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Robert J. Price Jr.
Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, USA

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Hegemony, Hope, and the Harlem Renaissance: Taking Hip Hop Culture Seriously

Robert J. Price, Jr.

Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, USA

Adult education instructors and administrators, who typically are not members of the hip hop generation, often have little knowledge and understanding of rap music (a.k.a. gansta rap) and hip hop culture, and consequently do not take the black popular cultural phenomenon seriously as it relates to adult education. Adult educators, especially those that serve in urban contexts, must listen to, take seriously, and understand adults in order to bridge the “culture gap” between mainstream and hip hop cultures. Talmadge Guy (2004) theorizes that the impact of hip hop culture and gangsta rap music on adult education is becoming more evident in urban environments as more and more young adults enter adult education programs and bring hip hop and gangsta rap influences into the classroom. As long as a cultural gap exists between professional, paid, and volunteer providers of adult education working in urban contexts and the students, the needs of adult learners will not be met.

New Head Niggas In Charge

The cultural gap extends to the African-American community as well. Bill Cosby publicly criticized young people in the hip hop culture for their use of Ebonics instead of edited American English. His public statements infuriated many in the hip-hop community. Cosby represents the *ol skool* (hip-hop spelling) that advocates the pursuit of education and career orientation as a means to the American Dream. “You can’t become a doctor and speak like this!” (And he made light of the use of Ebonics as an aberration of the language). Cosby’s preemptive public confrontation exposed the polemic debate between the Civil Rights and hip hop models of culture and worldview. As Cosby experienced in the retaliation from his hip hop critics, there is clearly a cultural gap between Civil Rights and hip-hop. Todd Boyd (2003) breaks it down nicely in *The New H.N.I.C. (Head Niggas in Charge): The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop*. Where Cosby symbolized what Boyd called the “race man” that conformed to mainstream white society, the hip hop culture rebels anti-socially and makes no effort to “fit in,” and does not seem to care what others think about them. The hip hop black male rejects the straight image of Bill Cosby and defines themselves as the “real niggas.” Furthermore, the Civil Rights movement is perceived as fixed in modernity with the Civil Rights era as the defining moment (sum mum bonum) of the black experience. In contradistinction, hip hop is postmodern and debunks civil rights as a meta-narrative. Boyd writes,

Hip hop has rejected and now replaced the pious, sanctimonious nature of civil rights as the defining moment of Blackness. In turn, it offers new ways of seeing and understanding what it means to be Black at this pivotal time in history. *If more people would actually listen to the music and attempt to understand the culture, we would all be better off* (my italics). Hip hop is not going anywhere. It will only get stronger. Better, and faster, like the Six Million Dollar Man, Colonel Steve Austin.

Generational Shift

The civil rights and hip hop cultural gap indicates a “generational shift” with new postmodern centers emerging in black culture. Houston A. Baker, Jr. (1984) applies the notion of “paradigm shift” advanced by Thomas Kuhn (1970) to the struggle for leadership between old and young or newly emerging intellectuals. A paradigm shift is a break with the past that is normally signaled by the adoption of a new set of guiding assumptions that unifies an intellectual community. According to Baker, a “generational shift” is an ideologically motivated movement overseen by young or newly or emergent intellectuals dedicated to refuting the work of their intellectual predecessors and to establishing a new framework for intellectual inquiry. The affective components of such shifts is described by Lewis Feuer (1975): every birth or revival of an ideology is borne by a new generational wave: in its experience, each such new intellectual generation feels everything is being born anew, that the past is meaningless, or irrelevant, or non-existent.

The generational shift at work in hip-hop culture as the new ideological nexus for black culture has implications for adult educators and administrators who need to take these cultural shifts seriously. When paradigms shift, those centered in former schools of thought are debunked and must go back to ground zero and begin learning the assumptions and worldview of the *nu skool* of thought. The knowledge and status accumulated in the old system is meaningless and irrelevant. It may seem humiliating, but adult educators and administrators must come down from their ivory towers and practice what we preach about lifelong learning in the context of hip hop culture.

Green Eggs and Hip Hop Culture

The story of *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960) written by Dr. Seuss applies to adult educators and administrators. We are socialized to like certain cultures and not others. This applies to “green eggs and hip hop culture” and the life experiences or social constructions of reality that shape our cultural biases and worldviews. Eighty-two times “I do not like” or “not” is mentioned, but he never even tried it! The point of the story is: we make “rational” and “objective” decisions that derive from subjective categories regarding *difference* without first experiencing it. This is what Walter Lippmann (1961) meant when he coined the concept of stereotype: we believe first, then see; rather see first, then believe. Once again, we must transcend cultural bias and take hip hop seriously.

Hegemony and Hope Dialectic

Walter Lippmann also describes hegemony as “manufacturing consent” through the control of information in the media. This is similar to the notion of hegemony advanced by Antonio Gramsci (1978) as the use of culture by the ruling classes to regulate uncritical consent of and orthopraxy in civil society. Hegemonic forces must be countered by self-regulating pedagogical processes that raise the consciousness and inspire hope and vision. There is a dialectical relation between hegemony (thesis) and hope (antithesis) that produces phoenix-like rising from the ashes (synthesis).

Historical reflection on the Harlem Renaissance will generate insights into the dialectical dynamics of hegemony and hope as a hermeneutic for interpreting hip hop as an urban youth culture. Given the centrifugal tendencies of generational shift, it is vital

that the dialectical tension with past social movements be maintained. So the Harlem Renaissance and hip hop culture can be compared and contrasted in dialectical relation using the following headings: spirituality, youth and representation, the streets, masculinity, mentoring, and the role of whites.

Spirituality. The spiritual energies of the Harlem Renaissance must be recognized as the inspirational force driving the cultural production. DuBois (1903) describes double consciousness as a “spiritual striving” in his classic *The Souls of Black Folks*. The notion of “souls” was important because of the hegemonic notion that black people were not fully human because they did not have souls. DuBois also wrote the *Gift of Black Folks* (1924) to define black people as spiritually endowed with gifts including intellectual resources. Alain Locke concludes the forward to *The New Negro* (1925) explaining the role of spirit and culture:

Negro life is not only establishing new contacts and founding new centers, it is finding a new soul. There is a fresh spiritual and cultural focusing. We have, as the heralding sign, an unusual outburst of creative expression. There is a renewed race-spirit that consciously and proudly sets itself apart. Justifiably then, we speak of the offerings of this book embodying these ripening forces as culled from the first fruits of the Negro Renaissance.

Hip hop culture shares the same spiritual sources derived from black church tradition. The strong tradition of creative black preaching and quality music are sources for rap music. The rapper integrates the two elements of the black church in rap music: preaching and music. The rapper preaches by creatively rhyming over music with deep bass tones. There is a spirituality at work in hip hop culture through rapper as preacher.

Youth and representation. Like hip hop culture, the Harlem Renaissance was a youth culture movement. Inscribed on the dedication page of the book is: This volume is dedicated to the younger generation. The majority of the contributors to *The New Negro* were young “rappers” in their twenties like Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston. As editor, Locke wrote “Negro Youth Speaks” to underscore the prophetic vision for the new Negro in light of the “double-consciousness” of W.E.B. DuBois. The new Negro would no longer see herself through the hegemonic eyes of dominant culture, but would self-define Negro culture and identity inspiring hope in the process. Locke (p.5) writes:

This is what, even more than any “most creditable record of fifty years of freedom,” requires that the Negro of today be seen through other than the dusty spectacles of past controversy. The day of “aunties,” “uncles” and “mammies” is equally gone. Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on...The popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a *realistic facing of facts* (emphasis mine).

The hip hop motto of “keeping it real” was first conceived by Locke in the hegemonic struggle to critique the media representation of blackness. The new negro wanted to jettison the media portrayal of blacks in *Birth of a Nation* (1915) by using the hegemonic depictions as an opportunity for adult learning and development. This is the

message of bell hooks (1992). The Buckwheat character had hegemonic intent; but “black looks” are the critical ways that adult learners interpret – not imbibe – black representations. Therefore, I agree with Guy (2004) that it is essential to promote critical media literacy among adult educators as an important first step in addressing the complex and adverse influences of gangsta rap and hip hop on adult learners in adult education classrooms.

The streets. There is also a gap between adult education and “the streets.” The streets are the *skool* of hard knocks that is the urban context for the real life world of hip hop. Guy (2004) describes it this way: Black learners who have internalized the negative messages often lack interest in pursuing education at all, and white and black educators often hold negative and stereotypical views of black learners that interfere with their ability to meet learners’ needs. Tupac Shakur defined “thug” as a hopeless or marginalized person. The “thug life” is about hard knocks because formal education is not viewed as the solution to the real life problems of violence in the hood, crack cocaine, no father’s name on the birth certificate, being a baby mama, jobless, etc.

Langston Hughes was educated on the streets of Harlem listening to the hopeless and marginalized sing the blues. Many of his poems were written to the rhythm of blues music. Hughes listened and learned from the streets. He was highly criticized by middle-class blacks for writing blues poems and his “ethnographic research” among the urban outcasts. Indeed, many judge hip hop because it is married to the streets.

Masculinity. The black male is the center in hip hop culture. The male-to-male relationships are often confrontational and ego-centric leading to violence over issues of disrespect. The gangsta style originated from gang bonding. So a gangsta has a posse or soldiers that become family and protection. Hip hop culture connects with prison culture as well. Basketball is big in hip hop culture. It is a sport where black males excel. Basketball skills are a way to prove your manhood. Male-to-female relationships are hierarchical too. The myth of black male sexual prowess is perpetuated by treating women as objects or property. Sadly, there a black girls and women that internalize the bitch and whore mentality that reinforces the stereotype of black male sexuality. Misogyny in hip hop is one the negative aspects that militates against the values of adult education. Hating on women in hip hop is grounded in subject-object detachment as source of self-esteem.

It is interesting to note that of the 28 contributors to *The New Negro*, seven were female. There could have been more females like Zora Neale Hurston, but black women were socialized to be homemakers and domestics. Meanwhile, Steven Watson (1995) describes Alain Locke as being primarily interested in working with male students because of his homosexual tendencies. The Harlem nightlife featured gin, jazz, and sex parties that openly included the gay lifestyle. (In contrast, hip hop culture is homophobic; real men “dog the women”). Watson states: Although Locke rarely saw promise in young women, he detected talent in this roughhewn, ambitious student. She could provide the connection to the black folk heritage that Locke considered essential to the creation of a New Negro literature. In the fall of 1924, he recommended her talent to Charles S. Johnson, who urged her to come to New York.

Mentoring. Mentoring is a key component in adult education and is evident in Harlem Renaissance and hip hop culture. Alain Locke is considered the “philosophical midwife” and “Dean” of the Harlem Renaissance. But insiders like Langston Hughes credit Charles S. Johnson (aforementioned) and Jessie Fauset as midwives as well. The role of the mentor in the Harlem Renaissance was vital because of the visionary function. The mentor inspires (breathes into) and conspires (breathes with) to foster hope and vision for the movement. The midwife is the encourager that brings the vision to life so that it becomes a movement. Claude McKay denounced Locke as midwife and organizer of the movement in 1930 largely due to philosophical differences. Nevertheless, Locke was the primary midwife; he skillfully imparted spirit and life to the renaissance with maieutic processes.

Hip hop has mentors that organize around a vision for hip hop culture and where it ought to go next. Cornell West, currently professor at Princeton, stepped down from his position at Harvard over his academic freedom to engage popular culture through films like *Matrix 2 an 3*, and developing a rap CD. West (2004) writes about the necessary engagement with youth culture, especially hip hop culture. Michael Eric Dyson considers himself a hip hop intellectual. Both West and Dyson engage hip hop culture and seek to influence the movement with values of adult education. Hip hop mogul Russell Simmons plays a major role as midwife for the hip hop culture. His Def Jam international conglomerate has helped move rap music into urban hip hop culture with records, comedy shows, films, and clothing. Recently, Simmons unveiled Def Jam University as a new line of clothing – not an educational component – like Akademiks. Many look to Simmons as their role model.

Role of Whites. Russell Simmons developed powerful connections with whites in the media industry to take hip hop culture to new levels. Simmons has developed a power base with the help of whites that financially control the industry. Guy writes (p. 49):

The political and economic reality is that access to the mainstream brings wealth and fame but requires that black artists yield control of their music to the hegemony of a white-owned, white-run black culture industry...These white-owned and –run companies do not operate in the interests of black urban communities seeking to reverse decades of racist segregation and disenfranchisement.

This point must be underscored: access to mainstream power and wealth comes through yielding control of their music to the hegemony of whites who control the black culture industry. This was the power relationship with whites in the Harlem Renaissance as well. White patrons like Charlotte “Godmother” Mason wielded power and influence over who received patronage and the content of their material. Godmother liked Locke and trusted his recommendations for support. She based her patronage on Locke’s recommendation and her approval of the cultural material. Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes were patrons. Godmother once read a manuscript by Zora Neale Hurston and expunged supposedly dirty words from the text. Zora was trying to “keep it real,” but Godmother would not have it because it did not fit her image of black culture. Lastly, *Nigger Heaven*

by Carl Van Vechten stirred up controversy with his perspective of black culture. It was politically tolerated because of his status derived from economic and political power.

Conclusion

The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual by Harold Cruse (1967) was a scathing critique of the cultural production approach of the Harlem Renaissance. Cruse is a Marxist. His model of transformation begins with the economic and political instead of the cultural. Cruse acknowledges the importance of cultural production, but not as the starting point to transform capitalistic society. He judged the Harlem Renaissance as a failure because the cultural approach did not have a lasting effect beyond the 1930's and did not make political impact. Meanwhile, it has been nearly 40 years since Cruse wrote his book. We can look back at the impact of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and assess the economic and political strides in social transformation since 1965. Hip hop began in South Bronx in 1979 largely due to the disappointment of young urban black over the failure of the economic and political tactics of the Civil Rights. Cruse judged the Harlem Renaissance for a lack of philosophy that gave cohesion to the movement; the same held true for the Black Power movement and the Civil Rights movement. Hip hop culture turned first to cultural production as a means to develop counter-hegemony. I disagree with Cruse. The "butterfly effect" of the Harlem Renaissance stirred the spirit for hip hop culture so that rap music was created *ex nihilo* out of the emptiness and hopelessness of South Bronx.

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