Rethinking Hip-Hop ED Through Intersectional Collective Identities

by William Garcia

As a teenager, I recall routinely sitting in the group home living room. I was constantly surrounded by other black teenage residents who took pride in showing off their loose durags, fresh Jordans and fresh white tee's, while ecstatically watching hip-hop videos on the BET channel. In a day's time, this would go on for hours. That TV box which transmitted hip-hop sounds with moving images were venerated the same way religious relics were praised by priests, while dealing with the harsh reality of growing up without parents. For the same reason, not once did we question the messages in those hip-hop videos nor did we believe music corporations created these videos for our consumption in order to increase their profit. In school, the word "hip-hop" was never uttered by teachers and seemed dichotomous with the standardized exams we had to pass to graduate high school. Furthermore, it was through those hip-hop videos that Black identities were manifested and oftentimes made contradictory to other people of color equating hip-hop with being solely an African American genre. The contradiction created a lot of tension in the group home and in the neighborhood through gang rivalries and fights in schools where African Americans, Latinos, and Asians all wanted to claim hip-hop. Asian, Latinos and African Americans were displayed as different groups who lacked any relational identities and integrated histories of social activism.

I was oblivious to the connection between the Civil Rights Movement and hip-hop's origins, which began in the Bronx by marginalized people from the Caribbean alongside African Americans. Little did I know that hip-hop was a recurrence, due to the fact that many Caribbeans (including the Hispanic Caribbean) had traveled to Harlem almost half a century before during the Harlem Renaissance and had contributed to jazz, bebop, cubop, and soul along other Black

migrants who had arrived from the U.S South. Most importantly, little did I know that the media hardly ever mentioned these shared histories of struggle, which to my mind, caused the upheavals wrought in the group home and in my neighborhood. However, the media is not the only outreach capability that omits these shared inter-connected musical soundscapes and politics. As Raquel Rivera argues in her book, *Puerto Ricans from the Hip-hop* Zone, Hip-hop consists of fluid cultural spaces, zones whose boundaries are part of a century-old history of cultural richness, adaptations and joint productions between African Americans and Caribbean people—among them, Puerto Ricans—in New York City. Meaning, that unlike hip-hop becoming reducible to as an African American phenomenon, hip-hop derives from an afro-diasporic community in a diverse cosmopolitan New York.

Currently, it is not difficult to constantly overhear the term “diversity”, a concept, repeatedly used by many educators to highlight the importance of differences in cultures in order to avoid misconstructions. The idea of living in a single world and supporting new modes of cooperation can be referred to as a pedagogic approach to cosmopolitanism. Unceasingly, the proliferation of cosmopolitanism depends on placing people in certain categories of identities thereby creating essentialist identities despite shared history amongst marginalized peoples. Categories like African American, Latino, Asian, African, and so forth, facilitate diversity because it avoids questioning one’s own interpretations of identity. Although many of these groups create collective empowerments especially from those who share similar experiences of marginalization, identities tend to remain static. By way of contrast, black feminist lawyer, Kimberlé Crenshaw states in her article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (1989): “The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (142). In the same way, blackness along with the creation of hip-hop and activism has been conflated into the thought that these movements are pushed forward by people of color from one single group. Crenshaw’s claim pushes us to consider “intragroup differences” as prevalent to the creation and continuous development of hip-hop, diversity in education, and culturally-relevant pedagogy.

For example, the Caribbean influence in Hip-hop origins has been almost entirely ignored precisely because hip-hop is an eminently popular form of music without any single specifiable place of origin or even national setting from where it sprang, despite having knowledge of its origins in Panama, Jamaica, New York, the U.S South and Puerto Rico. Hip-hop pioneers were erroneously referred to as simply African American. These include Dougie Fresh (Barbados), Clive "DJ Cool Herc" Campbell (Jamaica), Joseph "Grand Master Flash" Saddler (Barbados), and Afrika Bambaataa (Barbados/Jamaica) among others (Serwer). Other cultural studies have attempted to challenge this monolithic history in hip-hop culture such as Juan Flores's *From Bomba to Hip-Hop* which defied the historical amnesia that circulated around popular culture in Puerto Rico and the United States by tracing the Afro-Puerto Rican, Afro-Cuban and Black American inter-cultural development, from the Harlem Renaissance, to the origins of salsa, up to hip-hop. Flores criticized the lack of acknowledgement of pan-Afro-Caribbean contributions to hip-hop, which lead to narrow outlooks of hidden historical stories of struggle, cultural productions, and collaborations that lead to numerous achievements visible through the glocal dissemination of hip-hop. Flores' work on hip-hop needs to become part of hip-hop based education and hip-hop pedagogy otherwise students of color will continue to see their histories as dichotomous. Simply promoting hip-hop education without exploring its afro-diasporic history integrally linked to changing intersectional identities does a disservice to hip-hop based education and collective empowerment geared towards social justice.

This need to further explore the intersecting forms of identity, as a basis for understanding inequality is what I term *intersectional collective identities*. While this may hint at Crenshaw's idea of "intersectionality" in black feminism, I am using "intersectional" as the intersecting of multiple groups of color to form a collective. I refuse to use "multicultural" because of its function to mix and conflate identities to the point that it becomes anti-black in its discourse. I argue that *Intersectional collective identities*, as a term, re-conceptualizes hip-hop education as a pedagogical framework that has these intersections at the center. A cognitive dissonance may be necessary in order to piece together the exigencies that reveal shared identities through historical understandings. In any case, intersectional collective identities can be defined as the process by

which one's own identity is porously inter-connected with other marginalized youth through an understanding of conjoined historical experiences between different groups. The continuous misunderstanding of hip-hop's multi-dimensionalities will continue to restrict collective making. These identities in hip-hop pedagogy further reinforce bonds amongst marginalized youth who share intersectional collective histories. To provide an example of the changes that this term can do I will discuss the recent success of Ellis Prep Academy who won the 2015 Hip-Hop Science Genius competition with the intent of provoking a reconceptualization of hip-hop based education (HHBE) by focusing on the multiple and intersectional collective meanings of hip-hop.

Notably, the Hip-Hop Ed movement is pushing back against music corporations that control the hip-hop played in the airwaves. In the Hip-Hop Ed website, the founder Dr. Christopher Emdin talks about its origins on video saying:

> Hip-hop Ed is a movement that began almost five years ago through a conversation on Twitter between Brandon Frame and myself around Jay Z's book *Decoded* and it was just an organic conversation about how you can bring that text into a classroom. We happened to be the only people on that chat online interested in what was going on with the book and how we can have real life implications in the classrooms. Since then, it has grown into a worldwide movement ("What is Hip-hop Ed?").

Since then, what started as a conversation online has expanded into an annual event that is changing minds and giving agency to young people all around the world. Most importantly, of course, Hip-Hop Ed is pushing for agency in a school system that fails to acknowledge the students' cultural backgrounds—hip-hop being a prime example. What makes Hip-Hop Ed compelling is that students are exploring the transformations of the global-local phenomenon of hip-hop, reggae and reggaetón. The Hip-Hop Ed movement has created the means to develop new identities precisely because hip-hop culture is composed of collective and different backgrounds. Students are re-creating multiple expressions of hip-hop culture by transcending the corporate influence on rap.

In 2015, the Hip-Hop Science Genius contest emerged once again in order to promote more science literacy through the language of hip-hop and cultural relevant pedagogy. One group that

stood out was the group from Ellis High School who was composed mainly of culturally and linguistically diverse students spanning mainly from the Dominican Republic and Nigeria. They won the 2015 competition through their hip-hop-reggaetón song “DNA.” It attested that the pedagogical practices, teaching techniques and designs for curricula based on music and rhymes can be (and have been) easily applied to reggaetón and other cultural expressions.

For those present in the Hip-Hop Science Genius competition, the sound of reggaetón and hip-hop combined conjured thoughts of hip-hop possibilities beyond from what is displayed through the airwaves. The students from Ellis High School were also re-creating an Afro-Latino space through hip-hop, thereby constructing a space that brings other people of color together. As many know, Afro-Latinos have a different experience than other black people in the United States simply because “Black” means being African American and being Latino means not being black or white. Through Hip-hop Ed, the students were able to invoke and connect with their Afro-Latino history in the United States and bringing us back to the true roots of hip-hop. Given the highly selective manipulation of corporate rap, it should come to no surprise that students from Ellis High School differed in their interpretation of hip-hop. When I asked the teacher Habiba Kokhar who worked with the students from Ellis High School about the need for Hip-Hop pedagogy to become more open to different people she responded:

> So, for me it has to be. Going back to what hip-hop is. You have to recognize what’s going especially in urban education. What the American fabric looks like and what that is. If you don't take time to appreciate and value multiculturalism. If you don’t take the time to appreciate that you have community that has diversity. Yeah, you know, we might not understand everything but we need to take time to learn, not just understand and be each other’s keeper. I think that more than anything else that came out of this whole experience for us that we walked out of it and we truly feel like a family. And, that whole experience is very much hip-hop. I think what this did for even for the Science Genius program was, wait, let’s take a look at how were defining it and how are we looking at this (Garcia).

Indeed, what is interesting about the Hip-Hop Ed movement is that it opens the possibility for expressing authentic avenues for learning. This is due because unlike other traditional forms of African American music such as jug bands, ragtime, and gospel spirituals,

hip-hop and reggaetón are fluid cultural spaces, zones whose boundaries are adaptable. Students from Ellis Prep are continuing the legacy of utilizing hip-hop as a means of generating solidarities and stronger links amongst marginalized groups. In this sense, students are re-visiting the shared history amongst marginalized youth in the United States through hip-hop aesthetics and social activism. When I asked one of the teens who participated in the DNA video about what she thought about those who say that hip-hop and education cannot go hand in hand she responded the following:

> I would tell them that they are wrong because it can happen. One reflects what one lives in music. Since we're Latinos we incorporated reggaetón. Since we wanted to participate in the Science Genius competition we incorporated science as well. So yeah, it can happen. There are times when you see that learning in the classroom is boring, but if you make a song of a certain subject it is easier to remember (Garcia).

What I find compelling about her response is the way she expresses the need to incorporate reggaetón because they are Latinos. For them, leaving reggaetón out from the "DNA" video would limit the reflection of who they really are. In this sense, because of hip-hop's fluid nature, the students from Ellis Prep were able to partake not only in the Science Genius but also win first place. Their different approach to hip-hop gave them a unique edge the same way that DJ Kool Herc's incorporation of sound system culture from Jamaica formed the basis for hip-hop. Gaye Theresa Johnson's *Spaces of Conflict: Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race and Social Entitlement in Los Angeles* highlights the history of Black and Brown shared spaces and solidarity by placing importance on collective spaces as a way to articulate what she calls social citizenship. However, these multi-racial struggles that have historically changed structures of power is ignored in American history textbooks. Johnson suggests:

> Yet while sharing the experiences of containment and confinement, Black and Brown people have also been continually pitted against one another, manipulated by a white power structure to compete with each other for jobs, housing, prestige, and political power. Sharing struggles, spaces, and sounds has enabled Black and Brown people to work together for social justice in Los Angeles over the decades. This is a story of both continuity and rupture (ix-x).

Johnson conveys a need for people of color to validate each other's histories and come

together in turbulent moments of harsh disenfranchisement by the state apparatus and deleterious institutions. In a similar vein, these bi-cultural students from Ellis Prep have an incredible ability to sense different manifestations that forces hip-hop educators to explore beyond their conceptualizations.

Rendering visible the spaces of congregation, community and cultural production of underprivileged youth through hip-hop would further develop how we identify the multi-layers of urban youth of color. Whether one agrees with Emdin's conceptualization of neo-indigenous or not, the effort to highlight the histories of struggle of urban youth should further take into account the cultural citizenship that Johnson underscores. Impeding students from bringing their hip-hop cultural artifacts into schools creates more tensions amongst students in schools and diminishes the possibility of students working together against state violence against migrants, harsh detention centers, the incessant killing of Black youth by police authorities, and so forth—an insidious conglomerate which continues to criminalize youth of color.

An important point to consider here is how intersectional collective identities coalesce as a result of power relations caused by neo-liberal structures and cultural pluralism. For example, according to Arlene Davila's *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos and the Neoliberal City*, urban economic and political transformations of neo-liberal policies create rifts between Black and Latino communities (24). Davila also argues that neo-liberal policies and marketing forces envision culture as: "1) culture with manifestations of cultural of ethnic or racial identity, such as Black or Puerto Rican or Latino as boundaries of difference and 2) culture is treated as an object of entertainment and industry and a conduit of progress and development" (10). According to Davila, "This culture is 'masked' in attending discourses of globalization and treated as a medium of uplift, industry, entrepreneurship and progress" (10). These neoliberal discourses through commodification of African American culture and hip-hop create boundaries that avoid any type of true solidarity—or, at the very least, obscure them. It continues to create Black and Brown categories as dichotomous and in contention.

As Hip-Hop Ed continues to get more teens involved in hip-hop cultural production, it should also contribute to our understanding by elucidating how sonic spaces has the ability to

forge new collectives as it has in the past. Overall, Hip-Hop Ed is creating a space beyond corporate rap by overturning constricted spaces in schools and introducing an alternative approach to pedagogy that sharpens the perception and stresses a need to re-create new socio-political vehicles to address concerns in marginalized communities. Examining the efforts made by those who continue the hip-hop movement will continue to change many other subjects of study. Hip-hop was the cornerstone of the fight against the ill-fitted neighborhoods caused by segregation during the 1980s and beyond. Indeed, Hip-hop Ed forces us to see and question the images displayed in the airwaves and transform hip-hop pedagogy.

If any real efforts are to be made to unite diverse underprivileged youth, especially in urban settings, then hip-hop educators must have a clear understanding of intersectional collective identities. Neither hip-hop educators nor hip-hop academics can ignore the need to create greater solidarities by demolishing the wall that continues to constrain marginalized youth with similar backgrounds. Similarly, hip-hop educators need to distance themselves from oversimplifying the pluralism that exists within the youth they are supporting. In addition, framing these concerns in order to forge true solidary begins when educators begin to envision issues of immigration, islamophobia, and violence against Black youth as inter-connected issues, which will connect educators to, live the realities of their students. Hip-hop has to become as multidimensional as the students who are performing it.

Bibliography

Crenshaw, Kimberle. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 140, 1989, pp. 139-67.

Davila, Arlene. *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City*. U of CA P, 2004.

Emdin, Christopher. *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and the Rest of Y’all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education*. Beacon, 2016.

Emdin, Christopher. “5 New Approaches to Teaching and Learning: The Next Frontier.” *The*

Huffington Post, 31 Jan. 2014, www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-emdin/5-new-approaches-to-teaching-strategies_b_4697731.html?ir=India&adsSiteOverride=in. Accessed 2 Feb 2016.

Emdin, Christopher. “#HipHopEd Website Introduction” uploaded by Edmund Adjapong, 12 April 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=47AAGRStAQE . Accessed 9 Nov. 2016.

Flores, Juan. *From Bomba to Hip-hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*. Columbia UP2000.

Garcia, William. “IMG 6072,” 5 April 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=lX9H02nU1OM. Accessed 9 Nov. 2016.

Johnson, Gaye Theresa. *Spaces of Conflict: Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race and Social Entitlement in Los Angeles.* U of CA P, 2013.

Rivera, Raquel Z. *New York Ricans from the Hip-hop Zone*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Serwer, Jesse. “Toppa Top 10: Caribbean Hip-Hop Pioneers.” *LargeUp.* September 2011, www.largeup.com/2011/09/20/toppa-top-10-10-caribbean-hip-hop-pioneers/11/. Accessed 12 Sept. 2014.