

The Pedagogy of Hip Hop in Teaching Missiology

Exploring a Project Based Learning Environment
using Elements of Hip Hop Culture as the Curriculum

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Abstract

There is no doubt of the influence Hip Hop has had on the pop-culture scene throughout the Western World. Moreover, with the emergence of the field of Hip Hop Studies and educators such as Christopher Emdin who use Hip Hop to teach science, math, and history, it stands to reason that Hip Hop is much more than just a musical genre. This paper explores the uses of Hip Hop pedagogy in the classroom to teach aspects of missiology (e.g. *missio Dei*, being sent forth). Using a project based learning pedagogical format in which lectures are limited, projects and class interaction is elevated, and the use of the four foundational elements to Hip Hop are utilized (Djing, dance, graffiti art, and MCing), I will demonstrate the power of Hip Hop culture in a learning environment to teach missiological concepts. Finally, I will argue that Hip Hop pedagogy is an effective learning tool to engage the emerging young adult population as it utilizes a multi-discipline approach and contains many aspects in it that are theological and missiological.

The Case for Hip Hop and Missions

With its ‘in your face’ mantra and passionate pleas for calls to justice, social consciousness, and spiritual reformation (Hodge 2010a, 2010b, One 2003, Outlawz 1999). Hip Hop has begun to show its multi- dimensional traits and many uses (Dhokai 2012, Norton 2014, Petchauer 2011b). There is no reservation that Hip Hop has provided a wealth of material in which to discuss, debate, and engage with. Hip Hop¹, being a culture, lifestyle, and way of life, is also widely misunderstood and often seen, in the Christian church, as secular, humanist, devoid of God, and profane (Hacker 1995, Hodge 2009, 2010b, Hopkins 2001, Reed 2003, Smith and Jackson 2005). As the scholarship of Hip Hop has grown exponentially over the last decade, very little research has been done on the missiological significance of Hip Hop and its wealth of theological messages. Further, the absence of Hip Hop’s uses in the classroom for Christian higher educational pedagogy is even more glaring. To give an example, the non-

Christian scholarly world has seen the effectiveness of Hip Hop's uses in the classroom and has begun to adopt various pedagogical strategies in order to embrace the fullness of Hip Hop.

Christopher Emdin, launched a nationwide sensation when he suggested that Hip Hop could be used to teach math and science (Emdin 2007a, 2007b 2008). Emdin suggested that Hip Hop was a multi-disciplinary tool and one that aided students in learning the components of math; he has been very successful and continues to develop this pedagogy (Emdin 2015b). Jason Irizarry has suggested that Hip Hop's music is one which can provide potential for teachers to be informed on how to actually teach. Irizarry suggests that teaching practices can actually be improved from learning the pedagogical frameworks within Hip Hop (2009: 496-498). Emery Petchauer has suggested to us that when students are 'deeply involved' with Hip Hop culture their learning environment and structure is improved and that students are able to apply their experiences with the critical discourses of Hip Hop (Petchauer 2011b). In the music field, Hip Hop, in the obvious sense, has been utilized to teach everything from theory, notation, chord progression, voice structure, and digital notation (Petchauer 2011a, 2011b, 2009, Hill 2009, Emdin 2008, Dhokai 2012). These are just a few of the uses of Hip Hop in the non-Christian setting.

Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra have suggested that part of missions is about "caring for human suffering" (2003: 39-40) and that working for peace is part of a biblical mandate (167-171). Edward Pentecost has reminded us that missionary theology includes philosophy, theology, anthropology, sociology, communications, world religions, church history, and psychology (1982: 14-18)—all of which are aspects of what Hip Hop culture does (Hodge 2013b, 2013a). Glenn Rogers has also argued that part of missiology's specialization is community response and development along with teaching while developing a theology of mission (2003: 77-98). These are all aspects and mantras of Hip Hop culture (Hodge - 2015 Forthcoming). Should they also not be included in the missiological field as examples of appropriate contextualization? Wilbert Shenk has argued for a contextual and more contemporary form of missions and missiological engagement with popular culture (1999). I would agree and add that Hip Hop culture – global in many ways – is a mission field and also one that is largely under-studied in the field of missiology.

Thus, where is the work in the Christian educational context? Where is the work which makes the case to better learn the Gospel using Hip Hop pedagogy? I argue that Hip Hop is, in fact, a strong pedagogical tool for teaching the concepts of missiology—the *missio Dei* and being sent forth. This essay will demonstrate the uses of a Hip Hop curriculum used in a classroom setting at North Park University in Chicago Illinois by using the foundational four elements of Hip Hop—Djing, MCing, Dance, and Graffiti Art. Using classwork as a form of measurement, I will demonstrate the increases in knowledge toward the *missio Dei* by using Hip Hop as a pedagogical tool. Lastly, I will suggest that Hip Hop pedagogy is an effective learning tool to engage the emerging young adult population as it utilizes a multi-discipline approach and contains many aspects in it that are theological and missiological.

Hip Hop Education Literature

While I realize many reading this essay are not familiar with the concepts, arguments, and field of Hip Hop Studies, the limits of this essay keep me from expanding on the historical dimensions of Hip Hop and to make the case for Hip Hop theology.² However, there is a growing body of scholarship that argues for this (George 1998, 2004, Guevara 1996, Miller 2013, Morgan 1999, Neal 2002, One 2003, One 2009, Pinn 2003, Reed 2003, Rose 1994, 2008, Southern 1983, Utley 2012, Watkins 2011, Watkins 2005, West 1993, Zanfagna 2006) and I will mainly focus here, on the literature surrounding Hip Hop pedagogy and education in the classroom.

As Emery Petchauer has reminded us, it is important for researchers to explore the content of Hip Hop's lyrics, but it is inaccurate to assume that listeners interpret, apply, and assign meaning the same way researchers do (2011b: 770). Therefore, it is imperative that Hip Hop be engaged by listeners, communities, and educators; that is, we must approach Hip Hop as both a learner and educator simultaneous as Niyati Dhokai has suggested (2012: 113-114). This maintains, then, that the educator must be willing to change and adapt to the various contexts that emerging adult college students bring to the classroom. Iwamoto, Creswell, and Caldwell (2007) explored what rap lyrics and their meanings meant to eight college students of different ethnicities. In their study, they found that students

responses varied and that Hip Hop and rap music were utilized for a varied use in the lives of students (Iwamoto, Creswell, and Caldwell 2007: 343-344). From this, the suggestion is that Hip Hop cannot be viewed as merely a one dimensional construct and that “everybody” interprets the same thing in the music; the educator must be aware of this (Hill 2009, Dimitriadis 2001).

The basic elements of Hip Hop (DJing, dance, MCing, and graffiti art) can also be used in therapeutic sessions. Susan Hadley and George Yancy’s (2012) edited volume, *Therapeutic Uses of Rap and Hip-Hop*, argues for just that. Rap is utilized to incorporate aspects of psychotherapy in a contextualized manner by asking clients what their preference is in rap music; then, through careful therapeutic process, songs are dissected and discussed at length as it pertains to the person’s areas of concern (Elligan 2012:35-37). Further, Edgar Tyson discovered that rap music and elements of Hip Hop dance can be used in grief therapy with Black males (2013). This type of work in the areas of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can prove to be useful when dealing with a generation of urban Black males who have experienced intensely traumatic events. Tyson found that the youth, in the process of dealing with their trauma, actually discovered hidden talents they had through the rap music; this aided them in their recovery from PTSD (2013:298-300). Tyson argues that “...neglecting to utilize and examine these Hip-Hop based technologies in youth work also might represent a missed opportunity to successfully intervene in the lives of one of society’s most vulnerable populations” (303). That should be impetus for any missiologist to explore Hip Hop further.

Scott MacDonald and Michael Viega (2013) discovered a form of therapy through song writing in the medium of rap (e.g. MCing). By utilizing rap songs and artists who are discussing pain and lamenting, the authors—who are also therapists— found that the music making experience was important and life changing for the youth they were working with (168-170). This study demonstrates the power of music and the continuing positive effect of art in the lives of young people.

Christopher Emdin, whose Ted Talk on Hip Hop pedagogy has been viewed by thousands, has discovered a process of using Hip Hop to teach, inform, and construct mathematic equations. Emdin’s work is now being adopted in not only college classrooms, but also K-12 settings in which young people are taught basic concepts in math, science, and even history (2007, 2008). In this pedagogy, the active project based classroom is utilized to allow for students to discuss, engage, question, and learn

from the culture of Hip Hop while employing mathematical skills in the classroom from the basic elements of math to calculus. Emdin's approach uses both a contextualized manner of teaching, while also allowing room for the curriculum to change as needed; this is crucial as Hip Hop culture continues to evolve. Key constructs to his teaching philosophy (e.g. project-based and student-centered learning) remain concrete, while the actual pedagogy is movable and allows room for the educator to create new models of learning as the student climate changes to allow for effective teaching and strategy.³ Emdin's model is worthy for any educator to take note of and creates space for Hip Hop to be used beyond the teaching of just music (Iwamoto, Creswell, and Caldwell 2007, Petchauer 2011a, 2011b, Irby and Hall 2011, Dhokai 2012, Petchauer 2009). The spiritual and theological uses of Hip Hop are missing in this literature. One must ask, how students also might derive missiological principles from Hip Hop influenced education?

Conceptual Framework

This essay employs the conceptual framework and worldview of Paulo Freire's *conscientização* to explore how Hip Hop could be used in a critical fashion, while still maintaining a missiological position. This primary framework was chosen to accommodate the broader conceptualization of Hip Hop as a voice for the oppressed, liberating minds and souls, and in creating critical thinking skills toward a missiological theory. Freire describes *conscientização* as:

...learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality... *conscientização* does not lead men to 'destructive fanaticism.' On the contrary, by making it possible for men to enter the historical process as responsible subjects, *conscientização* enrolls them in the search for self-affirmation and thus avoids fanaticism (2000: 19-20)

This definition elucidates metacognition in the framework of liberation theologies and philosophies. That is, with Hip Hop, one is able to imagine a liberated position through the music, art, and social aesthetic of Hip Hop

culture (Giroux 1996). Using Freire's modus, Hip Hop, then, is used to help the student 1) think about how to think, 2) think towards liberation, and 3) in a missiological sense, think towards the liberating power of Jesus Christ within dominant structures of oppression and injustice. To this conclusion, Freire raises a Christological point,

...the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both (2000: 28).

A Christian's mission, then, is to help 'free minds' and souls toward a Christ-like worldview.⁴ Freire, then, has created a conceptual context for the use of Hip Hop to teach missiological concepts.⁵

In addition to Freire's *conscientização* concept, I also draw from Wilbert Shenk's (1999) work on the contextualizing missions model. Shenk argues for a three-part thesis toward the inclusion and engagement with contextualization (1999: 56):

Contextualization is a process whereby the gospel message encounters a particular culture, calling forth faith and leading to the formation of a faith community, which is culturally authentic and authentically Christian.

Control of the process resides within the context rather than with an external agent or agency.

Culture is understood to be a dynamic and evolving system of values, patterns of behavior, and a matrix shaping the life of the members of that society.

In this sense, Hip Hop is the contextualizing agent, used in a classroom, with emerging adult students, and allowing that cultural agent (Hip Hop) to create, change, and edify the classroom all the while allowing for the control of the process to reside within the context—in this case being young people and emerging adulthood populations. This, arguably,

is a process that connects with Sherk's dynamic and evolving ideology of culture by using a contemporary model of engagement in a classroom setting.

My utilization of critical pedagogy here is not to frame Hip Hop as a complete and true form of critical pedagogy, although there have been Eurocentric attempts to do just that (Stovall 2006) and Afrocentric ones as well (Wells-Wilbon, Jackson, and Schiele 2010). My attempt here, however, is to cohesively outline the general ways that educators and students may engage and construct a Hip Hop pedagogical environment as well as identify the similarities between Hip Hop and missiology vis-à-vis its use in the classroom.

Missiological Uses of Hip Hop in the Classroom

In the fall of 2012, I taught a topics course entitled “The Socio-Theological Discourses of Hip Hop Culture” at North Park University. The course was a hybrid of the flipped classroom,⁶ and used Linda Nilson's framework for student-centered learning and outcomes-centered course design (2003: 17-32). The course, which turned into a required general education course, was designed with the student learning process in mind and to give students 1) the opportunity to discover and explore Hip Hop Culture—in this case being the theological context, 2) allow for students to explore, missiologically, the meaning of Christian theology as seen from a Hip Hop perspective, and 3) to utilize new methods of pedagogy derived and rooted in the four foundational elements of Hip Hop. The course description was as follows:

This course explores the dynamics, cultural variances, theological discourses, and applied methods of Hip Hop spirituality in relationship to adolescent culture. This class introduces students to the issues, culture, and dimensions surrounding Hip Hop spirituality. Close attention will be paid to a theology of Hip Hop and its culture. Through discussion, historical contexts, sociocultural analysis, urban theory, literature, film, and Black Liberation Theology,

a cultural overview of Hip Hop will be drawn to better understand how adolescents and early adults engage in this forty year culture and musical genre; we will also be engaging in the ten foundational elements of Hip Hop culture: DJing/ Turntablism, Breaking, Graffiti art, Break Beats, MCing, Street Knowledge, Street Language, Street Fashion, Entrepreneurialism, and Knowledge of God and Self.

This course introduces students to the challenges and issues involved in Hip Hop studies as it relates to youth ministry, youth culture, and popular culture discourse. Close attention will be paid to various methods of intercultural engagement, the media's response and understanding of Hip Hop, our own understanding of race/ethnicity in relation to Hip Hop studies (which will include but not be limited to African American, Asian, Latino/a, Middle Eastern, and Euro American), youth ministry in the Hip Hop context, and ministry strategies in order to disciple or serve youth who live a Hip Hop ethos. The student will be challenged to become culturally aware and sensitive in their engagement with the past, present and future of Hip Hop. The student will also be able to interpret and analyze the reality of what Hip Hop was, is, and will be. And, the students will be equipped to be cultural ambassadors in their respective communities.

The course was initially open to both undergraduate and graduate students (seminarians). The first class had eleven graduate students and eight undergraduate students. The crucial element in this class was that the seminarian students came from ministry backgrounds—that is, ninety percent of them were actively engaged in a ministry setting. While the full ten elements of Hip Hop were discussed, we focused on the initial four—as previously mentioned. The learning outcomes, using a standard Bloom's Taxonomy approach with active verbs, were:

Analyze individual and culturally diverse approaches to Hip Hop culture. *(You will accomplish this by attending class, viewing films, and participating in class activities.)*

Articulate the ways Hip Hop espouses various theological mantras in connection to the *missio Dei*. (*You will accomplish this by doing the reading response papers, and final paper/ project.*)

Articulate the relationship between Christ and culture set against a grid of Hip Hop, urban popular culture, and current youth culture patterns. (*You will do this in group discussions, reading response papers, and in the final paper/ project.*)

Identify obstacles to current Hip Hop culture and popular youth and young adult culture. (*You will do this by viewing the films and the group project.*)

Articulate a theologically informed model for understanding, relating to and serving youth involved in Hip Hop culture. (*You will accomplish this in the group project, and in the final project.*)

You will note that assignments were assigned to each of the five learning outcomes of the course. This, following Nilson's (2003) student-centered learning approach, gave students a framework for how each assignment connected to their learning experience. This greatly affected the learning dynamics in class too.⁷ In addition, the class had an online component, Moodle, and electronic materials (e.g. articles, websites, and videos) were uploaded along with mini-lectures which aided in class preparation. Having Moodle greatly enhanced the class as lecture notes, syllabi, and all handouts were placed there; a real-time gradebook was also used so that students always knew where they stood in the class and were able to access comments to their work.⁸

In crafting the assignments I sought out colleagues such as Ebony Utley, Monica Miller, Andre Johnson, and Ralph Watkins all of whom are active scholars in Hip Hop Studies, and have taught courses on various topics of Hip Hop and rap music. This gave me an overall sense of how to structure the class. In designing assignments, five key aspects were kept in mind:

Readings and the required literature needed to be attended to.

Active learning⁹ was essential for student engagement and learning,

Missiologial principles must be kept in mind.

At least two of the main assignments must have a gender, racial, and ethnic diversity component to them.

No testing of any kind (e.g. multiple choice exams, or essay exams). Student success is measured by a) class attendance and participation, b) reading response papers, c) graded in class responses to activities or lectures, and d) a final group city excursion and a final paper or creative project.

The readings for the class were as follows:

Forman, Murray, and Mark Anthony Neal. 2011. *That's The Joint! The Hip Hop Studies Reader*. 2 ed. New York, NY: Routledge. ISBN: 978-0-415-87326-0 (2nd Edition is needed)

Hodge, Daniel White. 2010. *The Soul Of Hip Hop: Rimbs Timbs and A Cultural Theology*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press. ISBN: 9780830837328

Miller, Monica R. 2013. *Religion and Hip Hop*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Smith, Efreem, and Phil Jackson. 2005. *The Hip Hop Church: Connecting with The Movement Shaping our Culture*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP. ISBN-10: 0830833293 ISBN-13: 978-0830833290

Utey, Ebony A. 2012. *Rap And Religion: Understanding The Gangsta's God*. Santa Barbara, CA; Denver CO.: Praeger. ISBN: 978-0-313-37668-9

From there, the foundation was set to begin creating a class that would actively challenge the student. Lectures were kept to fifteen to twenty minutes (occasionally they went longer depending on the conversation) and immediately following each lecture, there was a form of processing involved for each student (e.g. think, pair, share; 3-2-1 processing) which, very often, involved writing.

Technology (cell phones, iPads, laptops), in this initial class¹⁰, was allowed, but used minimally and/or for a particular assignment. This aided greatly, and the maturity of the graduate students also helped to serve as

a “role model” effect for the undergraduates in the class. Class was a three hour block (6:30-9:50 PM; with a 30 minute break) which also enhanced the learning atmosphere of the course.

Each class contained some type of class activity which would help students process the subject matter of that specific class. When we dealt with aspects of the cross and Jesus, we explored artists such as DMX, Tupac, and Lauryn Hill as they discuss Christological messages in their music as they intertwined the sacred, profane, and the secular all into one song—this relating to MCing. Then, lyrics were given to students for a particular song, they were then asked to do a word study on the song, video, and artist (using their technology) and come up with similarities or dissimilarities connected to Jesus and Hip Hop; these projects were done in groups and the students were asked at the beginning “What is the mission God, or, what is God up to in this song, if anything?” The process took an hour, and the discussion forty five minutes. Responses to this assignment from students were:

- I never knew God was active in the Hip Hop community; I always assumed “we” [Christians] needed to go the “them.”
- I’m still having a hard time seeing the connecting of Jesus in a song that has the F-word in it, but, the lines to Jesus in Hip Hop and the Hip Hop in Jesus are a lot clearer now.
- God is at work with DMX. God is at work in Hip Hop and we need to listen.
- For the first time, I saw a contextual image of Jesus; these rappers are doing the same thing white theologians like Moody did— rappers just make it sound better!
- Now I can see, a little bit better, how Jesus is connected through and in Hip Hop

These responses, directly from students, helped bridge the next assignment which was to examine the social justice connections between rap music and the New Testament. These two assignments were covered over a period of two classes and then a full debrief session was given with the class. I used

3-2-1 processing to begin the discussion, yet, after about twenty minutes; the discussion always took a shape of its own.¹¹ Here are some of the themes, as I took my own notes, of these conversations:

- This is the first time I feel like I'm able to engage in class; I've been in seminary now for 2 ½ years and I'm always spoken to.
- God is doing something different within the Hip Hop culture.
- Jesus would have been a Hip Hop head.
- Hip Hop should be used as a missional instrument and cultural tool.
- Never knew Hip Hop was so complex.
- I see Jesus better as a result of Hip Hop¹²

Every other week we had a performance of spoken word, rap, or urban poetry.¹³ Each artist was given the scope of the class and then, in turn, focused their material around a theological or spiritual concept. Two such artists were Muslim and discussed the power of the “mission of God” in relation to “the people of God” within oppressive conditions. The artists took about an hour and a half of class to perform and then a discussion followed with the class while the artists were present. If the artist had an album or video, pre-class work was assigned so that the class was aware and knowledgeable of the person or persons. These performances, connecting back to MCing, DJing, and dance, made Hip Hop “come alive” for the students and gave a real-time expression of the pain, struggle and life connected to God and the *missio Dei*. I specifically chose Muslim artists because it gave us a much broader look within the Abrahamic faiths and traditions within Hip Hop culture.¹⁴

In brief lectures, I, as the educator, made full use of the classroom by walking, moving, and using all three white boards in the class. This follows a pedagogical process which actively places students' attention on both the material and how it is being presented, rather than just speaking from written notes, at the front of the class, from a podium (Nilson 2003).

Students were expected to go on a city outing to some Hip Hop event or venue within the city of Chicago. This project took students beyond the classroom, lectures, and literature which oftentimes, confounds students in their learning process. One must foster the active learning skills outside of the classroom (Hill 2013, Petchauer 2012, Nilson 2003). This city project specifically focused on a Hip Hop event or venue and students, with careful guidelines, were asked to research, engage, and participate (if possible) to explore the socio-theological dimensions of what was happening and how God was at work or the mission of God was being fulfilled.

The real power of this course was that students were able to better see God, understand the Bible and, explore Jesus through a Hip Hop lens, and engage the hegemonic structures of oppression all through a Hip Hop perspective. Two of the African American students in the class told me that this was the first time in their three years as seminary students, learning about “theology,” that they felt they had come into a class prepared and not behind their white classmates. A Latina undergraduate student told me that she took the class just to fulfill a credit, but, as a result, was considering ministry to the Hip Hop generation. Five of my Euro-American students relayed to me that this class was one of the “best” in terms of helping explain Liberation Theology, Howard Thurman’s theology for the disenfranchised, and James Cone’s Black Theology of Liberation. Hip Hop has a multi-disciplinary approach, much like missiology. Further, Hip Hop provides a contemporary feel to “learning” and curriculum design and when used to teach on missiological concepts, provides a rich pedagogical process in which to better understand not just the Gospel of Jesus, but the application of it in real-time settings. That is missional and needed for this generation.

Toward A Hip Hop Missiological Pedagogy

Not everyone can teach a class on Hip Hop. Not everyone should. Little to no understanding of the culture, only having “read” about Hip Hop, and simple ignorance of the field of Hip Hop Studies, could lead to disastrous results. This paper has been concerned with showing a case study example for a class on Hip Hop to teach missiological concepts. Yet,

almost any subject can be converted to do just that. The main goal here was to move away from traditional methods and pedagogy of teaching (e.g. lecture, passive learning, and testing), engage students with project-based learning modules, allow students to digest and process a wealth of new information, while still keeping the focus on God and what God was up to in a particular culture. Still, Hip Hop remains a relatively untouched people group by missiologists, and what follows is a brief glance towards what a Hip Hop missiological pedagogy may look like.

The reason Hip Hop and rap can evoke such a connection with this generation and provide a missiological connection is simple; They:

Evoked truth and light within contextual forms of theological inquiries.

Are multi-ethnic in approach and cultural worldviews.

Challenge the norms dominant in culture and religion.

Provide ambiguity yet reveal the mystery of who God is within suffering contexts.

Look for new modes of “church” in a sacred/profane context while still pointing to God as the ultimate “answer” for life—an aspect that the mosaic generation is interested in.

Youth, the Mosaics, postindustrial people groups, and those estranged from religious contexts are not the cultural contexts of fifty years ago. More importantly, with the advent of media, technology, and the age of information, we have a youth culture that is both savvy and technologically creative. For the pastor who is missionally minded, this can present challenges to their theological framework. Hip Hop, while flawed and still human, creates space for those seeking God in alternate ways, to find God and to value the power of what the Bible says in a more relevant contextual form. Hip Hop artists, such as Tupac, act as theologians who can interpret the Bible for a people who are hurting, in need, and desperate for God’s love. As Dyson reminds us, Hip Hoppers “...aim to enhance awareness of the divine, of spiritual reality, by means of challenging orthodox beliefs and traditional religious practices” (Dyson 2001: 204). We must give attention to this global culture and the effect it has on our youth – even more so if they are in our youth groups. For example, in my research, some powerful

responses came forth when I asked the question “What does Hip Hop make you feel spiritually, if anything?” Here are just a few: “I can feel God smiling on me when I rap,” “I found the Bible to be deeper and more real when I listen to Pac,” “Hip Hop is our good news...you feel me? I mean, it’s like a church and place we can go,” and “Hip Hop saved my life. Period. If it wasn’t for God working in the rap, I’d be dead now.” (Hodge 2009, 2010b). Hip Hop helps the church embrace its mission fully by having a message that youth can and do identify with (Smith and Jackson 2005).

Therefore, missions must look different from what we are used to in order to even begin a conversation with the Hip Hop community, and be what Harvey Cox calls the *laostheou* or “the people of God” in creating a Church (Big C) in which a daily relationship with Christ is at the center—even in the midst of chaos and social inequality (1965, 125). Missions must begin to engage Hip Hop culture as if it were a foreign far off island in the Pacific Ocean and realize that God has been doing something within that culture long before we set foot on its shores.

What is *not* needed is the relationally void¹⁵ style of handing out Christian tracks to complete strangers on the street in hopes that they will “convert” to our belief system. What is *not* needed is this constant “we” and “them” mentality that causes great chasm’s between religious and non-religious communities. What is *not* needed is more “religion” for people who need something deeper than just a simple sermon, simplistic five step solutions, and patronizing “I’ll be praying for you” statements. What *is* needed is an open mind and an open heart to see where we can be led by those in the Hip Hop community and in turn use the Hip Hop community as a tool for missions in the 21st century and seeing the margins as the center in Christian Mission.

As a concluding comment, missionally engaging Hip Hop is no easy task to be undertaken. Hip Hop is complex and presents not only a Nations Gods and Earth, The Nation of Islam, Zulu Nation, and Zionism. Further, as stated previously, there are parts of Hip Hop culture—as there are in any given culture or sub-culture—which do not give homage to God in any way shape or form. However, this should not dismay the mission-minded individual; we have a great calling such as Paul did when he was in Athens.¹⁶

If the Great Commission is truly valued by missiologists – which is so often touted in the literature – then the Hip Hop community is worth the missional pursuit.¹⁷ Scholars studying young people in this era have

noted that they are falling away from religion, see God as a good thing and not a personal God, identify with a pluralistic form of church, and see sin as relative to the context (Dean 2010, Kosmin and Keysar 2009). Hip Hop, while not a utopian “evangelizing tool,” creates space for youth to engage Jesus without the religious mantras present. Hip Hop gives a much purer God and argues for a relationship with God in context and creates a sense of personal consciousness to be spread, once attained, to the community. Hip Hop is a space for young people to find God on their terms and move beyond the four walls of “church” and into a much stronger and purer relationship with God as Hip Hop goes beyond simplistic answers (Hodge 2009: 289-293, Watkins 2011: 97-103). Thus, it behooves us as missiologists to grasp the *missio Dei* within Hip Hop in order to better understand 1) Hip Hop culture; 2) current youth culture; 3) the possibilities of mission to a global culture at a time when societally people are open to hearing about God and spirituality – even if it is in pluralistic circles. A genuine unedited Jesus is more satisfying to people than more words regarding “hell” and “sin.”¹⁸ The issues of pain, hurt, oppression, and disenfranchisement are crucial literacies for any minister of the Gospel. God is at work in Hip Hop and even if the appearance of it is offsetting, God is still doing a great work within the culture, music, artists, and youth who listen to its messages.

Notes

1. There are many definitions of what “Hip Hop” is, for the purpose of this essay, I will define Hip Hop as an urban sub-culture that seeks to express a life-style, attitude, and/or urban individuality. Hip Hop at its core—not the commercialization and commodity it has become in certain respects—rejects dominant forms of culture and society and seeks to increase a social consciousness along with a racial/ethnic pride. Thus, Hip Hop uses rap music, dance, music production, MCing, and allegory as vehicles to send and fund its message of social, cultural, and political resistance to dominate structures of norms.
2. In my book, *The Soul Of Hip Hop*, I describe how young people aged 14-21 understood God and Christian sacred scripture with deeper meaning from artists such as Tupac, DMX, Lupe Fiasco, and Lauryn Hill because these individuals spoke from their perspective and language (Hodge 2010b Interviews). Artists such as Tupac also act as natural theologians who interpret scripture and comment upon it no differently than, say, a T.D. Jakes or a Joel Osteen do for their constituents (Dyson 2001). Hip Hop pushes past the traditionalized white, blonde, blue-eyed, evangelical social construct of Jesus and asks for a Jesus that can “reach us,” be “real” with us, “feel” us, and relate to us – a contextualized deity in a relational stance (Hodge 2010b, Watkins 2011). This type of Jesus is one who can relate to youth in urban settings beyond the standard evangelical model of both mission and church. This type of Jesus also questions authority, seeks to increase social consciousness, validates and acknowledges the social isolation as valid and real to all the ‘hood, and every now and then “puts a foot in someone’s [butt] to tell a [expletive] he real” (Hodge 2009 Interview). As ethnomusicologist Christina Zanfagna exclaims, “Mainstream hip-hop percolates with unlikely and multifaceted religious inclinations. Despite its inconsistent relationship to organized religion and its infamous mug of weed smoking, drug pushing, gun-slinging, and curse-spewing, rap music is not without moral or spiritual content. Hip Hop provides a contextualized and relevant form of religious discourse, meaning, and identity for

urban youth and others who are its listeners. As missiologists and youth workers alike, we must give attention to what messages and theological concepts are coming from and out of Hip Hop culture.

3. This is a critical aspect in the design of new curriculum and pedagogical models of instruction. Linda Nilson reports that the accommodation of various learning styles in the classroom, will make for a better learning environment and stronger metacognition for the respective discipline (2003: 229-235).
4. This is part of what I argue Hip Hop brings both theologically and hermeneutically, with its message when studied and properly exegeted (2010b).
5. While Freire was not a missiologist and/or attempting to construct a Christian pedagogy, the concept here is similar to aspects of Christ's mission and the Great Commission; to teach those who are oppressed and oppressors of the life-changing power of the Gospel. This connects with Sherwood Lingenfelter's work on synthesis: pluralism, biblical contradiction, and transformation, in that the missionary must become and adapt toward that culture to better understand it, but to also aid in transforming it too (1992: 20-23).
6. This is a pedagogical model in which the typical lecture and homework elements of a course are reversed. Short video lectures are viewed by students at home before the class session, while in-class time is devoted to exercises, projects, or discussions (Initiative 2012).
7. This is measured by 1) course work, 2) class projects, 3) class participation, and 4) final course grades. I take an initial inventory of the class to measure their overall knowledge of course material, a mid-course evaluation (embedded into the course work), and then place those against the final outcomes and grades when the class is finished.
8. As the class has progressed, I have moved to a 95% all digital classroom. The only thing I print is the syllabus, a student information sheet, and the sign in sheet for each class. Everything else is located online and accessible 24/7 to students. I now utilize Turnitin for my grading rubrics and paper submissions.

9. This is a process whereby students engage in activities, such as reading, writing, discussion, or problem solving that promote analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of class content (CRLT 2014).
10. In subsequent classes I have eliminated it from the class, even more as the class has shifted to an undergraduate class only. However, I am still learning to find the best use of technology in the classroom.
11. I attribute this largely to the fact that the seminarians in the class were initiators and innovators of the conversation. It was rare that an undergraduate student initiated a conversation. This may have been closely related to the dynamics of the class and that the undergrads may have felt some apprehension with the older students in the class, and, after a while, the pattern emerged that the older students would speak first. Still, the dynamic of having older students in the classroom is imperative, I believe, in aiding the learning process. More classes should, and need to have hybrid components.
12. This type of statement was also a critical theme throughout my own research. Interviewee after interviewee relayed to me the power of Hip Hop's theology and how they "saw God/ Jesus" better as a result.
13. Poetry that is specifically about, engaging, or interpretive of the city and urban contexts—related to Hip Hop culture.
14. While Hip Hop is not entirely spiritual or theological, a majority of its faith traditions lie within Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions with variances and contextual approaches for each.
15. Shaw and Van Engen also tell us that relationships are over communicating any "special" style, message, or sermon and about receptors—the people group—will typically always respond better to the Gospel when there is a strong relationship intact (2003: 121-122).
16. However, this also requires us to be culturally and racially literate in order to breach the spiritual borders and enter into new "territories."

17. An interesting note here, Daniel Shaw and Charles Van Engen note that to communicate the Gospel message appropriately, one must foster the skill of appropriate communication to the receptors in their context (2003: 114-120). They also follow this with three modes of communication as well: coupling—which involves connecting a new message with the receptors preexisting assumptions, commonality—when message meanings are shared by both the author and the audience alike, and bridging—the authors, or communicators, responsibility to help de-code messages and meanings from the text and/or message. Shaw and Van Engen use this in the context of biblical interpretation and communication, yet, the parallels with Hip Hop and Gospel messages also applies (2003: 117-119). Wilbert Shenk asserts that, “...in order to do its work properly, missiology must keep four aspects continually in view: the normative, the historical, the present, and the future” (Shenk 1993: 18). Hence, with this in perspective, the *present* and the *future* should be focused—at least in part—to and with Hip Hop, and being aware of how one communicates the Gospel is fundamental too. Further, Hip Hop, in its contextual form, embraces John Driver’s *Messianic Evangelization* in which the forming of disciples of Jesus is fundamental (Driver 1993: 199). This was a critical finding in my work when I performed interviews on those between the ages of 13-19 who considered themselves to be “Hip Hoppers.” They realized a need for a connection with Jesus and cared less about knowing the “rules” and dogma but more about an actual relationship with Christ.
18. In Knut Alfsvåg’s work, the continued debate of the “postmodern” continues. Within those debates the issue of sin and morality typically surfaces and sin is often defined as a relative and culturally defined term. This has impact on how we in our churches define this word and what it means to actually “sin”(2011).

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