

## Using Hip Hop as a tool to Navigate and Heal While Under Attack

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### ABSTRACT

Hip-hop culture, historically and presently, serves as a platform for marginalized, oppressed, and vulnerable groups to express themselves. Rooted in blackness, hip-hop has long utilized storytelling to explore social, economic, and environmental justice content and highlight the interconnectedness of privilege and oppression. Through the lens of hip-hop music, art, spoken word, poetry, and more, the culture has explored the social and political history of the United States, including the challenges posed by both individual and systemic discrimination. This framework, combined with Critical Race Theory (CRT), provides the structure to develop an understanding of the various discourses of social justice and examine what anti-oppressive practice may look like in any setting. Furthermore, a Hip-hop framework allows for the use of self-reflection, oral and written communication, and creative expression to understand better how storytelling in hip-hop culture exposes social isolation, economic disadvantage, structural inequality, and a lack of access to power.

**Keywords:** Hip-Hop Pedagogy, Critical Race Theory, Resistance, Healing

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*“The message I stress, to make it stop, study your lessons. Don't settle for less; even the genius asks questions. Be grateful for the blessings, don't ever change, keep your essence, the power is in the people and politics we address”- Tupac Shakur (Me Against the World)*

Hip-hop, with its raw and honest lyricism, offers a unique platform for individuals to express their innermost thoughts and emotions. The genre often explores personal struggles, societal issues, and the harsh realities of life, serving as a voice for the disenfranchised by highlighting racial inequality, poverty, and police brutality. As Russell Simmons said, "The thing about hip-hop is that it's from the underground,



ideas from the underbelly, from people who have mostly been locked out, who have not been recognized." On his critically acclaimed third album, *Me Against the World* (1995), Tupac Shakur paints a lyrical portrait of the pain, anger, tenderness, and frailties of a young Black man in America. It is a polished, self-reflective album with significant social commentary on poverty, growing up as a black male, domestic violence, and family. The power of hip-hop lies in its ability to connect, inspire, and transform through storytelling. Shakur's album is one example of hip-hop's ability to connect to people, selling 240,000 albums in the first week (Billboard.com/charts). Listening to hip-hop can be cathartic, allowing individuals to release pent-up emotions and find solace in the relatable content. Beyond serving as an emotional release, hip-hop empowers listeners by instilling a sense of resilience, encouragement, and perseverance. For over 50 years, hip-hop artists have illuminated a path for marginalized youth to share their triumphs and pain, their roadblocks and angst, their joy and love, and their lives and dreams.

What follows is an illustration of the power hip-hop can have in higher education to engage in social justice content as classrooms transform into political battlegrounds and anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) bills pass. I will provide a brief overview of the changing landscape of U.S. classrooms. Next, I will examine the interconnectedness of education, hip-hop, and abolitionist teaching practices. Additionally, I will highlight how hip-hop was used as a teaching strategy to bridge social divides and unpack emotive topics such as gender roles, poverty, police brutality, racism, stereotypes, and more in an undergraduate elective course. Finally, I will discuss the implications for educators across the U.S. and the ways they can employ hip-hop as a classroom strategy to engage in social justice topics.

### **HIP-HOP DEFINED**

People often use rap and hip-hop interchangeably. Yet, they are not the same. Chang (2005) describes hip-hop as a culture-defining movement that incorporates a multiracial, polycultural worldview. Within this line of thinking, Baszile (2009) states, "hip hop lives on in multifarious representations...this includes socially conscious rap, gangsta rap, R&B sampling, spoken word, clothing, hair styling...and subversive uses of coded language" (p. 6). Hip-hop is a complex culture made up of five main elements: 1) DJing; 2) MCing; 3) Breakdancing; 4) Graffiti; and 5) Knowledge (Chang, 2005; Hill, 2009; Love, 2016). Marc Lamont Hill (2009), who defined the umbrella phrase hip-hop-based education (HHBE), identifies the elements of hip-hop culture (i.e., rap, turntableism, break dancing, graffiti, knowledge of self, fashion, language). In other words, although some may use hip-hop and rap interchangeably, rap is the lyrical element that contributes to the broader hip-hop culture. I will continue to use this framework. When I refer to hip-hop, I mean the broader culture, whereas rap specifically refers to its lyrical aspect.

### **POSITIONALITY STATEMENT**

"So, when'd you fall in love with hip-hop?" Many recognize this quote from the 2002 award-winning film *Brown Sugar* as the resounding question asked by Sidney "Sid"

Shaw, played by Sanaa Lathan. The sounds of both Motown and hip-hop punctuated my childhood. As a member of Generation X, I cannot recall a time when hip-hop was not a part of my life. Moreover, I have always loved hip-hop. Hip-hop was a friend and confidant, oftentimes helping me find the words to express myself. As a lover of poetry and avid reader, hip-hop felt like an extension of spoken word, opening a different realm to address the challenges of growing up and celebrate the good times. Salt-N-Pepa, MC Lyte, KRS-One, LL Cool J, Run-DMC, and others of that time wove stories of self-love, relationships, and social justice. I grew up alongside hip-hop, experiencing adolescence to the rhymes of Queen Latifah, A Tribe Called Quest, and the Beastie Boys. In songs like *Ice Cream* by Wu-Tang Clan, I heard the celebration of all hues of Black and Brown women and felt seen.

In this increasingly inequitable world, how we generate knowledge about our actions and their impacts is crucial. An important consideration in any knowledge-creation process is who is included in the “we” of this story. In line with Anzaldúa’s (1981, 1987) work, what lies before you is my story and the knowledge I, as a Black woman, have gained through living, raising a family, and teaching in a southern state whose political stance towards education has become increasingly at odds with the people in our community. I grounded this article in my lived experience as a lover of hip-hop, an educator, and a Black woman committed to raising the consciousness of those around me.

### **FOREGROUNDING HISTORY**

The Civil Rights Movement was a critical time in history and had a significant impact on the Black community and the country. Beginning in the mid-1950s and throughout the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement came to prominence and challenged racial injustice in the United States. Liberation from injustice requires agitation, resistance, and creativity. Freedom dreaming, per Love (2019), is “grounded in a critique of injustice” and “critical and imaginative dreams of collective resistance” (p. 101). It means a refusal to see oneself remaining subjugated to the outcomes of classism, racism, sexism, religious oppression, and the other “isms” of oppression. When we can see beyond the current circumstances and the things that seem fixed, we can resist negativity and begin to form new pathways. Beyond the well-known March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom held on August 28, 1963, the Black community saw the rise of the Black Panther Party in 1966. The Black Panthers advocated for class struggle and provided survival services such as clothing distribution, classes on politics and economics, free medical clinics, lessons on self-defense and first aid, an emergency-response ambulance program, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, testing for sickle-cell disease, and an educational daycare.

While the movement eventually achieved some equal rights legislation, the pursuit of one’s civil rights, particularly in Communities of Color, continues to be a struggle. The popularity of hip-hop and its proximity to the post-Civil Rights-era political movement have allowed this genre to serve as a mechanism for empowerment and to provide a counterstory to the dominant narrative about the Black experience in the United States. Ronald Reagan’s America made life for inner-city Black people even more desperate than the 1960s and 1970s (Davidson, 2004; PBS,

2021; St. Pierre, 1991). After “achieving” civil rights legislation, the Black community did not receive the promises of equity, equality, and relief promised by the passage of these laws. Throughout the 1980s, hip-hop grew more vocal in criticizing socioeconomic and cultural issues like police brutality, political apathy, poverty, and unemployment.

Simultaneously, hip-hop became a means to dissuade people from committing crimes and engaging in violence in response to the struggles of urban living. Before hip-hop came of age, the primary way of seeing the Black community was in crime reports on the six o'clock news. There was little to no discussion of the geographic, social, and economic barriers within the mainstream context. Those telling the story of black experiences in the media were predominantly white and ignorant of black life. Rooted in blackness, hip-hop has long used storytelling to explore social, economic, and environmental injustice and to highlight the interconnectedness of privilege and oppression.

### **Classrooms: America's *Continuous* Political Battleground**

Not only is my love and admiration for hip-hop important, but also relevant is my belief as an educator that education, and thus classrooms, are not neutral or apolitical. Textbooks are chosen through a complex political process, with schools governed by laws and managed by administrators. Each student and teacher enters the classroom with a unique background and brings their biases and beliefs. As educators seeking to build a safe, welcoming, and inclusive classroom environment, we must understand the political contexts that shape our teaching practices. Brayboy (2014) argued, “education in its many forms is imbued with power: power to control young people's bodies, epistemic engagement, curriculum, and teaching; power to best determine how education and schooling are utilized and to what end; power to control what kinds of knowledge is shared- or not-when, and where” (p. 396).

Over the past three years, politics has changed our classrooms across the U.S. As a nation, we witnessed the spread of state-level legislation that created a system of educational intimidation (PEN America, 2023). Bills such as Florida's House Bill 7, also known as the "Stop WOKE Act," restrict how schools and businesses can teach about race, gender, and inequality. Texas Senate Bill 3 limits how teachers can discuss current events and systemic racism in the classroom. Similarly, Tennessee's House Bill 580 restricts how teachers can discuss race, racism, and other forms of bias in the classroom. Proponents argue that such bills are necessary to prevent indoctrination and ensure a balanced perspective. Yet these bills and laws create conditions that foster a hostile climate in public education, empowering and supporting a one-sided ideology. The exact opposite of the “balance” they claim to seek. These blanket restrictions on books, discussions, and curricula for all students simultaneously and effectively disempower parents, teachers, administrators, and above all, students. Nationwide, efforts to breed anger and anxiety about public education as a means to restrict or prohibit instruction about race, sexuality, and gender have increased.

This strategy is not new. In 1989, hip-hop artist KRS-One, also known as “The Teacher,” admonished the educational system, its power, practices, curricula, and

pedagogy. Principally, “The Teacher” was outspoken about how embedded Eurocentric thought and values were woven into the U.S. public school curricula. For example, in his song, *You Must Learn* (KRS-One, 1989), he raps, “It seems to me in a school that's ebony, African history should be pumped up steadily, but it's not, and this has got to stop.” More contemporarily, dead prez (2000) flows:

They schools can't teach us shit. My people need freedom, we trying to get all we can get . . . Tellin' me white man's lies straight bullshit. They schools ain't teaching us what we need to survive, they schools don't educate, all they teach people is lies.

Similarly, in 2017, Scarface flows, “our kids educated by the enemy, and they don't know shit about their history cause they ain't teaching that in schools”. Knowledge is a critical element of hip-hop culture. If a person lacks knowledge or a critical consciousness of the world and their place in it, they are unable to express themselves or convey their message effectively. All three artists emphasize that, aside from a few key Black figures, students do not gain a deep understanding of other black pioneers. Historically, Black students learned about key figures and events in safe educational spaces before the infamous 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Walker's (2018) exploration of the ways Black educators created nurturing environments for Black students focused on their success in the face of systemic challenges. While many critics argue that schools are still segregated, it is still true that the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision played a role in elevating some black families. However, following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the function of educating black children shifted from fostering learning and critical thinking pre-Brown to monitoring and policing black children in predominantly white educational spaces post-Brown (Love, 2019; Martinez-Cola, 2022; Orefield & Eaton, 1996).

### **WHY IT MATTERS**

Teaching in today's classrooms is no easy task, and the contentious political climate adds an extra barrier for school communities to navigate. Tagg (2019) asserts, “the job of preparing young people for serious and important work has increasingly moved from secondary schools to colleges and universities, and most colleges and universities have neither understood nor met the challenge. And when I say ‘work’ here, I don't mean just earning a living. I mean also the job of living well and participating fully in the world” (p.17). The heart of an educator's job is to prepare students to understand and engage with the world around them. This responsibility extends beyond teaching core subjects; educators must help students think critically, consider multiple perspectives, make informed decisions, develop empathy, communicate effectively, and become actively engaged citizens who strive to improve their own lives and those of others.

Educators create environments where students learn to navigate various circumstances, especially those that are new and uncomfortable. By presenting multiple perspectives on relevant political topics, teachers help students make real-

world connections with their education. Students need to learn to delve beneath the surface of issues to form their own informed opinions while also being respectful of others, both in and out of the classroom. Morgan, Lane, and Perez (2022) found that during the 2016 election cycle, politics directly affected students' experiences on college campuses in the Southeast. Students in the study reported name-calling, tire slashing, and the loss of friendships as they struggled to navigate differing political beliefs. Recognizing and respecting multiple viewpoints helps students disrupt the institutionalized status quo ideas of normality and become the innovators future generations will rely on for social, technological, and political advancements.

Furthermore, educators must instill the value of civic engagement and the power of individual voices and opinions. Akom (2009) asserts, "the use of hip hop as a liberatory practice is rooted in the long history of the Black freedom struggle and the quest for self-determination for oppressed communities around the world" (p.53). Similarly, hooks (1995) stated the curriculum of hip-hop culture constitutes a worldview, a way of knowing and being in the world that reflects how at least three generations of young people have negotiated the realities of an increasingly global capitalist, racist patriarchy. The work from Akom (2009) and hooks (1995) underscores the transformative potential of hip-hop as a tool for empowerment and critical engagement with societal structures.

These perspectives emphasize that educators must instill the value of civic engagement and individual voices by recognizing that hip-hop is not merely entertainment but a cultural and intellectual practice that encourages critical thinking, resistance, and self-expression. Teaching students to identify politically unjust actions on racial, social, and moral grounds empowers them to apply classroom lessons, mobilize, dismantle oppressive systems, and lead future generations toward a more socially conscious and equitable society. Through lyrics, art, and dance, hip-hop tells counter-narratives to cultural deficit thinking about Black and Brown communities, celebrating the complexity, intelligence, and humanity of marginalized communities. Artists often address issues like systemic racism, economic inequality, and social injustice, highlighting the structural factors that shape their realities rather than blaming individuals or communities for their struggles. Hip-hop legend Doug E. Fresh stated, "hip-hop is supposed to uplift and create, to educate people on a larger level and to make a change". Artists use their music to comment on current events and societal issues, providing a historical record and a means of critique. Through its lyrics and storytelling, hip-hop educates listeners about social issues. Songs often reference historical events, social justice movements, and critical social theories, raising awareness and prompting listeners to learn more. Moreover, hip-hop often serves as a communal activity, bringing people together to share and discuss common issues. This communal aspect can foster dialogue and collaboration on social justice initiatives.

As discourses to abandon support for diversity efforts intensify, educators must acknowledge and respond to the realities of the students before them. Race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and immigration are all factors that expose individuals to higher levels of potential trauma. In her support of social justice and equity model of education, Ma (2021) takes an antiracist approach, emphasizing three elements of antiracist education. She illuminates the importance of 1) creating classrooms that

foster open dialogues and inclusive spaces; 2) promoting civic engagement; and 3) incorporating current events. I would add that these elements are also critical to promoting healing both within oneself and between communities. Attending schools that do not help students critically engage and interpret the functions of class, race, and gender, as well as the impact of xenophobia, homophobia, elitism, and transphobia in the world they live in, ensures hate and whiteness are never understood, challenged, or disrupted.

The nature of education and learning is at the cusp of transformation. We need to rethink education as more than upskilling and content mastery. Still, it is an opportunity and space where dialogue can unlock an individual's sense of power and self-mastery, enabling a student to make sense of the violence, tragedy, and trauma they encounter in the world. Thus, reimagining and re-centering a classroom rooted in critical thought, creativity, imagination, and joy becomes vital to activating a consciousness that stimulates agency, social change, and advocacy. Hip hop is one innovative approach to try to avoid the pitfalls of cultural-deficit models. As an art form and pedagogical practice, hip hop is participatory and foregrounds race, racism, gender, and other axes of social difference and experiences within and by communities of color (Akorn, 2009).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

I utilized Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Abolitionist Teaching practices to frame this work in the classroom and in the paper. These interlocking systems offer a strategy for a deeper interrogation of our roles in promoting antiracist, equitable, and inclusive behaviors in society. Hip-hop provides a practical, contemporary, and entertaining way to engage, navigate, and resist racial stress, trauma, and cultural taxation. Hip-hop, CRT, and abolitionist teaching practices share a commitment to challenging systematic oppression and the potential to transform education into a space of empowerment and liberation. Furthermore, they each offer a path towards healing and provide students with the opportunity to navigate, resist, and heal from the assault on anti-racism, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (ADEIB) efforts.

Incomplete historical narratives help maintain efforts to dismantle ADEIB. This also contributes to shaping societal perceptions, scholarship, policies, and laws in ways that marginalize communities of color. When we explore experiences of harm across ethnic groups, we can see how hip-hop, as a cultural and artistic movement, directly addresses and challenges this dynamic and, in part, operates as a powerful tool for uncovering incomplete historical accounts. For example, sowing discord amongst the various ethnic groups has been a successful strategy for limiting progress during times of heightened racial animus. Martinez-Cola (2022) posits that White supremacy is “so efficient in its transmission that there are tremendous similarities among the experiences of Black, Latines, Native Americans, and Asian Americans (p. 3). We must recognize that history is not linear but has curves and stories that have been either lost or deliberately erased. This incomplete historical account impacts social thought, scholarship, educational policies, and legal precedence. Yet, when we examine the experiences of communities of color, we illuminate the pathways of the

harm that has been committed across ethnic groups. For example, the road to the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision began in the mid-1800s, was multiracial, and was paved with at least 105 legal challenges from across the country. As a transdisciplinary theory and social movement, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its offshoots (TribalCrit, AsianCrit, and others) are a way to interrogate societal issues and find solutions. Perez and Nelson (2023) assert, “CRT is the culmination of anti-hegemonic movements in jurisprudence, social science, and education disciplines where social justice and racial equity are paramount” (p. 667).

CRT focuses on the social constructions of race and racism, and its principles align with the culture and music of hip-hop. Sometimes referred to as racial realism, it is the understanding and acceptance that racism and other intersecting oppressions are ordinary and endemic (Constance-Huggins, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Yosso, 2005). CRT and hip-hop alike view storytelling and counter-storytelling as ways to own and tell their own stories (Misawa, 2012). Both also recognize the legitimacy of people of color's experiential knowledge in understanding, analyzing, and teaching about systemic racism (Misawa, 2012; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). This makes hip-hop culture a space of expression for people of color who have largely been ignored. Another tenet of CRT is its criticism of oppressive conditions (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). Hip-hop is by the fixed, fluid, and shapeshifting terrain of racism, economic oppression, strict racial housing segregation, and technological advances. These tenets provide educators with guidance in creating inclusive classrooms that offer students a nurturing space to share their thoughts and become informed and active citizens who live with courage, vigilance, and dignity.

Similarly, abolitionist teaching is a strategy that aims to dismantle oppressive systems in education and advocate for freedom, equity, and justice for all students. As a pedagogical approach, abolition teaching strives to create affirming, inclusive spaces that see students as assets and prioritize the lived experiences of students from marginalized backgrounds, validating their identities and cultural knowledge. bell hooks (1994) asserted that with the racial integration of schools, Black children lost the safety of teachers who valued them and understood that learning to love your Black self was (and still is) an act of resistance. Hip-hop resonates with youth as a culturally relevant art form by reflecting their realities, values, and aspirations. In many ways, hip-hop is a return to ‘learning to love your Black self,’ and the classroom is one way to fulfill abolitionist educators' vision of schooling that eradicates inequities and uplifts all students. Its integration into education can make learning more engaging and relatable, and directly challenges deficit-based approaches in education that often dismiss these voices as unimportant or problematic. Building on this idea, Peterson (2013) elucidates the educational elements of hip-hop as: 1) knowledge, 2) consciousness, 3) search and discovery, and 4) participation. Together with the foundational elements of Hip Hop, the educational elements underwrite many initiatives that bring Hip Hop culture into classrooms at different levels of schooling and across various disciplines. Importantly, these educational elements are not disconnected from the traditional four elements of Hip Hop. Rather, the educational elements derive from the sensibilities, mindsets, and approaches embedded in the four main expressive Hip Hop elements. (p. 48)

Hip-hop pedagogy integrates culture and content into teaching to engage students from marginalized backgrounds. This approach challenges traditional curricula that often exclude the histories and contributions of communities of color, creating a space for these narratives to be acknowledged and valued. Therefore, hip-hop proves to be a worthy modality for practicing their analytical skills on social issues, and it also provides a creative mechanism for articulating their beliefs and tapping into their social agency. Oftentimes, modern U.S. education focuses more on test-taking than on deep learning and on tapping students' creativity to dream up innovative solutions.

Social justice work requires creativity to imagine a world we would like to live in. Art is one avenue for making sense of the world and articulating one's lived experience. These elements promote self-determination, knowledge, and social change, and lay the foundation for self- and community empowerment. Hip-hop created space to explore, discover, and imagine how one identifies and represents oneself. Oral histories, stories, drawings, songs, dances, and more have found their way into our culture as mechanisms for finding joy, love, freedom, and healing as humanity and community sovereignty were/are stripped away. The birth of hip-hop occurred on August 11, 1973, when DJ Kool Herc hosted a back-to-school party in the Bronx at his sister's urging. What began as a block party evolved into an international phenomenon.

Through the lens of hip-hop music, art, spoken word, poetry, and more, the culture has explored the social and political history of the United States, including the challenges of both individual and systemic discrimination (Boyd, 2004; Neal, 2012). When talking about racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression or "isms," it may be difficult to see these issues as an interlocking system operating at the personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural levels (Garcia & Soest, 2000; Perez, 2021). Two illustrations of hip-hop disseminating knowledge are the 1988 releases of Public Enemy's 1988 album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* and KRS-One's *By Any Means Necessary*. These albums, created on the back of persistent policies that failed the Black community through a decade of Reagan-era politics, spoke not only to a Black audience but also exposed young white people to the issues concerning urban Black America.

### **A CASE STUDY OF USING HIP HOP IN A COLLEGE CLASSROOM**

*"Broken glass everywhere, people pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't care, I can't take the smell, can't take the noise. Got no money to move out, I guess I've got no choice. Rats in the front room, roaches in the back. Junkies in the alley with the baseball bat... Got a bum education, double-digit inflation. Can't take the train to the job, there's a strike at the station." ~GrandMaster Flash and the Furious Five*

Social justice is a complicated concept, understood, defined, and enacted differently by people with diverse political ideologies. Race is a social construct that, in part, functions to maintain the dominant order of society. The techniques that I will describe below have been used in an undergraduate elective open to all students. The course engages with social justice content through the lens of Hip-Hop culture as a platform for marginalized, oppressed, and vulnerable persons and groups. Hip-hop

culture frames the exploration of social, economic, and environmental justice content and highlights the interconnectedness of privilege and oppression. Students use hip-hop music, art, spoken word, and poetry to explore the social and political history of the United States, including the challenges posed by both individual and systemic discrimination. This framework provides the structure for students to develop an understanding of the various discourses of social justice and to examine what anti-oppressive practice in any setting may look like.

In the second week of the course, students gather three different definitions of social justice using unique strategies or sources. They can ask a friend or parent, a professional, a blog, a scholarly article, or another source. Students have to summarize what they have heard and then provide their definition of social justice. This is an opportunity for students to learn about different views of social justice, how it is broadly perceived, and their thoughts on the topic before engaging with the course content. Additionally, by exploring social justice across different sources, students engage with diverse perspectives. This can lay the foundation for fostering empathy and awareness, helping them understand that social justice looks different depending on people's lived experiences.

As the course is grounded in history, students examine the financial justifications for American slavery and its ties to the Civil Rights Movement. Hip-hop provides an alternative institution that combines civil rights, Black Power, and Black Nationalism. An early reading for students is Chang's (2005) work, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. He describes the "bad numbers" the South Bronx was facing in the mid-seventies. The area lost 600,000 jobs, youth unemployment was between 60- 80%, the average per capita income was half of the New York City average and 40% of the national average, and slum lords and public policy led to a loss of 43,000 housing units in less than a decade (Chang, 2005). This is the backdrop to the birth of hip-hop and the "message" Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five delivered.

In "*The Message*"<sup>1</sup>, we are given vivid imagery of community conditions. (Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, 1982). The lyrics describe the harsh reality of inner-city, poverty-stricken ghettos prevalent during the Regan era. While the opening lyrics describe the conditions of New York's inner cities in the 1980s, the issues did not begin there. By reading Chang's (2005) work and then watching the music video *The Message*, students can identify themes from the readings in the music and video. Then they are brought back together for a large group discussion to unpack further the similarities, themes, and social justice issues they uncovered. This lays the foundation for students to challenge dominant narratives and paradigms that control images of Communities of Color (Collins, 2000), such as cultural deficit narratives, colorblindness, race neutrality, positivism/objectivity, and the meritocracy of Communities of Color (Misawa, 2012) as natural and normal. By identifying and explaining historical events and cultural elements in the song, students begin to develop skills to assess different points of view, assumptions, and arguments. Thus laying the foundation for the empowerment of self, community, and social change (Akom, Ginwright, & Cammarota, 2008).

## UNDERSTANDING THE LONG ARM OF THE LAW

Dominated early on by Black men, hip-hop's stories were primarily male. One of the most prolific voices in the industry was Tupac Shakur. He was unapologetic and uncompromising in his condemnations of the systemic and unrelenting trappings of the United States that kept people of color and poor people from both upward mobility and basic civil rights. As these themes are core to understanding equity and justice, Shakur's work provides students with an example of lived experience.

In his 1992 hit song, "*Changes*," he opens up:

I see no changes, wake up in the morning, and I ask myself, is life worth living, should I blast myself? I'm tired of bein' poor, and even worse, I'm black. My stomach hurts, so I'm lookin' for a purse to snatch. Cops give a damn about a negro, pull the trigger, kill a n\*\*\*\*a, he's a hero. 'Give the crack to the kids, who the hell cares? / One less hungry mouth on the welfare! First, ship 'em dope and let 'em deal the brothers Give 'em guns, step back, watch 'em kill each other/ It's time to fight back, that's what Huey said. Two shots in the dark, now Huey's dead".

In a few lines, he admonishes the legal, economic, and educational systems. Released posthumously, his lyrics describe the harsh conditions of being Black in America, which include poverty and racial discrimination from police. Furthermore, Tupac shows that this is not a new type of relationship between the Black community and the U.S. In the song Tupac rhymes, "It's time to fight back, that's what Huey said. Two shots in the dark, now Huey's dead" (Shakur, 1998). Co-founder of the Black Panther Party, Huey P. Newton taught himself to read and earned a Bachelor's degree and a Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he helped secure the first course on African American history (National Archives, 2021).

By highlighting a key Black American figure who is often left out of or misrepresented in history, Tupac draws attention to what happened when the Black community attempted to push back. His observations simultaneously show the persistent struggles endured by the Black community and a longstanding fight for equality. Yet, as you continue to listen, you hear the song is an anthem of hope and fortitude. It is a call to avoid the pitfalls of poverty and to come together to take care of one another.

Similarly, rap artist Common (2000) released "*A Song for Assata*"<sup>3</sup> a moving tribute and retelling of the trial of activist and Black Panther member Assata Shakur. Her highly publicized case was controversial, and it is widely believed that she was framed for the murder of a police officer. She successfully escaped from prison and sought political asylum in Cuba. Common highlighted Assata's story for a new generation, providing yet another tale of resistance and a counter story about the treatment of Black people at the hands of law enforcement and the legal system.

Rap marked the beginning of a shift from Black youth having little to no voice to increasing visibility and providing relatively unfiltered descriptions of what was occurring in the community. Hip-hop consistently pushed back- and continues to do so- on the dominant narratives of Black communities that were running on the nightly news and the American psyche about Black and Brown people. During an in-class activity, students first identify the themes they hear in both "*Changes*" and "*A Song*

for Assata." Next, in small groups, they search the media for current stories about law enforcement and Communities of Color. The class discussion then centers on the similarities and differences between what is occurring today and what they uncovered in the songs. Students then brainstorm possible strategies to raise awareness through social media, focusing on the issues that concern them. Finally, they create a mock social media campaign to demonstrate how they would put their ideas into action.

Dyson (1993) asserts that the historical revival raises the audience's consciousness regarding important historical figures and ideas by using the past as a source of reflection, creation, and resistance against mainstream stereotypes of Black America. Thus, helping listeners gain an awareness and a deeper understanding of the complex historical, social, and political factors that have contributed to the development and evolution of this form of cultural expression. Through working with the themes of police brutality and the war on drugs waged in black communities, prisons turned to profits and poverty, and their lyrics are a linguistic expression of shared social anger. Furthermore, these artists have shared powerful stories of disenfranchisement, exclusion, and invalidation stemming from the political, economic, and social conditions of the continuous deterioration of the inner city.

Confirming Dyson's (1993) assertion, student comments on the assignment revealed a lack of prior knowledge of historical figures and events. S.J., a white female, student in the course, stated, "I never heard about Assata Shakur or the Black Panthers. I didn't know there were black organizations that were trying to help the community. I think that is a good thing to do." Another student, L.R., a Latino male in the course, shared, "I heard about the Black Panther Party but only like the bad stuff. Like not that they were trying to help their community and not use the government". Lastly, M.S., a black female student, asked, "Who tell us to ask who benefits from us not knowing information? I find myself asking that question here. Who benefits from not telling us about Assata or any of this? It's not us".

The use of hip-hop as a liberatory practice is rooted in the long history of the struggle for Black freedom and the quest for self-determination. The songs analyzed through small- and large-group discussions, along with the assigned mock social media posts, are ways to help students gain awareness and a deeper understanding of the complex historical, social, and political factors. When students can deconstruct these topics in an academic setting, they become more aware of social injustices. An analysis of hip-hop's contributions illustrates the theme of empowerment across cultures as a means of engaging in social justice advocacy. Storytelling artists such as Tupac Shakur, Public Enemy, KRS One, Boogie Down Productions, and others illuminated that Black folks were born in America; however, in economic, political, and social ways, they were still not fully a part of American culture.

### **RAISING THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE**

In 1988, Public Enemy released the influential album "It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back". One track, Party for Your Right to Fight<sup>4</sup>, is notable for both its historical revivalism and its reflection of the Black American community's continuing struggle for equality (Dyson, 1993). In juxtaposition with Chang's (2005) work, students can hear a response to the consequences of social policies. The lyrics provide

a counterstory to the classist and racist narrative that Black people were the cause of their demise. Furthermore, the group returns to loving your *Black* self and learning as revolutionary as they highlight noteworthy Black leaders who are misrepresented in the larger U.S. cultural context. They rap:

Power Equality and we're out to get it. I know some of yo ain't wit' it. This party started in '66. With a pro-Black radical mix. Then at the hour of twelve ...J. Edgar Hoover, and he could'a proved to 'ya. He had King and X set up also the party with Newton, Cleaver, and Seale. Word from the honorable Elijah Muhammad Know who you are to be Black ...the original Black Asiatic man (Public Enemy, 1988).

Hip-hop music has proven to be an avenue for artists to share communal experiences regarding social and political issues. Rapper Chuck D of Public Enemy stated, "Rap music is the CNN of the ghetto" in 1989. As the lyrical aspect of hip-hop culture, rap was able to Hip-hop was, in part, a response to the conditions of post-industrialization, poverty, and so-called urban renewal. In the aftermath of civil rights gains and a decrease in attention to the inner city, Black and Latinx youth used hip-hop culture as a tool to express their concerns.

Similarly, in 2017, Residente, Ile, and Bad Bunny released *Afilando Los Cuchillos*<sup>5</sup> (Sharpening Knives) on YouTube amidst one of the most historically significant events in contemporary history. Almost 900 pages of leaked text messages between Governor Ricardo Rosselló and his administration contained homophobic, derogatory, and misogynistic slurs as well as jokes about the dead bodies that were collected at a government facility before and after Hurricane Maria surfaced in Puerto Rico. The artists deliver a powerful takedown of the Governor:

The people cannot stand more injustices; they got tired of your lies and the manipulation of the news. Hey, hey, all the groups, all the hoods, we are our own militia. You will not take advantage of us again. You are a corrupt man who takes corrupt advice. Get the fuck out of here and don't come back. And welcome the generation of: "I will not let you take advantage of me". And maybe you talk in your group like I do in mine. But I don't steal people's money, I don't laugh at the Puerto Ricans' death, Puerto Rico is furious, Ricky, you're going to lose. And let all the continents know That Ricardo Rosello is incompetent. (Residente, Ile, & Bad Bunny, 2019)

As demonstrations developed in response to the leaked messages, Residente, Ile, and Bad Bunny birthed a soundtrack for the movement in real time. Their work drew inspiration from the island's history of abuse and corruption. They were able to vocalize the resentment of *la gente*, victimized by generations of corruption and neglect. Hearing both of these songs in class, students are asked the following questions to shape the large group discussion:

- 1) What is the role, if any, of musicians like Public Enemy and Residente, Bad Bunny, and iLe in shaping political discourse through their art?

- 2) Should these artists use their platforms to influence public opinion and activism?
- 3) Both songs use vivid imagery (fighting, knives) to convey messages of defiance. How does the imagery differ, and what do you think it communicates about the kinds of resistance being called for?

With almost a third of the class representing the Latinx community, more students were familiar with the second song. One Latina student shared, I remember when that song came out because I still have family on the island. "Afilando los Cuchillos" is about Puerto Rican resistance to political corruption, and Public Enemy's fight was rooted in U.S. civil rights issues, especially the Black struggle. Even though they're different, both songs show how larger systems oppress minority groups." Another student, a white male, remarked, "They are kinda like some of the earlier songs in class, they both tell a story and give voice to those who feel powerless".

The artists call attention to the fact that much of the damage Maria caused to the island remains unrepaired. Moreover, they call out the hypocrisy of prosecuting petty crime while stealing from the coffers as its education system slowly dies. Reminiscent of Public Enemy's 1989 hit 'Fight the Power', the call for young people to rebel against economic inequality and discrimination, these artists followed the blueprint for raising the voice of the people. It should be noted that the protests that inspired the song succeeded in ousting the governor.

Hip-hop artists like Chuck D, Residente, Ile, Bad Bunny, and others projected the sound of the streets – a perspective that mainstream USA had not heard before – to protest and resist systemic racism. As an educator, I help students develop the skills to identify relevant connections between contemporary issues and historical movements and figures. In groups, students choose a contemporary social justice issue and, using at least three elements of hip-hop, connect it to songs or artifacts (dance, graffiti, spoken word, etc.) from before 2000. In this presentation, they are required to weave creativity with issues they are passionate about and historical events. Thus, developing their ability to ask sagacious questions to connect social justice topics to the significance of hip-hop artwork, artifacts, and culture while constructing potential actionable steps around these themes.

### **RECLAIMING SELF AND HEALING**

Exploring the intersections of hip-hop, gender, and race is another space to foster community dialogue and highlight counter-narratives. Black women have been early innovators of the culture, with artists such as MC Sha Rock and Roxanne Shante laying the foundation for future female artists. Black women have continuously fought against negative tropes, sexism, and misogyny in the larger society as well as within the music. Collins (2000) asserts, specifically focusing on Black women, that images such as matriarchs, mammies, jezebels, and welfare queens were used to disenfranchise, criminalize, disempower, and sexualize Black women. These controlling images (Collins, 2000) make social injustice appear unavoidable, natural, and deserved, thus allowing society to blame the oppressed and marginalized, and

skirt responsibility to enact change. They also strip people of their humanity and worthiness, allowing the justification of oppression and the generation of state-sanctioned, discriminatory practices. If you can strip away the worthiness and humanity of the matriarchs of a group, it is easier to vilify their children, irrespective of gender. If she is unworthy, then, by default, her offspring are second- or third-class.

To engage in resistance, one must not only understand the historical context and its impact on contemporary society but also believe they are worthy of living a different life. There has to be healing from the dominant deficit narratives that have surrounded an individual. One strategy I have employed to help students reclaim and heal is to identify stereotypes they see in the music videos played in class. As a class, we then identify how these stereotypes are maintained in society. I am also intentional in going beyond the black/white binary that dominates conversations of race in the United States to include international, multiracial, and various ethnic identities. From here, students begin, as a large group, to construct a counter-narrative to these stereotypes. Lastly, I ask: what would it take for your new story to come to life and overcome the stereotypes? This usually leads to a robust conversation full of creativity, and students are eager to use their own lives as examples of how they differ from the dominant narrative.

One consequence of illuminating the circumstances of the Black community is the opportunity for other Communities of Color to join in solidarity against the struggle against social injustice. Returning to the topic of controlling images (Collins, 2000), we can examine the long-held stereotypes about the Asian community. Stereotypes of the Asian community are often conflicting yet enduring. Similar to people of African descent, these stereotypes go beyond the American lexicon to be immortalized in American laws and policies. The Page Act of 1875 banned the immigration of "Oriental" laborers brought against their will for "lewd and immoral purposes". In other words, it banned all East Asian women from entering the country. It labeled them as not only potential disease carriers but also undeniable temptations for white men, simultaneously villainizing and erotizing them. As an additional layer of consideration, language discrimination is indeed racist and/or xenophobic.

Hip-hop music offers an additional opportunity to reflect on key relationships, groups, and settings that are important to one's development and ancestry. Millions who listen to hip-hop find it a strong source of both self and community empowerment. For example, Filipina artist Ruby Ibarra expresses resistance through her lyrics' double meanings and through rapping in her native Tagalog.

In her song "Us"<sup>5</sup>, the chorus commands, "Island woman rise/ Walang makakatigil/ Brown, brown woman, rise/ Alamin ang yung ugat." The Tagalog lyrics respectively translate to "no one can stop us" and "know your roots" (Ibarra, 2017). Throughout the song, Ibarra and fellow artists Working Klass Klassy, Faith Santilla, and Rocky Rivera use dual-meaning lyrics that call on brown women to teach, organize, mobilize, and, most of all, never forget who they are and where they come from, no matter what the dominant culture says. With her spoken word piece towards the end of the song, Faith Santilla solidifies the message:

*So let it be known, if you don't already*

*Pinays have always been part, and parcel, if not, imperative and critical to the struggle*  
*Filipinas are no strangers to wielding our own power*  
*Of all the privileges that exist in this world, none of which you may be a benefactor of*  
*There is at least one you bear*  
*And that is the privilege of having been born a Filipina*  
*Your DNA contains building blocks made from the mud of over 500 years of resistance and survival*  
*And when you are ready, sis, we'll be right here.*

This love letter to their Filipina sisters accomplishes several things. First, this song is deeply personal, emotional, and communal. They remind the Filipina listener who they are and where they come from. Second, this song (and its video) seeks to empower and foster a love of self, thereby challenging the false racial narratives about Asian women enshrined in society and our legal system. Third, the song shows the duality of being a Filipina American by employing

Both languages, without the offer of a translation, and unashamedly, these women are taking up space. These artists resist assimilation at the expense of their culture and offer an anthem that uplifts and loves their community. Lastly, for the non-Filipina audience to gain an understanding of who Filipina women are, which may be vastly different from how people outside the culture think of them, if they think of them at all. These women, using rap and spoken word, challenge the dominant ideology and ahistoricism about Filipina women through counter-storytelling to combat racism and other forms of oppression by centering their lived expertise (Misawa, 2012). More specifically, this knowledge of self fosters healing and wellness as people cope with the consequences of oppression. Building community emotions, identity, and personal growth can help promote resilience and radical healing.

## **IMPLICATIONS: THE EDUCATIONAL AND HEALING POWER OF HIP HOP**

*Let the music diffuse all the tension. - Nas*

Efforts to regulate educational curricula through various bills are part of a broader movement across several states, often sparking significant debate and controversy regarding academic freedom, free speech, and the role of education in addressing social issues. For example, Idaho House Bill 377 (HB 377) bans public schools, including public universities, from teaching that any sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin is inherently superior or inferior. It specifically targets the teaching of Critical Race Theory. Similarly, Oklahoma House Bill 1775 (HB 1775) restricts how schools can teach about race and gender. It prohibits teaching that one race or sex is inherently superior to another and bans the concept of individuals being inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive based on their race or sex.

Despite significant technological advances, humanity continues to grapple with fundamental social problems and oppression, such as poverty, homelessness, hunger,

ecological devastation, and racism. Hip-hop addresses these issues, resonating with listeners who feel understood and validated in their own experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance. Hip-hop wields significant power for a new generation to speak out against injustices and offer hope. Reclaiming narratives typically shaped by mainstream media and white-dominated culture is a hallmark of the culture. Through in-class discussions, students explore how hip-hop resists these harmful portrayals and reasserts agency over marginalized identities. Students see how the culture can be used to challenge and resist oppression, thus creating space for collective healing. This influence extends to artists worldwide, providing a platform for diverse voices. Hip-hop fosters a sense of identity and empowerment, particularly among young people, encouraging self-expression and pride in one's heritage and experiences, promoting solidarity and collective action.

As educators, whether in formal classroom environments or other spaces, hip-hop can serve as a mechanism for intergenerational connections and strategy building. This approach allows educators to connect with students and community members of all ages, fostering a shared understanding and collaborative effort toward social justice and empowerment. Hip-hop artists can reproduce or evoke images, events, people, and symbols to illuminate both symbolic and active forms of oppression. Through creating lyrics, dance, clothing, graffiti, and other art forms, hip-hop creates spaces for students to understand their ability to become social change agents no matter the discipline.

As an educator bombarded daily with confederate flags, extreme conservative news bites, and students who are ill-prepared, due to lack of exposure to diverse viewpoints, stepping into the classroom to discuss race and the function of race brings about a level of vulnerability that is unmatched. I have found that music, specifically hip-hop, offers opportunities to discuss race, sexuality, immigration, poverty, gender, and more. From the turn of the 20th century to modern times, Black music has been the heartbeat of America and emulated around the world. As the major cultural movement of Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1984), hip-hop evolved from music into an ideology, a lifestyle, and an entire culture that has been as influential as the Civil Rights era and beyond.

Hip-hop is a global phenomenon that has exerted a driving force on economics, activism, and the development of mass media. Borne out of Black joy despite their experiences with poverty, police brutality, policies, and more in a land that professed liberty and justice for all, yet treated Black people like livestock, unworthy of the amenities of humanity, in a nation under God. Engaging in learning about racism and its partner, privilege, is uncomfortable for faculty and students alike (Perez & Nelson, 2023). Using hip-hop is one way to humanize the experience for both stakeholders. Through the five elements of hip-hop: DJing, lyricism, breakdancing, graffiti, and historical knowledge, the classroom becomes a space to build community. Thereby allowing for engagement in anti-racism, economic inequity, human rights, immigration, and more to resist the current socio-political pressures and heal. Hip-hop culture at its core is built on values of social justice, peace, respect, self-worth, community, and having fun. As a tool for healing, it remains accessible and grassroots. Creativity is flexible, as you can make a beat with your mouth – beatboxing- or simply create a beat with your hands. You can create or recite lyrics

about anything without singing. People all over the globe can resonate with the philosophy of resisting exclusion, intimidation, and discrimination in the fight for equity and justice.

When talking about racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression, the combination of hip-hop and CRT can illuminate the interconnectedness of systems operating at the personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural levels. Classes using a hip-hop lens to analyze these themes provide students an opportunity to understand how Black power and the civil rights movement of the mid-1960s fueled hip-hop. Hip-hop is not perfect, but its promise is undeniable. The culture has complicated social and historical roots. Yet, it enables us to reflect on our society critically and forces us to face issues of race, privilege, class, and cultural appropriation. In this way, hip-hop was not – and continues not to be concerned necessarily with appeasing the crowd and fitting into the political correctness of the day. As these stories came to the forefront, the unconscious struggle faced by Black Americans became conscious: it became more difficult for the rest of the world to look away and ignore these crucial issues. Popular contemporary artists such as Kendrick Lamar, Lupe Fiasco, Ruby Ibarra, Rhapsody, and others have continued to build on the tradition by laying bare current injustices through their tracks. Abolitionist teaching is an art form to teach from a place of love and criticism. Hip-hop becomes a way for us to make sense of what is happening in the world and provides an opportunity to join as coconspirators to agitate, challenge, and undo hate. Facing our history and connecting contemporary struggles and solutions to hip-hop and CRT gives us a chance to heal as we dance in the rain.

## CONCLUSION

Education and learning are ubiquitous, offering opportunities to gain knowledge and wisdom in both formal and informal settings. Through its lyrics and storytelling, hip-hop educates listeners about social issues, often including references to historical events, social justice movements, and critical social theories. This raises awareness and prompts listeners to learn more, viewing these concepts through a lens of possibility, building, strengthening, and healing.

A hip-hop approach enhances our understanding of how storytelling within communities exposes shared social isolation, economic disadvantage, structural inequality, and lack of access to power. This framework provides the structure to develop an understanding of various social justice discourses and to examine what anti-oppressive practices might look like in any setting. Hip-hop offers students a way to engage with their personal and collective histories, emotions, and struggles in a culturally relevant and accessible manner. Creating space for expression, validation, critical analysis, and solidarity in academic settings can help students to process trauma, challenge social injustices, and foster a sense of community. Each of these is vital for healing. Hip-hop's unique ability to blend cultural pride, emotional expression, and resistance makes it a powerful tool for healing in both personal and collective contexts. Hip-hop emphasizes the communal sense of social institutions and policies, lived experiences, the impartation of knowledge, and the importance of creativity. This approach allows educators to connect intergenerationally with

students and community members, fostering a shared understanding and collaborative efforts toward social justice and empowerment.

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