

## Contemporary Christian Education for the Hip-Hop Generation

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***“Students try to believe in what is most real despite what must be seen at times like an overwhelming conspiracy to silence their inner worlds.”***

John M. Rankin

### INTRODUCTION

In this quotation, John M. Rankin author of Objects on the Shelf: Transitional Objects in Secondary School Curriculum provides a composite understanding of the inner landscape of teens around the world. This excerpt has caused me to pause and reflect on the social, emotional, educational and spiritual life of teenagers who are absorbed into the Hip-Hop culture of America. This work will articulate the elements of a sustained conversation about Christian Education theory for the Hip-Hop generation. To achieve this end, the first task at hand is to disclose the origins of Hip-Hop, and carefully defines Hip-Hop culture and its constituents.

### CONTEXT/PROBLEMATIC

Hip-Hop's genesis occurred in New York City during the mid-seventies. At its inception, Hip-Hop was a vehicle for African American inner city youth to throw block parties, parties at area clubs, and make money as DJ's and promoters. Hip-Hop remained largely ignored outside of New York City's ghettos until the fall of 1979 when the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" brought Hip-Hop national and international attention.<sup>1</sup> Hip-Hop is now a billion-dollar industry and has become the voice of young people. It breaks down racial, ethnic, gender, class, language and regional barriers.<sup>2</sup> Hip-Hop has become the greatest cultural bridge in the pop culture of America today.<sup>3</sup>

Hip-Hop is the name of young America's collective consciousness. It is generally expressed through the unique elements of Breakin, Emceein, Graffiti Art, Deejayin, Beatboxin, Street Fashion, Street Language, Street Knowledge, and Street Entrepreneurialism. To its constituents, Hip-Hop is a state of mind. The aforementioned categories constitute the nine elements of Hip-Hop. Below are definitions of each from the website—The Temple of Hiphop, an urban think tank.

**Breakin** is the study and application of street dance forms. It is commonly referred to as freestyle street dancing. Breakin moves are commonly used in aerobics and other exercises that refine the body.<sup>4</sup>

**Emceein** is the study and application of rap, poetry and divine speech. It is commonly referred to as rappin or rap. Its practitioners are known as Emcees or rappers. The Emcee is a Hip-Hop poet who directs and moves the crowd by rhythmically rhyming in spoken word. The

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<sup>1</sup> [www.rockhall.com--exhibitions](http://www.rockhall.com--exhibitions) essay. Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum: Exhibitions. A Hip Hop Story by Kevin Powell, curatorial consultant who traced the past and present of Hip-Hop's origins and development.

<sup>2</sup> Tony Mitchell, ed. Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA. (Middleton:Wesleyan University Press, 2001) p.1. This work contains thirteen essays that reveal the diasporic manifestations of international hip-hop.

<sup>3</sup> William Eric Perkins, ed. Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.p.262. In the epilogue Perkins makes the claim that rap music and the hip hop style has managed to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries in its wide appeal to youth.

<sup>4</sup> [www.templeofhiphop.org](http://www.templeofhiphop.org) all definitions are posted on the website under refinements. This website chronicles the origins, development and future of Hip-Hop. Refinements are actually definitions of Hip-Hop street language (slang)

word Emcee comes from the abbreviated form of Master of Ceremonies. Early Hiphoppas transformed the traditional character of the M.C. to include crowd participation routines and poetry.<sup>5</sup>

**Deejayin** is the study and application of Rap music production and radio broadcasting. It refers to the work of a disc jockey. Hip-Hop's disc jockey doesn't just play vinyl records, tapes and compact discs, but he/she interacts artistically with the performance of a recorded song by—cuttin, mixin and scratchin the song in all of its recorded formats. Its practitioners are known as turntablists, deejays, mixologists and jammasters.<sup>6</sup>

**Graffiti Art** is the study and application of color, light and handwriting. It is drawing that is scribbled, sprayed or scratched. Graffiti artists seek to be masters of handwriting and art. They rate themselves on their ability to write or draw a good story.<sup>7</sup>

**Beatboxin** is the study and application of body music. It commonly refers to the act of creating rhythmic sounds with various parts of the body, particularly the throat, mouth and hands. Its practitioners are known as human beatboxes or human orchestras.<sup>8</sup>

**Street Fashion** is the study and application of street trends and styles. It commonly refers to the clothing trends of the inner city. However, Street Fashion deals with all trends and styles of Hip-Hop culture—what's in and what's out, regardless of the expression, self-expression through Street Fashion is an important way to present Hip-Hop's identity and ideology to society.<sup>9</sup>

**Street Language** is the study and application of street communication. It is commonly referred to as Black English, Urban Slang and Ebonics. It is Hip-Hop's language and linguistic codes that exemplify the verbal communication of the streets. Advanced Street Language includes the correct pronunciation of one's native and national language as it pertains to life in the inner city.<sup>10</sup>

**Street Knowledge** is the study and application of ancestral wisdom. It commonly refers to the basic common sense and accumulated wisdom of inner city families. It consists of techniques, phrases, codes and terms used to survive within the inner cities. It involves the ability to reason soundly with or without the ideas or validation of the academic mainstream. Much of Hip-Hop's communal knowledge can be found with its comedians, poets and authors.<sup>11</sup>

**Street Entrepreneurialism** is the study and application of fair trade and Hip-Hop business management. It is commonly referred to as street trade, having game, the natural salesman or the smooth diplomat who creates business opportunities. Entrepreneurialism focuses on the motivating spirit to be self-employed, inventive, creative and self-educated. Its practitioners are known as hustlers and self-starters.<sup>12</sup>

Hiphop Kulture as it is referred to by the Temple of Hiphop is an inner city movement that seeks victory over the oppressive routine of urban life. The Temple of Hiphop's founder KRS-ONE (Lawrence Parker) announced Hiphop as an international culture for peace and prosperity at the United Nations in New York City in 2001. Defined by Parker as a spiritual art

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, refinements

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, refinements

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, refinements

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, refinements

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, refinements

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, refinements

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, refinements

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, refinements

form, Hip-Hop cannot be interpreted or described by words alone. It is a feeling, awareness, and a state of mind. Intellectually, Hip-Hop is an alternative behavior that enables one to transform subjects and objects in an attempt to describe and or change the character and desire of one's inner being.<sup>13</sup>

At the Temple of Hiphop, Hiphop is practiced as a unique inner-city awareness that enhances one's ability to self-create. It is a "sight" a way to view the world. As an acronym, the Temple of Hiphop teaches H.I.P.H.O.P. as His/Her Infinite Power Helps Oppressed People. Over the years, Hip-Hop has evolved into a global culture, transcending geographical, gender and racial boundaries, but for the purposes of this paper, African American youth will be the focus. The constituents of this culture are called Hiphoppas. This culture and her people are alive and represented in urban, suburban and rural areas.

Since it's beginning, Hip-Hop has been a youth movement. Ten to twenty-four year olds give Hip-Hop life. In Hip-Hop they've found a religion that gives them principles to live by. For many of these youth and young adults Hip-Hop is their only way of life. For them, Hip-Hop is an identity, until they find their own.<sup>14</sup> Many of these principles perpetuated by the Hip-Hop and Rap artists blatantly contradict the teaching of Jesus and Muhammad, the leaders of the two most prominent religions among the Hip-Hop generation. As we examine the Hip-Hop culture of today, what we witness is a far cry from its original intentions.

Chicago based writer Stephanie Mwandisi Gadlin who focuses on cultural and socio-political issues, has written what she terms, "Hip Hop's Unspoken Ten Commandments."<sup>15</sup> They are:

1. Thou must dis' black women
2. Thou must "lyrically" kill
3. Thou must covet
4. Thou must have a lot of sex
5. Thou must celebrate the drug culture
6. Thou must rarely talk about God and spirituality
7. Thou must promote capitalism
8. Thou cannot have a sense of history
9. Thou must not advocate
10. Thou must promote all things ghetto<sup>16</sup>

For the purposes of this paper, Unspoken Commandment Six is the problem that will be examined, as we articulate the purposes, practices and foundations of this Christian Education Theory. Gadlin's sixth commandment states:

Thou must rarely talk about God and spirituality. You must lyrically condone atheism and a false belief system that negates the existences of a higher being. You must routinely question the existence of a god by lyrically challenging him/her/it to take your life or to grant you three wishes. You are to refer to yourself as a god who gives and takes life. You

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. What is Hip-Hop?

<sup>14</sup> Devone Holt Hip-Hop Slop: The Impact of A Dysfunctional Culture (Louisville: Chicago Spectrum Press, 2003) p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Gadlin offers a contemporary critique of Hip Hop culture and how it is perpetrated by entertainers, athletes and rap artists. Her article can be found online at the Black Commentator which is a commentary, analysis and investigations on issues affecting African Americans. [www.blackcommentator.com](http://www.blackcommentator.com).

<sup>16</sup> Gadlin, "Hip Hop's Unspoken Commandments—April 17, 2003.

may lyrically create your own religion, based on a ghetto belief system. Thou shalt not talk about life and death as it relates to religious texts. You are prohibited from acknowledging any spiritual beliefs that may have been instilled you by family. However, you may identify with a Jesus by wearing a large, diamond encrusted piece whereby you may brag about its costs. Under no circumstance are you to promote prayer, reflection, meditation, atonement, redemption, sacrifice, mercy or grace. The consumer fan base must identify with your lack of spiritual grounding by believing that the only gods are sex and money. By keeping this commandment you vow to limit your personal spiritual growth and development. You also vow to never be seen publicly in a church, synagogue, mosque, temple or other house of worship and reflection.<sup>17</sup>

To address this problem specifically, I offer a definition of Hip-Hop Womanist Transformative Pedagogy that will serve as a preliminary framework for a Contemporary Christian Education theory for the Hip-Hop generation. Hip-Hop Womanist Transformative Pedagogy is the art of teaching that is informed by womanist theology and ethics, and guided by the aesthetics of hip-hop culture, that creates new forms of knowledge through the use of imaginative instructional methods to foster Christian formation, theological grounding, ethical embodiment, values clarification and historical enlightenment for the constituents of Hip-Hop.

### **PURPOSES OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION**

The primary purpose of Christian Education is to make disciples or learners of all ages. Christian teaching must empower the people and help them to flourish by bringing honest dialogue and relevant teaching into the Christian Education setting. We must meet students at their level of need. Christian Educator LaVerne Tolbert calls this transformation teaching, and the goal is to teach the word of God so that lives and minds are changed. She says:

The type of teaching that causes transformation occurs when learners replace bad habits with biblical ones, when godly thought processes result in right actions. As teachers we partner with the Holy Spirit in this transforming process.<sup>18</sup>

As we engage in Christian Education from an African American perspective, another purpose is to correct history. Throughout history, Christianity has been called the white man's religion. However, we must educate our youth and present specific dates, events and personalities that indicate that the early Christian movements occurred in northern and southern parts of Africa.<sup>19</sup>

Christian Education for the Hip-Hop constituency must meet the needs specific to the survival and advancement of African Americans. African Americans continue to have a number of survival needs that are reflected in our struggles for social equality. The African American church has traditionally developed ministries of charity; however the church is increasingly being called upon to address current and in many instances troubling social problems such as drug addiction, single parenthood, inadequate educational opportunities and performance; and

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<sup>17</sup> Gadlin, "Hip Hop's (Unspoken) Ten Commandments. p. 6

<sup>18</sup> LaVerne Tolbert. Teaching Like Jesus—A Practical Guide to Christian Education in Your Church. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) p.23

<sup>19</sup> Lora Ellen McKinney. Christian Education in the African American Church—A Guide to Teaching Truth. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003) p. 17

community health issues such as diabetes, prostate cancer, HIV/AIDS, and other health related problems that disproportionately affect African Americans.<sup>20</sup>

A third purpose of Christian Education in the African American context is to re-establish important cultural values. In years past, African and African American values have traditionally reflected the strengths of our communities, however recently we have seen the deterioration of these life-giving principles by the negative aspects of the Hip-Hop culture. It must be the task of the African American church to reinvigorate its teachings with positive beliefs and standards that have supported us and aided our survival.

African American Christian Education must engage African American youth in narrative models of teaching that will help them to critically reflect on their life stories in light of the Christian faith story. We must guide our learners to envision and engage in actions that hold promise for their liberation in the midst of various life situations.<sup>21</sup>

### **PRACTICES OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION**

When considering practices, I would offer the following opportunities to accomplish the purposes of Christian education aforementioned. **Worship** is an occasion for the people of God to gather around the word and sacraments, as well as give praise and honor to our Creator. Worship must be transforming and empowering and should include elements of the Hip-Hop culture such as Hip-Hop gospel music, praise dancing, praise teams, mime ministry and preaching that is relevant to the life situations particular to the Hip-Hop constituency. In some instances, this may require offering a hip-hop worship experience in addition to the church's morning worship experience.

**Storylinking** termed by Anne Streaty Wimberly is a contemporary model of Christian Education (bible study) from the African American perspective. The foundation of the model draws on Christian Education approaches during slavery. It entails a teaching/learning process focused on liberation and vocation. Storylinking is a process where people connect components of their everyday life stories with a Christian faith story found in scripture. People also connect their personal stories with the Christian faith heritage stories of African Americans found outside the scripture. The intent is for African Americans to be encouraged and inspired by the lives of persons who faced life circumstances with which they can identify. Storylinking engages persons in a process that is aimed toward liberation and vocation from a Christian perspective.

**Event Centered Education** proposed by Charles Foster states that paradigmatic, seasonal, occasional and unexpected events provide a pattern for participation by the people. To provide successful event centered education there must be preparation, engagement and mutually critical reflection.<sup>22</sup> This preparation requires developing familiarity with the stories, texts, roles and actions associated with events. It requires practice so that the learners can anticipate experiencing something of the power the event has had for people in the past. It also requires examination of the texts, symbols and actions of the event. Engagement in the event is crucial. Events become transformative for the learners when they allow their imaginations to be filled with possibilities, relationships and repeated engagement. Event centered education requires

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.

<sup>21</sup> Anne Streaty Wimberly. Soul Stories: African American Christian Education. (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1994) p. 50.

<sup>22</sup> Charles R. Foster. Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) p. 47-49.

sharing our experiences of the events in which we participate and assess meanings from the perspective of our own faith traditions and biblical experiences.

**Hip-Hop Chairs** uses Hip-Hop music as a resource. It is an exercise designed to engage groups or individual young people in discussions of values, beliefs and behaviors using the popular culture they relate to best.<sup>23</sup> The objective is to engage all group members in an energetic, peer-centered discussion of relevant social and personal issues through the analysis of popular hip-hop songs. Questions that can be touched upon during the discussion include:

- What is the artist trying to say?
- What do the lyrics mean to you in your life?
- Do the lyrics seem true to your experiences?
- What struck you about the tone of the lyrics?
- Do you agree with the message?
- Is the message something that young people should follow?

Hip-Hop songs with both positive and negative messages should be used to test the development of the student's beliefs. Themes in the music should deal with current issues with which young people have been struggling and should act as a bridge to more in-depth discussion.<sup>24</sup>

**The Wall** is an activity to help learners to self-analyze and examine the economic misfortunes (unemployment/underemployment) of young people and to share methods that other youth, as well as themselves, have used and can use to overcome these barriers to achievement.<sup>25</sup> This is a peer-centered learning exercise designed to allow learners to self-identify obstacles to success and methods for overcoming these challenges.

The aforementioned practices are those that have been used in various Christian Education settings. However, with the development of Hip-Hop Womanist Transformative Pedagogy additional practices will be tested through living laboratory experiences. Ideally, Christian education practices will evolve as a method of fostering Christian formation, theological grounding, ethical embodiment, values clarification and historical enlightenment.

## **FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION**

Foundations that inform this emerging theory include the bible, African American History, popular culture, ontology, axiology, epistemology and womanist pedagogy. The bible serves as the primary curricular foundation in Christian education, and essential ingredients for an effective teacher include biblical knowledge, an accurate interpretation of scripture, interpersonal rapport and concern of the listener; teaching skill and moral excellence. The African American story is about a people who continue to ask, Who am I? in the midst of society's assaults to their dignity. The study of African American history provides a bedrock wherein we can study the struggles, experiences, triumphs and tragedies of the life of people of African descent; and provide the Hip-Hop constituency with a new perspective of who they are as they navigate the tumultuous waters of the popular culture in which they exist. Popular culture is not a fad, but over the years has become a lifestyle and source of identity for its constituents. Being aware of the trends and styles of pop culture assists us in developing positive relationships with youth. If we are to reach and empower them, and help them to make God a vital reality in everyday living, our knowledge of popular culture is integral. Also, crucial to this

<sup>23</sup> [www.ydrf.com](http://www.ydrf.com), Youth Development and Research Fund, Inc.—Helping Adults Connect To Youth—Hip Hop Chairs

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, Hip Hop Chairs

<sup>25</sup> [www.ydrf.com](http://www.ydrf.com), Youth Development and Research Fund, Inc.—Helping Adults Connect To Youth—The Wall

theory are the philosophical concepts of ontology, axiology and epistemology. Ontologically, we must view each learner as having ultimate worth. Christian education provides informational opportunities for learning the expectations of discipleship, understanding the life and teachings of Jesus and determining the spiritual gifts that each learner can contribute to the body of believers.<sup>26</sup> To do this we must get to know the learners, respect them, reward them and relate new and relevant ideas. Imparting wisdom about the values of people of African descent is paramount. We must educate youth about the positive beliefs and standards that have supported African American people and has aided in our survival as a race as a means of studying the foundations of knowledge for diasporic people. Using the principles of the Nguzo Saba found in African American holiday of Kwanzaa is a beginning method to clarify values and infuse Africentric beliefs into Christian Education. To do this, we must be actively incorporate Womanist Pedagogy as a means of educational praxis. This didactic is proposed by Christian Social Ethicist Katie Geneva Cannon. Womanist Pedagogy is organized into three major principles—historical ethos, embodied pathos and communal logos.<sup>27</sup> Historical ethos is teaching from and with an Afrocentric perspective. Embodied pathos includes the requirements for the course are designed to facilitate students in teaching themselves what they need to know. Communal logos has to do with creating a classroom environment where conversation freely flows from teacher to student; from student to teacher and from student to student.

## SUMMARY

The history of Africans in America is story. The triumphs, trials and tribulations are recounted as story. Their culture and lifestyle is transmitted through story. Their religious beliefs are understood fully through story. Whether urban, suburban or rural the Christian story is best understood in the context of story. The development of this theory has evolved as a story. The styles, trends and lifestyle of constituents of the Hip-Hop generation and new black youth culture continuously evolve as stories to define their present reality. Hopefully this story and their story will leave a legacy for future African American Christians to dissect, transform and revise as we seek to be faithful to the task of Christian Religious Education.

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<sup>26</sup> Lora Ellen McKinney, *Christian Education in the African American Church*, p. 14

<sup>27</sup> Katie Geneva Cannon “*Translating Womanism into Pedagogical Praxis*” presented at the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Lecture—The Loy H. Witherspoon Lectures in Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, April 2, 1997.

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## INTERNET RESOURCES

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[www.rockhall.com](http://www.rockhall.com)

[www.templeofhiphop.org](http://www.templeofhiphop.org)

[www.ydrf.com](http://www.ydrf.com)