understand why Mr. Andrews went to that length to connect to us. A white man teaching a British Literature course, in a predominately black school obviously the disconnections between us and not only the literature but Mr. Andrews as well, was evident from the first day of school, until that fateful morning.

It is due to the experience in Mr. Andrews class, that I personally connected with several readings that support the notion that the use of hip-hop can push scholarship forward and also benefit young people beyond the classroom. Through analyzing the readings, we will explore the reason hip-hop and the use of hip-hop literature is marginalized, often associated with anti-intellectualism and seen as something that occurs outside of the classroom. We will identify what makes hip-hop a genre worthy of teaching, researching and exploring, and lastly we will uncover the benefits of hip-hop pedagogy and how the use of hip-hop music and culture improves students' empowerment, cultural awareness and overall responsiveness to critical literacy and life experiences.

There are many surface reasons why hip-hop culture is often associated with ignorance, and something that needs to be anywhere else but a classroom. It can be argued that hip-hop culture is violent, misogynistic, ignorant and encourages many young people in the wrong ways. However I believe there is a deeper reason hip-hop is associated with anti-intellectualism. For so long, black folks were not welcomed into intellectual spaces, it was not our place. Hip-hop's intellectual quality may look and sound different from the way traditional white spaces (people in power) define and view intellectual excellence, but that gaze doesn't make hip-hop intellectually

valueless. To admit that hip-hop has the same intellectual value as that of Shakespeare would be preposterous to some, but this is the case.

Accepting the literary and educational merit of hip-hop would cause a lot of the people of power to come to terms with their own deep-seated prejudices and guilt. In “*The Uses of the Blues*” by James Baldwin he unpacks white American guilt “The American found himself in a very peculiar position because he knew black people were people...After all, here he was, and he was, no matter how it was denied, a man, just like everybody else (Baldwin 62).” The recognition of this reality to those in power, can be almost impossible for them to do. There would have to be an admittance of years of wrong doings and the dismantling of white supremacy in all aspects of life. Baldwin goes on to suggest that the attempt to avoid the admission that black people were indeed people, was one key to what he defined as American Psychology. “For one thing, it created in Americans a kind of perpetual, hidden, festering and entirely unadmitted guilt...Guilt is a very peculiar emotion. As long as you're guilty about something, you are not compelled to change it (Baldwin 62).” Allowing hip-hop into prestigious academic spaces that have been occupied for so long, is something that can only happen when guilt and prejudices are addressed and erased.

Black people in white spaces have had to almost blend in with the furniture to meet the standards of acceptance in white intellectual spaces, hip-hop does not fit into those spaces, hip-hop and hip-hop literature creates its own spaces of intellect. Since hip-hop's emergence, it has been forced into anti-intellectual borders because it doesn't look like what intellectual merit “normally” looks like. Even though as of today hip-hop is majorly a commodified entity, in a way that is still American guilt. It is easier for those in power to make money off of hip-hop than

to admit that hip-hop is a scholarly genre that can stand toe to toe with the likes of a Robert Frost. If one would take a moment to thoroughly examine hip-hop music, the assumptions of anti-intellectualism would be dismantled. This can only happen through those in power moving beyond their guilt. “In order to get past this guilt you must act. And in order to act, you must be conscious and take great chances and be responsible for the consequences (Baldwin 62).” In this case, the consequence isn't really a consequence at all. Studying hip-hop in the classroom is an extremely rich experience, with many benefits.

In *Hip-Hop Literature: The Politics, Poetics, and Power of Hip-Hop in the English Classroom*, Kelly argues that hip-hop and rap have built an aesthetic and cultural relevancy that deserves its own high school course. This is due to its vast subject matters, the complexity of language and meanings found in hip-hop, and the ability to be relatable to most students. She expresses that some focused the use of hip-hop for accessing traditional literary texts and by doing she states, “They privileged the literary canon in a manner that continued to marginalize hip-hop (Kelly 51).” The “they” she is referring to, are the people in power. She feels they have privileged hip-hop by limiting it simply to critical discussion and a gateway to understanding traditional literary texts. I acknowledge that this, in essence, is what Mr. Andrews did in our class. Unknowingly, his use of hip-hop actually continued to marginalize it. I believe a lot of educators make the mistake of unintentionally marginalizing hip-hop by using it as a bridge to understanding traditional literature instead of exploring it as a genre of literature singularly.

Regarding the benefits, Kelly believes that the use of literary devices “...teach skills and concepts in literature that students struggle with when studying canonical texts that are distant from most students generationally and minority students culturally (Kelly 54).” The use of lan-

guage in hip-hop improves vocabulary and decoding skills and the utilization of storytelling all make hip-hop a literary genre worth being explored and established as a stand alone course that puts hip-hop at the center.

This complexity and uses of language are further explored and unpacked in “*What’s Love Got To Do With It? Analyzing the Discourse of Hip Hop Love Through Rap Balladry*.” The article explores the uses of language in rap ballads. The authors compare the song, “*I Need Love*” by LL Cool J to Soulja Boys, “*Soulja Girl*”. The article compares the way love was talked about in the 80’s, and how love is spoken about now, while performing a thorough analysis of who the subjects are in each song and why that’s important to understanding society and the importance of the use of language. Also, the authors add to the literature and discussion about the intersection of hip-hop culture and interpersonal relationships, as well as analyzing moments related to gender and their correlation to other socio-cultural trends, which is another benefit that transcends the classroom. LL Cool Js “I Need Love” places his love interest in the forefront, and he’s making it known that he will do anything to win the love of this young woman. On the contrast, Soulja Boy places himself as the subject and through the duration of the song, lists things that his “Soulja Girl” can do to be down for him.

The authors explore the artists uses of language by using Critical Discourse Analysis which is defined as “A methodological approach to the study of discourse that is used to make people aware of the way language reflects constructs, and sets up social identities and social relationships (Bell, Mier 42).” If taught in the classroom, students will be challenged to decode language and even understand patriarchy and gender roles. Using “I Need Love” and “Soulja Girl” teachers have a better chance at reaching and relating to students by using hip-hop from the past

and present to build connections, understand contrast and understand the impact of the use of language. “While both songs provide vivid imagery, another level of CDA-examining word choices, vocabulary and connotations and denotations shows further contrast between the two rap ballads and demonstrated that language, generally is not neutral (Bell, Mier 45).”

Another reason for an educator to implement the use of hip-hop in the classroom, is due to hip-hop's ability to incite social-change. In *Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy as a Form of Liberatory Praxis*, Akom critically examined the relationship between hip-hop culture and the evolution and promotion of hip-hop in the classroom. Akom used Paulo Freire's problem-posing method to develop an alternative instructional strategy called Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy. Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy is defined as “An alternative instructional strategy that addresses deep-rooted ideologies to social inequities by creating a space for prospective teachers to re-examine their knowledge of hip-hop as it intersects with race, class and gender and analyzing to what extent hip-hop can be used as a tool for social justice and beyond (Akom 52).”

Akom believes that hip-hop can be used as an educational tool for creating social change. Through my exploration of why hip-hop is a worthy literary genre, I found Akom's approach of focusing on the social aspect of the use of hip-hop very interesting. It is like he doesn't feel the need to convince the reader of the literary merit that hip-hop possess, he goes straight to the meat of what can really be learned and explored through the use of hip-hop pedagogy. Akom states, “Because of its commitment to social justice and action as a part of the research process, CHHP represents an orientation to inquiry that is highly consistent with the principles of youth participatory action research (Akom 55).”

Both Kelly and Akom also have strong ideals and beliefs about why hip-hop literature is marginalized, associated with anti-intellectualism. Kelly expressed that as kid she grew up with hip-hop as her backdrop and early on she accepted that there was no room in the classroom for her backdrop. As much power that she possessed as a “hip-hop kid,” there was no use for that power in education. Implementing the use of hip-hop gives young scholars an agency and gives them power in academic settings, power that is familiar to them.

This power is important, for so long students (especially students of color) have been under represented in the realm of academia. Students have also been taught how to mold themselves to fit into what white spaces deem as merit worthy academia. She expressed “Many students feel that they must shed their true selves to be successful academically; those who refuse to shift personas resist education, since they find it conflicts with their own identities (Kelly 52).” Kelly argues that rap can be powerful in helping students, but reminds the reader that the power is diluted, when the goal of it use is solely for reading traditional texts.

Akom in his unique way, explains his view of the marginalization of hip-hop. “Hip-hop as an academic field of inquiry has been historically marginalized not just exclusively by our cathedrals of higher education that we have anointed with the task of training teachers for urban and suburban communities speaks volumes to just how miseducated our society has become (Akom 53).” This made it very clear to me that it’s not only the higher, revered powers we respect that marginalize hip-hop literature, but also our own people who are unable or unwilling to look past violent and misogynistic lyrics to find the literary merit in and value in viewing hip-hop literature solidify the marginalization of the genre. He further supports his notion as he goes on to explain “Black folks remain mentally incarcerated if and when we rely on a Eurocentric

education system rather than developing curriculum that reflects our own culture, history, socioeconomic, and spiritual realities (Akom 54).” I agree with Akom due to the fact that some black people align what they deem worthy and revered with the ideals and standards of white spaces. Also, I believe due to the lack of a critical imagination, some black people cannot understand the way that they have been conditioned and are also not interested in figuring a way out of being conditioned, to exist in a space that is not controlled by the white gaze.

We see the marginalization of hip-hop from our own people in *Making Some Noise: The Academy's Hip-Hop Generation*. Hamilton explores what he considers, “Hip-Hop scholars,” who were not necessarily hip-hop babies but were hip-hop kids, who are now educators. One educator we were introduced to was Dr. Kyra Gaunt, who grew up when hip-hop was just in the beginning stages and go-go music was just starting out, she described it as jungle music that she just happened to know all of the words to. This solidifies the paradigm that Akom explored, it is not just the “higher ups” that have a marginalized anti-intelligent view of hip-hop, it comes from our own people and it takes sort of a renewing or refreshing of the mind to find the merit in it.

This renewal of the mind took place while she was working on her doctorate, her white professor played “*Public Enemy*” during class and this action inspired her to want to go back and teach about black music from a black perspective. “She did her master’s thesis on the sonic aesthetic practices of Public Enemy and how they related to George Clinton and James Brown, and she’s never looked back (Hamilton 2004).” With instructors like Dr. Gaunt, the arguments and theories of Kelly and Akom, of which I both agree, have a very hopeful future of being put into practice. Dr. Gaunt’s actions show that she conditioned herself to fit in her own space not controlled by white standards.

Through my reading and exploration, It is my opinion that a reason hip-hop is marginalized is because of where it takes place. It's spacial location has always taken place in the 'hood or streets. Something you rush home from school to participate in and listen to. I consider how the rap group N.W.A. was demonized by the American public by "expressing themselves." They were not considered genius like Shakespeare, or misunderstood and depressed like Robert Frost they were considered outlaws and deviants, and quickly labeled, marginalized and shut down due to using literature in their way. For example, the first bars in the song *Express Yourself*, Dr. Dre eloquently spits:

I'm expressing with my full capabilities
 And now I'm living in correctional facilities
 Cause some don't agree with how I do this
 I get straight and meditate like a Buddhist
 I'm dropping flavor, my behavior is hereditary
 But my technique is very necessary
 Blame it on Ice Cube, because he said it gets funky
 When you got a subject and a predicate
 Add it on a dope beat, and it'll make you think (The Best of N.W.A. the Strength of Street Knowledge.)

I questioned why that wasn't worthy to be explored as a singular text (Using "Express Yourself" as an example of how being in the hip-hop genre almost automatically disqualifies you, in the realm of education.) This is a disservice because there are not only literary devices that can be explored and taught, like Kelly focuses on, these lyrics can also be decoded to find how it is relevant to society and social justice as suggested by Akom. The fact that hip-hop literature is so multifaceted should alone make it worthy of independent study.

Initially when N.W.A came out with their song "*Fuck The Police*" the federal government (FBI) was so threatened by the group speaking out, they personally wrote letters claiming that the song was "encouraging violence against and disrespect for law enforcement officers (Compton Rappers Versus the Letter of the Law)." The FBI tried to make it impossible for

N.W.A. to be successful by forcing parent warning labels, silencing their free speech, having them arrested at shows. They were threatened by these black men with voices, armed with a pen and paper. N.W.A. dared to break the mold and use their voices and their agency to shine light on an epidemic, police brutality. The industry sat up and paid attention to groups like these, they had a following and their followers were inspired and influenced, because as Kelly made clear in her article, hip-hop was the backdrop or soundtrack to her life, it was influential. The proper use of hip-hop culture in the classroom can inspire students to speak out for injustice in and outside the classroom.

The benefits of using hip-hop pedagogy are endless. The few that Kelly spotlighted were using transformative hip-hop curriculum to create space for identity development, she states “We are giving them the opportunity to embrace their individuality while also pursuing academic success (Kelly 52).” She expresses that the use of hip-hop offers a “Counter narrative that aids students in working through their identity development as both students and individuals (Kelly 53).” A benefit that she reveals that I considered extremely important was how the acknowledgement of the worth of hip-hop shows students of color that they are relevant. “Acknowledgement that hip-hop music has merit as literature, and therefore has a place in the classroom conveys to the students that their background and culture are just as relevant and worthy of study as those of the students whose cultural identities are traditionally represented (Kelly 53).”

Akoms benefits focused more on the culture socially, “Through a counter-hegemonic curricula that focuses on youth culture and resistance race identity and social reproduction, students of color are able to provide alternate explanations of school inequality and simultaneously gain a critical perspective of their world (Akoms 55).” Once again, I believe he knows the literary merit

speaks for itself, the way he goes past the superficial and is ultimately wanting those who will experience hip-hop pedagogy to have an entirely different outlook on life and society and as a result incite change.

Hamilton similar to Akom focuses on the socio-political aspects of using hip-hop pedagogy. “I talk to my students about cultural property and representation, agency and identification and how these are bound up with nationalism, transnationalism, cultural identity and authenticity (Hamilton 2004).” He believes the reason hip-hop is important and beneficial for African American cultural expression is because of its immediacy and its insistence on lived experience. “I believe that makes hip-hop an area where we might see theory and practice coming together inside African American intellectualism, where we might see an attempt to develop innovative approaches to using hip-hop as a method for organizing African American youth around issues that are important to their survival (Hamilton 2004).”

I have gained a lot of knowledge from these readings and have a new appreciation for hip-hop. I am guilty of having marginalized hip-hop at one point and time and also associating it with anti-intellectualism. I believe if the people in power would let go of their guilt as Baldwin discussed and moved forward away from their prejudices to allow hip-hop to fully flourish without borders and allow hip-hop to be taught on a regular basis in schools, students would benefit tremendously and they would be shown they are worthy enough to be represented in the classroom. Through its use they will be able to genuinely connect with the material, and allow the benefits of its use to transcend the classroom and actually change their outlook and understanding of so much. These readings made me want to dive deeper into this genre, so that when I become an educator, I can make good and proper use of hip-hop pedagogy. I want to show every-

one as an educator that socially and literarily Hip-hop is a multifaceted force to be reckoned with.

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