

Hip Hop Studies in Black

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Nothing may differentiate Hip Hop from “Hip Hop Studies” more than their differential relationship to the state.

—*Greg Thomas (2010)*

To be black is to exist in exchange, without being a party to exchange.

—*Bryan Wagner (2009: 1)*

The incredible inventiveness of black culture is not to be understood outside the imperative task of transformation.

—*Sylvia Wynter (1979: 149)*

Hip hop has garnered voluminous critical attention from scholars and educators since arriving on the scene in the 1980s. This attention, however, makes it no different than any other product of black culture and social movement since at least the dawn of the trade in African bodies in the 14th century. The fact that hip hop is what currently galvanizes the critical study of race, power, and difference simply marks the present historical moment as another feature of “a changing same” oft-noted by black intellectuals and culture workers across eras. Amiri Baraka popularized this phrase in his poetry, prose, and critical study of black culture to denote the way in which the black tradition constantly undergoes reworking within the exigencies of present conditions (Baraka 1991, 2001). In the case of hip hop studies, we are using “a changing same” to denote how the antiblack world continually finds new ways, across an astonishing diversity of political, economic, and cultural conjunctures, to consume and use blackness in manners that extend

the interlocutory life of the captive black body for the coherence and morality of the “human” community (Wynter 2002).

We find hip hop no more or less compelling as a topic of study or pedagogy than any other moment or cultural product in black history. Both of us have used hip hop in our classroom teaching, conducted research on hip hop culture, and presented scholarly lectures on hip hop in public venues (See Saucier 2011, 2014; Woods 2010, 2013). As with any topic, there are advantages and disadvantages to using hip hop, depending on your objectives, skills, audience, and context. What receives relatively little attention, however, is why it is that hip hop has become such a popular topic of study and teaching. At issue for us, then, is not how can we study and teach hip hop to register insights about blackness and social change, but rather, how the *study of hip hop studies* can illuminate what Frank Wilderson terms a “culture of politics” that continues to insist on using blackness to fulfill an antiblack agenda (Wilderson 2010). Our intention is to warn radical pedagogues away from hip hop studies as long as it is not deeply accountable to black studies and its ethical coordinates.¹

As we see it, hip hop studies is unethical in its frivolous attention to black history that ends up retrenching the very realities that black studies ostensibly aims to address.² Hip hop does not have a politics; it cannot be read as progressive or retrograde by simply analyzing its expressive content (*cf.* Reed 2001; Spencer 2011). Moreover, hip hop as pedagogy can only become productive insofar as it serves to facilitate focus on “the context of its enunciation:” the unified and inexorable freedom movements of the black diaspora (Wilderson 2009: 123).³ What does hip hop studies do that black studies does not do? Why is hip hop studies so popular while black studies is constantly in disrepute and tokenized—even within the very academy that now markets the study of hip hop? While there are many ways of addressing these questions, in this essay we respond on three levels, and in so doing, chart what we believe is a necessary path for critical educators who are considering utilizing hip hop in their teaching practice or research.

We recognize at the outset that hip hop studies is not homogenous. The diversity of hip hop studies is reflected in the early journalistic accounts of David Toop’s *Rap Attack 1* (1984) and Steve Hager’s *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Breakdancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti* (1984); the rich ethnographic trilogy of James Spady’s *Nation Conscious Rap: The Hip Hop Vision* (1991), *Twisted Tales: in the Hip Hop Streets of Philly* (1995) and *Street Conscious Rap* (1999); the groundbreaking work of Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*

(1994); the transnational and global accounts featured in Tony Mitchell's *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA* (2002); and the edited magnum opus *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (2012) by Mark Anthony Neal and Murray Forman among numerous other important contributions. Scholars regularly chronicle the intersections of hip hop with feminist discourse (Brown and Kwakye 2012; Pough 2004; Sharpley-Whiting 2007), religion (Miller 2012; Miyakawa 2005; Pinn 2003), activism (Clay 2012; Ogbar 2009), masculinity (Jefferies 2011; White 2011), space (Faniel 2013; Love 2012), film (Monteybe 2013), language (Alim 2006; Alim et al. 2008; Potter 1995), globalization (Charry 2012; Condry 2006; Fernandes 2011; Ntarangwi 2009; Osumare 2008; Weis 2009) and many other topics. Despite the diversity within the field, most of hip hop studies is undergirded by a twofold problematic which is explored below.

After some notes on what *kind* of black studies we are using as our frame of reference, we begin our analysis by highlighting what should be a self-evident point about hip hop: that it is being used in a very old and tired manner wholly consistent with the ways in which black culture has always been a source of sustenance for nonblack society. The fact that many educators who embrace hip hop in their pedagogical practice do so in the belief that they are forwarding the cause of social justice does not in any way mitigate our criticism; rather, it deepens its urgency. Our concern here, however, is to mine this basic historical phenomenon to draw attention to two grievous errors in analysis as to what racism is and how social change occurs—and to note the corrective lens that black studies brings to this problem. The first problem we address is an overemphasis on the conception of racism as performance—the *doing* of repression and resistance. Here we find hip hop construed by educators in its liberatory guise: hip hop culture, according to this line of thought, offers a way out of the alienation of racism and global capitalism (Asante 2009; Clay 2012; McCarren 2013; Ogbar 2007; Sharma 2010; Watkins 2006).

The second problem we address is how the history of antiblack sexual violence is recast through both hip hop and hip hop studies as a matter of economic exploitation and racial prejudice. Almost every account of hip hop privileges the role of economic restructuring in the postcivil rights period, and a reinvigoration of racial animus attendant to these changes, at the expense of a reckoning with the war against the black community and its inexorable freedom struggle across the better part of a millennia. These analytic errors in hip hop studies, and the dismissal of the black studies archive that would guide us around such pitfalls, reflect a lack of solidarity

with black revolution. While this assertion on our part may seem counter-intuitive or even ludicrous given the presumption by many people of a radical or revolutionary sensibility in hip hop, we will briefly illustrate our claim with cases of how hip hop has been used to forward what is essentially a revanchist agenda against the black community.

1.

We begin by reintroducing hip hop studies to black studies. While the two have always been inextricably linked, it is our view that they have existed in parasitic tension as much as in common cause. In order to reorient (or restructure) the ethical dimensions of this relationship, we must clarify: what *kind* of black studies? By “black studies,” we refer to the political project emanating from the context of black revolution in the 1960s. Black studies in its Black Power-conception is an alternate paradigm that disrupts the mainstream Western order of knowledge, not simply a mode of thought that diversifies traditional epistemologies (Wynter 2002). It melds the rich archive of black letters back to the slave narratives with the Black Power generation’s unwavering response to the structural impossibility of blackness. In addressing the negation of their humanness, black people have always created cultures and social spaces of opposition. Black studies is a part of this critical tradition and its peripheral relationship to the academy shares a historical seam of struggle with maroon communities during the slavocracy.

Much of what constitutes black studies today, however, is not radical and revolutionary in its intellectual impulses or practices; it is not the progeny of black revolution and opposition. Rather, it is in large measure the outgrowth of an intentional strategy of containment (*cf.* Brown 2007; Ferguson 2012). The Ford Foundation assumed an influential role in directing program development in the academy during the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. Through the weight of its funding, Ford consciously sought to weaken the influence of the militant Black Power movement that led to the formation of black studies in the first place. Instead, Ford sought to foster a black studies that would service the needs of white people for racial understanding and acceptance. With but two exceptions, all of the grants made between 1968 and 1971 were awarded to programs and institutions that viewed black studies as a means to diversify a predominately white curriculum and university, promote integration, and provide intellectual legitimacy for disparaging Black Power ideology (Rooks 2007: 93–94).

The Foundation rejected almost every single proposal from black students or organizations to develop programs based on black consciousness. This early strategy of containing black revolution and shaping the political content of black studies in the period of the 1960s and 1970s would lead to the multicultural wars of the 1980s, a period that resulted in the further institutionalization of the liberal politics of integration, a withering triple assault on affirmative action, the industrial urban workforce, and the welfare state, and the undermining of the black studies intellectual project within a hegemonic ethnic studies formation that has redrawn the colorline as obtaining between whites and a multiracial coalition now known as “people of color.” Under the guise of “transcending” the black-white binary, multiculturalism in fact entailed nothing less than the outright rejection of antiblackness as inessential to the organization of the social.

We arrive at two points relevant to our consideration of the contemporary culture of politics that fancies hip hop studies. First, the containment of black politics is the precondition for the institutional life of multiculturalism. Second, hip hop studies is a product of the liberal multiculturalist university—*not* of the black struggle that produced both the radical conception of black studies and hip hop itself. Hip hop studies is a feature of liberal universalism in which scholars and teachers prefer “difference,” “ethnicity,” and “multiethnicity” over the “radical alterity” of black studies (Wynter 2002: 159). Hip hop studies should be viewed as nothing more than a prosthetic of multiculturalism, and in this sense its purpose in the academy is to further sabotage the radical history of black studies from within. For example, at the University of Arizona, where a minor in hip hop studies has recently been approved, hip hop is understood as a way in which to better understand “the fabric of humanity.”⁴ Hip hop in this instance is seen as forging a sense of cross-racial imagined community. By extension, this tendency is also exhibited in the scholarship by hip hop scholars who employ a multiculturalist paradigm (Kahf 2007; Wang 2007). These scholars often deemphasize and dehistoricize the centrality of blackness and its relationship to hip hop culture; it no longer is a black art form, but a cross-racial and multiethnic art form that belongs to everyone. Put slightly differently, multicultural understandings of hip hop often fail to deal with the legacy of black people as property and what this means might mean for who can claim ownership of hip hop. While radical blackness has *always* pursued solidarity and common cause with other racial and cultural groups throughout history, it has always done so through a pronounced critique of coalition politics that, time and again, subordinate the needs of the

black community to the needs of—take your pick—labor, integrationism, the union, women, “people of color,” “quality of life,” “safe and secure” streets, and so forth (Ture and Hamilton 1992). The subsumption of hip hop studies within black studies undermines the stability of the field and its coherent development in a manner that echoes the Ford Foundation’s earlier implosion of black studies. Hip hop studies recaptures black studies from within—that is, it undermines the radicality of the black studies *structural* assault on antiblackness by highlighting the diverse *performances* of resistance (read: *universalism*) at the expense of a sustained ethical confrontation with black suffering and black refusal-of-victimization (Vargas and James 2012).

2.

Black expressive culture, black people, *blackness* has been central to Western civilization since at least the time of the Mediterranean slave trade in the 14th century. This central role of blackness, its entanglement in white desire and disgust, has been the focus of critical work within black studies on the “fungible” quality of the captive black body. By “fungible,” black studies is calling attention to the premium in Western culture on rendering blackness *useful* to any and all manner of purposes that whites (and we would add, nonblacks) can dream up—beyond and beside whatever degree of surplus value is extracted from black labor. For instance, black studies scholars have shown that the crimes of slavery—from the terror of whippings, mutilations, incinerations, and dismemberment, to the daily hand-to-hand combat of rape, to the mockery of the coffle, auction block, and traders’ pen—were *staged spectacles* for white audiences as much as they were techniques for managing the enslaved (*cf.* Hartman 1997; Johnson 1999). This history of fungible blackness warrants due diligence from those who deploy black culture. There are numerous ways in which hip hop studies fails in this respect, and while a proper accounting remains to be done, it is our feeling that rather than promoting solidarity with blackness, the embrace of hip hop effaces the violence of black existence, discredits claims to black pain and suffering, and circumscribes black sentience. The litany of state-sanctioned and legally produced forces of “premature death” in which black people must live, such as the destruction of contemporary black family life due to the militarization of black neighborhoods by the conjoined child welfare, school, and criminal justice systems (Gilmore 2007: 28; Roberts 1998)—all register in hip hop studies in contradictory ways amounting to

little more than a “circumscribed recognition of black humanity” which is itself “an exercise of violence” (Hartman 1997: 34–35).

One way in which this problem plays out in hip hop studies is using hip hop to retrench grievous errors in analysis as to what racism is and how social change occurs. We can observe this error with respect to the tension between performance and structure. With respect to racism, one way of thinking about the difference between performance and structure is in terms of acts of interpersonal discrimination versus institutionalized forms of discrimination that do not require an individual agent to act with racist malice to nonetheless achieve racist outcomes. There is a strong preference in U.S. society to hold fast to the myth that racism is, in the final analysis, a problem of thinking bad thoughts and behaving badly—*performing* racism (Bonilla-Silva 2009). In fact, racism is a structure—historical, epistemological, ontological, axiological, social—in which our preconscious interests, unconscious desires, and conscious identifications are constituted in racial violence. Educators often find that students express an affinity for this notion of the performative, that it conforms to their expectations of racism, as well as with their perceptions of what is going on in hip hop: the performance of black resistance to racism, on the one hand; or, the performance of pathological blackness, on the other hand.

Unfortunately, performativity does not begin to approach the magnitude of what is at stake. Seizing the black body through direct relations of force formed the modern world. That is to say, racial difference—and specifically, racial blackness—is the effect of violence, not its cause. This means that the violence to which black people are subjected is gratuitous—wholly apart from any actions they may or may not have committed—and registers their position outside the structures of human filiation, hegemonic consent, and the social contract through which civil society is composed (*cf.* Marriott 2007; Mills 1999; Wilderson 2003). In the black studies archive, the structure of gratuitous violence is translated as delimiting the liberatory potential of black performance. In other words, if violence is not simply event (performance) but also a “grammar of emergence and being” (the structural coordinates of the social) then it is a disabling error in praxis to confuse the “scales of coercion” (Wilderson 2009: 119)—the violent production and reproduction of racial blackness—with the “scales of consent” (Sexton 2008: 9)—the institutionalization of relations of force within relations of power. Hip hop studies implicitly desires a causal link between performance (by the MC, the dancer, the student learning how to read/write/think through rap, etc.) and emancipation—or, in its liberal

universalist variant, a nebulous (from the vantage point of blackness) “social justice.”

Hip hop itself is not immune from this desire, nor are those who enter the academy through hip hop—which is the implicit goal of much of hip hop studies at the community and secondary school levels (i.e., that youth will better themselves and the world through their education). We have had the opportunity to participate in a number of hip hop conferences and events where the efficacy of performativity was grossly overstated in the absence of an analysis of racial regime and the antiblack violence which are both the conditions of possibility for the very idea and material reality of the U.S. itself, and moreover, are also the scene of black expressive arts. In each of these moments of yearning for the liberatory possibilities of performance, the corpus of black studies is overlooked and hip hop is treated as disconnected from the history of how white society has regarded the topics of black life as endlessly fungible.

One recent demonstration of this tendency in hip hop studies is the biannual “Show and Prove” conference sponsored by the Performance Studies Department at New York University in 2010 and 2012. The conference displayed much of the vitality of the current wave of hip hop scholars, including a few dancers, graffiti artists, and spoken word poets and MCs who not only brought unique performance insights to their studies, but in so doing implicitly reminded us that political interventions rely upon a praxis between expressive culture, labor, and intellectual critique. In short, there was a creativity and dynamism that one would expect out of a performance studies intellectual space located in Greenwich Village. The conference shortcomings were telling, however. First, there was a good deal of airtime devoted to lamenting and bemoaning the lack of respect within the academy to the study of hip hop culture. Numerous young scholars expressed how their work on hip hop was dismissed as illegitimate—even within performance studies or cultural studies. While there are serious institutional dynamics at work here, with real consequences, for instance, for how one finds work within universities that remain largely conservative and vested in the status quo, we see the issue in the following political and historical terms. When academics first began writing, talking, and teaching on hip hop culture back in the early 1990s, hip hop heads outside the academy (artists, fans, etc.) were scathing in their criticism: hip hop was their life, they said, and scholars were just interlopers exploiting and simplifying other people’s creative labors.⁵ They warned that institutionalizing hip hop in the

academy would bring a commodification that would equate to the death of the art form. The forces of commodification have surely come to strangle hip hop today, although the source of this process emanates from beyond the corridors of the academy.

This lack of historical awareness, and the difference between the historical moment of 1992, say, and 2010, points to our second concern with the “Show and Prove” conferences at NYU. The ongoing exclusion, marginalization, and delegitimation of hip hop studies is consistent with how the academy has regarded the topics of black life historically. The barriers faced by these young scholars, therefore, are the expressions of an antiblack culture in the academy and in U.S. civil society writ large. While we have no doubts that they are aware of this fact, either in consciousness or in their bodies, this awareness was nowhere evident in their scholarship. In fact, the NYU conference was largely devoid of an analysis of racial regime and the antiblack violence which is both the conditions of possibility for the very idea and material reality of the U.S. itself, but is also the context of enunciation for black artistic expression—in Fred Moten’s words, “Black Art, which is to say Black Life, which is to say Black (Life Against) Death” (2003: 209). In short, the NYU conference failed to situate hip hop study within its essential structuring antagonism, what Elizabeth Alexander (1994) has called the violence of “bottom-line blackness.” There is indeed a backlash against the academy’s recent infatuation with hip hop, and this reaction extends the larger historical backlash against black studies itself; but awareness of *this* context of counter-insurgency is sorely absent in hip hop studies gatherings such as the one at NYU and others such as the Schomburg Center’s Hip-Hop 4.0 Initiative.

Not only can black people never escape the structure of gratuitous violence *through* hip hop performance, but to assert as much further mystifies both the nature of structural violence *and* the very significance of the cultural expression itself. Privileging the performativity of racism and resistance rests on the notion that what we see or hear is the depth of what is in play in expressive culture. While this tendency may be a feature of Western society’s privileging of the visual, and of the instant gratification of consumer culture, with respect to hip hop it is also a denial of black sentient humanity and of the complex interplay between culture and historical context. The black studies canon has long borne the recognition that black expressive culture veils the extremities of violence conditioning black existence. For instance, Frederick Douglass (1987) observed that the horrors of slavery were most fully documented in the seemingly meaningless

shade of slave songs, while W.E.B. DuBois (1994) famously introduced the motif of doubleness, that white society never fully gains access to black life as it is lived behind the veil. M. Nourbese Philip writes of a “genealogy of resistance” whose methodology “lies in Silence/s. And words. In gaps. And synapses. In discovery. Surprising always in the correspondence and connections” (Philip 1997: 28). Why does hip hop studies think black culture is self-evident in the superficial layers of its expression?

3.

The second problem we wish to highlight is how hip hop is construed as a response to economic exploitation and racial prejudice. Virtually every single account of hip hop’s emergence privileges the corrosive effects of economic restructuring and social abandonment of black communities in the post-1970s period. Jeff Chang’s canonical history of hip hop, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (2005) begins with “Necropolis: The Bronx and the Politics of Abandonment”; S. Craig Watkins situates his study of hip hop culture in terms of “Black Youth and the Ironies of Capitalism (1999)”; and Tricia Rose’s seminal study *Black Noise: Rap Music and Contemporary Culture in America* (1994) focuses on the transformations of the urban political economy as key to the innovations of black culture, to cite but a few examples from the hip hop studies archive. These studies position the roots of hip hop culture within an era marked by the end of mass production and manufacturing in the United States. These scholars see hip hop as a productive way in which “post-Fordist” youth grappled with the insecurities of living in a time of no work. To this end, the violence in which hip hop emerges is never fully explicated; it remains a byproduct of deindustrialization, rather than a mundane instance of “the absoluteness of power” ensnaring black life (Hartman 1997: 86).

Although there is a long and rich Marxist tradition within black studies, black people have always grasped that racism cannot be explained through recourse to political economy, as Cedric Robinson’s classic study *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (2000) makes clear. On this score alone, hip hop studies is out of step with the black radical tradition that produced hip hop itself. In contrast to the hip hop studies account of the emergence of black youth culture since the 1970s, black studies considers the role of the symbolic economy within the historical structure of gratuitous antiblack violence—the negrophobic culture of

desire and disgust attached to black bodies. Specifically, the black studies approach centers black revolution and the state's terroristic relationship to the black community, unchanged despite modifications over time to the political economy and racist culture (from slavery to *de jure* segregation to colorblindness and formal legal equality to "post-racialism"). Any analysis of hip hop today, then, must account for the ways in which the present state of affairs in hip hop culture is in large measure an effect of *ongoing* state violence against black communities and their concomitant structural dispossession—even if this antiblack violence also appears as an intramural battle, reductively referred to as "black-on-black" conflict, or simplistically, as misogyny and homophobia. Or, to put it differently, hip hop marks the *afterlives* of COINTELPRO, lynching, the plantation, and the slave trade. The black youth that would come to name themselves the hip hop generation endured not only the deindustrialization of the cities, as described *ad nauseum* in the hip hop studies oeuvre, but they also witnessed the wholesale murder of the activists in their parents' generation. In the words of former political prisoner Dhoruba Bin Wahad, COINTELPRO was nothing less than "a program of domestic warfare" in which the black family and black children were the ultimate targets (Fletcher 1993: 18). FBI documents notoriously declared: "The Negro youth and moderates must be made to understand that if they succumb to revolutionary teaching, they will be dead revolutionaries" (Fletcher 1993: back cover).

Greg Thomas uses this historical context to note that black culture must be said to embody an "ethics of violence" that enables or encourages it to oppose, counter, and correct the antiblack violence in which the world is steeped (Thomas 2008: 310). In other words, it is not that black people are or black culture is pathologically violent; rather, the world has been pathologically violent towards blacks for over six centuries, and it is therefore unethical to issue *prima facie* indictments of black culture's articulations of violence. As Thomas notes, such expressions are properly understood in a historical sense as "counter-violence." Hip hop studies' silence as to the counter-insurgency campaign waged against the black community is especially curious given the preponderance of evidence revealing how COINTELPRO continues unabated today against black youth and hip hop itself (Parker 2007).⁶ We should not miss the connection between this problem and the first issue we observed above regarding racism and resistance as performance. Ignoring the historical context of gratuitous violence and counter-insurgency against black freedom movement, and instead focusing on how hip hop rose up like a phoenix from the ashes of the postindustrial city, shies away

from the banal reality of antiblack violence, betrays a preference for state violence over the violence (symbolic or actual) by oppressed communities, and promotes a vapid and romantic notion of resistance.

4.

When solidarity with black revolution is undermined in this manner, the features of black culture become as available to antiblackness as any other cultural form. In the midst of this world-defining antiblack destruction, hip hop studies is never far removed from either portraying hip hop's representations of violence as a pathological feature of blackness; or, deploying the violent tropes prevalent in hip hop culture to further police the black community. In *The Hip Hop Wars* (2008), for instance, Tricia Rose sharply disapproves of how hip hop has endorsed the "stop snitching" campaign popularized in many black communities in response to law enforcement's strategy of pressuring community members to provide information on each other pursuant to an arrest (*cf.* Thomas 2010). Rose writes, "Following the criminal code of no-snitching deprives these [black] communities of ways to protect themselves from criminals and to *legitimately* seek justice from crimes against law-abiding citizens" (Rose 2008: 226 emphasis added). Rose's preference for law and order is racist, given that the law brooks no sanctuary for black people, and furthermore, it is disingenuous in its implication that mayhem within black neighborhoods "is not an outgrowth of structural and externally induced violence" (Wilderson 2010: 104).

What we see in hip hop studies, then, is testament to the ubiquitous specter of black criminality—indeed, pathological blackness is essential to the construction of blackness itself and serves as the "shadow book" for narratives of reconstruction and resistance, whether in hip hop or in any other medium of black expressive culture. For Kevin Young (2012: 11–15), a "shadow book" can appear in three ways. First, a text that fails to be written due to its author's troubled relation to the "fact of blackness," as Frantz Fanon (1967) famously put it; this unwritten form of the shadow book haunts not just the reader but also the very sphere of culture itself. Second, the removed book is the text whose meaning is never fully realized; the removed book represents a willingness to inhabit the unfinished, the incomplete, and the insecure dimensions of blackness—the social life of structural vulnerability: or, what the story of Trayvon Martin's murder means to all black people. Third, is the lost text: books lost due to the precariousness of black life or

to the “invisibility blues” (according to Michele Wallace 2008, riffing on Ralph Ellison 1992) that overlooks, bypasses, and would diminish everyday black genius. In each of these ways, pathological blackness is the shadow book for hip hop studies, the *ur*-text for apprehending *what* blackness does, *how* it does, and what the doing *means*. It is the backdrop for pressures artists face to conform to the salacious desires of the largely white hip hop consumer base; it is the unwritten or unrapped rhyme about the fear and stress of antiblackness; and so on and so forth. Fred Moten puts it thusly: “The cultural and political discourse on black pathology has been so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black take place” (Moten 2008: 177).

Discussions about hip hop, then, inevitably arc back to popular critiques of policing and imprisonment; in turn, questions regarding punishment are filtered through images of hip hop culture. For instance, legal scholars such as Paul Butler, author of *Let's Get Free: A Hip-Hop Theory of Justice* (2010), view the problem with our current mass imprisonment policy—in the District of Columbia where Butler was a federal prosecutor for many years, blacks are 35 times more likely than whites to be incarcerated—as not a problem of punishment *per se*, but rather of its excess.⁷ Butler's primary concern is with what is lost in terms of punishment. He writes: “When popular culture presents prison as a rite of passage, punishment begins to lose its deterrent effect. If punishment is to be meaningful, it must be reinvested with stigma. We could accomplish this by using prison less frequently and more effectively” (Butler 2004: 999). Butler states that the purpose of punishment should be retribution; in support of this position, he cites a number of hip hop artists. Writes Butler: “[Hip hop] culture abounds with narratives about revenge, retaliation, and avenging wrongs” (2004: 1002). In short, Butler is still prosecuting: the only difference now is that he is using hip hop to build more prisons.

As egregious as this approach is, Butler's use of hip hop conforms with how Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), perhaps the most popular critique of policing and punishment today, treats blackness as pathology. Both Alexander and Butler ignore the black radical tradition and the war against the black community; both imply that hip hop is a deviant subculture; both promote reforms that would do nothing to change the fundamental antiblackness of punishment; and neither confront the construction of pathological blackness. For instance, in her description of what she terms

“the cruel hand” of criminal justice, what happens when a black person enters the system, Alexander refutes as racist the notion that “ghetto families . . . are perfectly content to live in crime-ridden communities, feeling no shame or regret about the fate of their young men.” Her refutation, however, turns in on itself. She writes:

The predictable response is: what about gangsta rap and the culture of violence that has been embraced by so many black youth? Is there not some truth to the notion that black culture has devolved in recent years, as reflected in youth standing on the street corners with pants sagging below their rears and rappers boasting about beating their “hos” and going to jail? Is there not some reason to wonder whether the black community, to some extent, has lost its moral compass?

The easy answer is to say yes and wag a finger at those who are behaving badly . . . The more difficult answer—the more courageous one—is to say yes, yes we should be concerned about the behavior of men trapped in ghetto communities, but the deep failure of morality is our own . . . are we willing to demonize a population, declare a war against them, and then stand back and heap shame and contempt upon them for failing to behave like model citizens while under attack? (Alexander 2010: 165)

For Alexander, as with Butler, young black men are embracing the stigma of criminality, turning to crime and a culture (hip hop) that celebrates narcissistic self-destruction in the context of constrained life choices.⁸ Because she does not change, reject, deconstruct, or even identify the paradigm that would posit such antiblack questions in the first place, we are thrown back into the gale-force of the white supremacist project, the ethos of slavery, as Jared Sexton puts it, that “admits no legitimate black self-defense, recognizes no legitimate assertions of self-possession,” autonomy, or self-determination—be it hip hop, gangsta rap, revolutionary literature, grassroots organizing, violence, or “crime” (Sexton 2008: 148–49). There is no good answer to a paradigmatically flawed question because it inevitably leaves the construct intact—black immorality and pathology—and black humanity is left outside flailing in the wind, trying to defend itself against the intensity of the paradigm that created it as abject in the first place.

This example emanates from *The New Jim Crow*’s flawed structural analysis. In shifting our attention away from the structural to the empirical

(or, in the terms we are employing here in our argument against hip hop studies, to the *performative*), Alexander obscures “a conceptual framework and an ethical orientation,” casting black subjection as the outcome of the machinations of criminal justice policy and criminal law (Sexton 2008: 103). Here is Alexander: “One might imagine that a criminal defendant . . . would be told of the consequences of a guilty plea or conviction . . . He will also be told little or nothing about the parallel universe he is about to enter, one that promises a form of punishment that is often more difficult to bear than prison time: a lifetime of shame, contempt, scorn, and exclusion” (Alexander 2010: 139). In this sense, the “civic death,” as she summarizes it, experienced by black people who have served time in prison is figured as a contingent violence, the result of the transgressive status of a guilty plea or a conviction, when in fact it is a gratuitous feature of the antiblack world to which all black people are subject, criminal record or not. To put it differently, Alexander inverts the structure: what she locates in the racially discriminatory operations of criminal justice—in other words, in being caught up in the excesses or corruptions of an otherwise ethical structure—is actually the result of black people having been accumulated through gratuitous violence and racialization. Imprisonment is but one among a litany of technologies across space and time valorizing this gratuitous violence.

Similarly, when hip hop studies does not properly situate its objects of study within the antiblack paradigm, it conjoins rather than disrupts pathological blackness. Take for instance *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs* (2012) by Dimitri Bogazianos, a book about the cultural lives of crime and punishment: the “rap game” and the “crack game.” Bogazianos’ nuanced exploration declines to call for detoxifying hip hop of its “impurities” or to reclaim what is good in hip hop, the political over the apolitical or criminal (as Butler does) (57). Furthermore, unlike Butler and Alexander, he understands that “the brutally complex nature of real-world suffering can only be addressed by the criminal justice system the one way it has ever addressed anything—through *reductive* efforts to separate the guilty from the innocent, the predators from the victims” (140 emphasis added). Despite these astute contributions, he fails to anchor his argument in an antiblack paradigm, preferring, once again, to focus on deindustrialization and worklessness, thereby softening the raw sexual violence producing and ensnaring both the crack and rap games. Bogazianos argues throughout *5 Grams* that the emergence of crack cocaine, a fairly recent development, rather than the centuries-deep structure of antiblackness, forms the “lethal core” of what he calls “a

larger *criminological structure of feeling*” (Bogazianos 2012: 7, emphasis in original). In doing so, it is lost on Bogazianos how the crack dealer turned rapper (or rapper turned crack dealer) is but an updated position of blackness, no different ethically or politically from “slave” or “criminal.” For Bogazianos it is crack cocaine that “marks a key turning point in community relations,” not, as we have documented above, counter-insurgency programs against the black community—of which the introduction of crack cocaine itself is notable, but in the end, merely one chapter in the *longue duree* of antiblackness (Bogazianos 2012: 140).

Ultimately, the failure to anchor hip hop studies in an antiblack paradigm leaves the hip hop studies scholars squarely within the fold of conservative cultural commentators such as Juan Williams and John McWhorter. The disappearance of black self-possession and revolutionary activity that occasioned the exercise of police powers in the first place, as in *5 Grams*, is the analytical precondition for sustaining the discourse of black pathology, which takes on various forms in the hands of hip hop scholars. Is there really any difference between avowedly progressive critics such as Tricia Rose and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, who observe that hip hop’s “thuggish, promiscuous, sexist, and violent” nature “gives men and boys every reason to continue gender violence,” and avowedly conservative critics such as Williams and McWhorter, who claim that hip hop is a “culture of failure that is poisoning young people” and “holding back black people” (Rose 2008: 211; Sharpley-Whiting 2007: 84; Williams 2006; McWhorter 2003)? The appearance of a conflict between these two camps is an unethical pretension; in fact, there is a consensus that blackness marks the phobic object of the criminal.

These narratives about hip hop as a canvas for the display of black pathology are also embraced by some within the black community itself, underscoring the fact that antiblack narratives are not the proprietary domain of academics and nonblack people. In her national survey of black Americans aged 30 and older, Cathy Cohen found that as much as 79% of respondents believed that rap music produced a range of negative behaviors in black youth (Cohen 2010: 24). Cohen’s data from The Black Youth Project emphatically refutes this simplistic pathology discourse in favor of a more complex portrait of what black youth are doing and how they understand their actions. For instance, Cohen reports that black youth hold quite conservative and “traditional” values when compared to other racial groups (Cohen 2010: 52). Furthermore, her data shows that while black youth report higher rates of sexual activity, they also report higher rates of using

protection to prevent pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (Cohen 2010: 57). Thus, as Cohen suggests, “it is the question of representation that begins to emerge when trying to detail the complexity of the sexual lives of black youth. We might ask if black youth who make impulsive sexual decisions and experience the sometimes-unexpected consequences of their actions are given the same care and forgiveness often afforded white youth” (Cohen 2010: 52). It is not black behavior that requires explanation; it is the context of violence that necessitates black refusal-of-victimization, or black self-possession-as-violence, that warrants sustained intervention. What needs further scrutiny, then, is how does hip hop studies face the specter of black criminality in ways that does *not* extend the interlocutory life of the very discourse being criticized within the assumptions of the critique? Or, to put it another way, how can hip hop studies set down the fantasy life of antiblackness?

We are repeatedly confronted with the solidity with which our society’s conceptions of blackness are entrenched in pathological terms when we attempt to incorporate topics from hip hop studies into our curricula. These efforts tend to backfire because students use hip hop culture to confirm their deep-seated notions of black pathology. The film *Tupac Shakur: Thug Angel* is a nuanced portrait of Shakur, attentive not only to his personal development, but also to what we have noted in this essay as the “context of enunciation” for his art, his sensitivity, his bravura, and his violence: the tradition of revolutionary blackness and the afterlife of counter-insurgency. The depth of the portrait of structural violence, however, confronts the students’ desire to see Tupac Shakur and black culture in terms of contingent, pathological violence, and they leave with simply more evidence that black people are largely culpable for the problems they face. In the rare instance where we have actually taught an entire semester-long course on hip hop, our course designs do not even broach hip hop specifically until the class has spent a good month exploring black history, struggle, and the fungibility of black expressive culture for white society.

Conclusion

The popularity of hip hop studies lives in inverse relation to the life of black freedom: when the possibility of black revolution is effectively contained, then the signs of black culture become less threatening and more readily consumable and popular.⁹ The black revolution had to be killed off

so that the market for black culture can thrive. At the center of the tension between hip hop studies and black studies, then, is the matter of violence. Hip hop studies, like most of this society, so-called “radical” quarters included, is ethically pathetic with respect to the specter of black counter-violence. Ultimately, hip hop studies will remain utterly wretched unless it comes to terms with the structure of gratuitous violence in which it exists. In order to chart an ethical future, hip hop studies must *become* black studies, and in so doing, confront the ways in which black existence in an anti-black world—in other words, a universe where black life is structurally impermissible—is bound up with “the contemporary predicament of freedom,” a fugitive life “lived in loss,” to borrow Saidiya Hartman and Stephen Best’s formulation of the problem (Hartman and Best 2005: 15). Hip hop studies can only be transformative and liberatory if it speaks the ethical grammar of black studies, and in so doing, accurately names the world as it is: hip hop studies *as* black studies would highlight “the urgency imperative of black genocide” (Vargas 2010). For example, hip hop’s emergence in the space and time of schooling institutions, as object of study and as pedagogy, also marks the general contours of the attack on public education. In other words, we could delineate the trajectory of educational controversies and reform with respect to black expressive culture and the vigorous desire and disgust with which civil society has always responded to such expressions of blackness. What this means is that we can mark the deterioration of public school through the criminalization and policing of blackness, and in order to gain traction on the problems we face in education, we need to resituate our inquiries squarely within the history of the black liberation struggle.

Again, we ask: what does hip hop studies do that black studies is not already doing? Why is hip hop studies so popular, while black studies is constantly in disrepute and marginalized? How did hip hop become a universalizing experience while black studies continues to be disdained as particularist, and hence, as racist—in other words, why is black studies imagined as standing in the way of social unity, whereas hip hop studies, with its global reach and appropriation of black culture, is construed as able to facilitate a coming together across differences? If we as critical pedagogues fail to anchor hip hop studies in a paradigmatic understanding of black genocide, is survival possible? Is a critical consciousness really critical if it is theoretically misguided and ethically suspect? What then becomes of praxis?

Notes

1. For hip hop pedagogy (or hip hop based-education) not accountable to black studies and its ethical coordinates, see for example A.A. Akom, "Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy as a Form of Liberatory Praxis," *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 42 (1) (2009):52–66; Greg Dimitriadis, *Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice*. New York: Peter Lang, 2001: 52–66; Marc Lamont Hill *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*. New York: Teachers College, 2009; Marc Lamont Hill, Emery Petchauer, and Jeff Chang (Editors), *Schooling Hip-Hop: Expanding Hip-Hop Based Education Across the Curriculum*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2013; Emery Petchauer. *Hip-Hop Culture in College Students' Lives: Elements, Embodiment and Higher Education*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

2. For some discussion on the ways in which hip hop connects with black history, see Perry Hall. "Hip Hop and the Black Studies Canon." *International Journal of Africana Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2010), pp. 13–41; Richard Iton *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008; Imani Perry. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004; Reiland Rabaka. *The Hip Hop Movement: From R & B and the Civil Rights Movement to rap and the Hip Hop Generation*. Lanham, MD, 2013; Reiland Rabaka. *Hip Hop's Amnesia: From Blues and the Black Women's Club Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Movement*. Lanham, MD, 2012; Reiland Rabaka. *Hip Hop's Inheritance: From the Harlem renaissance to the Hip Hop Feminist Movement*. Lanham, MD, 2011. All texts in some way discuss hip hop as an intellectual property of the Black Freedom Movement more generally, and the Black Studies Movement more specifically.

3. For works that do this well see for example Nicholas Brady, "Bound 2 You: A Black Study of Kanye West's Yeezus," *Out of Now where*, July 6, 2013, <http://outofnowhereblog.wordpress.com/2013/07/06/bound-2-you-a-black-study-of-kanye-wests-yeezus/> (accessed on January 9, 2013; Nicholas Brady, "Spinning on Blackness: Wading Through the Contradictions of Frank's Ocean," *The Feminist Wire*, July 18, 2012, <http://thefeministwire.com/2012/07/spinning-on-blackness-wading-through-the-contradictions-of-franks-ocean-2/> (accessed on March 8, 2013); Selamawit D. Terrefe, "Phantasmagoria; or, the World is a Haunted Plantation," *The Feminist Wire*, October 10, 2012, <http://thefeministwire.com/2012/10/phantasmagoria/> (accessed on March 8, 2013).

4. <http://www.arizona.edu/features/ua-introduces-nation%E2%80%99s-first-hip-hop-minor>, accessed on January 1, 2013.

5. Recently rap legends Scarface, Nas and Dj Premiere lamented the appropriation of hip hop by academics on the Dj Khaled track “Hip Hop.”

6. See also the videos *Black and Blue: Legends of the Hip Hop Cop* (dir. Peter Spirer, 2006); and *Rap Sheet: Hip-Hop and the Cops* (dir. Don Sikorski, 2006).

7. Statistics cited in Loic Wacquant, “Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh,” *Punishment & Society* 3, 1(2001): 96.

8. These observations echo earlier observations by sociologist Elijah Anderson in *Streetwise: race, class, and change in an urban community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

9. This observation riffs on an insight from Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 12.

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