

## **Lords Above Us and Within Us: Exploring Race, Spirituality, and Hip Hop Based Education**

Moira E. Pirsch

*This article explores selected scholarship, understandings, and practices utilized in Hip Hop culture and Hip Hop Based Education (HHBE) as they relate to conceptions of race and spirituality, ways in which scholars describe the relationship of HHBE to spiritual experiences, and how HHBE connects to racial identity and spiritual development. The article also explores the past and promise of these understandings and recent scholarship on the intersections of HHBE, spirituality, and race. The article closes by highlighting the emerging fields of hip-hop literacies, racial literacy, and spiritual literacy.*

*Keywords: hip hop, Hip Hop Based Education, hip-hop culture, hip-hop literacy, racial literacy, spiritual literacy*

let us, oh lords above us and within  
let us be useful to our neighbors  
& tender their wounds  
let us be more bandage than blade  
unless the blade is needed

let us be a sword against what does not  
bring us closer to home

let us be dangerous to that which fails us

and bring us a world good to us, all of us  
all us all us  
amen

From “principles,” by spoken word poet Danez Smith<sup>1</sup>

***“Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection.”<sup>2</sup>***

When I attended the Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Festival (BNV) for the first time in New York City in 2006, I was eighteen years old. I, a white middle-class teenager from a midsize city in the Midwest, was being introduced to a network of spoken word and hip-hop poets that was emerging across the country. I remember seeing hundreds of students from all parts of the world (from England to Guam and everywhere in between) huddled into groups, speaking, listening, and performing poems that spoke to their dual realities of oppression and

---

<sup>1</sup> Danez Smith, “principles,” [www.danezsmithpoet.com/a-poem-principles](http://www.danezsmithpoet.com/a-poem-principles), accessed Oct. 24, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 88.

liberation; all with the previously mentioned Paulo Freire quote on the back of their shirts. I remember not being sure who Paulo Freire was and what this quote really meant. However, even though I had no theoretical framework for understanding my experience, I knew that as we spoke about our teenage views of injustice in our neighborhoods and our world, what I was experiencing was powerful; a process of learning and living that was being built in word, in work, and in action-reflection—or what I now understand (borrowing from Freire) as praxis, or “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”<sup>3</sup>

Almost a decade later, as our nation faces another round of cyclical crises related to race and politics,<sup>4</sup> I’ve seen my peers from that day become the directors of their own non-profits, earn degrees at the nation’s top universities, and win established awards and professorships. I am earning my PhD in English education and reflect on those moments as a young poet and wonder how the experiences of spoken word and hip hop based education (HHBE) supported me and my peers in understanding our spiritual and racialized selves within our diverse world.

In our society in general, while fewer young people than ever before are choosing not to affiliate with any formal religion,<sup>5</sup> these same non-affiliated young people still report having regular deep spiritual experiences and are building what Thurston and Kuilie<sup>6</sup> call “deep community,” through secular organizations that mirror many of the functions of religious institutions. A pilot study I completed in 2016, along with a tradition of scholarship connecting HHBE to religious and spiritual lineages, points to the possibility that HHBE is one such space that supports spiritual experiences and deep community. When these spiritual experiences occur within critical multiracial environments, such as those facilitated by HHBE, racial justice work often precedes or goes hand in hand with such work.<sup>7</sup> It is the attempt to understand the connections between the movement of HHBE and recent scholarship that has led me to write this article.

This article is guided by the following questions: 1) *How do scholars of HHBE name and describe the connections between HHBE and spirituality?* 2) *How do scholars describe the connections between HHBE, race, and spirit within diverse educational contexts?* 3) *What are the pedagogical practices employed that support these connections?* In the following, I will frame this work with brief histories of HHBE, spirituality in education, and race in education, and then categorize threads of scholarship that bring together these ideas with the themes of: 1) participatory shine, 2) productive crisis, and 3) forward movement. To close I will focus on the pedagogical potential of such understandings, outlining the emerging fields of hip-hop literacies, racial literacy, and spiritual literacies.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>4</sup> See Jeff Chang, *We Gon’ Be Alright: Notes on Race and Resegregation* (New York: Picador, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., “Choosing a New Church or House of Worship,” <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/08/23/choosing-a-new-church-or-house-of-worship/> (Aug. 23, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Casper ter Kuile and Angie Thurston, *How We Gather* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Divinity School, 2015), 6–7.

<sup>7</sup> Shelly Tochluk, *Living in the Tension: The Quest for a Spiritualized Racial Justice* (Roselle, NJ: Crandall, Dostie & Douglass Books, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> This inquiry was completed through a literature review of twenty-one sources found by seven sets of terms including “hip hop based education;” “spirituality and education;” “race and education;” “critical spirituality;” “critical race theory and spirituality;” “hip hop based education and race;” and “hip hop and spirituality.” Journal articles were collected from a diverse range of sources, including peer-reviewed journals and books identified through JSTOR, ERIC (EBSCO), and CLIO (Columbia University Libraries Catalog). Key themes will be expanded upon in the findings section.

## **Framing: Hip Hop Based Education, The Cypher, and Sociocultural Theories of Learning**

Hip Hop Based Education (HHBE) refers to the use of hip hop elements as curricular and pedagogical resources.<sup>9</sup> Hip-hop culture, the basis for HHBE, often has widely varying definitions in literature, however one way that hip-hop culture can be defined is as an encompassing, multidimensional culture, which is expressed through the five elements of: 1) MCing (oral element—spoken word poetry falls within this category); 2) DJing (technological element); 3) graffiti (visual element); 4) breakdancing (physical element); and 5) knowledge of self and community (existential element).<sup>10</sup> Hip hop is often viewed as a way of life and extends into the realms of fashion, language, political sensibilities, and business.<sup>11</sup>

Hip-hop culture stems from a lineage of ancient African storytelling communities<sup>12</sup> and is grounded in what is popularly known as *the hip hop cypher*. The cypher often acts as a space for opening, or a holding space for discovery and expression literally and figuratively. In a literal practice, the cypher is usually the home of freestyle sessions based in movement or oral practices.<sup>13</sup> Rhetorically, the word *cypher* describes “the ability to decode and encode,”<sup>14</sup> and may act as an access point for one to get beyond the “codes” of knowledge, human connection, and understanding.<sup>15</sup> Toni Blackmon, in *The Wisdom of the Cypher*, tells us that “the cypher can be the closest thing to a Hip Hop prayer. It is a meditation of sorts, a place to lay down your burdens and open yourself to the possibility of ‘getting open.’”<sup>16</sup>

Scholars have illuminated the cypher and HHBE by utilizing a sociocultural lens that understands learning as situated within specific social contexts and communities of practice (CoP).<sup>17</sup> Wilson<sup>18</sup> and Love<sup>19</sup> outline the particulars of Hip Hop Communities of Practice (HHCoP), calling for scholarship to keep moving in the direction of considering HHBE “based on what hip-hop participants ‘do,’”<sup>20</sup> in relationship to the theories that underlie such practices.

---

<sup>9</sup> Marc Lamont Hill and Emery Petchauer, eds., *Schooling Hip-Hop: Expanding Hip-Hop Based Education Across the Curriculum* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Steinberg Seidel, *Hip Hop Genius: Remixing High School Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Jeff Chang, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 107–108.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>16</sup> Toni Blackman, *Wisdom of the Cypher* (Forthcoming, 2017), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Lave and Wenger posit that all learning is social learning. A result of these social learning experiences, based in the mutual engagement of practices, artifacts, and interactions by individuals, is not only the creation and development of relationships, but the related shifting of identities of the learner and community.

<sup>18</sup> J. A. Wilson, *Outkast'd and Claimin' True: The Language of Schooling and Education in the Southern Hip-Hop Community of Practice* (unpublished doctoral dissertation), University of Georgia, Athens, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Bettina L. Love, “What Is Hip-Hop-Based Education Doing in *Nice* Fields Such as Early Childhood and Elementary Education?” *Urban Education* 50, no. 1 (2015): 106-131, doi:10.1177/0042085914563182.

<sup>20</sup> Bettina L. Love, “What Is Hip-Hop-Based Education Doing in *Nice* Fields Such as Early Childhood and Elementary Education?” *Urban Education* 50, no. 1 (2015): 106-131, doi:10.1177/0042085914563182.

Further, in utilizing HHBE, there is not a set standard of practices or curriculums that one would need to adhere to in order to engage with HHBE as an educator. Despite the multiple organizations, conferences, anthologies, and curriculums produced about HHBE each year, a consensus on what HHBE is and how it must be practiced among practitioners and scholars has yet to arise, nor would it be welcomed, as one of the key components of hip hop is its ability to hold multiplicity. However, I might venture to say that to call oneself an HHBE practitioner, it might require a full commitment and engagement in the cypher, or community, a commitment that requires not only contribution to the community through whatever element/practice one may engage in, but also a commitment to authenticity, or what we might understand as knowledge of self. Through this sociocultural lens, where we understand the self as socially constructed, this full commitment to self *and* community are actually one in the same.

### ***A Few Notes on Spirituality, Race, and Education***

In 2017, the spiritual lives of millennials are taking drastically different shapes than they have before. As mentioned, while there is a growing number of millennials who are choosing not to identify with religious institutions, they still report having regular deep spiritual experiences.<sup>21</sup> Research on spirituality and education has taken many points of view over time and, outside of the study of religion and schooling, most research has focused on the “God within”<sup>22</sup> or the ability of students to access their inner spiritual worlds.<sup>23</sup> Recently, research on spirituality and education has expanded its focus and has begun more thoroughly looking at the internal spiritual lives of students *in relationship* to their greater outside world, or how those individual inner worlds are reflected and expressed in larger social and cultural contexts.<sup>24</sup> Further, scholars of psychology are also looking to justify the value and importance of having a spiritual intention when it comes to working with young people, especially as it relates to protecting against challenging aspects of adolescent life. Lisa Miller’s research “shows that spirituality is *the* most robust protective factor against the big three dangers of adolescence: depression, substance abuse, and risk taking.” She emphasizes the measurable psychological benefits of adolescent spirituality and states, “In the entire realm of human experience, there is no single factor that will protect your adolescent like a personal sense of spirituality.”<sup>25</sup>

Similar to the study of spirituality and education, scholarship on race and education covers a large spectrum, ranging from conversations on eugenics to segregation to psychology. Much of this work has focused on addressing racial disparities in educational achievement. Over the last few decades, scholarship has turned to focus more not only on challenging the measurements that identify such disparities, but also on practices, structures, and pedagogical orientations that can shift the ways students learn, teachers teach, and schools function.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Pew Research Center, “Choosing a New Church or House of Worship.”

<sup>22</sup> Mike Radford, “Spirituality and Education; Inner and Outer Realities,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 11, no. 3, (2006): 386, doi:10.1080/13644360601014130.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* (New York: Picador/St. Martin’s Press, 2016), 208–209.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey M. R. Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell, *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

While these two fields of study (spirituality in education and race in education) have much overlap, scholarship has only rarely put them in conversation, especially as it relates to classroom pedagogies and practices.<sup>27</sup> Dillard discusses how the integration of spirituality in conversations concerning race and culture in education has been a “missing piece” of pedagogical conversations thus far and there is opportunity to radically shift education when we center these intersections.<sup>28</sup> Outside of the classroom, Tuchlock<sup>29</sup> has described the necessity for people, especially those in dominant racial positions, to engage both their racialized and spiritual identities, in order to serve efforts for racial justice in a holistic way. This growing body of scholarship, of which I have hardly graced the surface, offers great opportunity for further study and pedagogical application.

### ***Walk the Talk: Findings and Implications***

Now that we’ve discussed a bit of where this work comes from, I’ll share three overall themes that arose in this brief study of scholarship that brings together hip hop, race in education, and spirituality in education. The three categories of themes that arose are 1) participatory shine, or how *participation* in HHBE communities can facilitate growth in individuals and communities; 2) productive crisis, or how HHBE communities experience challenge as opportunity, and 3) forward movement, or how an HHBE worldview sees unending opportunities for growth and improvement.

#### Theme 1: Showing Up: Participatory Shine

Hip-hop culture expresses spirituality in direct and indirect ways, both of which include active participation of more than one person. Scholars have noted that this participatory shine, as I’ll call it, is often not doctrine specific and can be expressed implicitly and explicitly in a myriad of ways, including as spiritual overtones in rap music, churches integrating rap in services, interpersonal communications, and digital expressions.<sup>30</sup>

I often reflect on a moment when I witnessed my brother and six of our male teenage peers perform their original raps at a high school dance. At a time when administrators and teachers looked down upon their academic performance, suspiciously vetting each line of their songs the week prior, I remember standing on a chair, seeing our entire school focused 100% on their dynamic expressions, their faces lit up, each of them jumping up and down on stage as they shared their intricate and overlapping rhymes. Wuthnow describes the essence of spiritual practice as “engaging in a regular pattern of activities to deepen one’s understanding and experience of the sacred, to strengthen one’s relationship to God, or to establish a closer connection with the ultimate ground of being.” He goes on to explain that while some artists practice their art with specific spiritual intentions, others’ work “puts them in contact with

---

<sup>27</sup> Cynthia B. Dillard and Chinwe L. Ezueh Okpalaoka, eds., *Engaging Culture, Race and Spirituality: New Visions* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Tochluk, *Living in the Tension*.

<sup>30</sup> Sharon Lauricella, “Performing Spirituality: Lil Wayne’s Letters from a New York Jail,” in Andre E. Johnson, ed., *Urban God Talk: Constructing a Hip Hop Spirituality* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 95–114.

something transcendent.”<sup>31</sup> While my brother and our friends were not explicitly rapping about God or a higher power, their participating together connected them—and the high school community also participating—to the “ultimate ground of being” that may not have been accessible if the larger community had not been present.

Another, more explicit example of how this theme manifests can be noted in rapper Lil Wayne’s blog from prison, where in his first letter addressed to his fans, he writes, “for my time here, my physical will be confined to the yard. My love and my spirit, however, know no boundaries.”<sup>32</sup> Lauricella notes that in Wayne’s nearly year-long series of letters, that prayer was mentioned in all of them, and that he openly conversed with fans around the themes of love, gratitude, and God. This exemplifies not only the shifting acceptance of spiritual communication in hip-hop communities, but also the interactive nature of spirituality in hip hop that goes beyond a singular performance of spirituality.<sup>33</sup>

### Theme 2: Fall to Fly: Productive Crisis

I used to feel so devastated  
At times, I thought we'd never make it  
But now we on our way to greatness  
and all that ever took was patience

From “Devastated,” by rapper Joey Bada\$\$

Last night took an L [Loss], but tonight I bounce back.

From “Bounce Back,” by rapper Big Sean

Tinson<sup>34</sup> explains that hip-hop culture, like all popular culture, must consistently engage with its contradictions. With hip hop in particular being a culture that arose out of marginalized, black and brown communities in the South Bronx that were dealing with and addressing economic and social inequities, the culture engages stark, often irreconcilable, contradictions with its highly commercial, visible presence in mainstream society. However, hip-hop culture continues to and always will toe this thin line, with authentic, transformative hip-hop culture being produced and engaged across the world, in direct opposition to, in concert with, and sometimes in collaboration with more mainstream elements of the culture. What is clear about the tensions of the culture as a whole is that there are not only cycles of challenges, or “devastations,” but also that these same cycles facilitate individuals’ and collectives’ ability to “bounce back,” and that these challenges may be necessary for the journey ahead. Scholars of

---

<sup>31</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 128.

<sup>32</sup> Lauricella, “Performing Spirituality: Lil Wayne’s Letters from a New York Jail.”

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Christopher M. Tinson and Carlos REC McBride, “Hip Hop, Critical Pedagogy, and Radical Education in a Time of Crisis,” *Radical Teacher* 97 (2013): 1–9, doi:10.5195/rt.2013.43.

spiritual development<sup>35</sup> have often noted that one must experience the darker moments, sometimes referred to as the dark night of the soul, in order to gain access to the light.

Another example of this theme is illuminated in the first experience I had teaching a hip hop and social justice class at a middle school in St. Paul, Minnesota. Within moments of the class starting, students threw paper at each other, carved their names into desks, started fist fights, and wouldn't listen no matter how many different approaches I tried. Two boys in particular were the most consistently disruptive. I changed my plans, added more energizers, and still encouraged them to write—to share the one thing that they will always have, and the one thing that no one can take away from them—their story. During the last week, we sent invitations home to parents for our final show. At the show, only two mothers showed up. It was the mothers of the two boys. Their mothers told me that their sons came home every day talking about how much they enjoyed the class.

Hip hop offers many lessons about perseverance through struggle. This example is representative of what Emdin describes as the importance for educators to build not only knowledge of *content* of students' culture, but also to remain open to the unknowable impact of classroom and community settings.<sup>36</sup> In my own example, I can only speak to my experience that the learning for me was clear. You may not always know the answers and still never give up on your students; never give up on yourself. We always have an opportunity to bounce back.

### Theme 3: Stay Building: Forward Movement

Advance and never halt, for advancing is perfection.

From “The Visit of Wisdom,” by Khalil Gibran

The final theme that arose is that of continual advancement, or the theme that practitioners and other individuals who participate in hip-hop culture are reluctant to ever settle on one set of understandings. This connects to the previously mentioned themes and emphasizes an element of movement, especially when addressing, and dealing with, the contradictions and challenges that are bound to arise. Aisha Durham<sup>37</sup> discusses how younger members of hip-hop culture, ones who have grown up with hip hop being an unquestionable part of American culture, whom MK Asante calls “the post-hip-hop generation,”<sup>38</sup> are actively taking stands against the problematic nature of corporate hip hop, and also social issues in greater society. One such example is how young people are standing up against racial profiling, mass incarceration, and murders of black and brown young people, through the Black Lives Matter movement and other connected movements. Not only does this “standing against” take form in artistic production, but also more directly in politics and community organizing, or ways that might go

---

<sup>35</sup> James W. Fowler, Karl Ernst Nipkow, and Friedrich Schweitzer, *Stages of Faith and Religious Development: Implications for Church, Education and Society* (London: SCM Press, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Emdin, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood ... and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> Aisha Durham, “\_\_\_\_\_ While Black: Millennial Race Play and the Post-Hip-Hop Generation,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 15, no. 4 (2015): 253–59, doi:10.1177/1532708615578414.

<sup>38</sup> See M. K. Asante, Jr., *It's Bigger Than Hip Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

beyond what has been traditionally known as civil rights organizing, including innovative and digital strategies.<sup>39</sup>

This notion of continued engagement in struggle also arises most clearly when it comes to how HHBE practitioners and students deal with issues of race, especially in the classroom. While traditional educational environments often shy away from difficult discussions on race, we see classrooms that engage hip hop can utilize music and cultural production as a vehicle to invite and encourage a discussion concerning race and how it functions in society. Not only does it offer important counter-narratives to the dominant racial discourse, but also examples for students to practice literacy skills of decoding/deconstructing the meanings of sometimes problematic representations in hip hop.<sup>40</sup> This continued engagement not only has the power to support students as they engage with these complex topics but also as they engage individuals beginning to understand their spiritual and racialized identities. Norton,<sup>41</sup> who shares how hip-hop writing illuminated the spiritualities of students, notes that students viewed their spiritual lives as important sources of support as they worked through difficult and challenging times. There is great potential to map out how this might function in future scholarship, as much has already been noted about how hip hop may be able to support the development of academic culture as a whole, especially as it relates to understandings of race,<sup>42</sup> however not yet with clear connections to spirituality.

While these themes arose in my search of relevant scholarship, in conversations, and in my experiences, it was not always clear how best to integrate these themes into actual practice, or how we might support educators and students of HHBE to engage with them. In the discipline of English education, scholars and educators often focus on the lens of literacy practices, or the multiple literacies,<sup>43</sup> with which students engage when interpreting texts or experiences. Now, I will very briefly explore some possibilities as they relate to supporting students in their journey to 1) shine—or how we might engage hip-hop literacies; 2) fly—or how we might build upon our understandings of racial literacy; and 3) build—or how students and educators may continue to develop a culturally relevant pedagogy that engages a diverse and developing notion of spiritual literacy.

### SHINE: Hip-Hop Literacies

When working with HHBE, there are expansive possibilities. Research thus far has shown us that through HHBE, young people are able to move beyond basic literacy practices, of reading and writing texts, and are encouraged to read and write the world.<sup>44</sup> Elaine Richardson (2006) describes hip-hop literacies as part of a lineage of African American language practices

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Steven Netcoh, “Droppin’ Knowledge on Race: Hip-Hop, White Adolescents, and Anti-Racism Education,” *Radical Teacher* 97 (2013): 10–19, doi:10.5195/rt.2013.39.

<sup>41</sup> Nadjwa E. L. Norton, “Young Children Manifest Spiritualities in Their Hip-Hop Writing,” *Education and Urban Society* 46, no. 3 (2014): 329–51, doi:10.1177/0013124512446216.

<sup>42</sup> Emery Petchauer, “Framing and Reviewing Hip-Hop Educational Research,” *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 2 (2009): 946–78, doi:10.3102/0034654308330967.

<sup>43</sup> New London Group, “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures,” *Harvard Educational Review* 66, no. 1 (1996).

<sup>44</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.



that honor the complex notions of the knowledge-making system prevalent in the “hip-hop generation.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, researchers have explored the use of spoken word poetry in school environments as a powerful practice to challenge dominant social structures within classroom settings.<sup>46</sup> When thinking about how hip-hop literacies can work within notions of race and spirituality, it’s clear that this perspective can offer a new way of looking at education overall. Marc Bamuthi Joseph describes hip hop and spoken word as spaces that center “the living word” in contrast to the “dead scrolls” that have dominated academia for decades.<sup>47</sup> With this emphasis on life, in relationship to death or dry/dying school communities, students and practitioners have ample opportunity to find valuable ways to engage such practices and important topics.

### FLY: Racial Literacy

Racial literacy, as explained by legal scholar Lani Gunier, “requires us to rethink race as an instrument of social, geographic, and economic control of both whites and blacks. Racial literacy offers a more dynamic framework for understanding American racism.”<sup>48</sup> She calls for treating not just the “symptoms” of racism, but the disease as a whole, and that will take a different set of understandings than previously thought.<sup>49</sup> Racial literacy allows a better grasp of the context of the world we live in and comparing racial liberalism to racial literacy, Gunier states, “It is about learning rather than knowing.”<sup>50</sup> This aligns with HHBE’s tendency to always keep moving.

Working with something like HHBE, which is inherently racialized as an African American art form that is utilized by people of all races, we see a clear need for practitioners and students alike (especially white teachers who teach students of color) to engage, as Tinson says, with the “histories, practices, and beliefs that emanate from and are germane to Africana and Latin@ communities today, including their discomfort with ‘experts’ of the culture and encounters that define their daily life experiences.”<sup>51</sup> This often challenging engagement, while working from a lens of racial literacy, can be productive. Sealy-Ruiz tells educators that intentionally teaching about the concepts of race “provides personal and professional fulfillment and insight into the ways in which students struggle to discuss critical issues that affect their lives.”<sup>52</sup>

### BUILD: Spiritual Literacies

With HHBE, we see that young people are engaging with notions of spirituality in more critical and conceptual ways. Norton states, “Although all children will not self-identify as

---

<sup>45</sup> Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*.

<sup>46</sup> Maisha T. Fisher, “From the Coffee House to the School House: The Promise and Potential of Spoken Word Poetry in School Contexts,” *English Education* 37, no. 2 (2005): 115-31.

<sup>47</sup> Marc Bamuthi Joseph, “(Yet Another) Letter to a Young Poet,” in Jeff Chang, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2006), 11-17.

<sup>48</sup> Lani Gunier, “From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (June 2004): 114.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>51</sup> Tinson and McBride, “Hip Hop, Critical Pedagogy, and Radical Education in a Time of Crisis,” 4.

<sup>52</sup> Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, “Learning to Talk and Write about Race: Developing Racial Literacy in a College English Classroom,” *English Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 24-42.

spiritual beings, a significant number do.”<sup>53</sup> Educators from all walks of life are encouraged to begin thinking about what this means for them in their practice, especially because understanding and engaging with the spiritual lives of young people “has the potential to counter many of the inequities within our society and educational system.”<sup>54</sup>

Spiritual literacy is the least understood and explored of the three frameworks discussed. The term was first used in the book *Spiritual Literacy* and is defined as “the ability to read the signs written in the texts of our own experiences. Whether viewed as a gift from God or a skill to be cultivated, this facility enables us to discern and decipher a world full of meaning.”<sup>55</sup> Further, only a few scholarly articles related to educational practices have used the term, none of which were set explicitly in the field of education or literacy studies.

Only once we begin to understand these three elements (of HHBE, race, and spirituality) individually can we begin to understand how they intersect or build a theory for what a Hip Hop Racial Spiritual Literacy could look like . . . or maybe these elements can always be static, shifting, and overlapping and one such synthesizing lens need not be created. In any case, scholarship thus far has made the case that our students’ spiritual, racialized selves must be engaged if we are to have healthy, productive classrooms moving forward, and hip hop based education offers a worldview that can help support the development of classrooms/cyphers from all parts of the country.

Now, let’s take a minute to think about how we could connect these understandings to a specific educational experience. I must mention again that the field of HHBE is extremely diverse and takes place in multiple types of community spaces and classrooms of all disciplines, so I want to be clear that there might not be such a thing as a representative lesson or experience. In efforts to illuminate what we might call racial and spiritual literacy practices through an HHBE lesson, I will offer a recent experience I had while teaching about hip hop and spoken word to adult educators at an arts center in the state of Hawai’i.

The setting of this lesson was an arts center that aimed to begin incorporating specifically spoken word in their cross-disciplinary arts programming that was led by a group of adult educators. A majority of the participants were not born or raised in Hawai’i although many had been there for over a decade. The lesson was grounded in the pedagogical orientation of understanding self and community or the interrogating of one’s “Life as Primary Text”<sup>56</sup> in relationship to all other texts, legacies, people, environments, or experiences. The lesson incorporated the following:

- 1) *general introductions* of participants that included naming the intentions they had for the workshop;

---

<sup>53</sup> Norton, “Young Children Manifest Spiritualities in Their Hip-Hop Writing,” 346.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 347.

<sup>55</sup> Frederic Brussat and Mary Ann Brussat, *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 16.

<sup>56</sup> Vajra M. Watson, “Life as Primary Text: English Classrooms as Sites for Soulful Learning,” *JAEPL* 22 (Winter 2016–2017), 6–18.

- 2) *a brief overview of the histories and traditions* that led to contemporary spoken word poetry and hip hop as it is understood in the United States;<sup>57</sup>
- 3) *the creation of a collective wordbank* intended to stimulate acknowledgement of where participants come from and the land they currently inhabit;<sup>58</sup>
- 4) *the introduction of an exemplar text*, which was a video of the youth spoken-word team of Hawai'i performing a poem in part Hawaiian and part English concerning how people honor indigenous cultures on colonized land;
- 5) *unpacking of the exemplar text* inspired by the Perpich Center for Arts Education's Critical Response Protocol;
- 6) *the creation of a new text written by the participants* that included words and phrases from the previous exercises with the prompt: I am . . . We are . . . ;
- 7) *sharing* the new creation with the group; and
- 8) *creative debrief*, or opportunity for participants to share thoughts, questions, or words that exemplified their experiences within the lesson.

After this workshop, participants were then asked to submit their top lines to be shared publicly through the program's website.

Throughout the experience of this lesson, there were implicit and explicit ways participants acknowledged race and spirituality. Because these two ideas are fluid and often intersect with other concepts, we see these themes arising in conjunction with multiple experiences. It is interesting to note that notions of race arose mostly in explicit conversation and unpacking of texts, while spirituality arose more implicitly through the language that participants chose to use in their writing.

First, a conversation around race indirectly emerged during the unpacking of the text, mostly around understanding language. As mentioned, a portion of the text was spoken in Hawaiian, and some in the group understood and shared what they understood as the translated content of the piece, connecting to the same themes around acknowledging indigenous land and shared histories of colonization. Discussing language and land gave rise to a more explicit conversation about who is responsible for colonization and its effects. A debate among a few members of the group began as they discussed their own understandings of white-skin privilege and how as white people they can address racism in broader society. One white participant talked about her emotions not only around addressing the colonization of Hawai'i through utilizing art pieces that speak to the history of the struggle for Hawaiian sovereignty, but also

---

<sup>57</sup> Joseph, “(Yet Another) Letter to a Young Poet.”

<sup>58</sup> Participants called out words they related to the following prompts: “Who is your community?” “What are locations of your community?” “What are locations around you?” “Things overheard in your community” and “Colors of the ocean.”

around building partnerships with native Hawaiians who are most affected and bringing them into their classes and workshops. Further, another participant, in her written piece, wrote “We are returning to learning.” While it is likely there are many possibilities for what this student was referring to, I am reminded of Gunier’s reference to racial literacy as being “about learning rather than knowing.”<sup>59</sup>

Understandings of spirituality arose more implicitly, specifically through participants’ written responses, often as they referred to their own understandings of themselves as being a part of nature or universal experiences and also the ideal of forward movement. One participant said “I am light in the early morning. . . . We are trying.” Participants also spoke to the collective nature of their experiences with one another, or how they viewed the experience of being together as one that was valuable or “a blessing.” One participant shared with this group: “We are blessed to share with others.” Finally, participants also expressed the idea of understanding life as not being permanent, or how they must humble themselves as artists/educators for, as one participant closed the experience with, “We are passing thru.”

In all, this particular lesson highlights a sliver of how we might begin to understand these notions of race and spirituality within an HHBE context. Because of the dual understandings of explicit and implicit practices related to these notions, it is difficult to grasp succinctly how HHBE might function more broadly as a tool for spiritual and racial development, however this study has shown us that it is a worthy study to engage in, and more research and pedagogical inquiry would be valuable.

With that being said, I have only dipped my toe into the vast ocean of scholarship and understandings related to this work. I am comforted knowing that even though my immature teenage self was unaware of the multiple intersections of educational possibilities in which I was engaging, it was a journey on this step I am called to be on; and that today there is very likely something equivalent to a quote by Paulo Friere that I don’t understand and it won’t be another decade until I am able to flesh out what it means. But I know it’s okay, because not only will I continue to participate with my community, but I’ll embrace those challenges and possible misunderstandings and will always keep it moving.

With that, I close by offering this quote, by Thomas Merton: “You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them.”

---

<sup>59</sup> Gunier, “From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy,” 115.

## References

- Blackman, Toni. *Wisdom of the Cypher*. (Forthcoming).
- Brussat, Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat. *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.
- Chang, Jeff. *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2006.
- Chang, Jeff. *We Gon be Alright: Notes on Race and Resegregation*. New York: Picador, 2016.
- Dillard, Cynthia B., and Chinwe L. Ezueh Okpalaoka. *Engaging Culture, Race and Spirituality: New Visions*. New York: Peter Lang, 2013.
- Durham, Aisha. “\_\_\_\_\_ While Black: Millennial Race Play and the Post-Hip-Hop Generation.” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 15, no. 4 (2015): 253-59. doi:10.1177/1532708615578414.
- Duncan-Andrade, Jeffrey M. R., and Ernest Morrell. *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008.
- Emdin, Christopher. *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood ... and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2016.
- Fisher, Maisha T. “From the Coffee House to the School House: The Promise and Potential of Spoken Word Poetry in School Contexts.” *English Education* 37, no. 2 (2005): 115–31.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 2000.
- Fowler, James W., Karl Ernst Nipkow, and Friedrich Schweitzer. *Stages of Faith and Religious Development: Implications for Church, Education and Society*. London: SCM Press, 1992.
- Gunier, Lani. “From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma.” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (2004): 92–118.
- Hill, Marc Lamont and Emery Petchauer, eds. *Schooling Hip-Hop: Expanding Hip-Hop Based Education Across the Curriculum*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2013.
- Kitwana, Bakari. *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.
- Kuile, Casper ter, and Angie Thurston. *How We Gather*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Divinity School, 2015.
- Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Lauricella, Sharon. “Performing Spirituality: Lil Wayne’s Letters from a New York Jail.” In *Urban God Talk: Constructing a Hip Hop Spirituality*, edited by Andre E. Johnson, 95–114. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013.

- Love, Bettina L. "What Is Hip-Hop-Based Education Doing in *Nice* Fields Such as Early Childhood and Elementary Education?" *Urban Education* 50, no. 1 (2015): 106–131. doi:10.1177/0042085914563182.
- Miller, Lisa. *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*. New York: Picador/St. Martin's Press, 2016.
- Netcoh, Steven. "Droppin' Knowledge on Race: Hip-Hop, White Adolescents, and Anti-Racism Education." *Radical Teacher* 97 (2013): 10–19. doi:10.5195/rt.2013.39.
- New London Group. "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." *Harvard Educational Review* 66, no. 1 (1996).
- Norton, Nadjwa E. L. "Young Children Manifest Spiritualities in Their Hip-Hop Writing." *Education and Urban Society* 46, no. 3 (2014): 329–51. doi:10.1177/0013124512446216.
- Perry, Imani. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Petchauer, Emery. "Framing and Reviewing Hip-Hop Educational Research." *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 2 (2009): 946–78. doi:10.3102/0034654308330967.
- Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. "Choosing a New Church or House of Worship," Aug. 23, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/08/23/choosing-a-new-church-or-house-of-worship/>.
- Radford, Mike. "Spirituality and Education; Inner and Outer Realities." *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 11, no. 3 (2006): 385–96. doi:10.1080/13644360601014130.
- Sealey-Ruiz, Yolanda. "Learning to Talk and Write about Race: Developing Racial Literacy in a College English Classroom." *English Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2011): 24–42.
- Seidel, Samuel Steinberg. *Hip Hop Genius: Remixing High School Education*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2011.
- Smith, Danez. undated. "principles." [www.danezsmithpoet.com/a-poem-principles/](http://www.danezsmithpoet.com/a-poem-principles/), accessed Oct. 24, 2017.
- Tinson, Christopher M., and Carlos Rec McBride. "Hip Hop, Critical Pedagogy, and Radical Education in a Time of Crisis." *Radical Teacher* 97 (2013): 1–9. doi:10.5195/rt.2013.43.
- Tochluk, Shelly. *Living in the Tension: The Quest for a Spiritualized Racial Justice*. Roselle, NJ: Crandall, Dostie & Douglass Books, 2016.
- Watson, Vajra M. "Life as Primary Text: English Classrooms as Sites for Soulful Learning." *JAEPL* 22, (Winter 2016–2017), 6–18.
- Wilson, J. A. *Outkast'd and Claimin' True: The Language of Schooling and Education in the Southern Hip-Hop Community of Practice* (unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Georgia, Athens., 2007.
- Wuthnow, Robert. *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

*“Lords Above Us and Within Us: Exploring Race, Spirituality, and Hip Hop Based Education”*

*Moira Pirsch is a poet, educator, and organizer from the Midwest and has studied the power of spoken word and hip hop education for over a decade. She is a PhD student in the English Education Department at Teachers College and a Research Fellow at the Institute for Urban and Minority Education (IUME). Since earning her Masters in Arts in Education from Harvard University, she has played a leadership role in large arts-based events, including Harvard’s Arts First Festival and the Brave New Voices Festival hosted by Youth Speaks. She has been awarded the Dean’s Fellowship for Teaching and Diversity and the Provost’s Grant for Professional Development where she is focusing on the potential of spoken word and hip hop to transform, uplift, and empower communities.*

The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles published by the *Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS)* are the authors’ own and do not reflect or represent those of the *JIRS* staff, the *JIRS* Board of Advisors, the *JIRS* Board of Reviewers, Boston University, or Hebrew College.