

Rebel Music on the Black Atlantic: From Urban Literacies to Academic Transformations

Ernest Morrell, UCLA; morrell@gseis.ucla.edu



Statement of the Problem

- Academic failure in literacy classrooms
 - Social, economic, and civic consequences
- Lack of attention paid to urban literacies
- Over-emphasis on functional literacy rather than critical literacy
- Colonialist, racist, and culturally oppressive curricula and pedagogies
- Lack of regional/Diaspora approach to critical literacy education

Research Questions

- How do hip-hop and reggae function as rebel musics?
- What are the empowering youth literacies associated with the consumption, production, and distribution of hip-hop and reggae music?
- What are the core principals and practices of a critical hip-hop/reggae pedagogy across disciplines and age-spans?

Theoretical Foundations: The Black Atlantic

- There is a need for postcolonial scholarship that no longer privileges the Nation-state as the primary marker of identification. Anderson (1991) for example, defines the nation as an “imagined community” born with the demise of feudalism and the rise of capitalism. Anderson further argues that the nation was created to serve bourgeois interest.
- Gilroy (1993) argues that the nation is too often considered as the privileged site of material production, political domination and rebellion. Gilroy, instead, identifies a shared culture of blackness, a trans-cultural, international formation that he identifies as the “Black Atlantic.”

Theoretical Foundations:

Critical/De-colonial Pedagogy

and Neo-Vygotskian Cultural Psychology

Critical/De-colonial Pedagogy

- Dominant education and dominant institutions as colonizing forces (Fanon, 1963; Woodson, 1933)
- Education as humanizing and as developing critical consciousness among “oppressed” populations (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2003)

Neo-Vygotskian Research

- Using ethnographic research to identify the Funds of Knowledge found in students homes and communities (Moll, 2000)
- Drawing upon language and literacy practices in non-school settings to scaffold academic literacies (Lee, 1995; Morrell, 2004)

Theoretical Foundations: Gramsci and Cultural Education

- Role of media in proliferating hegemony
 - Gramsci was interested in analyzing the agencies by which culture is shaped (i.e. media, literature, theatre, schools, politics) and to what extent culture could be guided by conscious political agency (Gramsci, 1985)
- Gramscian pedagogical project
 - To create citizens able to wrest the class privilege of culture away from ruling class by expanding and restructuring the educational system
 - To create citizens that are better critical consumers (of dominant culture) and producers (of proletarian culture) (Gramsci, 1919/1985)

Hip-Hop



Hip-Hop Culture

- Hip-hop is a world-wide phenomenon with extensive influence in the U.S. and the Caribbean
- Hip-hop is a collective consciousness. It is generally expressed through the unique elements of Breakin, Emceeing, Graffiti Art, Deejaying, Beatboxing, Street Fashion, Street Language, Street Knowledge, and Street Entrepreneurialism
(Hip-hop's nine elements).
- Hip-hop is practiced as an alternative behavior capable of transforming subjects and objects in an attempt to manifest a collective consciousness. Hip-hop is a state of mind.
 - KRS One, Temple of Hip-hop
(www.templeofhiphop.org)

Critical Themes in Hip-hop

- The subconscious psychology that you use against me, If I lose control will send me to the penitentiary. Such as Alcatraz, or shot up like al Hajj Malik Shabazz. High class get bypassed while my ass gets harassed. And the fuzz treat bruh's like they manhood never was. And if you too powerful, you get bugged like Peter Tosh and Marley was. And my word does nothing against the feds, So my eyes stay red as I chase crazy bald heads, WORD UP.
 - Refugee Camp, "The Beast"
- Violence and Crime in Urban Ghettos
- Urban Poverty
- Black Power Movements
- Corruption and Greed in American Government
- Racism in American Society
- Connections with an African "motherland"
- Critical Consciousness
- Indoctrination via school and the media
- Youth Resistance

Reggae Music



Reggae Music and Culture

- Reggae music is a worldwide phenomenon with tremendous influence in the Caribbean and the United States
- Roots of Jamaica's modern music are in rebellion and independence (Bradley, 2002)
 - Born, in part out of a combination of the rising influence of the Rastafari religion, the economic and civil unrest in the post-independence period and the intense pride in separation from a colonial power (Britain)
- A (chronologically) postcolonial and (ideologically) anti-colonial musical form
- An explicitly pedagogical musical form.
- Roots reggae of the late 1960s and early 1970s explicitly spiritual and political (Bob Marley, Burning Spear, The Mighty Diamonds, Lee Perry); the 21st century has witnessed a return to roots reggae through contemporary artists such as Buju Banton, Capleton, Cocoa Tea, and Luciano

Critical Themes in Reggae Music

- The whole of the nation
Living in these tenements,
Crying and applying to
their council
For assistance every day
Now that their tribulation
so sad
Now that their
environment so bad
High rise concrete
No back yard for their
children to play
African children
I wonder do they know
where you're coming
from,
African children
In a concrete situation

- Aswad, "African-Children"

- **Black Holocaust**
- **Rastafarian Religion**
- **African Heritage**
- **Colonization/De-colonization of the Mind**
- **Emancipation**
- **Economic Injustice**
- **Revolution**
- **Black Heroes and Heroines**
- **African/Diaspora History and Culture**
- **Cultural Pride**
- **Urban Decay**

Musical Production as Literacy Practice

- “Reading” past and present musical genres (i.e. jazz, blues, soul, folk music, funk, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, ska, rock steady, etc.)
- Reading a variety of historical and contemporary texts in preparation for lyrics
 - Many allusions to classic and contemporary texts and historical events in musical lyrics
- Composing musical texts as writing process
 - Critically “reading” the world in search of ideas for texts
 - Brainstorming Ideas in Notebooks
 - “Composing” drafts as texts or freestyles
 - Workshopping (in the streets or in the studio)
 - Constant revision of texts
- Reading and writing associated with marketing and distribution of musical texts

Musical Consumption as Literacy Practice

- Reading Hip-hop and Reggae core texts (CDs, Music Videos, CD Jackets)
- Reading secondary material (magazines, books, web sites, etc.)
- Reading sources cited in hip-hop and reggae texts
 - African religions, African Diaspora history, current events, politics, activism, etc.
- Re-reading the world through the lens of critical hip-hop or reggae music

Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Popular Music with Urban Youth in the Americas

- Teaching popular music in English language, English literature, and social studies classes at primary and secondary levels
- Instituting media education and ethnic studies at primary and secondary levels
- Incorporating critical hip-hop and reggae pedagogy across humanities and social sciences at postsecondary level
 - Linguistics, Anthropology, Sociology, Education, English, Cultural Studies, Communication, Women's Studies, History, Philosophy, Political Science

Universal Critical Literacy: Adolescent and Adult Literacy Education

- UNESCO has declared 2003-2012 the decade of “literacy.”
- Functional literacy ≠ freedom
- Revolutionary literacies for academic advancement, professional membership, AND civic engagement
- Critical Literacy Education across the disciplines, across the lifespan, and across contexts
 - Cross-age
 - Cross-discipline
 - Transnational
 - In school (primary, secondary, and postsecondary) and non-school settings (homes, community centers, workplace, and independent media)