

# Critical Social Justice Possibilities in Hip-hop Literacies: An Introduction

*Elaine Richardson with Steve Lessner*

Hip-hop manifested during the Black Power Era. Black Studies scholars assert that Hip-hop pedagogy is useful when locating Black diaspora movement for liberation (Saucier & Woods). Hip-hop is inextricably bound to Black Lives Matter (BLM) era of the freedom struggle. The Black Lives Matter Hip-hop generation is shaping freedom in their own terms, sounds, and likeness (Cohen). Begun by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi and Patrisse Khan Cullors in 2013 as a hashtag after the vigilante murder of Trayvon Martin, these loving and powerful Black queer women started a movement, emphasizing the sanctity of all Black life, prioritizing the most marginalized ones. The global Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement provides synergy for Hip-hop [and others] to develop coherent political frameworks to demand long overdue justice.

However, some artists such as Kanye West, Lil Wayne, Waka Flocka Flame, 50 Cent, and others, appeared to be going down on the wrong side of history in their support of Donald Trump in the 2020 Presidential campaign. These rappers backed Trump, despite his support of white supremacist groups, confederate monuments, police brutality, anti-Black Lives Matter tactics, failures around Covid-19, which cost disproportionate loss of Black and Brown lives, and backlash against the first Black president-Barack Obama. (McGrady) Hip-hop and Trump make for strange bedfellows. We see these artists as wasting their clout on Trump. Barack Obama called upon Jay-Z to support his campaign and the rest is history. Speaking to CNN political analyst, Michael Smerconish, about Kanye West's support of Trump, Meek Mill expresses shock and disappointment:

...Kanye came out of nowhere and just went red hat, and that was kind of against everything we represent. I don't know what he represents, but coming up in the Hip-hop community, we came up fighting, and fighting for our rights for a long time, and what that red hat represents don't really represent what we've been fighting for our whole lives. (<https://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2018/12/01/meek-mill-on-prison-reform-kanye-new-album.cnn>)

Whether some members of the Hip-hop community are misguided or only focused on their own individual success, at the same time, the Black Lives Matter Hip-hop generation is striving for collective progress. In response to Derek Chauvin's very public horrific nonchalant knee-to-the-neck murder of George Floyd, that went viral, a renaissance in Black art for social justice re-emerged alongside protests across the nation and the world. Amanda Gorman, in a discussion with Michelle Obama, emphasizes that the renaissance in Black art, in fashion, music, dance, visual arts, and all

forms of human expression, is historical, grounded in the Black experience and inextricably linked to Black Lives Matter becoming the largest social movement.

With regard to visual arts, producer, entrepreneur and one of the founders of Verzuz, Kasseem Dean aka Swiss Beats is working to disrupt the art world. He has been pushing the millionaires and billionaires of the Hip-hop generation to own the culture rather than only creating it. Swiss is a graduate of the Harvard Business School and sits on the Boards of art museums and galleries in the U.S. and in London. Along with his wife, Alicia Keys, Kanye West, Jay-Z and Beyonce, Sean Combs and others, he is a collector of Black art and seeks to cultivate the importance of collecting even among non-wealthy Black people. Swiss founded the “No Commission” Art Fair. In this space and others Swiss provides a venue for Black visual artists to exhibit and retain 100% of their sales. He is also organizing around the issue of royalties for visual artists as is the practice in 70 other countries throughout the world. If this change comes, Black artists will be able to profit for any resales of their work during their lifetime. As Yvonne Bynoe states, Swiss is among the new “generation of African-American art collectors and patrons [who] are shaking up the art world. They embody the ethos of Hip Hop culture: Succeeding in a world not designed for you by reconfiguring it.” (<https://www.blackartinamerica.com/index.php/2021/05/04/how-the-hip-hop-generation-is-disrupting-the-art-world/>)

With regard to music, there will always be artists that bring a strong message. Roc Nation released an album of songs about revolution, police brutality, genocide, racism, and more on *Reprise*, with music by various artists such as Ambre, Rapsody, Vic Mensa, Ant Clemons, King Mel, Sebastian Kole and others. Tobe Nwigwe and his team dropped a short and powerful EP, *Pandemic Project*, showcasing ear and mind-opening Hip-hop beats and rhymes such as “I Need You To” urging listeners to become familiar with the evidence surrounding the murders of Breonna Taylor and Elijah McCain and demand their killers be brought to justice. *Pandemic Project* is a Black empowerment EP featuring tunes such as “Make it Home,” which is basically a prayer song for Black people to make it home alive. But if by chance in this white supremacist world we do not make it back to our hood, our nappy heads will make it to heaven, to our “nappy headed Christ.” The overall message of “Fresh Air” is to guard one’s soul, breathe, seek truth and one’s best self. “Try Jesus” is a humorous critique of the Christian non-violent teaching, to turn the other cheek. In “Hip-hop Has Been Standing Up for Black Lives for Decades: 15 Songs and Why They Matter,” Zaru and Brown survey songs from 1982-2020 that address Black experiences through memorable lyrics rooted in protest: dreams, suffering, rage, hunger, joy, survival, and unity.

In 2015, Janelle Monae released the protest song “Hell You Talmbout” with the Wondaland crew. The song admonishes listeners to say the names of Black people wrongfully killed by police and vigilantes. She performed the song in 2017 at the Women’s March in Washington, DC. September 25, 2021 in collaboration with the African American Policy Forum Monae dropped another version, “#SayHerName (Hell You Talmbout).” This song features:

Kimberlé Crenshaw, Beyoncé, Alicia Keys, Chlöe x Halle, Tierra Whack, Isis V., Zoë Kravitz, Brittany Howard, Asiahn, Mj Rodriguez, Jovian Zayne, An-

gela Rye, Nikole Hannah-Jones, Brittany Packnett Cunningham and Alicia Garza. Through this song, these women unite — not just as entertainers and activists, but also as daughters — and aim to share the stories of our sisters who have died at the hands of police. (<https://tinyurl.com/yc2tue45>)

Collaborations between activists and artists have a long and impactful history in the Black freedom struggle. Tamika Mallory is an organizer, activist, author, speaker. She has a long history of organizing, including the 2017 Women’s March, which she co-led. She co-founded Until Freedom, an organization that fights racial injustice. Jeezy features Tamika Mallory on the song “Oh Lord.” It is built around bluesy and soulful vocals from “Trouble So Hard” by Vera Hall collected by ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax in 1937. Those vocals are mixed in with parts of Tamika Mallory’s May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020 speech in Minneapolis as part of the nationwide protest around George Floyd’s murder. Tamika’s words express heart felt rage and an exacting analysis of the state of perpetual emergency experienced by the Black community. In his raspy signature tone, Jeezy is flowing with straight facts. The song is history, culture, education and protest all (w)rapped together.

Tamika Mallory did a guest appearance on the 2021 Grammy show with Lil Baby of the song “The Bigger Picture.” Lil Baby is a platinum selling award winning rapper, known for being a voice of the streets. Among his many powerful words and stories, included in the song, one of my favorites is: “I can’t lie like I don’t rap about killing and dope/But I’m telling my youngins to vote/I did what I did cause I didn’t have no choice or no hope.” It’s important that Lil Baby used his platform to showcase Tamika Mallory and her message to the multi-racial and 8.8 million viewers of the Grammy audience. She directed some of her words to President Joe Biden, demanding justice, equity, policy and spoke of the hell Black people have been catching for over 400 years. As equally important as hard-hitting words, Hiphop is all about fashion and style. In addition to her words and staged protest, Tamika’s presentation was enhanced by the fly outfit she wore. In a conversation with Tamron Hall “Tamika Mallory Was Afraid That Her Grammys Performance Would Be Edited,” Tamika discussed that she always partners with designers who have a commitment to the cause, such as Vietnamese designer, Cong Tri. There is power in unity.

Looking briefly at the Hiphop community performing other actions for social change, Meek Mill and Jay-Z partnered with New England Patriots’ owner, Robert Kraft, Philadelphia 76ers’ partner, Michael Rubin, Brooklyn Nets partner, Clara Wu Tsai among others to start REFORM Alliance. They appointed political commentator, Van Jones, as the organization’s CEO. REFORM Alliance aims to halt the cycle of the criminal justice system that keeps people on parole and probation, for violations, such as popping wheelies on one’s motor bike, or misdemeanor assault, and returning people to jail and in the system for extended terms. (France) This is what happened to Meek Mill, who has become somewhat of a poster case for prison reform. Meek Mill’s release from prison is the result of #FreeMeekMill movement involving organizations such as the Color of Change, on the ground supporters, as well as celebrities and sports stars such as LeBron James, Questlove, T.I., Philadelphia Eagles players, Colin Kaepernick, and of course Jay-Z, who penned a *New York Times* Op-ed

“The Criminal Justice System Stalks Black People Like Meek Mill.” In September of 2020, Mill and Jay-Z’s organization have realized some change beyond Meek’s release from prison. REFORM Alliance successfully advocated for California law to reduce probation: for misdemeanors one year, and two years for felonies. In January 2021, three bills were passed in Michigan. “Michigan had the sixth highest rate of probation supervision in the country. Now that Governor Gretchen Whitmer signed the bills into law, Michigan is on pace to decrease the state’s overall caseloads by 8.4 percent.” (Aniftos)

It is interesting to imagine possibilities for transformation if REFORM Alliance and Jay-Z linked their platform and resources to organizers such as Mariame Kaba and Ruthie Wilson Gilmore. In thinking about prison reform vs. prison abolition, Kaba asserts:

While some offer calls for reform, such calls ignore the reality that an institution grounded in the commodification of human beings, through torture and the deprivation of their liberty, cannot be made good. The logic of using policing, punishment, and prison has not proven to address the systemic causes of violence. It is in this climate that we argue that abolition of the prison-industrial complex is the most moral political posture available to us. Because the deconstruction of the American system of mass incarceration is possible, and it is time. (25)

As Alicia Garza observes, it takes organized movement of those affected to create lasting social change:

The real story behind any successful movement is many people coming together to create the change they want to see in the world. This truth has been obscured by popular narratives of successful social change that tend to revolve around the courageous actions and moral clarity of one person, usually a cisgender heterosexual man (212).

This seems to describe Ice Cube’s approach with *A Contract with Black America* (CWBA) ([contractwithblackamerica.us/wp-content/uploads/CWBA-Full-Contract.pdf](https://contractwithblackamerica.us/wp-content/uploads/CWBA-Full-Contract.pdf)). As Ice Cube explains, in an interview with journalist, Roland Martin, he set out to create a bi-partisan initiative to make whichever party that got into power (Democratic or Republican in the 2020 election) work to repair oppression of Blacks as a protected group. He developed the CWBA after the George Floyd killing and social protests and aimed to make concrete demands (Ice Cube Interview). The CWBA received criticism for omitting important entities of Black community (e. g. Black women, queer people, undocumented people, and more), and received negative evaluation from many for being seen as working with the Trump Administration. Though Ice Cube has since added a section on Black women, it is problematic to create a comprehensive document.

Roland Martin introduced Ice Cube to Alicia Garza during Cube’s interview. Garza explained to him that his approach of going to the Trump Administration to make a transaction was misguided, and that it would be more productive if he shared his platform and joined forces with organizations such as hers (Black2theFuture.Org),

to bring many thousands together in the power of organized movement. Hopefully, Garza and Cube get together.

There are countless examples of critical social justice work and possibilities underway in the Hip-hop community, too many to name, as well as many that we are not aware of. Our aim is to shine light on the work that abounds in the midst of the twin pandemics by scholars, educators, activists and artists. Hip-hop is the people. There's power in the people. Critical social justice possibilities in Hip-hop literacies is about possibilities in people. As educators, we cannot best serve those we do not love. Love is critical. In that spirit, we proudly present the four articles that comprise this special issue.

Elaine Richardson's 'She Ugly': Black Girls, Women in Hip-hop and Activism-Hip-hop Feminist Literacies Perspectives" draws upon Hip-hop feminism, studies of Black girlhood, and Black women and girls' literacies to illuminate the layered and violent narratives that shape society's treatment of Black women and girls, what these narratives look like in everyday life, how they are taken up and negotiated in different social spheres, such as an afterschool club for Black middle school girls and the platforms and artistry of women Hip-hop artists and creatives. Richardson considers what activism is possible through juxtaposing Black girls as emerging creatives, celebrity corporate artist activists Nicki Minaj and Cardi B, independent activist artists such as Noname and dream hampton. Given the far-reaching representations of Black women and girls in popular culture, the art, lives and platforms of women in Hip-hop are critical sites to understanding complexities, strategies and possibilities for social change.

In "Higher Hustle: Nipsey's Post Hip Hop Literacies," Marquese McFerguson and Aisha Durham offer an analysis of Nipsey Hustle and the critical social justice Hip-hop literacies he performed, through the ways he stood against the white-owned mainstream music industry and the roles ascribed to Black men. Through owning his music, its production and distribution, building a business in his community and investing in its people, Hustle demonstrates an emancipated Blackness through economics, creative Black political empowerment, and literacy in the collective interest of Black people. Hustle imagined radical change from the bottom-up, drawing upon his Black diaspora identity (Eritrean and Los-Angeles), his other outlawed identity (as a former gang banger with insight into gang life as a mode of survival in the hood), and a successful self-made independent artist. McFerguson and Durham also show Nipsey's attunement to the interiority of Black masculinity, exposing the fullness of Black life, as his music and commentary drops the mask and rescripts the hardcore street Black male rapper, to expose structural conditions. In these ways Nipsey demonstrates a higher hustle.

Drawing from books written by Hip-hop artists, Hip-hop documentaries, song lyrics and interviews with Hip-hop educators and scholars, Toby Jenkins distills nine Hip-hop-centered values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors clustered around approach, drive, and posture, that educators must develop to be literate in contemporary global culture. In this article, entitled "Free Your Mind and Your Practice Will Follow: Exploring Hip-Hop Habits of Mind as a Practice of Educational Freedom," Jenkins ar-

gues that “The messages and deeper forms of understanding derived from the perspectives, actions, and behaviors of hip-hop community members can be seen as a social justice possibility because they build efficacy among communities that have been culturally miseducated.” She contends that for far too long, Hip-hop pedagogies have been seen as central to the success of Black and Brown students, when educators themselves must be centered in Hip-hop as a professional mindset in their own lives. Jenkins asserts that a hip-hop mindset is beneficial to educators because it can also help them to explore possibilities, imagine new realities, and feel more free to bring all of who they culturally are into their professional practice. The “Hip-Hop mindset” is a way of thinking and being that can help bridge communities with the core outcome being collective responsibility for social justice.

Tessa Brown’s “The Art of Truth in Things’: Confronting Hip-hop Illiteracies in Writing Classrooms at Predominantly White Colleges and Universities” examines her research on Hip-hop composition pedagogy at a predominantly white university. As a young queer white Jewish woman graduate student, striving to show up for social and racial justice, Brown’s goal was to engage students in the global phenomenon of Hip-hop, celebrate Black cultural practices, critically examine exploitation, misrepresentation and appropriation of Black culture and people, by corporate music conglomerates and American capitalism, expand students’ writing identities, and prime them for transformation of their ideologies around anti-Blackness, with an eye toward social change. Brown used Hip-hop songs, videos, and scholarship that engaged themes of literacy, discourse, the writing process, citation use, and Black Language with non-Hip-hop texts from writing studies. Her collaborating researcher focused more on Hip-hop culture, rappers as writers, thinkers, and rhetors, highlighting their lyrics, sonic tapestry, visuals, and context. Combined they taught 4 courses centered in Hip-hop composition pedagogy, in which students wrote essays, research papers, did close readings, and in Brown’s course, wrote literacy narratives.

Through student exit interviews, Brown found that her course design did not provide opportunities for her students to reflect on their own raced and gendered identities, producing a colorblind classroom environment, which for the most part, left students inadequately positioned to significantly discuss the very topics she hoped they would critically process: anti-Blackness, systemic racism, and Black cultural resilience, resistance, compliance, and critical negotiation of the American systems of racism, sexism, capitalism and empire. From her students of color, she learned that the course seemed more geared toward helping white students develop a critical lens for understanding their consumption of a steady diet of stereotypes of commodified Hip-hop AND rappers’ resistance and resilience. Further, she found that students needed critical sociolinguistic grounding in Black and Hip-hop language to truly appreciate Hip-hop. Brown asserts that Hip-hop composition pedagogy must be anchored in reflexivity, that allows students to locate themselves with regard to power, to promote collective solidarity building, and not individual achievement.

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