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Knowledge of Self: Possibilities for Spoken Word Poetry, Hip Hop Pedagogy, and “Blackout Poetic Transcription” in Critical Qualitative Research

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Abstract

This article traces the development of Blackout Poetic Transcription (BPT) as a critical methodology for artist-scholars engaged with Hip Hop pedagogy in higher education spaces. We include Keith’s outline of the BPT method and Endsley’s first hand account of implementing the practice in an undergraduate classroom. Together, the authors grapple with mainstream and alternative identities within their Hip Hop praxis as spoken word artists and educators.

Keywords

higher education – critical race theory – Hip Hop – poetry – arts-based methodology

1 Introduction

In this article, Anthony Keith, Jr. “Tony” and Crystal Leigh Endsley, who are both spoken word artists and faculty at different universities and academic departments in the U.S., explore the methodological possibilities for Hip Hop pedagogy and spoken word poetry for critical qualitative research. First, they explain the historical significance of Hip Hop culture within the context of global popular Black culture, and as a thriving intellectual enterprise in

academia. Then, Keith explains “Blackout Poetic Transcription” (BPT) as a critical race method he developed inspired by Hip-Hopography (the study of Hip Hop) and blackout poetry (a form of literary art), for his research about spoken word artists (poets, rappers, emcees) and Hip Hop educational leadership. Endsley follows with a detailed account of her experience teaching BPT as a qualitative research method for undergraduate students to explore Hip Hop culture as an element of their multiple and intersecting social identities. Collectively, the authors suggest that BPT functions as an anti-racist and decolonizing research method that disrupts mainstream, traditional pedagogies and methodologies, and as a reflexive scholarly praxis for educators and researchers. Portions of the article are written as a script to reflect the transparent and collaborative nature of their research process.

2 Hip Hop as Scholarly Research Praxis

In 2023 Hip Hop will celebrate its 50-year history as global popular Black culture. According to public and scholarly consensus, Hip Hop’s cultural evolution began in 1973, by Black and Brown descendants of enslaved Africans in the south Bronx, N.Y., as an artistic, performative, and intellectual response, and resistance to racism, colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy (Rose, 1994; Potter 1995; Nelson 1998). Hip Hop, from a critical consumerist perspective (Kellner, 2016), is marked by a mainstream narrative which suggests it is only commercialized rap music, when in actuality the culture consists of five elements: 1) djing – layering beats/mixing records; 2) emceeing/mc’ing – speaking rhythmic words that “move crowds”; 3) breaking -free style/improvisational battle dancing; 4) graffiti – public street art, writings/drawings; and 5) knowledge of self – competency of cultural knowledge and history. Hip Hop cannot be dismissed as merely a passing fad for young people that will soon run its course: it must be taken seriously as an intellectual phenomenon deserving of scholarly study similar to the New Negro Renaissance, Blues, Jazz, Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Arts Movement (Aldridge and Stewart, 2005, George 2004). The published peer-reviewed literature about the possibilities for Hip Hop as research praxes, while thin, is experiencing its “second wave” in the discourse about racial equity in education (Petchauer, 2015).

The first wave, which Söderman (2013) refers to as the “academization of Hip Hop,” began in the early 1990’s, deriving from scholarly work about racial opportunity gaps in American public education. Contributions in this milieu are rich with conceptual, theoretical, and empirical accounts of educators practicing Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy (CHHP) as culturally relevant teaching for motivating Black and Brown learning and engagement. According to

Akom (2009), CHHP centers curricula, instruction, and assessment on their student's lived experiences, which are likely shaped by Hip Hop culture. And, from a critical race perspective (Bell, 1995), is a response to fulfilling the "educational debt" (Ladson-Billings, 1995) overdue from the history of chattel enslavement of Africans and their Black descendants throughout the diaspora. These descendants were forbidden and punished for using their native languages and literacies and denied a formal education about their cultural history; they were denied opportunities to learn knowledge of self. CHHP assumes Black and Brown learners are both "knowledge consumers" and "knowledge producers," and are therefore, intellectually motivated by transformative pedagogy that draws on the sensibilities and mindsets of Hip Hop culture devoted to teaching resistance, knowledge of self, and self-determination (Bridges, 2011; Emdin, 2017; Kim & Pulido, 2015; Love, 2016; Rose, 1994). Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) argue that the thematic nature of Hip Hop texts can function as valuable springboards for critical discussions about contemporary issues facing the lives of marginalized students. Studying Hip Hop texts may lead toward more thoughtful analytical expository writing, the production of poetic texts, and a commitment to social action and community empowerment.

Scholarship in the first wave also introduced Critical Hip Hop Literacies (CHHL), which stemmed from New Literacy Studies (Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Morrell, 2005) to foreground how spoken word artists, poets, and rappers manipulate language, gestures, and images to position themselves against or within discourse to advance and protect themselves (Richardson, 2013). For context, the relationship between Hip Hop culture and spoken word poetry is theoretically twofold: 1) the historical and epistemological evolution of Black literacies and Black language, and 2) conceptually, as the "emceeing" element in Hip Hop culture. Scholars across academic disciplines, including English, sociolinguistics, and African American history, argue that spoken word artists, poets, and rappers function as emcees that engage audiences in a performance of multiple and multimodal ways of communicating in written and spoken form that is not tied to standard American English (Fisher, 2003; Jocson 2006; Potter 1995; Price-Styles, 2015; Belle 2016). According to the scholarly literature, this communication is more closely associated with African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a language rooted in African linguistic patterns spoken with variety amongst many Black families in the U.S. This language shares a similar relationship to the "verbal artistry" evident in Hip Hop music (rap) (Labov, 1972; Smith and Crozier, 1998; Rickford, 2016; Van Hofwegen and Wolfram, 2010). To be clear, rap at its core is poetry spoken rhythmically over a timed beat.

The second wave of published literature about Hip Hop as scholarly praxis seeks to answer questions about the sonic, kinesthetic, linguistic, visual practices and expressions of how Hip Hop can shape and recreate research. Within

this second wave is an increase in institutions of higher education around the world, particularly in North America, engaging Hip Hop in an academically rigorous manner through courses, research, conferences, and symposia (Abe, 2009; Söderman, 2013). Notably, Cornell University, Harvard University, and the College of William and Mary collect and make accessible historical artifacts of Hip Hop culture through their archives. In addition, there are well over 17,000 doctoral dissertations published globally in ProQuest that feature “Hip Hop” in either the abstract or the title. These works include Tricia Rose’s (1994) foundational work, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, which suggests rap music and Hip Hop are cultural, political, and commercial forms, and for many young people are the primary cultural, sonic, and linguistic windows on the world. Rose’s work laid the foundation for Carson’s (2017) dissertation, *Owning My Masters*, which is also a 34-song rap album that tackles issues of racism and rhetoric in academic spaces. From a critical race perspective, the fact that Hip Hop is a multi-billion dollar music and entertainment industry owned by White executives, and not yet an academic major is indicative of “interest convergence” (DeCuir and Dixson, 2004; Ledesma and Calderón, 2015), whereby anti-racist policies and practices are only possible if Black *and* White people are “equal” benefactors. Therefore, many Hip Hop scholars with anti-racist ways of teaching and researching are marginalized within “mainstream” academic spaces designed to safeguard Eurocentric epistemologies rooted in dominant beliefs in objectivity, meritocracy, and individuality. Perez-Huber (2008, 2009) describes this act as, “academic apartheid” and “epistemological racism.”

In Tony’s dissertation, *Educational Emcees: Mastering Conditions in Education Through Hip-Hop and Spoken Words* (Keith, 2019), he describes how he invoked Hip-Hopography (Spady, 1991; Petchauer, 2015) as a critical race methodology (CRM) (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002) for collecting, analyzing, and sharing the stories of Black and Brown people for the purpose of emancipatory research and discovery. Tony interpreted Hip-Hopography as a methodological framework for doing Hip Hop-centric research that includes five “aesthetics”: 1) sampling – sourcing methods from multiple methodologies; 2) layering – analyzing data within and across levels; 3) flow – organizing the data; 4) rupture – categorizing the data; and 5) affect, performance, and embodiment – discovering answers to research questions and presenting findings (see Davis, 2019).

As a Black man and spoken word artist, Tony’s epistemological commitments were to decolonize traditional approaches to qualitative research and therefore, he “sampled” from several methods rooted in critical theory, such as Black Feminism and Participatory Action Research (Hall, 1992; Krumer-Nevo, 2009; Durham, et al., 2013), Narrative Analysis (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004;

Webster and Mertova, 2007; Martin, 2014), Critical Hermeneutic Phenomenology (Mobley, 2015, 2019), and Poetic Transcription (Glesne, 1997; Langer and Furman, 2004) to develop a method for transforming his qualitative data into “research poems.” According to Dill (2015), one of the strengths of generating interpretive poetry is that the presentation of “poems-as-data” can allow a diverse set of audience members to engage with the research, and the poetic form inspires readers to focus on the content *and* meaning.

Tony was in search of language to describe critical educational leaders (Theoharris, 2007; Horsford et al., 2011; Khalifa et al., 2016) who embody Hip Hop pedagogy and identify as spoken word artists, poets, rappers, and emcees, or, “Hip Hop Educational Leaders” (HHEL). He interviewed ten Black and Brown HHEL’s who are also spoken word poets, rappers, and emcees, that serve as community-school partners inside high schools located in urban centers across the U.S. (i.e., Detroit, M.I., New York, N.Y., Washington D.C., San Francisco, CA). To deconstruct the terminological power between researchers and participants, Tony referred to them collectively as “The Squad”, which represents language used in Hip Hop culture that describes a united group of people who love, protect, and hold each other accountable. He analyzed the data from their stories by developing a method of poetic transcription inspired by “blackout poetry,” which will be explained in the subsequent section.

3 Blackout Poetic Transcription (BPT)

Tony: The first step in this process is to conduct individual, in-person and/or virtual interviews with members of the community about the focus of the research topic. In my case, I was interested in The Squad’s biographical journeys towards becoming Hip Hop educational leaders. I then transcribed the interviews to generate qualitative data for analysis using the Hip-Hopography aesthetic framework and an innovative approach to poetic transcription (see: Figure. 1).

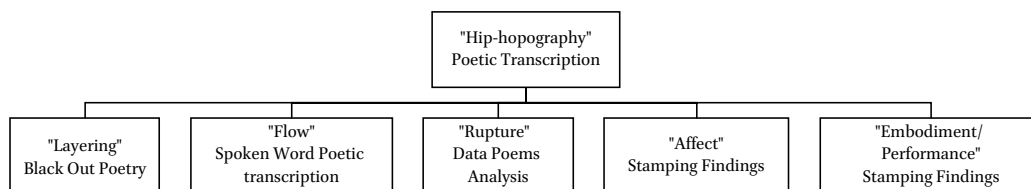


FIGURE 1 Hip-Hopography and Blackout Poetic Transcription

4 **Layering: blackout Poetry**

If sampling is the creative process that garners material, “layering” is what is done with the materials to shroud their identification to untrained eyes and to add style (Petchauer, 2015). Within the context of Hip Hop, layering is a stylistic component associated with graffiti artists, but it is also evident in the ways in which rappers layer meanings of words in songs across variations of language (Alim, Baugh, & Bucholtz, 2011; Rose, 1994). To begin my layering process and for the purpose of removing any information on the transcripts that would disclose the identities of The Squad, I was inspired by the visual element of blackout poems. Blackout poems are created when a poet takes a marker (usually black marker) to already established text like a newspaper article and redacts words until a poem is formed (Brewer, 2014; Kleon, 2010). Towards this purpose, I used the black color of the highlighter function in my word processor to “blackout” confidential information, as well as any words or phrases I deemed unnecessary for the purpose of understanding meaning and that would not disrupt the integrity of the text (e.g., “it”, “an”, “the”, “yeah”, “um”, “you know what I’m saying” etc.) (see Figure. 2). Before performing the blackout poetry technique, I read all the transcripts several times while simultaneously listening to the audio recordings. I noticed that listening to their voices while reading the actual words spoken from the transcript triggered memories from the interview and I began to recognize the rhythm and cadence of The Squad’s spoken words – which is a process that would inspire the next step in my data analysis, “flow.”

5 **Flow: spoken Word Poetic Transcription**

Although layering is what is done to the samples, the purpose of this process is not to create a unified product whose parts are seamlessly indistinguishable from one another; samples that are layered “flow” together, and this flow is a key attribute in Hip Hop music and language (Petchauer, 2015). According to Hanley (2008), the current that flows into the reservoir of rap is the Afri-cultural gift with words, both written and spoken. To develop flow from the layered data samples, I started reading the words that were not blacked out on the transcript out loud and noticed they sounded like a spoken word poem. I then recorded myself speaking these words in rhythm which I subsequently transformed into “poetic transcriptions” (a transcript of data formatted in stanzas). According to Glesne (1997), poetic transcription blurs the accepted boundaries

Original Transcript

I mean like they, for me just being from Detroit like, art was never enough. It just wasn't enough for me to just say I'm a poet. which is something. I knew that I was, but I also knew that being a person from a Black city like Detroit being a young activists, I mean I've been an activist since I was about 16, 17, you know, it's just when, you know, I just went all in like, you know, became a part of the black student leadership at as a freshman and Eastlands my first year at school, you becoming an organizer. I'm against like really White supremacist practices. Um, at the state paper, the student paper there immediately just the switch came on. It was the best thing that happened to me in college. Oh, I got some things to do. .

I was a journalist by trade before i was a poet I've studied journalism, political science a So I was an activist first, you know, and the, and the poetry found its way into the activism cause I didn't really, you know, I'd separated the two and I was always like, you know, lending my voice to different organizations. And as a college student I was co-president of the Black Student Union at Wayne State University when I left

Black Out Poetry

art was never enough. I'm a poet. from a Black city, Detroit a young activists, an activist since 16, black student leader organizer against White supremacist practices. state paper, student paper .

a journalist by trade a poet studied journalism, political science I was an activist first, poetry found its way into the activism lending my voice to organizations. Black Student Union

Data Poem

art was never enough
I'm a poet
from a Black city, Detroit
a young activist since 16
Black student leader
Organize against
White supremacist practices

state paper, student paper
a journalist by trade
a poet
studied journalism, political science
I was an activist first
poetry found its way
into the activism
lending my voice to
organizations
Black student union.

Figure 2 Blackout Poetic Transcription and Data Poem, after this paragraph

between art and science that explores shapes of intersubjectivity, and examines issues of power and authority that “creates a third voice, that is neither the interviewee's nor the researcher's, but is a combination of both” (p. 215). I uploaded the poetic transcripts into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, to begin organizing the data into manageable chunks for analysis. My inclination was to break down the poetic transcripts into smaller “data poems” (chunks of poetically formatted data) which I performed by creating breaks in the poetic transcription when there was a pause or shift in the story (e.g., change of topic, different questions, interruptions). According to Byrne (2017)

the process of writing poetry from data is distinct from that of the poet who may take any inspiration as a starting point and use any words they choose...creating poetry from the data reveals the researchers' involvement more clearly...the primary intent of researchers is to represent their data in alternative ways...poetry is not their aim but a means (p. 41–42).

In addition, Dill (2015) suggests one of the strengths of generating research and interpretive poetry is that the presentation of “poems-as-data” can allow a diverse set of audience members to engage with the research, including but not limited to artists, youth development professionals and policymakers. I was also inspired by various methods of Narrative Analysis, (e.g., structural, thematic, and critical events), which according to Clandinin and Connelly (2004), analyzes stories in at least three dimensions: 1) temporality – the past present and future of people, places and things and events under study, 2) sociality – the social conditions under which people’s experiences and events unfold, and 3) place – the specific concrete physical and topological boundaries or sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place. To understand the temporality, sociality, and place, I coded the data poems in NVivo into three categories which were: 1) context, time, and setting; 2) actions and behaviors; and 3) beliefs, philosophies. Then, I began the analysis of the findings.

6 Stamping: authenticity, Liberation, and Accessibility

At the beginning of the study, Tony and two members of The Squad who were all based in Washington D.C., developed three essential research agreements for discovering answers to research questions and presenting findings which were: 1) authenticity – throughout the research process The Squad should feel affirmed to “be Hip Hop,” which meant an acceptance, appreciation, and love for the use of language, phrases, vocabulary and pop culture references (e.g., the use of AAVE, profanity, and terms like “tripping” and “holla”); 2) liberation – the notion of “liberation” through qualitative research is closely aligned with what Cho and Trent (2006) define as “transformational validity” or the “emancipatory process leading toward social change that is to be achieved by the research endeavor itself” (p. 321–322). We agreed that during the research process there should be “metaphysical moment” that sparks wonder and feels “ecclesiastical” or “sermon-like” (Erskine 2003; Hodge 2010; Johnson 2013; Watkins 2011); and 3) accessibility – we also agreed that because most of the published scholarly texts are laden with academic jargon that is dismissive of the language and culture of today’s youth, we agreed to use “stamped” – a term created by Black and Brown D.C. youth to affirm truths about their world.

Stamped is analogous to receiving a “stamp of approval” in mainstream dominant culture.

To “stamp” the *authenticity* of the poetic transcripts, Tony did not censor any words, phrases, or language in the data poems, which includes the use of profanity and slang. In addition, as a form of member checking, he shared excerpts of the data poems with The Squad to ensure their words were captured correctly and treated with care. Towards stamping *liberation* and *accessibility*, Tony engaged the next element of Hip-Hopography, “affect,” by partnering with a local youth rapper without any formal research experience to identify parts of the poetic transcripts that sparked wonder, inspiration, and emotionality. They decided to code these moments in data as “jewels” (to represent the lyrical “gems” in Hip Hop music that *move* them). Jewels are subjective, therefore Tony identified jewels specifically related to his research questions about HHEL. By sourcing emic data from the jewels, Tony’s findings suggest HHELs who are also spoken word artists, poets, rappers, and emcees can be called “Educational Emcees” or “Ed Emcees.” As critical educational leaders, Ed Emcees embody an organic Hip Hop pedagogy and use rhythmic spoken words to inspire love as an anti-racist learning and engagement condition for Black and Brown learners in American public education.¹

According to Petchauer (2015), the nexus of affect underscores the quality that Hip Hop is fundamentally a participatory culture and that one “does something to be down and *embodies* Hip-Hop by what they do” (p. 86). In qualitative research, the notion of “embodiment” is a key component of Critical Hermeneutic Phenomenology, which according to Mobley (2019), is both a philosophy and a methodology centered on the subjective experiences of groups and individuals in an attempt to disclose the world as experienced by those being studied. The researcher’s biases and assumptions are “included” and “essential” to the interpretive process. To ensure stamping *accessibility*, Tony hosted “Ed Emcees” – a public event that included performed embodiment of his research along with members from The Squad at BusBoys and Poets, a popular restaurant in his hometown of Washington D.C. BusBoys and Poets was selected as the venue because of its reputation for community activism and cultivating a spoken word poetry subculture. Over 100 people attended this event, including family members, friends, parents, school principals, business owners, college students, teachers, college administrators, neighborhood elders, Hip Hop music artists, poets, and preachers across racial, culture, gender and generational lines.

1 While Tony’s research was conducted in the U.S., his qualitative findings introduce language and terminology into the academic lexicon that is applicable across geographic regions because of Hip-Hop’s global pop culture influence.

Crystal: The diverse crowd who attended Ed Emcees closed the event with a standing ovation and is one indicator of the impact an effective stamping technique can offer. I was there and the energy in the room was palpable, and that same energy is needed to bridge academic and home communities of undergraduate students. After having carefully followed Tony's development of this innovative methodology, we began discussing the potential and possibility for curriculum and personal development that it may offer. I asked, under what circumstances could blackout poetry take up what Lauren Leigh Kelly and Don C. Sawyer III (2019) insist is a crucial aspect of Hip Hop Education, "[to] encourage resistance to dominant structures of oppression that typically silence and marginalize those from non-dominant populations" (p. 8). Why is this charge especially critical within schooling spaces and Hip Hop? How might BPT function in different ways for a different sort of research project? The work of LeConte Dill (2015) posited that youth who are centered and invited into the academic project of research through participatory action methods tend to become more invested in the outcomes, especially when the project is poetic in its foundations. The genealogy of spoken word poetry can be traced directly back to Hip Hop culture and in this article and our research, Tony and I engage with spoken word poetry as a practice of Hip Hop, not only because of the technique and similar skill sets required to create and perform as an Emcee or spoken word artist, but also and especially because of the implied investment in vocalizing a desire for social change and justice for the oppressed that is central to the Hip Hop movement and a critical Hip Hop pedagogy (see Chang 2006, Endsley 2016, George 1998). Beyond the basic similarities in the skills of writing and reciting that both a Hip Hop emcee and a spoken word artist must develop, those who take the stage under these roles must also physically perform. The embodiment of the lyrics and the risk and rewards of live performance acknowledge and emphasize the relationship between the audience and the performer; the performer is also actively producing knowledge about their own experiences, lived and imagined. At a very foundational level, the spoken word artist and emcee are working to produce new knowledge about themselves and the world around them. In his work on Hip Hop and spirituality, Daniel W. Hodge (2017) argues "Hip-Hop creates...a voice to pushback...it is a vehicle in which those who are questioning authority, challenging dominant narratives of normality, the disenfranchised and the voiceless can still find solace in a community of like-minded people" (p. 3). Community connection, self-exploration, spiritual endurance, and resistance are key to exploring a deep engagement with the fifth element of Hip Hop, the knowledge of self, and clearly aligns spoken word poets and Hip Hop emcees as members of the same family (Endsley 2016). This shared lineage means that students who make use of BPT as a tool of Hip Hop research, praxis, and pedagogy, can be classified as

poets actively revising, rewriting, and performing counterstories that centralize rather than marginalize their knowledge and experiences (Martinez, 2020).

Indeed, Dill (2015) further states that underserved youth can “use their art to counter such monikers as they emerge with new titles and roles such as “poets” and as “researchers” (p. 134) and in this way new alternative identities are explored by student researchers that challenge what the mainstream makes available. Sherrell McArthur and Ghoulneesar Muhammad (2020) remind that writing poetry, specifically, has historically served as an effective push back against racism because it “highlights the voices, ideas, and concerns” of underserved students (p. 21). If educators are invested in the promise and possibility of spoken word poetry as a tool of revision and re-envisioning the damaging stereotypes of mainstream narratives, which are found in both education and Hip Hop, then these central questions demand confrontation. Riding the wave of excitement and momentum from Tony’s successful and energetic public presentation, I asked him to think through the upcoming gig we had booked at a small, private liberal arts college where a group of students of color identifying as feminists and poets had invited us to perform and host a writing workshop. Because we are collaborators who often partner in both creative and scholarly work, we decided to implement Tony’s unique methodology as a test-run at the first opportunity we had to conduct an informal college-level experiment.

In attendance were 15 students and in the span of one hour and a half, we facilitated a generative small-scale writing workshop focused on creating spoken word poetry using a Blackout Poetry method. The major difference in this instance is that the students did not have a chance to interview or transcribe, nor did they develop research questions. Their only objective was to create poems using the Blackout method and quotes that Tony and I selected. We shared quotes from two of our favorite scholars and writers: Ngugi wa’ Thiong’o and Toni Morrison. The students were thus only required to partake of the final step in the BPT process and then share their new poems with the group. This workshop as simply a creative writing practice was consistently a rich experience with this particular group of students. They responded strongly to the practice of Blackout Poetry. Even within the confines of our time restraints, they commented on the ways the method demanded an acknowledgement of their own power as authors and poets. The students commented that the exercise forced them to consider more carefully their process of choice: what poems they write, or don’t, and which topics they allow to surface and then pursue as worthy of writing about. I took notes on the edge of my own poem about how the students vocalized their discomfort and feelings. Actively “blacking out” another person’s words—especially those of a global icon like Thiong’o or

Morrison—was described as feeling “uncomfortable” and several of the students agreed that they chose carefully because they “[take] it so seriously” (fieldnotes, November 2019). The reflexiveness modeled by the students during the workshop nudged us to consider what might happen if undergraduate students were trained in the entire process Tony outlined in his research. We agreed that based on this experience, there was much more that the full framework of BPT might offer in order to meet the needs of the students we worked with on a more regular basis who might be interested, if not invested, in research and artistic activism. Because the conversation following the workshop with the students was so productive during this trial run, we discussed what it may look like to map it out in its full format as a research methodology over the course of a semester for Crystal’s 200-level spoken word poetry class for undergraduate students.

The institution where I teach is urban, commuter, and designated as both a Minority Serving and Hispanic Serving Institution. Most of the students I work with are pursuing degrees in the field of law enforcement or human services such as social work. My work on this campus has been primarily focused on developing curriculum at the intersections of art and social justice keenly working towards dismantling racism, classism, and sexism. To this end, I developed and implemented the college’s only course focused on spoken word poetry entitled *Poetic Justice* which was offered for the first time in 2019. The students in this course are required to perform and create original spoken word poetry, analyze poetic performances, and study scholarly work focused on Hip Hop and poetry. I considered the possibility of using this course as a pilot for this research method for several reasons. Based on the feedback from the first cohort of students enrolled in this course, it was clear that they were never taught about the ways poetry, Hip Hop, and other creative approaches could be used as tools to research social issues critical for their home communities and to disseminate that research to a scholarly or public audience. Although I spent an intentional amount of time during this course concentrating on analysis of scholarship, performance poetry, and lyrics, prior to introducing Tony’s BPT method I had not considered using the class to teach qualitative research methods. The students in *Poetic Justice* range from first year college undergrads to seniors and yet not all of them have taken the required senior capstone class or research methods course. This positions the course as an ideal opportunity to introduce critical arts-based research methods that can be applied to their own learning situations. Further, there are no arts-based research methods courses offered in any department on my campus. I found that while the students had the ability to unpack poetry and performance in a new way and also appreciated the historical context that spoken word poetry exists within, none

of them viewed the writing and performing of spoken word poetry as *research*. To them, the form of expression was just that—a vehicle for their emotions and not a tool of interrogation or revolution.

This is the gap that Tony's BPT methodology is positioned to fill, particularly for students who enroll in the course not because they seek to become professional poets or artists but because they are seeking innovative ways to address the recurring issues marginalized youth are confronted with today. It is important to note this distinction because learning this critical qualitative research method is applicable to students of disciplines outside of the arts or education, especially because of the ways in which the findings of BPTs can be relayed to a broader audience. I was eager to serve students' immediate needs and also push them to consider the rigor and depth that poetry, and ultimately, Hip Hop education, manifests, and one of the ways it might be used in the pursuit of liberation.

7 Be Water: flowing In and Crashing Out of the Mainstream²

One of the key features of *Poetic Justice* is the visiting artists who come to campus and work with the students throughout the semester. Tony already had plans to be on campus because of an invitation Crystal's department issued him as part of Black History Month programming. In the past, Tony has workshoped with students in Crystal's class prior to featuring at an open mic performance. This semester, we decided to focus Tony's class visit on training the students in BPT.

In the weeks preceding Tony's visit, Crystal's students utilized tools related to spoken word poetry to delve into their own identities and lived experiences and to rehearse getting them down on paper and spoken out loud into the world. Each instance of the students insisting on writing and revising who they are is an opportunity for them to reflect on how they know such a thing. Another key component in the practice of spoken word poetry and Hip Hop is positioning students and emerging artists as knowledge producers who raise "transformative critical consciousness" as they challenge existing power structures that are embedded in schooling spaces (El-Amin et al., 2017, np.). We wanted the classroom to be disruptive, at the least, and used BPT to amplify non-academic voices within the walls of the academy as a step in that

2 This quote refers to Bruce Lee's famous line as character Li Tsung in the 1971 television show "Long Street." Lee attributed the quote to his real-life philosophy on identity and adaptation, which is explored in-depth in Khuin's 2016 book *Transnational memory and popular culture in East and Southeast Asia: Amnesia, nostalgia, heritage*.

direction, especially because the students were in control of selecting and curating those poems in their final form. If the popular culture the students consume is shaped and continuously marketed by a world and industry that only wishes them harm, or only views them as consumers, then what hope does art, specifically Hip Hop, hold for them as a transformative education praxis? What does spoken word poetry offer in terms of research possibilities to youth who are perceived as “less than” if the tired tropes in the mainstream are only engaged with as negative portrayals rather than subversive possibilities? For those educators who are not practitioners of the culture, how are they implicated through privilege, access, or their role of power? On the other hand, what can such an exploration offer to those of us who want to teach and learn through Hip Hop frameworks if the mainstream is disregarded as only vain or shallow? How can we explain our participation and pleasure in the mainstream? We invite these questions and welcome the discomfort that our responses cause because we must acknowledge a disconnect between the institutionalized academic space we operate within and the origins of the culture. We must acknowledge our implication and relative authority and access to power within an oppressive system even as we seek desperately to “cultivate disruption” of that same system (Endsley, 2018). While these questions were not the focus for the assignment, they were brewing in the class discussions leading up to the project, and in our offline conversations.

Personal identity and how that identity is perceived was the focus of the first few weeks of writing in the course. Next, students explored the impact their environment and community has on their identity. Through this inquiry, the students developed research questions that they would use to interview residents in the community where they live: their building, their block, their street, their neighborhood. Their assignment asked them to interview at least three individuals using identical interview questions. The questions vary between each student because their questions should focus on an issue that they identify as pertinent to the students’ community. Developing these questions required more familiar methods of research, including an annotated bibliography to understand the ways their community is reflected (or not) already within the academy. Once their interviews were complete, the students transcribed them into a Word document. These steps, while they may appear basic, ask the students to participate in very traditional forms of easily recognizable qualitative research methods. The idea behind this project is not to insist that one track of research is better. Instead, we hope to demonstrate that interweaving and overlapping arts-based methods and methodologies rooted in liberatory Hip Hop praxis along with classic approaches can cast data in a new and unanticipated light, offering up meaningful perspectives and specifically enriching and empowering students of color in higher education spaces. Our pedagogical

and poetic praxis is guided by this ethic of love and discipline. As we developed this first iteration of poetic engagement, we were guided by the following questions: how can students' communities and their own identities be better served by academic research processes? How does spoken word poetry and Hip Hop open doors for this sort of hybrid methodology that more clearly reflects the student-as-researcher in an authentic and functional way? How can the research conducted and disseminated by students about their communities better reflect them? Such questions are not always satisfied with answers, but remind us of our ultimate and overarching educational goals—to make moves that honor the authentic and organic, that make space for the mess and for the contradiction, and to work alongside the students as servants of the communities that birthed us. These questions also allow us to reflect even as we ask the students to engage in reflection.

After the students' interviews were transcribed through guided practice in class, they were then shared within small groups. Finally, the students engaged in BPT and shared their poems through performance and presentation. Each phase of this project creates the chance for the student to explore a singular issue and research question from a different angle. During his initial campus visit, Tony guided the students through step-by-step instructions and practiced BPT with them so that they became familiar with how it works and why it is so useful. When the semester concluded, the students shared their work with one another (the COVID-19 crisis hindered our original plans to perform the pieces live along with a visual art installation of the final Blackout Poems at our campus).

Blackout Poetic Transcription literally racializes the research process, it *Blacks Out*, asserts Blackness onto white pages, based only on what the student researchers identify as the crucial pieces of information from the interviews. The act of Blacking Out text can also be understood as lighting up; the student researchers must decide what deserves to be emphasized by the light. Blacking Out is an agentic action, and focuses and re-directs the readers' attention to key points. The power dynamic between the researcher and the subject ceases being solely an intellectual concept and instead is viscerally experienced and thus made real for the researcher. Students engaging in this method undertake the responsibility that comes with shining light on what they identify as most important. BPT opens up new ways to teach undergraduates about the complexities of navigating their identity as marginalized people while they simultaneously enjoy the privileges that they can access because of their place in higher education; student researchers who are also members of the community being researched can use BPT to grapple with the contradictions that shape their social positions. The research process and the findings or outcomes are thus embodied and enacted through the physical act of Blacking Out,

transforming a traditional research praxis into an inquiry that centers and interrogates how power relationships are acted out and experienced. Through BPT, Tony has provided an organic and authentic way for students to explore and learn about themselves even as they remix the mainstream discourse narrated about their communities and their own identities. Because the students can create many different versions of outcomes from the same interview transcript, they can explore multiple possibilities and revisions of the same data. Thus, BPT provides a means of pedagogy, self-reflexive praxis, and the possibility of reinvention and reimagining who we are and how students see themselves throughout the research process, within the academy, and beyond. The remainder of the Black Out text is “lit,” both in terms of positioning students’ own ideas about analysis and exploring the “how” and “why” of their community members’ responses to their research. The students are only able to light up and illuminate because of what they chose to Black Out. This analysis provides insight into not only the research, but the research process; the interviews are explored and analyzed even as the student researcher is required to reflect on what their choices about key terms and phrases shows about who they are and what they value. The agency and practice of re-presenting research through poetry that is ultimately meant to be performed live for the public puts their bodies and decisions on the line. This is not a task to be taken lightly. Social responsibility hits differently when students must perform their ideas in public and are accountable for what they choose to include or highlight. For students unaccustomed to being listened to, this amplification of their agency provides a new experience and opportunity for exploring their own values and perceptions.

In the section below, we have demonstrated each step of BPT. We exchanged responses to the same set of open-ended questions and then created the final “data poems” based on our interviews.

8 Why “Blacking Out” Matters in the Hip Hop Classroom: turning Expectations Out

Interview questions: Do you see any parts of your identity reflected in mainstream Hip Hop? Which parts are missing? Where do you see your students reflected in mainstream Hip-Hop?

8.1 *Tony’s Interview Transcript*

“Within the context of mainstream Hip-hop, I see glimpses of myself in the music – not so much in the content, but more in the lyricism – the

verbal artistry of rhythmic spoken words. Sometimes, I think I'd make a great battle rapper, cause I got some clever punchlines, a decent flow, and my wordplay ain't nothing to be fucked with. But I can't freestyle and spitting a poem over a timed beat is a little intimidating. I also see myself in the swag and coolness of Black culture which is amplified through Hip-hop. I see myself in the social resistance and the liberatory power of arts movements created by Black and Brown young people. However, what I don't see in mainstream Hip-hop, are the stories of people like me – who blur the line between the academy and the neighborhoods that the academy talks about. I don't see enough light shining on Hip-hop educators working to improve learning and engagement conditions for kids stuck in the margin in schools and classrooms around the world. What about us ain't popular enough? What about us ain't sexy enough to grab the attention of educational policy makers, school and district leaders who are trying to solve problems in education? I'll also say that while there may be a severe under-representation of Black gay men in mainstream Hip-hop, many of us work in an unpopular place, education. And our students fucking love us – hell, the world fetishizes about us and appropriates our culture for their benefit, and yet ignores our voices. The entire world loves to “yessssssss honey!!!!” and “throw shade” and “- which has become vocabulary in the global popular lexicon, yet the funnel that sucks up and spits out Hip-hop to the masses is filtered through a sieve of hyper-masculinity that won't allow Black gay men, like me, to be great. I will say though, that I am inspired by the possibility of Hip-hop to become popular education – where voices like mine, and many others become normalized within the context of mainstream.”

8.2 *Blackout of Tony's Interview*

████████████████████, I see glimpses of myself in the music – not ██████████ in the content, ██████████ in the ██████████ verbal artistry of rhythmic spoken words. ██████████ I'd make a great battle rapper ██████████ got some clever punchlines, a decent flow, ██████████ my wordplay ain't nothing to be ██████████ with. ██████████
████████████████████. ██████████
the swag and coolness of Black culture ██████████ amplified ██████████ Hip-hop. ██████████ social resistance ██████████ liberatory power of ██████████ movements created by Black and Brown young people. ██████████ I don't see ██████████ stories of people ██████████ – who blur the line between the academy and the neighborhoods ██████████

[REDACTED]. I don't see enough light shining [REDACTED] Hip-hop educators working [REDACTED] for kids stuck in the margin [REDACTED] around the world. [REDACTED] us ain't popular enough? [REDACTED] us ain't sexy enough to grab [REDACTED] attention [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] under-representation of Black gay men [REDACTED] many of us work in [REDACTED], education. [REDACTED] our students [REDACTED] love us – [REDACTED], the world fetishizes [REDACTED] us [REDACTED] appropriates our culture [REDACTED] yet ignores our voices. The entire world loves [REDACTED] “yessssssss honey!!!!” and “throw shade” [REDACTED] become vocabulary in the global popular lexicon, yet the funnel that sucks up and spits out Hip-hop [REDACTED] is filtered through a sieve [REDACTED] hyper-masculinity [REDACTED] won't allow Black gay men, like me, [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] I am inspired by [REDACTED] possibility [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] voices like mine, [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] normalized [REDACTED]

8.3 *Data Poem – Tony*

“Enough Light Shining”

I see glimpses
 of myself in the music –
 not in the content
 in verbal artistry
 rhythmic spoken words

I'd make a great battle rapper
 got some clever punchlines,
 a decent flow,
 my wordplay ain't nothing to be fucked with.

the swag and coolness of Black culture amplified Hip-Hop.
 the social resistance
 liberatory power
 movements created by Black Brown young people.
 I don't see
 stories of people
 who blur the line

between the academy
and the neighborhoods.

I don't see
enough light shining
Hip-Hop educators working
for kids stuck in the margin
around the world.
us ain't popular enough?
us ain't sexy enough to grab attention?

under-representation
of Black gay men in mainstream
many of us work
in education.
our students love us
the world fetishizes us
appropriates
yet ignores our voices.
The entire world loves to
"yessssssss honey!!!!"
"throw shade"
become vocabulary

the funnel that sucks up and spits out
Hip-Hop
is filtered through
a sieve
hyper-masculinity
won't allow Black gay men,
like me

I am inspired
by possibility voices like mine
normalized.

8.4 *Crystal's Interview Transcript*

"Sometimes. I think that's what appealed to me so much as a young person growing up is that Hip-Hop did not back down. The contradiction of my identities is always located somewhere in this cultural space,

especially in the music. I knew Hip-Hop first because of the mainstream, whatever that means. I don't judge the media or mainstream too harshly only because I don't rely on it as my source. I see aspects of my identity that are not acceptable or indigestible or angry or full of pleasure in Hip-Hop and in some mainstream artists' work. I see my work ethic and my commitment to God and my family over everything. Sacrifice is there and adaptability. And these are qualities I also see my students within new or popular parts of Hip-Hop too. They are like, the MOST New York, and represent so many different parts of the world and experiences and I think Hip-Hop is that sometimes too. They are striving and competing to be the best, no matter what the stories are that are being told about them, which is easily paralleled to mainstream Hip-Hop. What I often see that sometimes bothers me in myself, in my students, in Hip-Hop is a lack of balance, or so much of an ego that no humility is present because it takes humility to learn and to teach for sure. Also, self-reliance to a point of self-destruction, or resistance to new experiences. That's not balance. And I think that's what is missing."

8.5 *Blackout of Crystal's Interview*

_____ a young person
 _____ Hip-Hop did not back down. _____ my
 identities _____ located _____ in this cultural space, _____
 the music. I knew Hip-Hop _____ because of _____ mainstream, whatever
 that means. _____ media _____
 _____ I see _____ my identity _____
 not acceptable _____ indigestible _____ angry _____ full of pleasure in Hip-Hop _____
 _____ I see my work ethic _____ my _____
 _____ God _____ my family over everything. Sacrifice _____ and adapt-
 ability. _____ I _____ see my students _____ in _____
 _____ Hip-Hop _____ the MOST New York, _____
 _____ different parts of the world _____ Hip-Hop
 is that _____ too. _____ striving and competing _____ no
 matter _____ the stories _____ told about them, _____
 parallel _____ to mainstream _____ What _____ both-
 ers me _____ is a lack of balance _____ so
 much _____ ego _____ no humility _____ it takes humility to
 learn and to teach _____ self-reliance to a point of self-destruction,
 _____ resistance _____ balance. _____
 _____ is missing.

8.6 *Data Poem – Crystal*

“Balance”

As a young person
Hip-Hop did not
back down my identities
located in this cultural space
the music

I knew Hip-Hop
because of mainstream
whatever that means, media
I see my identity
Not acceptable
Indigestible
Angry
Full of pleasure

In Hip-Hop
I see my work ethic
my God
my family over everything
sacrifice and adaptability
I see my students
in Hip-Hop
the most
New York
different parts of the world
Hip-Hop is that too.
Striving and competing
No matter the stories
Told about them
Parallel to mainstream

What bothers me
Is a lack of balance
So much ego
No humility
It takes humility

To learn and teach
Self-reliance
To the point of self-destruction
Resistance
Balance is missing

9 “Enough Light Shining”: using Knowledge of Self to Re-shape Outcomes

We consider this publication of the BPTs we co-created to function as one type of performance. Our goal is to share these poems with the students in this course when they are trained, and thus complete the final step of “embodiment” or “performance.” Because we perform regularly as artists, our tendency in the classroom is to also perform as educators: we rehearse, prepare, engage the audience, and emcee with our students. Frankly, our investment is higher on campus because the risks are greater and more is at stake in terms of paychecks, student evaluations, and the politics that manipulate higher education spaces to maintain the status quo. There is also a mainstream identity and expectation that educators, specifically Hip Hop educators, must grapple with which invites further study. Mainstream identities for educators imply mediocrity—these are educators satisfied with the status quo, who are reluctant to critique or reflect on their classroom or scholarship. The mainstream identity for faculty in higher education perpetuates a narrative that social justice remains a largely intellectual pursuit and encourages what Tony names a “lazy pedagogy.” Lazy pedagogy chooses the path of least disruption. For example, faculty of color who may show up and provide physical representation, but who decline to commit to the daily, disciplined work of grappling with internalized oppression and the impact of the seduction of power and privilege on their pedagogy. Or, White faculty who think that simply adding one “social justice” reading to a syllabus or posting a slick social media caption is satisfactory. Those actions are fine, but they are a *minimum*, and a Hip Hop praxis requires excellence, not mediocrity. We rebuke the spirit of lazy pedagogy, which seeks out self-promotion and one-off instances to perform as social justice educators yet abandons students and causes for the sake of comfort. Instead, we call for our comrades to engage in sustainable, long-term critical Hip Hop pedagogy that persists even when it’s not on trend and when it doesn’t garner attention or applause. We must reflect on our own complicity engaging in this mainstream, for better or for worse. What demands does the mainstream expectation place on our identities as educators invested in social justice and

equity? How are our appearances, behaviors and performances of those identities policed and by whom? These are not easy questions, and as always, we turn to “knowledge of self” the fifth element of Hip Hop to guide our inquiry. However, for us, invested as we are in liberation, because we perform as spoken word poets and emcees, our voices, bodies, and spirits are on the line when we resist. After all, knowledge of self is arguably the most crucial element of the culture and because our work brings us in relationship with youth, we emphasize teaching and learning about identity to equip them to navigate and amplify the power dynamics that confront us all. For those of us ready to refuse lazy pedagogy, for those of us doing the work of being uncomfortable and squaring up with our simultaneous implicitness in the system and our glorious defiance by bringing our whole selves into higher ed spaces thus inviting our students to meet us with their whole selves, BPT is one way to dig into that fertile soil to see what we find.

Risking a new endeavor in the classroom is part and parcel of Hip Hop pedagogy and critical engagement for us. The reality is, we don’t know how successful this attempt to integrate an explicit research method will be, nor can we predict how it will impact the students. We understand our role as Hip Hop educators to include the facilitation and modeling of reflexive practices that incorporate and include our experiences even as we strive to encourage the students to work towards vulnerability. And if this idea ultimately fails, we will do what Hip Hop always does—create something new out of nothing. Black-out Poetic Transcription is a sound research tool, and we propose that the concept of reflection, navigating identities and co-creating new futures is important to demonstrate in our college classrooms. Our efforts to lay out the details of the process and our hopes for the possibility of this method is intended as a signal to our peers who face similar struggles and desire so much to propel students beyond the mainstream. We are here to disrupt, to make demands, and to do so grounded deeply in love.

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