

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Hip-Hop Fight Club: Radical Theory, Education, and Practice in and Beyond the Classroom

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Bolekaja! . . . Come on down, let's fight! – Marimba Ani¹

The press does not exist merely for the purpose of enriching its proprietors or entertaining its leaders. It is an integral part of the society, with which its purpose must be in consonance. It must help establish a progressive political and economic system that will free [women and] men from want and poverty . . . It must reach out to the masses, educate and inspire them, work for equality of [women and] men's rights everywhere. – Kwame Nkrumah²

Introducing . . . In This Corner. . .!

Few who have any working knowledge of Hip Hop are unaware of the importance battling plays in all its elements. Emcees battle, DJs battle, graffiti artists battle, dancers battle, everyone battles. Well, not everyone, or at least not nearly enough. If, as has been suggested, "hip-hop journalism" is to be a "sixth"³ element and "hip-hop scholarship" now a "seventh"⁴ element of hip-hop then these elements must also "Step in the Arena" or "Enta da Stage."⁵ As someone loosely affiliated with each of these elements, I have for sometime now thought this necessary but have only really found a home for this argument in my classrooms, as tacit pedagogy. There I have taken advantage of the classroom space to engage this idea as a method of teaching communication studies and of developing a theoretical approach to media studies since 2006. The battle I am interested in furthering is a traditional one, found in any field or any social or cultural movement; it is a political battle, an ideological battle. Yet, we might ask, from what political, cultural or ideological lineage should we draw? What is the nature or goal of our work? With what organization or movement are we connected or how do we define those organizations or movements? While I have not seen or been able to engage these arguments in ways I would like to outside the classroom, I have found them to be welcomed supplements to coursework and bases from which students can gain interest or find involvement in critical, even radical, thinking.

The study or application of Hip Hop as pedagogy is as contested (though still not nearly contested enough) as most fields of inquiry have ever been. Over the last 20 years or so an emergent field of Hip Hop Studies (HHS) has entered the fight for relevancy even as other related fields, such as Africana/Black Studies, that once proposed to study and advance the liberation of Hip Hop's progenitors, struggle for survival.⁶ This shift or passage of fields in and out of the dark night of U.S. "higher education" is also indicative of unfinished ideological fights among those within these fields and prefigures similar conflicts to come over the purpose of academia/academics and the relationship these fields have to the conditions faced by those ostensibly under study. I see these fights as necessary aspects of field insertion, co-optation, hierarchies of spokespeople and codification of canons, narrowing of ideological limits, eventual ineffectuality, and the subsequent liberalizing or altogether dismissal loom large on the horizon of predictable outcomes from unchanged systems and structures. Hip Hop then becomes

an avenue in the classroom through which I attempt to engage these concerns, even if in relative isolation, and work to show how Hip Hop continues to reveal the intransigence of colonial power relationships and the particularities of anti-Blackness in our contemporary world. My goal, in its broadest sense, is to have Hip Hop be the conduit through which my students and I can grapple with existing traditions of radical thought and practice.

The struggle to find space in the classroom for often omitted or diminished traditions of radical thought and practice is part of an equally conscious—and overtly stated—goal of having my classroom be an intellectual training ground for future political activists. As will be discussed, this includes the development and application of an Africana Media Theory or Black Radical Media Criticism (AMT/BRMC), as well as the deployment of a Fight Club model of discussion/debate. AMT/BRMC attempts to infuse long-standing traditions of globally situated African radical thought and journalistic practice into, or in contradistinction from, established forms of media criticism and theory with the explicitly-stated goal of opening up space for students to aggressively confront imposed notions of the role or function of media and journalism. Fight Club is a fitting heuristic device suited to these goals as it allows for an energetic, overt and positive confrontation to occur where student and faculty notions are challenged and encouraged toward the evolution of political consciousness, organization and activity beyond the classroom. Fight Club as a method for the inclusion of Hip Hop and AMT/BRMC—or hip-hop as radical theory—also greatly assists the struggle over time, syllabi or curriculum constrictions set by my academic environment.

Fight Club v. Time and Space

. . . I am the inescapable, the irresistible,

The unnegotiable, the unchallenged

I am time

I scroll in measurements, control the elements,

I hold the evidence, I tell the story

I am time

I know no prejudice, I bare no sentiments

For wealth or settlements, I move forward

I am time

You can't recover me, conceal or smuggle me,

Retreat or run from me, crawl up or under me,

You can't do much for me besides serve...

– Mos Def⁷

My attempt at finding time and space for Hip Hop and radical theory in the university classroom has been mitigated by several factors; first, I teach at an underfunded Historically Black College and University (HBCU),

one that is public and itself part of a specifically conservative academic tradition and which is rife with our own version of being academically ghettoized by overwhelmingly persistent 4-4s (4 classes each fall/spring semester) with more than 100 students per semester, full advising loads and horribly uncompetitive pay. All of this leads to the annual decision by departmental leadership that we simply have too many majors (more than 600, by far the largest in our College of Liberal Arts) for me to teach courses outside the narrowly established core needed by the department. Secondly, I teach within a School of Global Journalism and Communication that is experiencing its own traditional struggles of creeping commercialism and hostility between journalist practitioners and academics, and an overall climate of anti-intellectualism, signaled in part by a total disrespect for terminal degrees by those without said degrees who due to their prior professional journalism experience are promoted to positions of departmental and school leadership. However, I argue that neither of these points approaches the impediment that Hip Hop is an expression of colonized communities whose existence can hardly be said to be "welcomed," never mind their full inclusion as subjects or sources of intellectual inquiry in this country's systems of (higher) education. To much of the academic establishment, be that at HBCUs or Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), Hip Hop in all its loud and brash expression conjures uncomfortable memories of the oppressed whose silence has for so long been required.

In 2010 Dr. Brian Sims, professor of psychology at North Carolina A&T, combined the elements of freestyle battling, street corner oratory and radical intellectualism into what he has since then called "Fight Club."⁸ Each week people gather, put topics on a board and debate them until, through crowd vote, a "winner" is determined. It has become an effective way to engage many involved in Hip Hop and higher education to develop and harness critical thinking skills and to most importantly test and challenge ideological positions. Building on the approach Sims initiated, I have found Fight Club to be an appropriate description of my own method of teaching that is tied to critiques of traditional Communication Studies courses. Rather than relying on existing communications analysis, I employ a developmental concept, which I call Africana Media Theory/Black Radical Media Criticism (AMT/BRMC). In my view, one of the glaring gaps in Communication Studies is a theoretical approach to media studies whose foundation are historical works of media analysis or journalistic practice that come from the African world/Black radical traditions of political struggle.

However, I also see this method as practice for or as a test of how those of us involved in what is often referred to as "hip-hop activism and scholarship" can utilize the Fight Club as a model for vigorous debate over the precise meaning of these phrases so that we can identify, define and draw some important political lines. What do these debates mean for this period of Hip Hop-based education? And how do the debates impact professors and other professional educators? I consider my pedagogy as an example of the Fight Club model by bringing students into these debates with Hip Hop as the epicenter of critical

thought. In this instance, my Fight Club "chalkboard assertion," an opening bell of sorts, begins as follows: "Hip-hop activists and scholars have yet to properly define or even debate their political and ideological positions and this serves to weaken the potential for hip-hop to serve the liberation of its progenitors." Throughout the semester we wrestle with the ideas that emanate from this statement, as it is intended to provoke discussion and serve as a pivot on which many of the course ideas turn.

The previously outlined constraints of meeting core curricular goals means that I am challenged to find ways to merge Hip Hop discourses with standard communications theory. Because Hip Hop is a highly visible cultural form, students connect easily with these efforts as evidenced by how frequently Hip Hop is referenced in students' written work and in-class arguments, which allow Hip Hop to be a conduit through which important societal contradictions can be isolated, identified, scrutinized. Yet, courses I have developed which link these issues more thoroughly such as Hip Hop as Mass Media or Hip Hop and Pan-Africanism, though popular, have not reached the core Communications course offerings.⁹ The question then becomes one of method, strategy, and application, to allow Hip Hop to perform its critical function of expressing and explaining the world, or to paraphrase Kwame Ture, aiding "the job of the conscious [which] is to make the unconscious conscious of their unconscious behavior."¹⁰

As Hip Hop introduces, expresses, and extends a variety of radical traditions, it has also been the platform of choice for many colonized African communities around the world to identify and communicate their struggles and histories. This includes their navigation through social and industrial mechanisms, which continue to constrain the liberatory aspirations of these aggrieved communities.

When it comes to some of the basic tenets of introductory college-level communication studies courses I will use examples in Hip Hop that explain "mass communication," or the technologically mediated dissemination of ideas, by outlining the process through which a song must go in order to be heard via the media technologies of radio, video, printed or online presses and even internet radio broadcasts. For instance, in any given week we can use UrbanInsite.com to look up the top 20 songs as determined by radio airplay or "spins." We can see by individual radio station or national totals what songs are played and how often. From there we can select songs and artists, determine the particular record label and parent company that owns the song and actually chart the process by which that song went from being written and recorded, to being disseminated and monetized. We can chart the process by which issues of copyright and intellectual property are managed, and how media consolidation allow for management of popular culture by charting how three conglomerates owning most commercial rap music feed us their product intravenously through the equally consolidated feeding tubes of radio, television and internet.

For example, on a given week this past summer, Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines," featuring Pharrell Williams, was the number one song on the radio. It played 3969 times

nationally, slightly down from 4009 times it was played the previous week.¹¹ The song/artist is owned and distributed by Interscope Records which is itself owned by Universal Music Group, a subsidiary of international conglomerate Vivendi. Using this data opens a discussion of payola, or pay-for-play, which helps to demonstrate the enormous cost of air-time (roughly \$1000 per song, per station) devoted to ensuring maximum public consumption.

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In textbook chapters on the music industry or radio, film, even book and magazine publishing, I use hip-hop-based examples to demonstrate corporate consolidation or to challenge claims of “profit motive” for media companies’ selection of what will or will not be promoted. For instance, in our oft-used textbook by Straubhaar, et al., *Media Now: Understanding Media, Culture, and Technology*, the authors briefly describe various elements of media economics including “the profit motive,” or the need of media companies to produce products that will sell well in order to “recoup their costs” on the production.¹² While this may be a fitting starting point, taking the previous example of how songs go from production to dissemination allows students the opportunity to challenge the simple argument that it is the right of a given artist to make money however little change they bring to the music industry’s tried and true method of commodification and consumption. Students come to realize that the largest record companies are often small segments of much larger operations that are important but not essential to financial sustainability or even growth. In 2011, for instance, Universal Music Group, the largest music company in the world, was only 14% of Vivendi’s revenue. Sony Music was only 6% of Sony’s overall revenue and Warner Music Group was at the time 3% of its parent private equity group’s revenues.¹³ The argument I make here, similar to arguments made about Rupert Murdoch’s willingness to take losses on his press properties, is that the forms of popular culture we are offered are less about profits and more about managing ideas, ranges of debate, and critical thinking. Beyond making money, the industry process of song/artist promotion deeply reflects the function of and process by which propaganda or psychological warfare¹⁴ is conducted through “message force multiplication.”¹⁵

Moving beyond the demonstration of corporate consolidation of the media industry, I also seek to model efforts that counter degrading images and ideas, linking Hip Hop media analysis with social struggles. When, for instance, in 2012 rapper Too Short was broadcast to the

world by *XXL Magazine* sharing some dangerously inappropriate sexual advice for teenagers, I, with the help of Rosa Clemente and a quickly-formed “We Are the 44%” collective, launched through social media, was able to shift the discussion not only to one focused on male violence against women but also into an opportunity to openly critique media function and ownership structures.¹⁶ As we revealed, *XXL* and its content were linked to its parent company Harris Publications, which placed our concerns in a broader context of media consolidation and the imperial reach afforded mostly white, male and interlocked media ownership.¹⁷

Fight Club, Hip Hop and Africana Media Theory/Black Radical Media Criticism (AMT/BRMC)

I first studied law to become a better burglar. – Huey P. Newton¹⁸

AMT/BRMC is my attempt to organize existing but disparate works from within the African world that is routinely ignored by most media theory scholarship.¹⁹ It attempts to argue against the exclusion from Communication Studies the works, for example, of Frantz Fanon and how media form part of the “polydimensional” method of colonization,²⁰ or Claudia Jones’s radical feminist journalism which challenged the limitations of Marxism and called into question the “internal colonialism” of Black America, or George Jackson’s call for a militant underground press that would promote revolution, at the intersection of media theory and journalism history. Ultimately, I seek to position AMT/BRMC as the standard by which Communication Studies is measured. Beyond that, I also mean to distinguish the difference between more conventional descriptions of critical or radical media theory and AMT/BRMC in a way similar to how Reiland Rabaka draws out the distinction between Africana critical theory and Africana philosophy.²¹

For Rabaka, Africana philosophy is “concerned only with identifying, reconstructing, and creating traditions and repositories for thought of continental and diasporan Africans.”²² However, Africana critical theory, he continues, is “theory critical of domination and discrimination in continental and diasporan African life-worlds and lived experiences.”²³ Similarly, I seek to highlight the main differences between AMT/BRMC and dominant media criticism. That is, while there exists no shortage of media criticism or analysis stemming from the African or Black world and, of course, European or White media criticism – including “radical media criticism” – there exists a tendency to discredit African global thought or omit such perspectives altogether. AMT/BRMC attempts, in a distinct fashion, to organize various traditions of African philosophy, apply them specifically to a criticism of mass media and journalistic practice, so as to have them become, as Rabaka continues of Africana critical theory, “critiques not simply [of] imperialism but the anti-imperial theory and praxis of the past... to better confront, contradict, and correct domination in the present and offer alternatives for liberation in the future.”²⁴



HIP HOP ONE LOVE, BERLIN, GERMANY, OCTOBER 2012
PHOTO BY CHRIS TINSON

In a journalistic sense this is akin to what I've previously identified as the difference between civic or advocacy journalism and what Hemant Shah once coined as "emancipatory journalism."²⁵ Drawing on Shah's articulation, this refers to a practice that acknowledges a persistent denial of freedom, then naturally eschews notions of "objectivity" as inherently limited and openly calls for radical political organization and activity. In linking this work with hip-hop I have made the case that the development of the rap music mixtape was in fact an early example of anti-colonial and "national" media/journalism development.²⁶ I argue that as a form of media theory hip-hop often demonstrates the central tenet of AMT/BMRC. From this view, the presence of hip-hop demonstrates a continuing absence of liberation and explicitly, even if unconsciously (hence the development of the mixtape) calls for alternative forms of communication, organization and ultimately action in response to existing conditions. The explicit distinction between the AMT/BRMC approach and most media criticism, even of the so-called "radical" variety, mirrors the distinction between Black or "minority" journalism/media criticism and the open advocacy of radical organization, even rebellion.²⁷ Hip Hop is a microcosm of the gross exploitation and worsening conditions for oppressed communities and demands (at minimum) a more aggressive intellectual confrontation that moves beyond simply including racially diverse contributors as part of an already narrowly-formed discussion. Beyond simple inclusion there is a desperate need for unabashed, unapologetic media and journalism *produced by* aggrieved communities that identifies these conditions and calls for their total eradication through radical grassroots political organization and movement-building. In other words, AMT/BRMC marks the journalistic difference between the Afro-American newspaper and isolated Black columns in other news outlets, and fully independent platforms such as the Black Panther newspaper historically, or Black Agenda Report in the present day.²⁸

When Straubhaar, et. al., discuss the development of the printing press, or the telegraph I include discussions of the rise of the rap music mixtape as Hip Hop's first "national" mass medium. Much as Dan Schiller has described the expansion of the telegraph wire and post office service in the social formation of the United States,

the mixtape helped create and extend a burgeoning Hip Hop "nation."²⁹ More directly, the history of the rap music mixtape, and even the broader and international origins and applications of the mixtape itself, can be used to explain the internal colonialism suffered by the Black and Latin American communities from which they were produced.³⁰ The necessity of a mixtape as a primary conduit for a Hip Hop community/nation excluded from or demonized by existing media tells the political and cultural tale of internally colonized communities while explaining the persistent and special relationship mixtapes have to not only Hip Hop enthusiasts in general but particularly Black and Brown communities who form their core. Additionally, as Straubhaar, et. al., give one and a half full pages in their chapter on newspapers to all of the so-called "people of color" or "minority" presses in a sub-section titled "Diversity in the Press," I encourage students to envision the mixtape as a kind of early "Hip Hop press" which eventually developed into an entire wing of what is now called "Hip Hop journalism" or the "sixth element."³¹ In extending the woeful attention given to the world's numerical majority, including discussions of the fully omitted radical press traditions (abolitionist, anarchist, socialist, feminist, Black internationalist, etc.), we are able to add important depth to the question of why these presses or forms of journalism were necessary in the past, and discuss why they may still be required in the age of the Internet and rapidly expanding global communications networks.

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This wider vision is largely possible by simply centering Hip Hop in discussions of other more "relevant" topics in communication studies. Unfettered by the political function of imposed structures, Hip Hop speaks effectively and radically to the conditions of oppressed communities. One simple pedagogical technique is to let students hear, read and see Hip Hop as it actually exists outside of dominant, corporate, colonizing impediments of mainstream media and business. And if there is a benefit to teaching within communication studies it is that the field itself is necessarily interdisciplinary and as such allows for easy and sound (pun intended) connections to or interactions with any number of arenas of thought. Hip Hop is highly interdisciplinary, multi-faceted and comprised of its own diverse but intersecting elements all of which are born of particular socio-cultural, political, historical and geographic contexts. By looking beyond the imposed limitations of traditional Communication Studies discourse, I am able to relate these to topics imposed by departmental structure and, more importantly, to have those avenues of thought

interact with previously established and continuing radical intellectual and activist traditions.³²

Fight Club, "Hip Hop Activism," and the Classroom

Although Hip-Hop itself was born in the early 1970's in the wake of the heyday of the Black Power and Black Studies movements, "Hip-Hop Studies" or the mainstream study of Hip-Hop by Black academicians and journalists generally takes place and shape in the historical context of this later rendition of Black Studies mainstreamed as "African-American Studies." And it is what it is ("Hip-Hop Studies"). Part of a global "Hip-Hop Revolution" it paradigmatically is not. In actual fact, on the whole, it has an ambivalent or adversarial, even antagonistic relationship to Hip-Hop itself... If it is cliché for bourgeois (petit-bourgeois or pseudo-bourgeois) critics to pontificate on "Hip-Hop" and "commercialization" (while upholding mundane bourgeois values otherwise themselves), no commentators of note have condemned (as a "problem") its commercialization in academia or publishing as a "new" and profitable "object of investigation. - Greg Thomas³³

The approach that has had the most powerful impact in the classroom is the introduction of students to some of the debates around the popular discussion and definition of "Hip Hop scholarship" and "Hip Hop activism." In the above quote, Greg Thomas has brilliantly summarized my own concern by identifying that much of what has become Hip Hop Studies' canon is a tendency for authors to condemn commercialism while becoming overwhelmingly commercial themselves. Taking as his example seminal "Hip Hop scholar" Tricia Rose's *Hip-Hop Wars*, Thomas writes:

*What are the perspectives of this Hip-Hop on the rap that Rose recommodifies as "Hip-Hop," on the "wars" or "debates" over Hip-Hop? Moralistically, Rose criticizes her two target paradigms without a hint of the possibility that the paradigm from which she criticizes is a paradigm and one in dire need of criticism itself. For even if the subject at hand were to remain the likes of Nelly and Kanye West, under a less overblown rubric, the evaluation of Hip-Hop and the "commercial" sold in *The Hip-Hop Wars* would change drastically as soon as the Hip-Hop repressed by it returns to attack exploitation, Western empire and the complicit academic critic with an oppositional perspective or set of critical values, norms and ideals.³⁴*

I often encourage students to see the same in much of what has become Hip Hop journalism. In each case "wars" or "debates" are often reduced in focus to the most commercial rappers and the limited ranges of their thought. Rarely if ever, as Thomas argues, is the focus on journalists or scholars themselves and their own largely

commercial, narrow, liberal and intellectually or politically debilitating content.³⁵

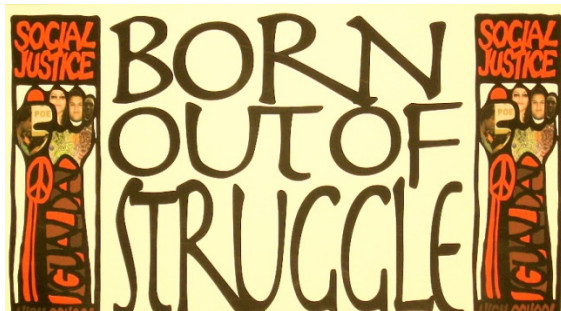
Having these discussions as secondary or tertiary content within different courses and the fact that most students have not read much or any of the developing "canon" of Hip Hop Studies, I provide a few shorter articles and use primarily public media, in particular mine and comrades' radio shows.³⁶ In this way I introduce students to what I argue are insufficient discussions of the meaning of these phrases (Hip Hop scholarship, Hip Hop activism), the limitations they set as canon, and the often ideologically conservative political positions taken by the most popular spokespeople.

Since the 2008 election of Barack Obama these discussions have centered largely around the tendency among those most popularly referred to as "Hip Hop activists and scholars" to narrow "activism" to Democratic Party electoral politics and the insufficient debate around that fact within an equally nebulously defined "Hip Hop community." The use of mostly radio and selectively chosen archived Internet video greatly assists in introducing students in shorter periods of time to poignant aspects of current debates. In the case of my own radio program or my own involvement in these debates, these media also allow students to experience the extension of the classroom space to a broader public sphere.

One of the teachable moments of this work occurred in March of 2006 when I was invited as a guest on the Michael Eric Dyson show, which formerly aired on Radio One. Prior to my appearance on the show, I wrote a column critical of Dyson's stance as a progressive alternative to rightwing and mainstream media while enjoying frequent and seemingly friendly visits on the show from John McWhorter, a Black representative of the Manhattan Institute's decidedly conservative political agenda.³⁷ In my conversation with Dyson I argued that McWhorter's appearances weakened Dyson's progressive posture and moreover wasted already limited media space at a time when genuinely progressive news and commentary was sorely needed by Black and Brown communities. In particular I also responded to McWhorter's wholesale and repetitive condemnations of rap music as extensions of his blanket condemnations of Black culture and social behavior all of which was/is devoid of historical or political context or an understanding of how the music industry works or what political state function it serves. Shortly after the article appeared Dyson invited me to debate him and McWhorter. Though I accepted the challenge, I predicted that I would merely be the radical straw man that provided legitimacy to a disingenuous platform of debate.

As a teaching tool, the audio from what would be two appearances on Dyson's program allow for an introduction to some of the key tensions in popular discussions of Hip Hop, as well as examples in the politics of media, interviewing and commentary. Specifically,, the exchange demonstrates the ranges of acceptable political debate as defined by the right-wing McWhorter, who uses Hip Hop as a mechanism for condemning Black culture as the real cause of Black inequality, and Dyson to establish a left

political baseline that legitimizes the right and prevents extensions of the left's position to critiques of planned structural inequality, i.e. colonialism, capitalism, White supremacy. Finally, the exchange demonstrates (my own) poor use of time and argument within the confines of commercial media where time constraints and established norms of the left (Dyson)/right (McWhorter) consensus require skillful and practiced adeptness to overcome. Or as I explain in class, it is not enough to be correct during debate. You must also learn the skill of managing time, staying focused on talking points and being, in this case, radio-ready, clear and engaging. Most importantly, one must become aware of interviewing and debate techniques that rival any skilled propagandist in assuring a message is conveyed with greatest impact on its target audience. Together, my students and I identify areas where debate points were won and lost.



BORN OUT OF STRUGGLE, POSTER, LAWNDALE/LITTLE VILLAGE HIGH SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, CHICAGO 2007

I had initially intended to challenge Dyson and McWhorter on several bases: a) In his criticism of Hip Hop's narrow and debilitating content McWhorter ignored the colonial, corporate process by which songs are selected for popularity assuring that no radical content (so much of what is actually produced around the world) ever reaches its intended audiences and, b) that allowing McWhorter to appear as a regular guest on his program Dyson was disingenuously establishing the boundaries within which these discussions can take place. When he defended his right to have any guest of his choice and argued that he did not fear disagreement, I suggested Dyson drop the Manhattan Institute neocolonial McWhorter and have weekly debates with people to his political left. What happened was more akin to an episode of *The Boondocks*, some kind of faux BET Awards back-stage fight with Dyson descending into rants about his manhood and being unafraid to confront conservatives, and McWhorter being coy, evasive and defending himself by saying that at least his wife liked him, and me ridiculously descending into arguments over footnotes and (accurately if not effectively) equating McWhorter to an intellectual Melvin "Cotton" Smith.³⁸ After two appearances and two hours I made few of the points I had planned to and, much to my chagrin, allowed both the liberal and conservative viewpoints on the issues to serve as the only legitimate range of argument.

In more serious and clear examples I at times engage students around the development and eventual (for all intents and purposes) demise of the National Hip-Hop Political Convention (NHHPC) of 2004. While many hoped this would be more akin to the 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana or the beginning of an

internally colonized domestic non-aligned movement, it and subsequent conferences ultimately devolved into campaign rallies first for John Kerry and later Barack Obama.³⁹ I recently revisited this issue on my radio program, which, when used in my class, is for students another opportunity to be quickly introduced to the history of the NHHPC and some of the debates that emerged there around the marginalizing of women and radical politics. From there more current debates are encouraged around the concerns raised earlier about the lack of political clarity of many "Hip Hop scholars and activists," concerns which unfortunately prefigured the largely uncritical support of the "Hip Hop community" for the disaster that has been Barack Obama's two terms.⁴⁰

In addition to the Dyson debates and recent coverage of the history of NHHPC, there is my use of video from a panel convened at the 2011 National Conference for Media Reform (NCMR) in Boston. Panelists, including Rosa Clemente, Mariama White Hammond, Dr. Chris Tinson, and myself, attempted to address these and related issues around "Hip Hop scholarship and activism." One of the many important outcomes of that panel was what I think is the first clear delineation of a distinct "Hip Hop radicals" category. Rosa Clemente coined the phrase, while Tinson and I sought to address some of the troubling trends in popular work around Hip Hop. Most notably emphasis was placed on the diminishing (if not full on erasure) of Black and Latin American radical political traditions that run far left of voting for Democrats. The limitations established and defended by many of Hip Hop's spokespeople meant that even a well-known and established Hip Hop activist like Rosa Clemente could have her 2008 vice-presidential campaign on the Green Party ticket with former congresswoman Cynthia McKinney practically ignored by her own "Hip Hop nation." Encouraged by Hip Hop's "intelligensia," which provided little counter-narrative to the orchestrated and skillful rise of Obama, most were as convinced as the wider public that his election would be transformative. Worse still were the claims that Hip Hop got Obama elected or that he was Hip Hop's candidate because he could make reference to an artist or two.⁴¹

Let me offer one final example. Recently, Bakari Kitwana, noted Hip Hop commentator and organizer of Rap Sessions, joined my radio program to revisit the debate over the definition of "Hip Hop activism," which provided another teachable media piece.⁴² Prior to our conversation on air, he asked me to respond to some questions about Hip Hop activism and found my responses puzzling; in fact, as he said, he was "shocked" to hear that I felt a need for some debates around ideology or political trajectory among those described as part of this Hip Hop activist collective. Specifically, Kitwana found troubling my views that Hip Hop activism has by now become a brand, a euphemism for liberal funding of some "minorities" to ultimately and solely organize themselves to vote for the Democratic party's candidates. Kitwana's acknowledgement of a diverse array of politics within the community, I argued, was not itself evidence that those ideas were equally welcomed, suggested or organized politically by those within these vague categories of "Hip Hop activists and scholars." The wide-array of politics within these communities, including

pan-Africanism, Black nationalism, anti-imperialism, socialism among them, are—as in other fields—overwhelmingly marginalized in favor of liberal electoral politics. For the classroom, however, the most important aspect of these public discussions is that students can hear them debated and be introduced to broader, more radical ideas all within a context of Hip Hop.

The Hip Hop academic and activist debate can function effectively in the classroom by demonstrating the purpose and (often unintended) consequences of debate especially involving educators at the college level. Judging by student responses to the examples, these debates are an exciting break from the norm of most classroom specific exercises. The debate also allows for introductory level students to experience basic media studies concepts such as agenda-setting, framing or gatekeeping and where they can witness how these concepts play out in the context of debating Hip Hop and its relationship to people's lived experiences. For more advanced students the debate allows them to witness the ideological limitations put on popular, commercial media versus the public, community radio format of my own and some of my colleagues' media outlets, and lets them see media theory in practice. This year, for example, graduate students in media theory will read some of the literature, watch and listen to some of these debates and analyze them via conventional (Marxist, Feminist, Critical) and unconventional (AMT/BRMC, Hip Hop Feminism) theoretical angles and will be encouraged to vigorously engage me and each other in a "fight" around my initial assertion that, "Hip Hop activists and scholars have yet to properly define or even debate their political and ideological positions and this serves to weaken the potential for Hip Hop to serve the liberation of its progenitors."

Conclusion: And the Winner Is . . . ?

Earlier I stated that I "feel" these debates have been most effective as a teaching tool. This is because to date I am still in the process of measuring the effectiveness of this approach. I, like many of my colleagues, am still engaged in a process of trial and error in developing this approach and developing appropriate tools for measuring its success. Yet, student energy and passion during course discussions, the routine with which these debates and radio-derived teaching tools are referenced in student essays, and the length of time students are willing to spend in post-class conversations that spill over into the hallways and out into the parking lots are a testament to the potency of a Hip Hop centered media analysis. Rarely do our traditional communication studies discussions flourish to that degree.

The Hip Hop academic and activist debate can function effectively in the classroom by demonstrating the purpose and (often unintended) consequences of debate especially involving educators at the college level.

As I reflect on my experiences moving back and forth from the classroom to larger society and back again, I am increasingly cognizant of the political and media environments that seek to locate, destroy, or otherwise thwart the reach of unconventional ideas. And like many activist-scholars, I struggle to find ways to be relevant, which in my case means doing what I can to reacquaint my mostly working-class Black students and communities to the range of their own radical political and cultural traditions. As I frequently remind students, Hip Hop is part of those radical traditions. Observing that fact requires the active use of radical media analyses, especially ones that come from Hip Hop's progenitors and that are overtly concerned with their liberation, in educational settings. My pedagogical approach to these goals is very much akin to the Fight Club model, where a stage is set each week to battle over ideas. By semester's end the "fight" ends as Hip Hop has always intended, with hugs and pounds (which for students translates into grades and graduation), and amicable parting of the ways with the goal of later advancing political organization and struggle. What is more "Hip Hop" than that?

Notes

¹ Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior*, Trenton: Africa World Press, 1994, 1.

² Quoted in Herbert Altschull, *Agents of Power*, New York: Longman, 1984, 150.

³ Raquel Cepeda, *And It Don't Stop: The Best American Hip-Hop Journalism of the Last 25 Years*. London: Faber & Faber, 2004.

⁴ Personal communication, a statement made to this author by scholar/emcee Dr. Jason Nichols/Haysoos, March 30, 2013.

⁵ Gang Starr, *Step in the Arena* [Album], Chrysalis/EMI Records, 1991 and Black Moon, *Enta da Stage* [Album], Nervous Records, 1993.

⁶ Travis Lars Gosa, "Colleges Love Hip-Hop, but Do They Love Black Men Too?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 15, 2013. Archived online at: <http://chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/2013/02/15/colleges-love-hip-hop-but-do-they-love-black-men-too/>. See Also, "HuffPost Live: Is a Hip-Hop Studies Minor Legitimate?" January 16, 2013, archived online at: <http://newblackman.blogspot.com/2013/01/huffpost-live-is-hip-hop-studies-minor.html>.

⁷ "The Hurricane," *The Hurricane: Music from and Inspired by the Motion Picture*, MCA Records, 2000.

⁸ "Fight Club was founded by Dr. Brian Carey Sims in 2010 as a student/community outreach initiative of the first annual Dialogue on Progressive Enlightenment (DOPE) conference at North Carolina A&T State University, and serves as the material response to students wishing to carry DOPE forward as an active means to radically interpret and engage the world to produce progressive, transformative social change. Since then the Fight Club

model has been implemented in various other communities including a student-led effort in Washington, DC (Fight Club-DC) and in Ann Arbor, MI." Quoted from an as yet unpublished essay, "Structured Dialogue in the Black College Classroom," Drs. Brian Carey Sims and Lumas J. Helaire.

⁹ I will leave out the long, boring and tedious history of attempts to make such courses part of the core; suffice it to say all attempts failed.

¹⁰ Comments made during a meeting of the Patrice Lumumba Coalition, New York: NY., 1996.

¹¹ The week running August 4-18, 2013, UrbanInsite.com/charts.

¹² Straubhaar, J., LaRose, R. and Davenport, L. (2012), *Media Now: Understanding Media, Culture, and Technology*, Seventh Edition, Boston, MA.: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, p 33.

¹³ Ball, J. *I Mix What I Like! A Mixtape Manifesto*, Baltimore, MD.: AK Press, 2011.

¹⁴ "Propaganda" would become "public relations" to avoid the negative connotation the term achieved after the second World War and each have a definition and function that is interchangeable with "psychological warfare." Each share as core to their definition and function the conscious use of techniques to mold the worldview for political purposes of a target audience, individual or mass. For a discussion of "message force multipliers" see David Barstow, "One Man's Military-Industrial-Media Complex," *The New York Times*, November 29, 2008. Archived online:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/30/washington/30general.html?pagewanted=all>. For a discussion of the modern-day application of what are largely indistinguishable definitions and uses of "propaganda" and "psychological warfare" see Laura Flanders's GritTV episode, "Maintaining Bush's Propaganda Program?" Archived online: <http://blip.tv/grittv/grittv-maintaining-bush-s-propaganda-program-2800627>.

¹⁵ For a discussion of "message force multipliers" see David Barstow, "One Man's Military-Industrial-Media Complex," *The New York Times*, November 29, 2008. Archived online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/30/washington/30general.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹⁶ The 44% represents the number of Black and Brown girls sexually molested or assaulted before the age of 18. Public Statement: "We Are the 44%" Coalition Challenges Sexual Violence Against Black and Latina Teens, February 21, 2012. Archived online at: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/wearethe44/public-statement-we-are-the-44-coalition-challenges-sexual-violence-against-blac/159855520800028>.

¹⁷ To extend the similar arguments made from opposite ends of the political spectrum by Ben Bagdikian on the one hand and Zbigniew Brzezinski on the other and

summarized in Jared Ball, *I Mix What I Like! A Mixtape Manifesto* (Baltimore: AK Press, 2011) pp. 55 and 73.

¹⁸ David Hilliard and D. Weise, *The Huey P. Newton Reader*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002, 25.

¹⁹ By African world I mean, diaspora and also mean to include Black or African Americans and the Afro-Latino diaspora as well.

²⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, NY: Grove Press, 1964, 35.

²¹ See Rabaka, W.E.B. Du Bois and the Problems of the Twenty-First Century: An Essay on Africana Critical Theory (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

²² Quoted in, Bassegy, Magnus O. (2007). "What is Africana Critical Theory or Black Existential Philosophy?" *Journal of Black Studies*, 37; 914.

²³ Quoted in, Bassegy, Magnus O. (2007). "What is Africana Critical Theory or Black Existential Philosophy?" *Journal of Black Studies*, 37; 914.

²⁴ Quoted in, Bassegy, Magnus O. (2007). "What is Africana Critical Theory or Black Existential Philosophy?" *Journal of Black Studies*, 37; 916.

²⁵ Jared Ball, *I Mix What I Like! A Mixtape Manifesto*. Baltimore, MD.: AK Press, 2011.

²⁶ Jared Ball, "I Mix What I Like! In Defense and Appreciation of the Rap Music Mixtape as 'Dissident' and 'National' Communication," *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 5, 2011, 278-297.

²⁷ See for instance, D. Berry and J. Theobald (eds.). *Radical Mass Media Criticism: A Cultural Genealogy*. Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2006. The only Black voice heard in this volume is bell hooks' and only through the lens of the White author's perspective.

²⁸ This tradition can be said to run through Freedom's Journal, The North Star, David Walker's Appeal, the journalism of Marcus Garvey's The Negro World and the work of Ida. B. Wells, Robert and Mabel Williams, and through much of the "minority" presses described by Juan Gonzales and Joe Torres in *News For All The People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media*, London: Verso, 2011.

²⁹ Jared Ball, "I Mix What I Like! In Defense and Appreciation of the Rap Music Mixtape as 'Dissident' and 'National' Communication," *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 5, 2011, 278-297.

³⁰ Jared Ball, "I Mix What I Like! In Defense and Appreciation of the Rap Music Mixtape as 'Dissident' and 'National' Communication," *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 5, 2011, 278-297.

³¹ Raquel Cepeda, *And It Don't Stop: The Best American Hip-Hop Journalism of the Last 25 Years*. London: Faber & Faber, 2004. This is not to suggest that the content or perspective of this journalism deserves to go unchallenged.

³² These movements would include anti-imperialist, pan-Africanist, as well as Black involvement in socialist, communist, anarchist and labor movements most of whose intellectual and press traditions are ignored. See, for instance, Juan Gonzales and Joe Torres, *News For All The People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media*, London: Verso, 2011, John Downing, *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2001 or the earlier press history classic, David Armstrong, *A Trumpet to Arms*. Boston: South End Press, 1981.

³³ Greg Thomas, "Hip-Hop vs. The Bourgeois West ... and 'Hip-Hop Studies'?" June 14, 2010, imixwhatilike.org. Found online March 30, 2013 at: <http://imixwhatilike.org/2010/06/14/thomasvrose/>.

³⁴ Greg Thomas, "Hip-Hop vs. The Bourgeois West ... and 'Hip-Hop Studies'?" June 14, 2010, imixwhatilike.org. Found online March 30, 2013 at: <http://imixwhatilike.org/2010/06/14/thomasvrose/>.

³⁵ I have also attempted to make this argument here: "Stand and Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership and Hip-Hop Culture by Yvonne Bynoe" (Book Review) in *The Global Journal of Hip-Hop Culture*, Vo. 3, No. 1, January 2007, and here: "Stealing Empire: P2P, Intellectual Property and Hip-Hop Subversion by Adam Haupt" (Book Review) in *The Global Journal of Hip-Hop Culture*, vol. 4, no. 1, June 2009.

³⁶ My show, The Super Funky Soul Power Hour airs Fridays 11a-12p on WPFW 89.3 FM Washington, DC. My comrades Dr. Chris Tinson and Carlos 'Rec' McBride do even better and more Hip Hop-grounded work on TRGGR Radio Fridays 6-8p on WMUA 91.1FM in Amherst, MA. as does, JR and BlockReportRadio.com, Hard Knock Radio from KPFA 94.1 FM in Berkley, CA. and DaveyD with Breakdown FM at DaveyD.com.

³⁷ Jared Ball, "Et tu Michael Eric Dyson? Fraternizing with the Devil," BlackCommentator.com, March 16, 2006. Archived online at: http://www.blackcommentator.com/175/175_dyson_ball_QUEST_pf.html.

³⁸ FBI infiltrator of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party who aided state officials in capturing, framing and convicting BPP member Geronimo Pratt in 1969. See, Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of*

Repression, Cambridge, MA.: South End Press, 1990, 84-87.

³⁹ "The Non-Aligned Movement is a movement of 115 members representing the interests and priorities of developing countries. The Movement has its origin in the Asia-Africa Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. The meeting was convened upon the invitation of the Prime Ministers of Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia and Pakistan and brought together leaders of 29 states, mostly former colonies, from the two continents of Africa and Asia, to discuss common concerns and to develop joint policies in international relations. Prime Minister Nehru, the acknowledged senior statesman, along with Prime Ministers Sukarno and Nasser, led the conference. At the meeting Third World leaders shared their similar problems of resisting the pressures of the major powers, maintaining their independence and opposing colonialism and neo-colonialism, especially western domination. The Non-Aligned Movement: Description and History, The Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) of South Africa. Retrieved September 15, 2013, archived online: <http://www.nam.gov.za/background/background.htm>.

⁴⁰ "Women Tell Some of the Untold Story of the Rise and Fall of the Hip-Hop Political Convention and Saying 'No' to Clear Channel!" March 15, 2013. Archived online at: <http://imixwhatilike.org/2013/07/02/women-tell-the-untold-story-of-the-rise-and-fall-of-the-hip-hop-political-convention/>.

⁴¹ "Beyond the Beats: Towards a Radical Analysis of the State of Hip-Hop," a panel at the National Conference for Media Reform, April 14, 2011. Archived online: <http://imixwhatilike.org/2011/04/09/beyond-the-beats-towards-a-radical-analysis-of-the-state-of-hip-hop/>.

⁴² "What is Hip-Hop Activism?" with Bakari Kitwana, October 12, 2012. Archived online at: <http://imixwhatilike.org/2012/10/12/what-is-hip-hop-activism-w-bakari-kitwana/>.



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