Hip Hop as Artistic and Pedagogical Resistance in Youth Religious Education
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Abstract

In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has examined the relationship between hip hop culture and classroom centered pedagogy. These studies have demonstrated the classroom potential of hip hop for fostering emancipatory teaching/learning aims (e.g., fostering critical consciousness, activism, resistance). While these scholars have been particularly attentive to the liberative role that youth based cultures such as hip hop can play within schooling settings, attention to hip hop within religious teaching/learning contexts has been virtually ignored. As such, very little is known about the teaching/learning potential of hip hop within youth religious education. This paper seeks to attend to this gap in literature by examining the liberative potential of hip hop specifically as an artistic and pedagogical form of resistance within youth religious education.

The quest for liberation is a pronounced cultural and educational theme, and has been since the dawn of the twentieth century. There is an extensive body of educational research which asserts that educational processes can and ought to serve as avenues for social transformation—that is, as a means of reforming unjust historic socio-political realities. Within this vein of literature, several scholars have made an exploration of pedagogy a specific focus of study. In particular, a modicum of theorists has examined how a focus on the aesthetic/artistic dimensions of teaching/learning can foster emancipatory aims within educational practice. This paper seeks to contribute to this growing set of scholarship by examining the potential of one contemporary cultural movement, hip-hop, as a form of artistic and pedagogical resistance within youth religious education.

Art as Resistance

Some creative forms of art have been closely tied to the quest for liberation. In the *Aesthetic Dimension*. Herbert Marcuse identifies a key liberative function inherent within art. In particular, he contends that art serves as a practice of resistance, a way of re-imaging the extant

social order. As a cultural force for resistance, then, art ultimately enables a viewing of a world that has otherwise been rendered invisible.[1] Put another way, art facilitates a sounding out of the experiences within the world that are at times silenced. Ultimately, the ability to be seen and heard, are, in and of themselves, acts of resistance in so far as such processes facilitate a revealing of subaltern perspectives that tend to be hidden. As Marcuse suggests, then, a part of the liberative purpose and function of art is to enable people to resist a given reality so as to reshape that reality. To this end, contemporary artistic movements have often served a revolutionary role in helping to re-create oppressive socio-historic realities in light of the experiences of marginalized persons.

Hip-Hop as Arts Based Movement

Hip hop has, arguably represented one of the most significant and socially transformative artistic based movements of the late twentieth and early twenty- first centuries that emerges out of the context of marginalized youth cultures. Yet, within academic literature there has not been a sustained treatment of the artistic/socially transformative based dimensions of hip hop. When the artistic based dimensions of hip hop have been the center of research, studies have focused overwhelmingly on rap music, without considering the vast range of artistic practices that comprise this cultural form. While rap music is perhaps the most widely recognized form of hip hop, the term *hip hop* refers to a collective group of related art forms in different media (visual, sound and movement) that originate out of Afro- Caribbean, African-American and Latino neighborhoods and cultural traditions in New York City. The term also refers to the events at

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1. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), ix.*

which these forms were practiced, the people who practiced them, their shared aesthetic ability and the contemporary activities that maintain those traditions.[2]

While hip hop is an eclectic art form, the tendency to focus exclusively on rap music within most academic literature has, at times, contributed to an undermining of the artistic legitimacy of hip hop, in the wake of critiques that this particular form of hip hop engenders violent and aggressive behaviors among youth.[3] Tellingly, such a perspective has often kept people from recognizing hip hop's potential use as a socially transformative resource, particularly in work with youth. This has especially been the case youth religious education. Moreover, while a number of studies have dealt with the deleterious effects that hip hop can engender in the lives of youth, fewer works have explored hip hop's potential as an artistic/liberative resource for youth. Given the sheer significance of hip hop as a profound cultural influence shaping and reshaping young people's lives today, however, this oversight warrants attention.

Hence, this paper engages in a marked departure from the prevailing discourse on hip hop by seeking to uncover the socially transformative dimensions of hip hop and their particular import for teaching/learning within youth religious education. To this end, this study endeavors to reveal the rich potential of hip hop by arguing that hip hop can provide arts based liberative approach to teaching and learning within youth religious education. It does so in ways that resist oppressive systems and structures operative in young people's lives— including those that reveal themselves within the curricular schema of institutions of religious teaching/learning.

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2. Joseph Schloss, *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls, and Hip Hop Culture in New York*(New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.
3. Michael Erik Dyson, Know What I Mean: Reflections on Hip Hop (New York: Civitas Books), 2007), xvii.

As a contemporary art form, hip hop first burst onto the popular scene in the early 1970s. Evolving out of the post segregation and post-Civil Rights generational consciousness of poor young people living in the South Bronx of New York City, hip hop quickly became the primary vehicle through which these youth sought to confront the oppressive socio-political realities (e.g., housing discrimination and police brutality) they were encountering within urban life. Anthony Pinn writes: "Hip hop culture emerges as a cultural and creative response to the matrix of industrial decline, social isolation, and political decay endemic to New York City's Bronx section." [4] Not unlike other art forms before it such as the spirituals, the blues, reggae and rock and roll, hip hop served as a vehicle of social critique and protest— reforming, however, the fight for liberation and social justice in revolutionary ways.

Utilizing a new wave of aesthetic practices that emerged out of Afro-diasporic cultural traditions, hip hop introduced four major artistic forms: DJ-ing (playing, mixing, scratching records), MC-ing (rapping), B-boying/B-girling (dancing), and graffiti (visual art). While these aesthetic practices were fundamentally about creativity and play, a means through which young people engaged a leisurely way of being in the world, marginalized youth also used these practices as creative avenues to resist and re-imagine unjust social realities. Thus, what hip hop's earliest origins demonstrate is that there can be a dynamic relationship between young people's leisure practices, forms of resistance and their quest for social justice. Today, hip hop boasts a wide variety of art forms that also includes, film, photography fashion and literature.

Renewed Interest in the Liberative Dimensions of Hip Hop

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4. Anthony B. Pinn, *Why Lord Suffering? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*(New York: Continuum, 1995), 122.

While the earliest forms of hip hop were steeped in clear liberation motifs, some contend that hip hop's trajectory over the years seems to have all but erased any ties to social justice ideals. In particular, proponents of this view assert that hip hop's commercial success has somehow overshadowed its concern with more socially conscious aims. In contrast to such a view, research across varied academic disciplines indicates that there is a renewed interest in the liberative dimensions of hip hop. In recent years, an increasing number of studies have demonstrated the classroom potential of hip hop for fostering emancipatory teaching/learning aims (e.g., developing critical consciousness, activism and resistance.)[5] While these studies have been particularly attentive to the liberative role that youth based cultures such as hip hop play within classroom settings, hip-hop's potential as a liberative resource for teaching/learning within religious contexts has been underexplored. As such, very little is known about the liberative pedagogical potential of hip-hop within youth religious education.

New Directions for Hip Hop Analyses within Religious Educational Literature

Beyond African American Populations: The Need for an Expanded Focus

Though there has been a dearth of attention to hip hop within religious educational literature, there have been a few works that have explored hip hop as a religious educational resource in work with youth. However, these treatments have tended to limit their discussions to African-American constituencies, without considering the genre's broader import for other populations. These studies have greatly enriched our understandings of how hip hop can serve a

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5. Marc Lamont Hill, *Beats, Rhymes and Classroom Life: Hip Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2009), xix; Brad Portfolio and Paul Carr,eds.,*Youth Culture,Education and Resistance: Subverting the Commercial Ordering of Life* (Boston: Sense Publishers,2010),112-148.

unique role in religiously educating African American youth—e.g., serving as a means through which opposition to injustice can be fostered in these youths' lives.[6]

Today, however, hip hop represents a profound global and cultural phenomenon that is influencing the lives of young people who represent a wide range of social, racial/ethnic constituencies within the United States and beyond. In fact, while the top artists within hip hop continue to be primarily African-American and Latino, white persons now account for 70 percent of hip hop consumers.[7] Hence, as one *NY Times* article aptly notes: " Hip-hop is not a subcultural curiosity or even an outsider success story. It is the grammar of youth culture, of the whole country."[8] Embracing the reality that hip hop now represents a social and cultural staple within the lives of millennial youth, signals the need for a more extensive body of scholarship within religious education that addresses the significance of hip hop to the lives of young people generally. Making the case for a more general exploration of hip hop's significance to young people's lives within religious education, however, does not undermine the fact that the African American community continues to maintain a unique relationship with hip hop culture. Instead, pursuing such a focus underscores that utilizing hip hop as a religious educational resource can enrich the lives of diverse groups of young people.

The Need for Greater Emphasis on the Educative Dimensions of Hip Hop

Beyond the tendency to focus exclusively on African American constituencies within religious educational literature , current analyses also tend to emphasize only the religious dimensions of hip hop. While these studies have sought to reframe a primarily "secular"

6. Evelyn Parker, *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope Among African-American* Adolescents (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 125-145.;Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Marlon Hall *Wake Up: Hip-Hop Christianity and the Black Church* (Nashville:Abingdon Press,2011),119-172.
7. Paul Butler, *Let's Get Free: A Hip-Hop Theory of Justice*(New York: The New Press, 2009), 128.
8. Jon Carminica,"He Took Hip Hop from Gritty to Global,"*NY Times,* September 1, 2012, C1-C2

perspective of hip hop in order to probe the religious sensibilities inherent within hip hop, these

works typically overlook the educative dimensions of hip hop.[9] However, the most

comprehensive approach to religious education involves attending to the dynamic interplay

between both the religious and educative dimensions of life. In an attempt to bolster the

significance of the educative dimensions of hip hop within religious educational literature, in the

upcoming section, hip hop is examined as a pedagogical approach that can reform curricular

practices within religious education.

Curriculum and Religious Education

Curriculum within religious education has been largely influenced by a "schooling"

perspective ---that is, viewing curriculum as a set of texts through which persons receive

instruction in knowledge and behavior about religious faith. This type of approach to curriculum

is concerned primarily with the cognitive dimensions of religious learning (e.g., building

religious literacy). Embracing such a view of curriculum, however, has often caused religious

educators (including youth religious educators) to minimize utilizing the arts as a primary

curricular resource. In response to this, some scholars have argued for the essential role of the

arts within religious education. Still, few of these theorists have emphasized the specific

importance of hip hop as an artistic approach within religious education.

Hip Hop Curriculum: Artistic and Pedagogical Resistance Youth Religious Education

Maria Harris has made one of the most sustained attempts within religious education to

focus curriculum through an emphasis on artistic/aesthetic form. Harris contends that education

within the church, similar to all artistic processes is a work of giving form. She is particularly

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9. Anthony B. Pinn,ed.*Noise and Spirit:The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*(New York:New York University Press,2003),3-22.

concerned with education as the fashioning and refashioning of ecclesial teaching forms in order to provide an alternative church curriculum or way of forming people in faith within a community of faith. In particular, Harris' work signals three ways in which aesthetic approaches to curriculum such as hip hop can serve as a form of pedagogical resistance.

Holistic Emphasis In Curriculum as Resistance

First, Harris underscores that an aesthetic view of curriculum is one that seriously engages the idea that teaching and learning encompasses the whole of human experience---that is, our entire bodyliness.[10] As she perceives it, the arts provides an effective means through which this sense of wholeness (the union between mind, heart and body) can be nurtured within religious education. Moreover, when pedagogical practice assumes these holistic aims, such a process ultimately becomes an act of resistance by countering traditional paradigms that tend to reduce effective teaching/learning to acquiring book knowledge. [11] bell hooks points out that when education lacks a holistic focus, it can become an oppressive medium---one that diminishes students' creative agency as active participants in educational processes.

As a contemporary art form, hip hop serves as an example of a more holistic, approach to curriculum within youth religious education. Specifically, hip hop offers multiple approaches to educating youth: through dance, music, poetry, metaphor, etc. that engage both rational and non-rational modes of knowing. Hence, hip hop represents a more comprehensive approach to religious education than the ones currently being utilized in work with youth . Within youth

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10. Maria Harris.*The Aesthetic and Curriculum Development.* (Joint Educational Development, 1982)
11..bell hooks,*Teaching to Transgress:Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 13-22.

religious education there has been a tendency to overlook the more intuitive, affective dimensions of religious /learning. However, hip hop integrates both the cognitive and affective as equally important dimensions of pedagogy. Such an approach ensures that curriculum within religious education addresses the teaching/learning needs of all young people, and does so in ways that affirms the active contributions of each student within these processes.

Emphasis on the Cultural Traditions of Marginalized Populations as Resistance Practice

Second, Harris underscores that teaching/learning approaches within the church (including artistic approaches) have tended to operate from a largely Euro-American perspective. This has ultimately prevented the church from utilizing the wisdom inherent in a variety of cultural traditions including that of African-American and Latino persons within curriculum.[12] In response to this dynamic, Harris emphasizes the need for religious educators to place as central within church curriculum those views which are at present peripheral or unattended to . Utilizing hip hop as an arts based pedagogy provides an occasion for the church to reform biases in curriculum that relegate the cultural traditions of disenfranchised groups to secondary standing within religious teaching/learning.

As arts based form that emerges from black and Latino youth cultures, hip hop reflects the aesthetic imaginations of those on the margins. In this sense, hip hop resists the cultural and political biases inherent in aesthetic approaches to religious education that that tend to privilege Euro-American perspectives. Instead, hip hop subverts this type of aesthetic hegemony by introducing new aesthetic paradigms for teaching/learning within religious education that utilize the cultural expressions of disenfranchised youth as exemplars. In doing so, hip hop offers new

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12. Harris, *Fashion Me,* 123.

meaning schemas and interpretative frameworks through which curriculum with young people in the church might not only be approached but ultimately reformed.

Resistance By Leisure as Educative Form of Life

Third, Harris notes that an aesthetic approach to curriculum is one that embraces a view of curriculum as not a static, but rather, fluid process. In this sense, curriculum involves the sum total---the *course*—of the learning experiences (teaching, worship, community, preaching and outreach) taking place within the local religious context. This curriculum within the church is also shaped and reshaped by a broader "curriculum of life" comprised of four main educational forms of life: family, schooling, job and leisure activity.

As arts based form that emerges out of youth's leisure practices, hip hop is an example of the educational form of life that is leisure activity. During adolescence, leisure activity takes on particular salience. This is because, today, such practices (similarly to role that institutions like the church and family have traditionally played) are now serving as alternative sites of identity formation for youth. Hence, leisure assumes a formative role in young people's lives—one that is ultimately educative. Moreover, while there are a variety of ways in which young people can engage in leisure, research indicates that young people spend a significant amount of their leisure time in hip hop culture.[13] Thus, as a leisure based form of life, hip hop retains some of the richest resources for how curriculum within the church can be reshaped.

However, very few studies have engaged the educative significance of leisure based forms of life such as hip hop. The aversion to utilizing leisure as an educational form that can shape the church's curriculum can be attributed to a conventional view of leisure that equates it

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13.Oneka LaBennett,*She's Mad Real:Popular Culture and West Indian Girls in Brooklyn* (New York: New York University press, 2011), 3-4.

with empty time or mindless activity. Embracing this perspective within the church has caused youth religious educators to overlook leisure as a vital resource within curriculum and the ways this form of life can teach young people. Incorporating arts based forms of leisure such as hip hop within curriculum is one way that the church can reclaim the educative significance of leisure. Such an approach ultimately resists the domestication of education within the church by offering a renewed vision of curriculum as housed within and between a plurality of forms of life.

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