

The Pedagogy of Progressive Hip Hop

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to consider music as a means of educating people about the broad, sociological concept of social inequality as it relates to class, examining how lyrics might shape one's views regarding this paradigm. Music is a medium of active engagement that reaches the masses and encourages critical thought among listeners, regardless of their interest in sociological concepts. I would argue that ignorance of the issues surrounding social inequality and society's at-large acceptance of a false consciousness serves to perpetuate the status quo and keeps individuals from becoming informed consumers of sociological thought. Through music people can become not only informed but also empowered to engage in active change against the structures limiting them. Progressive Hip-Hop, in particular, tends to focus on a sociological definition of inequalities and the road to overcoming these injustices. By analyzing the lyrics of two progressive hip hop artists—Blue Scholars and Common Market—I will illustrate how one sub-genre of music can be used to reach multiple audiences (at various levels of social class) and encourage knowledge dissemination while paving a course to action.

The study of music and lyrics is in no way new to the discipline of sociology; however, the vast research to date regarding rap and hip hop emphasizes Critical Race Theory and approaches rap music as a genre that exists within and for the African-American community. Ignoring the artists and listeners who are not of African-American descent who identify with the messages of social injustices that are a part of rap music, the current scholarship fails to be all-inclusive in rap music's legitimate use as a pedagogical tool. Concerning the sub-genre often referred to as progressive hip hop and/or conscious rap, the themes reverberated throughout the lyrics are issues of social inequality to which subordinate class members of all races and ethnicities can relate. Specific themes expressed in the lyrical content of progressive rappers will be visited below. Furthermore, I would posit that the lyrics in some conscious rap explore important current events and provide the foundation for a discourse that may be otherwise overlooked.

The youth who came up in the post-industrial society of the late 1970's and 1980's experienced high levels of neglect and isolation. As a response to these circumstances, hip hop music and what is known as hip hop culture developed (Pulido, 2009). This post-industrial shift resulted in higher value being placed on careers requiring a college degree and increasingly lower value on traditional, "blue collar" positions, such as factory and manufacturing jobs. The resulting growth of individuals who were forced from the middle and lower-middle classes into the lower class is a theme often repeated in the lyricism of conscious rappers (e.g. the rich getting richer at the expense of the poor). Important aspects of hip hop music—from its origins through today—include identification with the plight of the lower class as well as grass roots involvement as part of its major tenets (Bennett, 1999). Many conscious rappers/progressive hip hop artists are actively involved in their communities through such endeavors as youth music programs and political activism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Race Theory

Although I criticize the heavy use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the academic study of rap music due to its narrow focus on African-American artists and communities, it would be irresponsible not to recognize the value it provides to this area of academic inquiry. A major theme in CRT is that of the counter narrative. According to Pulido, "counter narratives are stories told by people of color who are submerged in a racially hierarchical society" (2009). These stories are prevalent in the wider context of rap music as a whole but are told from a more critical, almost academic, approach in progressive hip hop. The widely-held beliefs and "stories" that are contained within a majority-ruled master narrative are often challenged by the counter narratives of subordinate groups. This master narrative tends to give priority to the idea that America functions as a meritocracy and all people are given an equal chance at success in life. Rather than acknowledge the systematic forms of oppression (and specifically racism) that occur in the U.S., these widely accepted views "accept social arrangements as a result of the superior intellect and abilities of Whites" (Pulido, 2009).

Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed

The fact that hip hop as an academic field of inquiry has been historically marginalized . . . speaks volumes to just how 'mis-educated' our society has become . . . [I]t suggests that Paulo Friere's critical pedagogy is now more relevant than ever as a method for eradicating racialized opportunity gaps in achievement and for creating educational spaces that ameliorate the life and death issues that many of our youth face on a daily basis (Akom, 2009).

According to Freire (1970), oppression is a system where both oppressors and oppressed are locked into their respective roles by the forces created by that oppression. Because the oppressed—once in a position to do so—tend to only reverse the roles and maintain the existence of oppression, it is important to note that the oppressed must use their new position to join with the oppressors rather than against them. In the status quo, education is practiced in such a way that students are alienated as if they were the oppressed. The system is set up in a manner that encourages teachers to act as—or at least on behalf of—the oppressors to maintain this status quo and hinder real learning by both the teacher and students (Freire, 1970). Because the counter narratives mentioned above are not given their proper place in the curriculum, rap music has become the text of those who identify with its stories. Keeping in the Freirian tradition, progressive hip hop artists seek to overcome historical injustices and discover a society in which equality is truly realized.

The absence of counter narratives in traditional education leaves progressive hip hop artists like those already mentioned with the job of educating their “students” about these seldom-heard stories. The problem-posing methodology employed by Freire (1970) offers youth the opportunity actively to participate in what he calls “critical praxis.” Becoming engaged with social issues encountered in their everyday lives, these young people are taught to move beyond victimization and “confront unjust social and economic conditions” (Akom, 2009). Opportunities to engage in this “critical praxis” are readily available through the grassroots efforts of such progressive hip hop groups as those reviewed here. It is through such outreach that Freire's vision can be carried out. Blue Scholars frontman, Geologic states, “We are all involved in some community work of some kind, and we have different fronts on which we do ideological battles—race, class, the environment” (Mudede, 2006).

Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy

Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy (CHHP) “combines aspects of youth participatory action research (YPAR), Freirian pedagogy, and CRT to challenge racism and other intersections of social difference in order to prepare young people to be prospective teachers inside and outside of urban and suburban schools” (Akom, 2009). YPAR involves five steps, including planning, taking action, observing, evaluating, and critical reflection. CHHP both borrows from, and expands upon, CRT. Akom (2009), who introduced CHHP, explains his approach as follows:

Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy attempts to address deep-rooted ideologies to social inequalities by creating a space in teacher education courses for prospective teachers to re-examine their knowledge of hip hop as it intersects with race, class, gender, and sexual orientation while analyzing and theorizing to what extent hip hop can be used as a tool for social justice in teacher education and beyond.

In a course on CHHP co-taught by Akom at San Francisco State University, two main goals were identified: collaboration between hip hop artists who utilize their art form as a vehicle to explore social justice themes while articulating the demands for social justice, and development of a counter-hegemonic public sphere for students to explore norms about race, class, gender, culture, language, and the availability of institutional resources and privilege inside and outside of schools.

HIP HOP AS A TOOL

Hip Hop Uses

“The growing literature within and outside the academy suggests the presence of a hip hop generation in which youth are utilizing hip hop as a counter discourse in response to the subordination African American and Latina/o youth encounter in their daily lives” (Pulido, 2009). While Pulido still relates hip hop to race and the African-American and Latina/o communities, I believe this emergence of a “hip hop generation” crosses boundaries of race, as evinced by the wide acceptance of rap music in popular culture. It is not my intent to discount the uses of hip hop in race pedagogy; rather, I suggest the current academic study of hip hop as a tool for understanding racial inequality can be extended to other areas of social inequality, specifically social class. It has been suggested that hip hop can be described as a way for the oppressed to “resist and challenge the social ideologies that caused and maintained their subordinate position” (Land and Stovall, 2009). It seems that including class struggle in the academic study of hip hop music would be common sense, yet the large body of scholarship to date concentrates on CRT and largely ignores other areas of inequality that can be addressed through hip hop music. Researchers in sociology and other disciplines can combine the lyrical content of progressive hip hop with various social contexts—applying these lessons to both groups and individuals—in the study of identity construction and action (Roy and Dowd, 2010).

Hip Hop as Pedagogy

As mentioned above, hip hop as a genre has been widely accepted into popular culture. This popular culture, especially music, helps individuals to construct and understand various perspectives regarding inequality and can be used to mobilize efforts to overcome these inequalities (Steinberg, 2004). Land and Stovall (2009) have argued that this wide acceptance of hip hop into popular culture—along with the undertones present in the lyrics (political, social justice and action)—should lead us to consider hip hop and its uses in the

field of education. At the start of this paper, I suggested that hip hop could be used to educate not just its intended audience but reach across boundaries and provide a counter discourse for unintended audiences outside of the subordinate group(s) whose stories are being told. Given the absence of a voice these subordinate groups have in the traditional educational system, progressive hip hop may be the only way some become familiar with these counter narratives.

MUSIC ANALYSIS

Artist introduction

While the current academic work regarding hip hop holds great value concerning inequalities based on race, I argue that progressive hip hop can be a pedagogical tool in educating students and teachers about inequalities based on social class, as well. George Quibuyen (a.k.a. Geologic) is the Filipino emcee from the hip hop duo Blue Scholars. Ryan Abeo (a.k.a. RA Scion), hailing from Louisville, Kentucky, is the white frontman for the duo Common Market. The groups' shared DJ is trained jazz pianist and Iranian-American Alexei Saba Mohajerjasbi (a.k.a. Sabzi). The diverse backgrounds of these individuals help to illustrate how hip hop can transcend racial boundaries and educate persons from all races about social inequalities based on social class. According to Sabzi, "the purpose of our music is to be socially relevant to our communities" (Mudedede, 2006).

Lyrical Themes

The research supporting my claim that hip hop pedagogy can be used as an educational tool regarding social class is based upon a lyrical analysis of the artists Blue Scholars and Common Market. Upon examining their music, I established six major themes repeated throughout the lyrics of both artists. Although this list is not all-inclusive, these are the themes most common and most relevant to the academic study of inequalities based on social class:

1. Hardships: those obstacles faced by members of a subordinate class
2. Encouragement: to engage in action and/or activism
3. Social Theory: reflections of shared experiences lived by members of a subordinate class
4. Inequalities: class struggle, wealth distribution and structures that maintain the status quo
5. Political Messages: church and state, education, knowledge dissemination, and military
6. Social Protest: steps to be taken through activism and/or violent protest

Examples of Themes

Hardships

From “No Rest for the Weary” by Blue Scholars:

You better move, hold your head high, soldier it ain't over yet
That's why we call it a struggle, you're supposed to sweat.

From “Second Chapter” by Blue Scholars:

Now it's the turnin of the page to the second chapter
A tragedy and comedy so cue the blood and the laughter
To survivors of economic and natural disasters
Livin for the right here and not the hereafter.

From “Bonanza” by Common Market:

The difference in victory and failure is where your mind's at.

Encouragement

From “Opening Salvo” by Blue Scholars:

Now this here's for those who choose fights
Whose fruits might never not ripen until after their life
It's not right how they martyr our leaders and target our children
Disrespect our sisters then wonder why we militant.

From “Life and Debt” by Blue Scholars:

Mom's tryin to tell us not to protest instead
Pray for peace but that ain't the nature of the beast
So lady grab a bullhorn and take it to the street
Yelling power to the people
El pueblo unido jamas sera vencido (the people united will never be defeated)
Til the wealth is spread equal
You twenty-first century Gabriela Silang
Fierce like Lorena with a rifle in her arms.

From “Gol’ Dust” by Common Market:

And what’s a legacy worth next to mined metal
Measure me first, depression? It’s better we work
For change, not for pennies, if anything the commodity
Traded is us for flakes of gold dust.

From “Every last One” by Common Market:

It’s our intent to re-implement modesty
Demandin self-respect to be the market’s hottest commodity
Regulate the wealth and decimate extreme poverty
And educate the kids with every dollar from the lottery.

Social Theory

From “North by Northwest” by Blue Scholars:

And they say desegregation was a big step forward
But integration only covered up a rotten core
The surface might’ve changed but the cauldron is still hot
Now we more politically correct with less real talk.

From “Re-Fresh” by Common Market:

Share thought with the downtrodden, intent
To tap into the wealth of knowledge
My people gain upon the avenue.

Inequalities

From “Black Patch War” by Common Market:

I plead ignorance to business affairs beyond the field but on the real
What we’re dealin with here’s extraordinarily–heavy handed

Look where your property landed
Now come play monopoly with vigilantes and bandits.

From "Black Patch War" by Common Market:

All I'm askin is a fair market at the auction
I put my work on the block, give me my portion.

From "Gol' Dust" by Common Market:

We crush the precious metal to dust for distribution
All you gotta do is breathe to receive the restitution
Under pressure we become both gems and grown men
It's like a jungle sometimes, wonder why I was thrown in
When my instincts seem to do more harm than good
It's difficult to defend against steel armed with wood
Maybe I was never meant to be a champion
I'm standin downstream pannin for ambition to hand in.

From "Nina Sing" by Common Market:

Famished on a barren land of AIDS and malaria
One percent could fix it with a tenth of their inheritance
Freedom buried in the treasure chest of the nefarious.

Political

From "Life and Debt" by Blue Scholars:

Bills are usually late, interest accumulates at a usury rate
Collection agency waits from paycheck to next one
Budget like a noose, workin while we sing the proletariat blues
On 501-C3 community plantations, non-profit sector propped up
To kill the movement for the changes in production relations.

From “Blink” by Blue Scholars:

They said talk is cheap, but war is expensive
I speak cause it’s free and these words are my weapons
Don’t think for a second that I will not question
US foreign policy, imperial aggression
Inventing war for the quenching of the thirst for the oil
But money don’t trickle down to workers who toil
You see blood trickles down from the wounds to the soil
And broken antennas with aluminum foil, be
Standin on televisions transmitting propaganda of millionaire senators
And your so-called commander-in-chief
I’m telling you the man is a thief
In his hands he holds a plan to ban your freedom of speech.

From “Loyalty” by Blue Scholars:

Why they call themselves right, but then act so wrong
Dollar sign challenge while the unemployment line long
No call for the blue collar getting low ball
It’s a long climb just to get to petit bourgeois.

From “Every Last One” by Common Market:

Exponentially increase the delegates
We politic with activists not asses and elephants
Rectify and edify a new central intelligence
Based upon dissemination of knowledge and evidence.

Social Protest

From “Cornerstone” by Blue Scholars:

And your brain’s just a cage with a mind locked inside it unless

Knowledge itself gives proper perspective
To see how the politicians keep the dollars protected
My namesake is not confined to scholarly methods to reach the mass
Never preach the way they teach in class
Sleep walkin, half-dead spirits leavin fast
If you never had your ass beat, bro
You can't speak about non-violent protest and other such mythology
Watch how the quantity leaps into quality
Deep beyond the reaches of your Babylon economy
I speak solemnly, I seek equality
My people celebrate life despite poverty.

From "Gol' Dust" by Common Market:

This battle hymn of the republic will knock for all my soldiers
The block, that's where we focus and plot to overthrow this
Echelon, send a message to stop takin our vote, this has got to be a joke
Cause it's not what we were told.

From "Black Patch War" by Common Market:

To fifth-Third, send word of another bank bombin
Ranks mobbing, over the hill on horseback
Surround the storehouse, four corners and torch that
Been in the poorhouse before and I don't want that.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Messages of hardships, such as those referenced above in “No Rest for the Weary” can be used to illustrate the structural inequalities that both cause and maintain one’s place within a subordinate class. The phrase, “The people united will never be defeated” has been placed under the theme “encouragement.” Counter narratives such as the one presented here serve not only as encouragement to subordinate class members but also allow those stories to be told to a much wider audience. “Life and Debt” (Blue Scholars), in particular, names two women leaders, Gabriella Silang and Lorena Barros, and their contributions to class struggle, indicating this genre’s use in the study of gender inequalities, as well. Social Theory in the style of Charles Lemert, can be seen in Common Market’s “Re-Fresh” when Scion mentions the “wealth of knowledge” subordinate class members gain from the street.

In the song “Nina Sing” by Common Market, the very idea of freedom is called into question when Scion talks about the debilitating diseases in the United States and other poorer nations that are largely ignored by those with enough wealth and power to do something about it. Political counter narratives are presented more often than other themes and provide an alternative interpretation of political issues; in “Blink,” Geologic raps about millionaire senators speaking to masses of subordinate class members through their outdated televisions still operated with external antennas complete with aluminum foil just to get reception. Finally, themes of social protest—such as that heard in “Cornerstone” by Blue Scholars—give a depiction of violent protest and attempt to explain why such efforts are both undertaken and necessary in the struggle for equality.

Very few of the lyrics above are limited to race alone; instead, they present a calling to subordinate class members from all racial/ethnic backgrounds to join together and take a pro-active position against the structures that cause and maintain their place in the subordinate class. Drawing upon CRT, the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, and CHHP, I suggest the development of a new pedagogy that seeks to use hip hop as a means of educating people from all walks of life by exposing them to the progressive lyricism of emcees from all racial backgrounds. This pedagogy would aim to educate “students” about social inequalities as they relate to class struggle and would recognize that the lower class is comprised of people from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Relying on the similarities shared by all people in this subordinate class to bring them together for a common mission, it is my vision that such pedagogy would help others to overcome their fear of those who are different and allow them to construct strong bonds that cut across racial boundaries and prejudice.

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