Elevate And Find: Developing Young Hip Hop Feminists Through Critical Art Education And Activism

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Abstract: This paper will critically review civic engagement literature to reveal a gap indicating a need for social science research on how the arts contribute to developing critical, civic-minded, activist youth. This paper is predominantly concerned with young women of color in the United States and how they seek to utilize Hip Hop feminism in their civic artist-activist expressions and community mobilization efforts. While there are some programs utilizing the arts in order to increase youth activism and civic participation, currently there is a dearth of literature indicating how critical arts education curricula can scaffold youth civic development. This paper will examine two case studies exemplifying young women of color utilizing the arts, particularly Hip Hop, for activism. Many of the young artist-activist women do not realize the traditions they are building upon. Therefore, young women might benefit from the exploration of theories, traditions and methods utilized in historic or parallel artist-activist movements in order to substantiate youth positionality and to encourage development of youth artist-activist agendas. With this, potential literature will be presented to support and scaffold critical arts education curricula in order to provide a historical basis and an endpoint to such burgeoning youth artist-activist agendas.
Traditional modes of civic action are increasingly outdated and under-representative of the range of historical civic actions and behaviors utilized by groups who have been positioned as marginalized, oppressed, and disadvantaged (Levinson, 2010). Youth civic engagement takes many forms, traditional and non-traditional, from learning civic knowledge and preparation for activities like voting, mobilizing for protest, or performing critically conscious Hip Hop pieces (Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2003). Researchers are currently working to explore how youth activities (artistic, extracurricular, religious, sport and education) might impact youth civic and political participation and identity development (Ginwright & James, 2002; Jensen, 2010; Junn & Masuoka, 2008; Seif, 2010; Stepick & Stepick, 2002). Non-traditional activities include the use of social media, artistic production and expression, such as Hip Hop (music, videos, poetry slams, and graffiti), all of which youth engage to comment on power structures and civic institutions (Levinson, 2010).

Within the context of youth political and civic development, it is important to recognize the importance of culture and history on political socialization and identity development vis-à-vis context and development of personhood. Virginia Sapiro (2004) recognizes that children are not only capable of holding dialectical conversations with their parents about politics, but children are making highly political decisions daily in their choices of whom to play with (or exclude) based on socially situated social identity categories of race and gender based on their context, their own identity; and are in turn influencing and being influenced by social discourse. It is from their intersectional positions that youth begin to develop identities "not as purely essentialist properties of a static self, but rather as multifaceted and dynamic as people position themselves and are positioned in relation to social practices” (Rubin, 2007). This dynamic understanding of self, therefore, influences group membership, political positionality, and the stances youth choose to take (Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2003; Sapiro, 2004; Stetsenko, 2012).

Civic activities that engage youth in community matters salient to their personal identities allow them to develop a participatory stance towards social and political issues. Youth are transforming active practices through cultural tools for developing a civic voice in order to position themselves as knowledge producers. As a more horizontal method of civic production, the arts and social media allow youth to manifest a transformative activist orientation (Stetsenko, 2012) towards knowledge appropriation and production, through which youth define themselves and are defined by these egalitarian practices.

The purpose of this paper is to critically review civic engagement literature to reveal a gap indicating a need for more attention to how the arts contribute to developing critical, civic-minded, activist youth. This essay is particularly concerned with young women of color in the United States and how they seek to utilize Hip Hop feminism in their civic artist-activist expressions and community mobilization efforts. Currently there is no standard curriculum model indicating how we can scaffold youth civic development through the arts, and yet some community youth programs use urban arts to increase youth activism and civic participation. Two case studies exemplifying young women of color utilizing the arts, particularly Hip Hop for activism, will be presented herein. The case studies will also explicate a disconnect with previous generations leaving many of the young women uninformed of traditions they are building upon. Perhaps young women might benefit from learning about theories, traditions, and methods utilized in previous and parallel artist-activist movements. In turn, this realization may provide impetus for further activism, inspire artistic civic youth curricula development, sanctify the youth mission in terms of their older generations, or provide the youth with a greater sense of confidence in their activist agendas. Areas of study with associated literature will be suggested to support and scaffold critical arts education curriculum design and development.
Using Hip Hop in Civic Development to Bridge the Gap

Youth use Hip Hop as a vehicle to develop and narrate their experiences through a multicultural medium and multimodal discourse; however, research on youth using Hip Hop in their civic life and political development is underexplored (Seif, 2010). Creative approaches for youth organizing, some of which use Hip Hop as a tool for engagement, are particularly promising strategies of mobilization (Kirshner, 2009). Hip Hop provides the affordance of ‘power in numbers’ indicated through youth participation in an organization called Youth Rising (Kirshner, 2009). In an activity at Youth Rising, youth utilized Hip Hop to finish “I can” statements, taken from Nas’s “I Can” rap, in order to articulate their experiences, hopes, and civic critiques (Kirshner, 2009). Flores-Gonzalez, Rodriguez, & Rodriguez-Muniz (2006) also vividly describe how Hip Hop, as youth culture, is utilized in Chicago at Batey Urbano to resist and challenge unjust practices.

Youth utilize the arts towards transformative ends in order to foster their own identity development, through a process of contestation and envisioning new values (Daiute, 2006; 2011; Porfilio & Gorlewski, 2012). Hip Hop is considered a powerful medium with which to resist, critique, and produce discourses that counter the mainstream discourses, in addition to negotiating individual values and macro value-systems (Daiute, 2006; Porfilio & Carr, 2010). In addition to its unique positioning as a counterforce to mainstream discourse, Hip Hop is an expressive tool supportive of and congruent with intersectional youth social identities (Roychoudhury & Gardner, 2013). Critical pedagogists and critical educators have been studying and theorizing Hip Hop education based on critical consciousness frameworks indicating that Hip Hop arts and culture can provide enrichment around critical literacy (Porfilio & Carr, 2010; Porfilio & Gorlewski, 2012). These alternative frameworks and curriculum are building on tools youth develop to provide spaces within schools for contestation, self-reflection, imagination, and critical thought about social justice (Love, 2014).

Researchers of youth civic engagement are currently asking if the arts may be a site for youth civic engagement (Levinson, 2010; Seif, 2010). Schools must offer creative sites (i.e. the arts, music, Hip Hop culture and social networking) where youth can engage in traditional and nontraditional forms of civic engagement (Levinson, 2010). Some scholars propose looking at youth’s civic education, extracurricular activities in religious groups, sports and the arts to inform youth development curricula and organizing efforts (Seif, 2010). Many youth arts programs are shutting down, and yet youth engage arts to create and envision the world they hope to see (Kahne, Nagaoka, Brown, O’Brien, Quinn & Thiede, 2001). Hip Hop education curricula transforms the classroom experience for many youth, while Hip Hop expressive arts provide a critically-conscious civic mindedness and radical outlet for creativity and activism (Ginwright, 2004; Seif, 2010). Hip Hop catalyzes civic engagement at various levels and on many fronts:

At the self-awareness level, young people use hip-hop culture to express pain, anger, and the frustration of oppression through rap, song, poetry or spoken word. At the level of social awareness, they use hip-hop culture to organize, inform, and politicize at the community level. […] At the global awareness level, hip-hop culture carries some possibility to unite youth through common experiences of suffering and common struggles of resistance (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002).

An integral next step in studying youth civic engagement is to explore how youth utilize urban arts, particularly Hip Hop, to see how Hip Hop influences and develops civic engagement, youth organizing, civic behaviors and activism (Seif, 2010). The next section will present two case studies in which American youth exemplify Hip Hop feminist activism in community organizations.

Youth Hip Hop Feminist Activism in Community Organizations: Presenting Two Case Studies

Youth Hip Hop Dance Activism

In a large northeastern non-profit organization in the United States, youth are utilizing Hip Hop dance as a means to express their activist stance and desire to call for an end to domestic violence. The youth have called attention to the issue of domestic violence...
within their organization and have expressed to their adult counterparts that they want to mobilize and strike in a creative way. The youth not only want to speak out against domestic violence, but they hope their Hip Hop dance piece will articulate the complexity of the lives of people who experience domestic violence. The youth dancers also intend this performance to represent a unified and mobilized front against domestic violence; a force calling for justice, respect, and nonviolence for women, domestic partners, intimate partners, and children who have suffered injury and trauma associated with domestic violence or who are currently negotiating the realities of domestic violence within their homes.

As part of their mobilization plan, the youth dancer-organizers are engaging social media including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to advertise their creative dance protest event, their organization, their unification, and to mobilize and bring together adults and other youth, not only to raise awareness, but to engage with community stakeholders in order to build coalitions (with social service providers, hospitals, women and children’s rights organizations) in an effort to protect people currently experiencing abuse and to educate the greater community about the realities and painful experiences of domestic violence. Their hope is that their emotionally charged Hip Hop dance piece will strike a chord with people, including those who perpetuate the violence, and break the cycle. This case example demonstrates one of the few examples of how youth are utilizing a highly emotionally expressive art, Hip Hop dance, as a radical and transformative means to articulate their positionality, and unification through political assembly and creative mobilization.

Critically Conscious Hip Hop Dance Curricula

The second case study is derived from first-hand experiences with youth in a large non-profit organization’s after-school dance program in Harlem, New York. The author designed a critical Hip Hop dance curriculum with the following course description:

Jazz (Street Jazz, Lyrical Jazz, and New Jack Swing Dance technique) and Hip Hop (choreography and uprocking) are combined with traditional Jazz (1920's-1930's) capturing the arts and culture of the Harlem Renaissance.

Students learn dance as a social, cultural, historical form of discourse to build on core competencies in language and expression. Students develop enhanced communications skills through an understanding of dialectics. In both sections of the course dance is being utilized to build on core competencies in language and expression (through body language, and matching movement to music lyrics). Dance for civic engagement, community mobilization, social change, social justice and spirituality are explored utilizing a cultural historical approach and a Freirean framework of critical and creative consciousness. All students begin to engage briefly with dance research on various levels, as they are instructed to prepare a few homework assignments, class presentations/demonstrations, and one final individual and group project to submit in addition to their performance in the end of semester production (Gardner, 2012).

The dance program utilizes Hip Hop dance research in order to build writing skills, develop a verbal artistic voice, and cultivate critical consciousness. It is through this curriculum that dancers have begun working on critical research essays and projects, in addition to making decisions to create their own dance pieces calling to end domestic violence and to articulate a Hip Hop feminism through dance to unite women. One young woman in High school has investigated the affordances of tutting in a particular Hip Hop dance crew. She is utilizing YouTube to capture her data and analyze the use of tutting in pieces in connection with message boards on YouTube. Her thesis is that a particular Hip Hop dance crew utilizes tutting in order to represent and embody collectiveness and solidarity. She expands on these ideas by indicating that there are additional layers of meaning as the dancers choose to utilize tutting only at certain points in one particular piece. These moments of tutting are what she believes illustrates communal transcendence. Through her utilization of social media, she was able to collect her data from video and message boards, and analyze the data by explicating it and watching the video multiple times.
Hip Hop critical consciousness-raising through Hip Hop dance research has developed future choreographic projects for other young women in the program. Two groups of young women are seeking to articulate their stance on significant women’s issues. One group of young ladies is choreographing their own piece seeking to call attention to domestic violence, child abuse, and intimate partner violence through dance. Another group of young ladies are working to develop a piece articulating a Hip Hop feminism in which they can comfortably express themselves, their perspectives and concerns, while simultaneously calling for women to unite and mobilize at both their micro level and at the macro level. Integral to creating and teaching the critical Street Jazz and Hip Hop dance education curricula presented herein was the necessity to pay homage to previous artist-activists and subsequent social movements influencing Hip Hop activism by implementing these historical movements into the curriculum with the intention of scaffolding civic development and activism. Critical arts educational curricula should elucidate artist-activist forefathers and mothers, their stances, their work, and their activist agendas in order to build upon the work youth are already doing in youth organizing and community organizations, and to inspire and bolster youth consciousness, confidence and mobilization efforts. Much of the literature utilized to teach the critical dance course presented herein (Gardner, 2012) has been included and discussed in the next sections titled the Hip Hop Artist-Activist Inheritance and Revisiting Historical and Parallel Artist-Activist Movements.

The Hip Hop Artist-Activist Inheritance

Hip Hop artists, scholars, and activists have inherited a great wealth of experience from their artist-activist forefathers and mothers, some of which include: Katherine Dunham, Mabel Hampton, Amiri Baraka, Sylvia Pankurst, Kenneth B. Clark, Okello Kelo Sam, and Ai Weiwei (Stephens & Phillips, 2005; Rabaka, 2011). Many Hip Hop educators are answering Laura Shapiro’s call for teaching artists to become education activists (Shapiro, 2005). Not only do Hip Hop artist-activists build upon a great history and tradition of global artist-activists, but Hip Hop artist-activists are being recognized by the National Conference of Artists New York and Medgar Evers College in a recent exhibition, “Black Artist as Activist“ (CUNYNewswire, 2010).

Hip Hop has inherited history and culture from the Harlem Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement up to (the current historical moment consisting of) global Hip Hop feminisms (Rabaka, 2011). Hip Hop did not invent anything; Hip Hop reinvented everything (Ice-T & Baybutt, 2012). Building upon their inheritance, Hip Hoppers have created a system of Hip Hop praxis, which youth actively contribute to in order to express themselves, negotiate their identities, preserve Hip Hop culture and develop themselves and Hip Hop cultural practice, reinvent themselves, and envision the future. It is through Hip Hop’s commitment to conceptualizing the good life, and seeking social transformation that Hip Hoppers struggle for liberation, taking an activist stance towards envisioning the future and realizing social justice. It is through the dynamic and cyclical interplay between theory, cultural production and practice that Hip Hop culture, its practices, and members of Hip Hop culture develop. Therefore, the reflective attending dimension of art cannot be cut off from the productive dimension (Greene, 1998).

From Afrika Mambaataa’s utilization of Hip Hop dance as an intervention to protect and promote peace in place of gang violence (Chang, 2005), to Lupe Fiasco’s critique of capitalist agendas in “Around My Way (Freedom Aint Free)” and his articulation of a Black male feminism in “B*tch Bad” promoting Hip Hop critical consciousness raising; Hip Hop artist-activists build upon historical and parallel movements in order to resist, but also to transform society through critique and imagination with an unwavering commitment to action, social justice and liberation. Hip Hop artist-activists are simultaneously challenging the status quo, building coalitions, resisting, taking a stand for personhood and justice, and positing the future, while producing critical and self-reflexive art capturing the beautiful complexity that is our lived experience, with which we mobilize and serve as ambassadors, philosophers, and leaders in envisioning a liberatory good life. But, Hip Hop artist-activists are not merely exemplifying a resistance, self-esteem, self-identification through self-awareness; Hip Hop artist-activists are identifying themselves with the process of becoming artists (Greene, 1998; Stetsenko, 2012).
Revisiting Historical and Parallel Artist-Activist Movements

Feminist Street Theatre in Bombay

Activists in two diverse and distinctive urban contexts will be discussed as some of their methods and circumstances may be helpful to include in critical arts education curricula. Feminist Activist-Artists in India built upon traditions of creative resistance from World War II, at which point the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) was born and performance served as a dominant method of protest against British colonial rule wherein actors performed the famine and how to organize against it. (Garlough, 2008).

Contemporary grassroots Indian feminist groups in Bombay employed street theater to create public forums on issues such as, but not limited to: rape, inheritance law, and the historic representation of women in traditional and popular media (Garlough, 2008).

Not only is street theatre a way to create a public forum, but the women who are able to persuasively articulate their message to various diverse audiences impact people across class and caste lines with performances promoting civic engagement and demonstrating critical discourse (Garlough, 2008).

Blues and Jazz Women, Black Feminist Epistemology & Hip Hop Feminism

“With music by our side to break the color lines,” Janet Jackson alludes to the Communist Manifesto and tenets of Black feminist epistemology in “Rhythm Nation:”.

Musical forms have a central role in African American culture as a major source of socialization, social change, political thought, and expression of a desire, religious belief, and love (Morgan, 2005). The music, history, and memories of past generations are the seeds of the Hip Hop generation, and the women prepare to both run with them and use them to incinerate race and gender stereotypes (Phillips, Reddick-Morgan & Stephens, 2005; Morgan, 2005). Women have a strong presence in all aspects of Hip Hop culture from music production to graffiti, rapping, breakdancing, activism, and the use of Hip Hop culture to promote social justice and educational reforms (Fitts, 2008). Similar to Hip Hop’s inheritance, Hip Hop performers took their cues from the Blues and Jazz women who preceded them; with Blues women, Ma Rainey, Dinah Washington and Bessie Smith exemplifying living proof that “bad luck and trouble” could be survived (Morgan, 2005). Angela Davis describes that their [the Blues womens’] “aesthetic representations of the politics of gender and sexuality are informed by and interwoven with their representations of race and class makes their work all the more provocative” (Morgan, 2005). Similar to the standpoint of many Blues women, many Hip Hop artist-feminists rap about female sexual and social empowerment, agency, respect, and celebration of the female body through a loving and healthy sexual relationship (Tillet, 2014).
women; 2) Black male leaders often consider it inappropriate for Black women to play leadership roles in fighting for Black freedom and justice; and 3) that mainstream Feminism from suffragists to pro-choice advocates define feminism by excluding the needs of Black women and poor women (Tillet, 2014). However, like female emcees who do not restrict their sexist critique to the Hip Hop community, but speak to larger institutional systems of racial and gender oppression by acknowledging the complex societal forces of oppression; Black feminists and womanists love women and enjoy spending time with women, but also assuredly seek to support, stand with, and love Black men (Fitts, 2008; Morgan, 2005). Morgan (2005) identifies two themes throughout African American women’s discourse: one associated with representing both individual and group identity, and the second representing racial, gender, and class injustices; Morgan professes that any critique of gender hegemony is also a critique of race.

Third Wave Feminisms

Some scholars would validate three waves of Black Feminist epistemology, marking the first wave as women’s suffrage in the nineteenth century inspired by the abolitionist movement, and the second being the modern women’s movement beginning in the 1960s catalyzed by the Civil Rights Movement. The third wave can be described as Hip Hop feminism by some, while others refer less explicitly to a younger generation of women in the 1990s influenced by foremothers but defining feminism differently and respectfully rejecting aspects they find limiting (Guy-Sheftall, 2002). Morgan’s iteration of the Third Wave examines the complexity of women’s investment in sexism and their purveyance of sexism on themselves and other women through enjoyment of chivalrous privileges (Guy-Sheftall, 2002). Rebecca Walker is the cofounder of the Third Wave Foundation, a national, multiracial and multicultural organization devoted to young women’s leadership and activism (Guy-Sheftall, 2002).

The Influence Of Intersectionality Theory On Hip Hop Feminisms

Growing out of Black Feminist epistemology and influencing Hip Hop Feminisms, Patricia Hill-Collins expanded Kimberle Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality; a systematic methodology for studying the relationships between multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations, including combinations of race, gender, class, sexual identity, ability, which interact simultaneously and contribute to social inequalities (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). The theory reveals that racism, sexism and homophobia do not act independently of one another, but instead represent intersections of multiple forms of discrimination (Collins, 2000; Knudsen, 2007). When individuals and communities are identified as different from the mythical norm – societal schema of an average white male—they gain a status of “other” (Collins, 2000; Lorde & Rich, 1981). Group self-awareness and multifaceted identification of self preserves self-esteem and serves as a protective tool from dehumanizing outside influences. Therefore, it is through self-definition and self-evaluation that we may resist (Collins, 2000). It is with this comprehensive, multifaceted and diverse approach that Hip Hop artist-activists take a stand through collective pursuits towards justice and liberation.

Future Directions

Multiple complex intersectional identities have emerged, including scholar-activist, psychologist-activist, dancer-scholar-activists, and artist-activist, which have influenced and served as the predecessors for Hip Hop artist-activists. It is through recognition and celebration of intersectional identities, as artist-activists, that Hip Hop Feminists may upend and resist the notion that complexity can only lead to social inequality. Perhaps developing Hip Hop feminists can bolster their artist-activist agendas through interactions with critical theory, literature and methods from the Feminists in Bombay using street theater, the Blues women, Black Feminists, and other Hip Hop artist-activists. These articulated areas of study suggest supportive content for curricula to scaffold critical arts education, civic education and artistic activism. Furthermore, such a realization of congruent urban Feminist frameworks may provide young women of color with impetus for further activism, sanctification of the youth mission in terms support from senior generations, a greater sense of confidence, and an unrelenting, unconquerable stance in their activist agendas.
Hip Hop artists both dance and protest as cultural participants and innovators; using skills and constantly embodying and reframing feminist identity (Morgan, 2005). Just as Hip Hop artist-activists utilize cultural tools, discourse, practices, and praxis, developing Hip Hop Feminists may engage with cultural tools and practice, in order to express dialectic complexities, celebrate histories, preserve and develop Hip Hop culture in order to build transformative theoretical frameworks, influence social policy, articulate their stance and envision the good life through creative protest. Hip Hop artist-activists prophetize our collective liberation through a cultural historical account of Hip Hop’s past, present and future.

References


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