

“That’s Not Real Music”: Problematizing the Resistance to Hip-Hop in Music Education

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I seek to critically interrogate the field of music education’s hesitance to engage with hip-hop’s inclusion in music studies. I begin by briefly summarizing the pedagogical potential of hip-hop and then consider why much of the field still continues to express hesitance toward engaging with the genre and the scholarship surrounding it. To begin to answer this question, I mobilize a personal experience in a teacher education program in order to exemplify how the act of racial shaming, among myriad other forces, perpetuates a bias against music such as hip-hop and pedagogy of Whiteness in music education. To conclude, I draw theoretical and pedagogical implications for teachers and teacher educators engaged in combating a pedagogy rooted in White conceptions of art and education.

Keywords: hip-hop education, popular music, critical pedagogy, race

Introduction

Transcending nationality, gender, race, and even language, one musical genre reigns as the most popular across the globe (Hooten 2015). Boasting over 100 platinum artists, a discography which encompasses nearly every imaginable language, gender, ethnicity, and culture as well as a dominating popular culture status, hip-hop is a global phenomenon. Hip-hop is a way of life, a way of knowing, and a way of emoting that many of our students understand and value deeply (Dimitriadis 2001).

In addition to this status as a global phenomenon, hip-hop is also a complex, nuanced musical style rooted in diasporic African influences and developed largely in the United States by talented, innovative musicians. The foundational elements of hip-hop ultimately converge to position the genre and its culture not only as a powerful, intricate art form, but also as an incredibly rich pedagogical source. Many musical concepts can be learned through hip-hop. From polyrhythms and odd meters to timbre and tone, hip-hop likely offers it.

But, as scholars such as Adam Kruse (2014) and Paris (2012) have shown us, hip-hop does not exist to simply transmit the typical content of music education in a shiny, new package. The genre exists as its own art form and, as such, it delivers its own specific knowledge *in addition to* the elements of a “traditional” music education. The specific ways of knowing that hip-hop offers are far-reaching and, I believe, are also hip-hop’s greatest offering to educators. From addressing complex issues surrounding race to studying music production, hip-hop’s unique knowledge can be applied as a powerful pedagogical force.

One only has to turn to contributions by Emery Petchauer (Hill & Petchauer 2013), Lamont Hill (2009), Christopher Emdin (2009), Evan Tobias (2013, 2014), and others to begin to realize this power. Through the work of these scholars, among others, we can begin to see the potential of hip-hop in education as it offers culturally relevant pedagogy such as 21st century musical skills such as digital recording techniques. It offers gateways to critical pedagogy while educators simultaneously open their classroom doors to students who, far too often, are left beyond the pale of consideration (Elpus 2009). Additionally, beyond these scholarly contributions outlining the potentialities of hip-hop, many further resources are available from websites and online forums that connect educators, demonstrate the potential of hip-hop education, and offer a starting point for educators as they begin teaching hip-hop (Elpus and Abril 2009).¹

However, despite these offerings, as well as hip-hop's immense popularity and educative potential, music educators are often hesitant to engage with hip-hop in their classrooms. This hesitance is common and can be found across nearly all levels of music education. As Deborah Bradley states: "The western musical canon predominates our curricula, while we continue to argue whether popular music should have a place in what our students learn, and which styles of music are 'appropriate'." As Bradley urges us, "If we look closely, we may recognize that there is much about our profession that begs examination of its possible role in perpetuating inequities, racial inequities among them." (2007, 134)

While it should be recognized that legitimate issues actually exist within hip-hop which deter educators from mobilizing the genre in the classroom, it should also be acknowledged that the vast majority of the potentially problematic issues in hip-hop ranging from language (Kruse 2016) to hip-hop's sexualization of women (Tobias 2014) have been addressed multiple times in recent years.

In the following sections, I strive to critically examine this hesitance toward hip-hop. Through this process, I hope not only to shed light on a serious issue within our field but also to help music educators and teacher educators reconceptualize music pedagogy as they actively combat a racial bias in our field. To begin, I first problematize the hesitance surrounding hip-hop pedagogies. Following this, I analyze a personal experience in a teacher education program in order to exemplify one of the many ways in which this hesitance and a pedagogical racial bias are perpetuated in the United States. Next, I further elucidate the racial bias of the normative music pedagogy in order to properly position the experience described below, as well as the resistance to hip-hop pedagogies as symptoms of White supremacy and its resultant racialized conceptions of schooling. To conclude, I offer a pedagogical model for teachers engaged in combatting this racial bias and toward antiracist, liberatory possibilities.

To begin this project, I would like to simply ask: How could so many music educators turn their backs to the potential of hip-hop? How could such a powerful, educative art form be ignored by so much of the field?

What's Holding Us Back?

The easy answer is that music educators are stuck in their ways. What is commonly referred to as a “banking method” of education (Friere 1972) shows no signs of giving up its place at the fore of music education. This pedagogical model features a teacher who simply attempts to “deposit” information in a student’s mind. In the music classroom, this means that the teacher exerts control over what type of music to perform, how to perform it, and when to perform it (Allsup & Benedict 2008). In this setting, both freedom of personal expression and creativity are severely limited as an attempt to simply deposit information into students dictates a teacher’s pedagogy.

While this model of music education can be useful in certain settings such as quickly teaching large numbers of students how to play an instrument, it also has many limitations to it. These limitations have been discussed by philosophers and pedagogues ranging from John Dewey (1938/2007) and his call for creative, democratic classrooms to Maud Hickey (2012) and her pedagogy of musical composition in the classroom.

In reaction to the general consensus of these critiques the field largely has reacted. More and more commonly as I speak with music educators, I hear stories of how we are responding to these issues. Educators have begun turning over the podium and letting members of the class rehearse the band, asking students to create their own compositions, fostering democratic microcosms, and encouraging students to pick up not a sousaphone but an electric guitar.

The field of music education has shown that it can be receptive to critique and new ideas. Now, it is time for the field to once again embrace both critique and research in order to improve our pedagogy through the inclusion of hip-hop.

The Learned Values of Music Education

I believe that the hesitancy to fully embrace hip-hop brings the systemic racism of the music education field and its perpetuation of White, middle-class values into full view. In the paragraphs that follow, I begin to articulate this racial bias, as well as one of the many ways in which it is perpetuated.

When we consider the standard model of music education, the type which dominated my musical upbringing from kindergarten through college, there is a certain conception of what music, music students, and a music class are. Yet, many of us never consider where and when these values were learned. We simply have them. However, by applying Thandeka's work surrounding Whiteness to the reality of music education's learned values, we may recognize that these ideas are anything but naturally developed (Thandeka 1999). Instead, I submit that these values are often adopted as a result of, among many other influences, unknowingly challenging them and experiencing racial shaming in consequence.

In Thandeka's research (1999), racial shame is regularly applied by White people as a tool for reproducing White supremacist values and understandings. This operates in many ways but is particularly evident in developmental, childhood experiences. In Thandeka's book (1999), *Learning to be White*, this process is exemplified by an examination of White parents shaming their young child for inviting his Black friends to his birthday party. In her analysis, Thandeka claims that the White child (unaware of the racial expectations placed upon him) who invites his Black friends to his home has violated his family's codes of Whiteness. As a result of this violation, the boy's parents become uneasy and visibly upset with his behavior. Through this experience, the young boy, Jack, is reprimanded for associating with his Black friends through racial shame. Following this experience, Jack is left to attempt to fully understand why he has been punished for simply inviting his Black friends to his birthday party. In consequence, he is taught a clear lesson about the definition and requisite behavior of Whiteness.

As Timothy Lensmire (2017, p. 34) puts it:

In sum, for Thandeka, White racial identities emerge in the racial abuse, by White authority, of its own community, with this abuse meted out in intimate relations among family and friends as well as in larger relations constructed in law, policy, and social class. The result is a White racial identity riddled with shame and ambivalence—a White identity defined by a desire to reach out beyond the White community and a deep confusion about and fear of this wanting.

I fear that when many educators consider Thandeka's insights regarding shame and White identity and then reflect upon their experiences in teacher education programs, they may remember moments when, like the young child in Thandeka's work, they learned racialized pedagogical values through shame.

Personally, I can remember such a moment in my own pedagogical development with perfect clarity. This moment occurred in an undergraduate music education course as I looked on in shock while the professor stood in front of the class with my teaching philosophy essay in hand. Reading from the essay, the professor publicly belittled and demeaned my thoughts before the entire class. He read aloud excerpts from the sections on "hip-hop education" and "critical pedagogy" as he proceeded to denounce them as "pie in the sky". He went on to tell the entire class that these ideas were not only foolish, but they were simply unattainable.

While this moment could certainly be analyzed in multiple different manners, I wish to focus on what the professor was actively denying in this story. By rejecting the notion of a hip-hop pedagogy, what else was rejected? What is it about the concept of such a pedagogy that demands a public, authoritative reprimand? Considering the story in this light, I believe that it can be understood as a moment of racial, pedagogical shaming which operates to maintain the domination of White values in the classroom, something which I fear is a devastatingly common occurrence in teacher education programs.

The Racial Context of a Music Classroom

When we critically consider the ways in which a music classroom typically operates, as well as the types of people, music, and cultures that are allowed within that classroom, and, ultimately who becomes a music educator, we can see a clear racial (White) bias (Bradley 2007), at least in the United States. To bring this bias into full view, and to properly position the experience above as an instance of racialized, pedagogical shaming intended to maintain a pedagogy of Whiteness, it is helpful to consider the various elements of the normative music pedagogy.

Let us first begin this consideration with the curriculum. The typical music education curriculum seems to feature one of three things as worthy of study:

1. Western classical music
2. Folk songs (Typically Western European/North American)
3. A combination of 1 and 2

In response to this, we hardly need to go any further than asking two questions. First of all, who makes this music? And second, who values and listens to this music? The answer to both of these questions, overwhelmingly, is White people. As a result, “Our music education curricula continue to validate and recognize particular (White) bodies, to give passing nods to a token few 'others,' and to invalidate many more through omission.” (Bradley 2007, 134)

In response, we may adopt Thandeka’s framework not only to recognize the utilization of racial shame as a weapon for keeping White educators in their place, but also to conceptualize one of the many ways that White values remain dominant in American schools and, in turn, the nation.

Through this process, it is my hope that educators may begin to realize the racial bias of many of the foundational elements of music pedagogy, as well as the numerous ways that these biases are perpetuated. While I have offered and mobilized only one personal experience, it is my hope that this effort will help educators conceptualize the myriad ways a pedagogy of Whiteness is maintained, as well as the ways in which it manifests itself in the daily activity of classrooms and

teacher education programs. As a result, teachers and teacher educators may begin not merely to recognize a pedagogy grounded in the perpetuation of White supremacy but to act against it.

Toward a Liberatory, Antiracist Pedagogy

In response to this, I call upon music educators to consider what exactly we are holding onto so dearly when we reject hip-hop. When music teachers claim that they are concerned about hip-hop's language but then use it themselves, hear their students say it, and also feign ignorance to the existence of "clean" songs and the idea that not all hip-hop is "profane," what are they really saying? By treating hip-hop as "less-than" and claiming that it is not musically valuable despite its historic musical traditions and songs with rich harmonies, complex melodies, and incredibly innovative polyrhythms, what are music educators perpetuating? When a teacher turns away a student at their door because they want to learn how to make beats like J Dilla, who and what exactly are they rejecting from the classroom? When the professor in the story reacted so aggressively to the concept of critical hip-hop pedagogy, what was he really reacting to?

In order to successfully challenge the fundamental role that Whiteness plays in music education programs, actions such as reconsidering the acceptable "primary instruments" for future educators, advocating for coursework in culturally relevant pedagogy, and ultimately re-conceptualizing the goals of music education become necessary. In consequence, many future music educators and scholars will be offered the possibility to simply exist in music education. Beyond this, these future educators and their peers can also emerge from music education programs with a nuanced ability to understand and utilize the important educative potential of genres such as hip-hop as they strive toward a radically new praxis. As a result, the structures reproducing modes of teaching rooted in Whiteness will be fundamentally challenged by a new concept of music education.

Meanwhile, practicing K-12 music educators can begin to problematize the rejection of hip-hop pedagogy in order to re-approach the genre and apply it in the classroom. Or, they can continue their ongoing work with hip-hop as they add depth to their understanding of music education pedagogy. For both future and practicing educators, the inclusion of hip-hop to music study and actions that result from these processes can, and should, take any number of different forms.

Perhaps in the second-grade general music classroom, hip-hop is being used as what Adam Kruse refers to as a “bridge” which connects content such as form and harmony to culturally relevant musical understandings grounded in hip-hop (Kruse 2016). Or, in a 9th-grade music technology course, hip-hop is the central element of a curriculum designed to teach composition and recording techniques. A hip-hop pedagogy could also apply the works of artists such as Kendrick Lamar and Mos Def as autoethnography to teach a radical, critical pedagogy interrogating police brutality in the United States (Karvelis *in press*). In a 7th grade music and culture course, hip-hop music videos could be applied as cultural texts in order to analyze the intersectionality of feminism (Karvelis *in press*). The limits to a hip-hop pedagogy are essentially non-existent.

While hip-hop can be effectively applied in any number of ways, the hip-hop pedagogy which I encourage educators to embrace is composed of three foundational elements. It is important to note that these elements should not be considered definitive or requisite. In order for hip-hop, as well as critical pedagogy, to function authentically, a teacher’s pedagogy must constantly be adapted to each unique space and time. Considering this, the pedagogical model offered below is presented in the hope of transforming critique into the foundation of an ever-evolving, radical praxis. The core elements of this pedagogy are:

1. A classroom “management” model based in grouping practices and cooperative learning
2. The active cultivation of creativity
3. The mobilization of hip-hop in critical pedagogy

In order to help illustrate this pedagogy, allow me to first briefly describe the demographics of the school for which I originally designed this model and in which I currently use it. The school is located just outside of Phoenix, Arizona and much like the city itself: 86% of all students identify as Latin@² or African-American and 88% of students receive free or reduced-price school lunch. Additionally, the students, living in a conservative border state, are the frequent recipients of severe discrimination and racism.

The practice outlined in the following paragraphs is intended to respond to these characteristics as it encourages students not only to engage with music but also to illustrate how music can be a liberatory force that speaks directly to the lived realities of the students as it simultaneously arms them with their own radical voices. A constant force in realizing these goals and the overarching theme of the pedagogy is the decentering of Whiteness and authority in the classroom. This practice includes reconsiderations of everything from curriculum and classroom “management” to grappling with the role of being a White teacher in a school populated almost entirely by non-White students.

The first element of this pedagogy—a cooperative, group-based classroom “management” model—is exceedingly important as it serves as the foundation for a liberatory, inclusive hip-hop contributions to the curriculum. This necessitates the removal of teacher-centered authority in all possible forms and instead fosters a radical, equitable microcosm. In this setting, students create the classroom guidelines and norms, choose whether or not to comply with these ideas, and work as a cooperative unit in order to foster a creative, productive classroom. In this setting, neither the teacher nor the student is permitted to enact unjustified authoritative actions such as unnecessarily mandating a student’s silence. Instead, the class as a whole strives toward working democratically in order to achieve the group’s goals for the day.

This classroom environment naturally ebbs and flows day to day. Typically, the students organize themselves in table groups to work on projects, discussions,

and compositions. The students have the option to complete these projects together or individually. To avoid potential issues, the overarching classroom ethos draws from a utilitarian principle of justice which suggests that each action should be done with the intention of doing the most possible good. When issues arise and someone has conflicted with this ethos in order to interfere with another student's well-being or learning, the teacher is encouraged then to engage in a dialogue with the student in order to resolve the issue as opposed to engaging in punitive action. Following this process, if necessary, a collaboratively developed classroom constitution and the other members of the classroom may be consulted to determine how to proceed. In doing so, the democratic roots of the classroom are honored as authoritative action is uprooted in order to plant the seeds of a truly liberated environment.

While this model of classroom management may seem utopian, it is actually rather simple to implement and once the revolutionary culture is fostered it can be and has been used in highly effective ways across many different demographics. This liberated environment with the reduction, if not near removal, of central authority and punishment creates the foundation for the hip-hop pedagogy that follows.

The second element of this pedagogy is the constant fostering of creativity. A liberatory pedagogy can be fully realized when students are encouraged not only to duplicate or understand, but also to create. Hip-hop provides such encouragement. What this entails varies, but it often features students composing beats, recording tracks, performing live shows, and engaging with hip-hop as the creative art form it is. Perhaps in one project students are composing their own tracks, then recording and collaborating with peers. Ultimately, the students design their album artwork and release their work on recordings. The element of creativity could also extend well beyond the classroom and include students scheduling and promoting their own shows as they learn the realities of the music business. Active creation in ways such as these builds upon and furthers the liberatory classroom environment as it allows educators to embrace hip-hop in powerful, effective ways which teach a

number of diverse musical skills. Through this truly hands-on work, the students learn about harmony, melody, recording techniques, beat production, scales, keys, rhythm and other musical skills in a culturally-responsive, relevant manner.

Lastly, I believe that it is highly important to recognize the roots of hip-hop history as an African-American art form. To do so, educators should recognize how hip-hop developed, as well as where it is today as they allow the culture to inform the teaching. In the hip-hop content I embrace, this necessitates discussion on the reality and history of hip-hop and the hip-hop community. We begin by realizing that the roots of hip-hop lie deeply within the Black community in New York City during the 1970's. We also discuss the hip-hop tradition not simply as a genre, but as an entire culture and a way of life. This requires discussion on hip-hop culture, the tradition of breaking, graffiti, and the history of the hip-hop community. Building off of this foundation, we begin to discuss those who originally made hip-hop as well as those who currently continue the tradition. Our class studies those such as Grandmaster Flash and the turntable techniques that he helped to innovate, as well as RZA and J Dilla who, among several others, advanced the art of hip-hop production during the 1990's. Following this, our class analyzes the ways in which the hip-hop community has used hip-hop as a way to speak truth to power and a medium to voice opinions, experiences, and stories. Lastly, we discuss how we can assess the musical qualities in hip-hop and ask the difficult question, positioned historically and culturally: "What is hip-hop?" and "What makes a hip-hop song good?". Through considering these questions and realities, we ignite a powerful discussion that places our work well within the historical context of hip-hop.

Discussing hip-hop and the histories of the hip-hop community in this way quite naturally leads to the recognition of and mobilization of hip-hop as critical pedagogy. In my own classroom, I use hip-hop as a critical text to discuss issues of gender, White supremacy, and other complex issues. Additionally, students not only discuss these issues but draw from our creative environment to develop their own viewpoints and music which speak to these topics, among others. For example, in

the Black and Latin@ dominated school in Phoenix, Arizona where I teach, students commonly create original music which pulls from the insights and work of artists such as KRS-ONE, Lauryn Hill, and Kendrick Lamar in order to interrogate critically their own experiences and the realities of Latin@ struggles in modern-day America. In one such project, students analyzed Lauryn Hill's "Everything is Everything" (1998) as an intersectional feminist autoethnography. Following this work, several of the young women in the class realized the gendered oppression of the school dress code and engaged in a democratic challenge to this rule. Ultimately, the young women created a petition to challenge the policy. In doing so, hip-hop functioned not only as a critical text that spoke directly to the lived experiences of my students, but also inspired the democratic action which is the ultimate goal of any critical pedagogy (Karvelis *in press*).

To summarize, the hip-hop practice I encourage educators to embrace is established firstly through cultivating a collaborative approach to classroom "management." This classroom model draws from the work of those such as Christopher Emdin (2017) and Gloria Ladson-Billings (2014) and their continued calls for culturally responsive pedagogy. In creating a liberated classroom, we respond to these considerations as we extinguish authoritarian control and allow the space necessary for students to exist as individuals in collaborative ventures. By doing so, hip-hop content is allowed the space necessary to develop as we simultaneously attempt to eradicate a classroom management system founded in Whiteness (Emdin 2017).

Launching onward from this liberated classroom environment, students are encouraged to embrace creativity in all aspects of the curriculum. The students learn musical skills through direct application in hip-hop composition. Alongside this creative work, students critically examine the realities of hip-hop history and the many complex issues that relate to this history. Ultimately, the students apply these understandings in their own critical, autoethnographic musical work.

This process, along with its innate creativity, functions as a rejection of the “banking model” of education in which so much of music education is rooted. What results is a liberated, antiracist, and creative environment where students embrace hip-hop to engage with a multi-faceted critical curriculum. This pedagogy strives not only to recognize a student’s lived realities, but also to develop, respond to, and ultimately mobilize this very same critical consciousness.

By applying hip-hop in ways similar to these, music educators begin not only to realize, but also to act against a White supremacist model of education and its many forces of reproduction. For many, this likely requires a critical, personal consideration of why hip-hop pedagogy is all too often rejected in music classrooms and music education programs. By developing a more nuanced understanding of the racial influences present in this denial of hip-hop, educators can then position themselves to make the transformative, responsive pedagogical changes needed in this moment. For educators who actively embrace hip-hop pedagogy, they can perhaps consider what more they could do to counteract the influence of Whiteness in music education as they simultaneously advance their teaching. As a result of these important efforts, music education can begin to fundamentally transform a pedagogy rooted in White supremacy into an antiracist, creative, and liberated future.

About the Author

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¹ See <http://hiphopmusiced.com> – the Twitter chat #HipHopMusicEd moderated by Christopher Emdin, and the Hip-Hop Music Ed Facebook page.

² Latin@ is used by the author and others as a print version of Latino/a, to indicate people of Latin ethnicity of both sexes.