

Sharise Wigfall
New York Theological Seminary
swigfall@mail.nyts.edu
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“The Remix”: Hip-Hop as a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy for Religiously Educating Youth

Abstract: One significant contributor to low levels of engagement with biblical content among young people is a perceived lack of cultural relevancy. One option to consider when exploring alternative methods for biblical engagement is the significance of the cultures that are shaping and influencing the lives of urban youth. This study will specifically highlight hip-hop culture, its healthy integration within youth ministry programming and the ways it might serve as a culturally relevant pedagogy essential to the increase and encouragement of young people’s engagement in religious education and spiritual practices.

Introduction

Throughout the history of Christian tradition, scripture has held primacy as the central text for both Christian faith and education. It informed the moral instruction that took place in the home and the formal observance of rituals that took place during corporate meetings in churches, temples and schools. Bible-based Christian teaching was embodied and actualized in the life of the believer, indicating that one was in covenant with God. Fluency of biblical text contributed significantly to one’s spiritual formation and who they were as individuals.¹ Biblical disengagement, whether as the result of the Bible’s complex history as an oppressive tool, people’s repeated exposure to ineffective teaching or something else, is a pedagogical problem. This paper argues for a pedagogy of cultural relevance by reclaiming teaching from the Bible in ways that resonate with urban youth.

According to Harold Burgess, one essential function of the educational work of the church is, “[t]o introduce learner to the Bible. This biblical introduction, it is acknowledged, must go well beyond the mere transmission of information about the Bible or the rote memorization of biblical passages. It must promote an understanding of the Bible in terms of its relevant contemporary message. The Bible, then, is considered to be worth knowing in and of itself because it is the primary written witness to revelation. Furthermore, the Bible is the basic source of Christian theology, and its principles

¹ Russell G. Moy, “American Racism: The Null Curriculum in Religious Education,” *Religious Education* 95 no. 2, (2000): 119-122, DOI: 10.1080/0034408000950202. Within the text, Moy quotes Grant S. Shockley, “Christian Education and the Black Religious Experience,” in *Ethnicity in the Education of the Church*, ed. Charles R. Foster (Nashville, TN: Scarritt Press, 1987), 32.

provide potential solutions to many human problems. In addition, it has been theorized that a knowledge of the Bible will prepare the way for men to receive God and to respond to Him in the present.”² While this is true, given the ways in which it has been misused, constituents of marginalized communities might not want to engage the Bible. Additionally, it has been subjected to ineffective and pedagogically unsound methods of teaching.

Young people today are struggling to connect and engage with scripture. In particular, many youth have difficulty identifying how the Bible – with its dense language, ancient stories and strange rituals – is relevant to their lives. A recent study conducted by the Barna Group highlighted young people’s perceptions of the Bible, the role they believe it should play in their lives and their level of personal engagement with it. According to that study, nearly half (47%) of American millennials (ages 18-33) are not engaged with the Bible.³ This is especially alarming, given that there are more versions and ways to access the Bible today than there were in the past. Among urban youth, Bible engagement seems particularly low. In general; young people tend to engage sources through which they acquire the most fulfillment and meaning, neither of which they encounter when they read scripture.⁴

Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray in *Teaching the Bible Through Popular Culture and the Arts* offer a wealth of pedagogical possibilities to assist in this crisis of biblical disengagement among youth. Arguing that the integration of musical texts in the religious education of youth can curate a space for engagement, they discuss how music can provide a catalyst for engaging young people specifically with the Bible. In addition, the amount of music available makes it possible to locate items that relate to the variety of biblical text and themes. Utilizing music as a comparative text alongside the Bible in order to explore particular themes, opens up fresh avenues of inquiry and interpretation and slowly closes the gap of disengagement.⁵

Bridging this gap calls for cultural relevance and, while the biblical text is in no ways irrelevant, the methods which we’ve used to communicate and teach young people are. Engagement with scripture has been regarded more as a religious practice than a relational one. This represents a failed opportunity to encourage, young people to reflect on scripture for meaning in their lives while encountering God through His word, thus connecting the realities of their world with the revelation of the word. Beginning with irrelevancy, Charles Foster in *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education* offers insight regarding flaws within religious education as it relates to the teaching of scripture and the ability to make it applicable to one’s present life.

² Harold W. Burgess, *Models of Religious Education: Theory and Practice in Historical and Contemporary Perspective* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel, 1996).

³ American Bible Society, *State of the Bible 2018: Bible Engagement Segmentation* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2018), 6-13, <http://american.Bible/Bible-engagement-research-state-of-the-Bible> (accessed February 7, 2019).

⁴ Tim Hutchings, “E-Reading and the Christian Bible,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 44, no. 4 (December 2015): 423–430.

⁵ Mark Roncace, and Patrick Gray, *Teaching the Bible through Popular Culture and the Arts* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

The generational gap between literature and congregants makes interpretation difficult. This gap has resulted in individuals developing their own interpretations, ones compatible with their experiences and current realities. Foster argues that it's not the text that's irrelevant, but rather the way in which the text is taught. This is not to suggest that nothing is working, but that the growing number of young people disengaged with the Bible should urge us to consider alternative methods that are culturally relevant, and which cause youth to think critically, connect individually, apply spiritually and live out actually.⁶ Hip-hop culture, in particular, is playing a formative role in the lives of urban youth. The contributions of hip-hop are significant, emerging out of experiences that continue to speak to – and echo the sentiments of – young people. It's musical, it's artistic, and it's rooted in cultural sensibilities that are attractive to this generation.

Hip-hop is one of the most popular cultural movements and one of today's most lasting and influential forms of art. Comprised of and characterized by music, art, dance diversity, quality, innovation and influence, it is, in many ways, the language of this generation, a language one must embrace to effectively engage and educate young people, because it articulates young people's matters of importance that otherwise would not be heard. Hip-hop doesn't just transcend cultural barriers, but religious categories also emerge out of hip-hop. While some view hip-hop as just a contemporary cultural art form, hip-hop is also an educational and historical coded language that speaks to and for this generation. Hip-hop is a cultural cookie cutter that contributes considerably to the cultivation of young people today. Hip-hop's significance has and continues to form young people's attitudes, language and identity.

Method

This paper employs an art-based methodology that seeks to speak directly to the ways in which hip-hop can serve as a powerful tool for biblical teaching and learning when appropriately aligned with the prevailing social and aesthetic interests and experiences of urban youth. The works of Gloria Durka, Joanmarie Smith and – more specifically – Maria Harris, explicitly address the aesthetic dimensions of religious education, in particular Harris describes an aesthetic approach to curriculum. Each argues that, unless the process of religious education is aesthetic, it is not education and it is certainly not religious.⁷ Hence, this paper seeks to: 1) explore the intersection of hip-hop culture and religious education, 2) examine how the integration of pop culture within youth ministry programming can inform our pedagogical practices and encourage young people's engagement in spiritual practices, and 3) reimagine religious education that resembles, relates and responds to the spiritual needs of young people.

Within the context of an aesthetic approach to curriculum, I will examine the significance of hip-hop for Christian faith and aesthetic teaching-learning from within religious education. As an art-based form, hip-hop represents an opportunity to re-envision and reform the pedagogical approach to young peoples' religious education.

⁶ Charles Foster, *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994).

⁷ Gloria Durka and Joanmarie Smith, eds., *Aesthetic Dimensions of Religious Education* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

More specifically, hip-hop presents an aesthetic curriculum that is effective for teaching the Bible. In the field of religious education, there have been explorations into identifying the importance of specific artistic expressions in teaching the value of faith. This research will follow this same course of study, emphasizing an aesthetic approach to curriculum to explain how hip-hop as a cultural art form presents an aesthetic curriculum that is effective for engaging young people with the Bible.

Like Harris's forms of curriculum, hip-hop as a cultural art form serves as a model of a holistic approach to curriculum for religiously educating youth. Through its five essential elements, hip-hop provides a number of aesthetic pathways through which learning can be achieved and conveyed: by way of movement, spoken word, music etc. all of which include a mode of learning. Hence, hip-hop models a more holistic approach to teaching scripture than those previously and presently employed in work with youth. In addition, this holistic approach is intentional in ensuring that the curriculum tends to the young peoples' teaching and learning needs while simultaneously affirming their contributions to the learning process.

The notion of hip-hop as a pedagogy of cultural relevance aims to create meaningful connections for young people, authentically and practically incorporating the creative elements of hip-hop into teaching, and inviting young people to make a connection with the content while meeting them on their cultural turf by teaching to, and through, their realities and experiences. When a curriculum does not reflect the culture, interests, and realities of youth, they lose interest in the content and context.

Hip-hop History: Emergence, Effect & Expansion

Hip-hop is a genre of music and a way of life which emerged from the housing projects of New York City in the late 1970s. At its inception, hip-hop was a direct result of overflowing creativity, suppressed energy, and a lack of available outlets for release and expression among impoverished teens and young adults. This alternative to the gang involvement and violence that followed the defunding of afterschool programs, music and art classes grew into a vehicle for African American inner-city youth to host block parties and fundraisers as DJ's and promoters. Hip-hop wasn't engaged beyond New York City until 1979 when "Rapper's Delight" brought hip-hop national and international recognition. Since the seventies, hip-hop has become a billion dollar industry and the language of young people.

Although no single individual can claim credit for the founding of hip-hop music or the hip-hop culture, Afrika Bambaataa, Busy Bee Starski, and DJs (disc-jockeys) Hollywood and Kool Herc are generally considered among the most prominent figures in the early years of the genre.⁸ Collectively, their gathering in the Bronx started the humble beginnings of hip-hop. The result of their endeavors grew into what is known as the hip-hop culture of today. Despite challenges and numerous critics, hip-hop has become one of the most popular musical forms in the world. Its reach and longevity have been much

⁸ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-hop Generation* (New York: Macmillan, 2005), 12.

greater than most expected when it surfaced in the late 1970s. Hip-hop, through its various modes and messages, has broken down racial, ethnic, gender, class, language and regional barriers to become the greatest bridge in the pop culture of America today. It is the avenue through which young people contest and convey the challenging forces in their lives.

Since its beginning, hip-hop has been a youth movement. Young people gave hip-hop life. In hip-hop, they have found a religion that gives them principles to live by. For many of these youth and young adults, hip-hop is their only way of life, an identity until they find their own. Through hip-hop they've encountered authenticity, advocacy and agency. Hip-hop continues to evolve to the present day, altering generational thinking from politics and race to art and language.

Hip-hop and Spirituality

In *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap*, Anthony Pinn uncovers the significance of the spiritual in the world of rap music. He argues that there is no distinction between the sacred and secular, and that they coexist and merge in unexpected places. Rap, like the various forms of black popular music which preceded it has profound connections to the myriad religious traditions found within African American communities.⁹ The sacral roots extend from the spirituals and gospel right through to the blues, jazz, soul, and finally hip-hop. Although it has often been deemed blasphemous, hip-hop is ripe with deep religious potential specifically because it explores life's complexities and current conflicts, and normalizes the tension of both sacred and profane expressions coexisting within the narrated experiences of marginalized youth.

In *The Soul of Hip-hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology*, Daniel Hodge writes: "Hip-hop allows everyday life, language, and culture to be given fair examination. There is nothing too sacred to talk about or deal with. Hip-hop that exposes injustice is considered political and socially conscious and is often associated with [a] hip-hop spirituality [which] portrays [a] God of "the streets" and Jesus as a "social critic and revolutionary."¹⁰ Hip-hop's offensive and profane elements also reflect deep religious truths that challenge traditional Christian perspectives". This broader conversation of what spirituality is and can be, allows room to highlight the ways in which young people engage spirituality and the significance of hip-hop as a viable tool for exploring biblical themes and Christian faith with young people.

Both Smith and Jackson argue that, while hip-hop embodies a spiritual dimension, hip-hop alone isn't enough to tend to one's spiritual needs. They state: "The spirituality hip-hop offers is attractive but can't provide consistent, holistic solutions, internal peace and sustainable life change. Like all other musical styles, hip-hop is spiritual by nature; however, its influence depends on the artist and his or her interpretation of life. It would be putting too much weight on hip-hop to expect it to meet

⁹ Anthony Pinn, *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Daniel W. Hodge, *The Soul of Hip-hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2016), 13-28.

all the spiritual needs of its people.”¹¹ Smith and Jackson contend that faith communities can glean from hip-hop, specifically from its criticism, with hopes that meaningful examination will foster a greater understanding of hip-hop culture’s power to effectively engage young people. Hence, this paper argues that, by utilizing and exploring the art of hip-hop through a cultural, political and theological lens - and pairing hip-hop culture with spiritual practices and programming - religious educators can acquire new pedagogical approaches that engage young people and create a space for transformative learning and spiritual formation.

Hip-hop and Theology

The underexplored dimension of hip-hop is its theology. Theology, in its basic sense, is the study of God, how God interacts, intercedes, speaks, lives, thinks, wants and is, and hip-hop repeatedly depicts God showing up in the most unusual and interesting places. Hip-hop theology argues that popular culture can be a sacred place, an area in which one can encounter God in what’s deemed the most unholy of places. Since hip-hop theology embraces both the sacred and the profane, it challenges us towards a basic theological understanding of the profane.

In their *article Theomusicology and Christian Education: Spirituality and The Ethics of Control in the Rap of MC Hammer*, N. Lynne Westfield and Harold Dean Trulear state: “Theomusicology treats black music in a holistic manner and secularity as a context for the sacred and profane rather than as the antithesis of the sacred ... As such, theomusicology is a tool for us to move beyond the simplistic notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ that are uncritically used to characterize black secular music and especially rap music, and to help us develop an understanding of the meaning system under construction by African American youths.”

Hip-hop is a community where sacred and profane expressions coexist and describe both positive and negative experiences interchangeably. Performers and listeners of hip-hop claim to undergo euphoric experiences, which suggests that a spirituality resides in so called profane expressions as well. This fits well within what is known about the history of black popular music and its entanglement with the divine and the religious. Yet, while those who engage hip-hop experience a sort of spiritual ecstasy through its lyrical content and musical arrangement, there is an inability to experience the sacred dimensions of rap music by those who don’t engage fully, perhaps borne of an unwillingness to acknowledge how hip-hop exists along the continuum of evolving black musical expressions. Namely, within the context of the church, generational gaps and tensions have hindered the validation of hip-hop and its significance in the lives of young people and its contribution to their faith formation and liberation.¹²

Evelyn Parker in *Bridging Civil Rights and Hip-hop Generations*, notes:

¹¹ Efre Smith and Phil Jackson, *The Hip-hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 154.

¹² Harold Dean Trulear and N. Lynne Westfield, “Theomusicology and Christian Education: Spirituality and the Ethics of Control in the Rap of MC Hammer,” *Theomusicology: A Special Issue of Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* 8 (1994): 218-238.

“The struggle of black youth and their adult affiliates to validate hip-hop while debating with adults who seek to reject hip-hop as a viable culture elucidates the contemporary generational divide that needs bridging if the black Church is to be healthy and wholesome and live out its prophetic mission.” Parker argues that the church’s inability to: 1) acknowledge that young people are engaging spirituality through alternative cultural resources they’ve located in hip-hop and 2) validate it as a tool for teaching and learning, has made it almost impossible for young people to view the church as progressive, culturally relevant or culturally responsive.¹³ The lack of cultural relevance, agency and acceptance within the church has caused many youth, particularly black youth to shape spaces of their own, utilizing hip-hop as a tool by which they experience liberation and encounter the divine.

Religious Education through Hip-hop

In the field of religious education there have been explorations into identifying the importance of specific artistic expressions in teaching the value of faith. This paper endeavors to do the same. The sole purpose of religious education is to provide, develop and promote programs that equip individuals for discipleship. The core elements of religious education are biblical teaching and learning. It is through active participation in religious education programs that students acquire the tools and skills needed to grow spiritually in a community of believers. In order for this discipleship to happen, the teaching and learning experience must be authentic, relevant and holistic, meeting students where they are and at their level of need.

Hip-hop as a teaching technique within church-based religious education is an authentic, relevant and holistic approach that encourages the analysis and incorporation of one’s experiences in order to meet young people where they are emotionally, socially, intellectually, morally and spiritually. Hip-hop’s emergence as a youth led movement to contest dehumanizing forces in their lives and communities positions it as a prime tool for addressing young people’s oppressive realities and communicating a hope for change, liberation and justice. Thus, utilization of hip-hop as a form of teaching will aid young people in understanding and engaging with their faith and viewing hip-hop through the lens of cultural heritage and relevance will help them achieve liberation.

Hip-hop as a teaching tool requires both exploration and activation of the imaginative dimensions of young people. Integrating the aesthetic thoughts and ideas of youth and granting them full control to implement what they dream will increase participation and will link them to the work at hand. In *Reclaiming the Spirituals: New possibilities for African American Christian Education*, Yolanda Smith offers (through the utilization of the spirituals) a template to teach all cultures and forms of art.¹⁴ Drawing from Smith’s template and approach to religious education, this paper furthers the scholarship examining the potential for hip-hop as a cultural art form of teaching and

¹³ Evelyn Parker, “Bridging Civil Rights and Hip-hop Generations,” in *Black Practical Theology*, eds. Dale P. Andrews and Robert London Smith (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 19-34.

¹⁴ Yolanda Smith, *Reclaiming the Spirituals: New Possibilities for African American Christian Education* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004).

learning within a religious context. It lifts up the significant and far-reaching contributions of hip-hop and highlights its inherent value as musical, artistic, rooted in cultural sensibilities that are attractive to this generation and useful in the way that it echoes the sentiments of young people.

Hip-hop is a popular and enduring cultural movement comprised of and characterized by music, art, dance diversity, quality, innovation and influence. Hip-hop, in many ways, is the language of this generation, a language one must embrace to effectively engage and educate young people because it articulates young people's matters of importance that otherwise would not be heard.¹⁵ Like the spirituals, hip-hop transcends specific cultures. Just as spirituals aren't restricted to the church, hip-hop isn't restricted to the streets or to the realm of secular entertainment. As it continues to form young people's identity, style, attitudes, language and fashion, hip-hop is an educational resource also. Hip-hop opposes the oppressive occurrences in the lives of young people and validates and gives voice to their concerns. The more it is accepted and integrated into religious educational programming, the more a cultural pedagogy will be forged that attends to the circumstances of youth and gives them a voice through the biblical narratives.

Hip-Hop and The Bible: The Art of Storylinking

Hip-hop's four primary artistic elements (knowledge is the fifth and foundational element) - emceeing (rap music), deejaying (playing, mixing and scratching records), B-boying/B-girling (break dancing) and graffiti (visual art) - resemble the curriculum forms Harris utilizes. Each embodies a pedagogy of cultural relevance and curriculum in the way it requires a reciprocal exchange between young people and those executing the element. Each element offers young people the opportunity to join the teaching and learning experience. For the sake of biblical engagement with young people, the curriculum of engagement helps young people connect their stories with the biblical narrative in order for them to witness God's presence and action in their lives. Merging faith and hip-hop will foster unique spaces of theological formation, where youth are able to connect their feelings, expressions of meaning, faith in God and Christian living.

To connect refers to the act of attaching, joining, linking, associating or relating to something. Connecting is essential in helping young people see themselves – both present and future - as a part of the everyday story displayed in both hip-hop music and the larger story of God found in scripture. Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, through the lens of African American tradition, presents a modern model of religious education she identifies as storylinking. It mirrors the methods of religious education during slavery where teaching and learning was fixated on liberation and vocation. Storylinking is the process of pairing portions of one's lived experience with the biblical narrative and those of the Christian experience not found in scripture for the purpose of fortifying the faith of members of a community who lived through similar circumstances.

Employing this narrative approach to teaching will help young people to critically reflect on their life stories in light of the Christian faith story by pairing the biblical

¹⁵ Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip-hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2002), 3-24.

narrative with everyday life stories conveyed through hip-hop lyrics. Each element of hip-hop entails story-linking, allowing young people to engage in deep, layered and echoed God-talk as biblical and personal narratives expressed through hip-hop intersect, forging connections with what was read through scripture and heard through song.¹⁶

Hip-hop and Education: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

There is a significant amount of research in urban education that focuses on cultural relevance as an essential component of teaching and learning. Scholars, such as Gloria Ladson-Billings, discuss the importance of engaging urban youth through culturally relevant and even culturally sustaining pedagogies. Ladson-Billings defines culturally relevant pedagogy as: “A pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.”¹⁷ Therefore, culturally relevant pedagogy is a method that encourages educators to join students’ lived experience to their learning experience while simultaneously adhering to the expectations of the core curriculum. In Ladson-Billings’ studies of effective educators in urban settings, she identifies cultural relevant pedagogy as a pedagogical approach and a way of educating African-American constituents, ensuring that students are excelling academically, critically thinking and culturally aware in order to contest the status quo of the current systems and social structures.

As Ladson-Billings outlined, culturally relevant pedagogy is critical to student learning. It fosters academic success and opportunities for students to develop cultural competence and critical consciousness to challenge social constructs. Culturally relevant pedagogy can also promote understanding of the content being taught among students, because of the precise connection between the content and students’ lived experiences and realities, fostering an environment where students are eager to learn and are engaged in learning. Thus, religious educators who strive to be culturally relevant become relevant in their practice and the communal disparities that have an emotional impact on young people. This necessitates that religious educators learn more about their students, their students’ lived experiences and the community from which they come, diminishing the divide and building bridges rather than walls (of content comprehension, lived experience and generational differences) within both ecclesial and academic settings.

Evelyn Parker, presents the metaphor “walking together” in her attempt to bridge the gap between the hip-hop generation and those who grew up in the Civil Rights Era. Comparing the contemporary content of Kanye West’s, “Jesus Walks,” with the traditional gospel lyrics “walk with me” suggests that walking together is a collaborative ministry approach that fosters relationships between young people and adults. Parker highlights the role of the previous generation in helping young people search for meaning.¹⁸ Here, Parker is making the connection in order to bridge the gap utilizing hip-

¹⁶ Anne Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 50.

¹⁷ Gloria Ladson-Billings, “But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” *Theory into Practice* 34 (1995): 159-165.

¹⁸ Parker, “Bridging Civil Rights and Hip-hop Generations,” 19-34.

hop. She argues, through her metaphor of walking together, that both traditional gospel and hip-hop can be useful for the education and discipleship of young people. She further suggests that if we don't embrace hip-hop as a form of teaching Christian youth, and if we allow the critique of previous generations to dismiss hip-hop, we forfeit the transformational potential of hip-hop as a culturally relevant pedagogy within religious education.

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