

White empathy and the educational neutralization of hip-hop

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ABSTRACT

There are many reasons why the rich popular tradition of hip-hop culture has become attractive to teachers as a means of engaging students, and many classroom experiments with hip-hop have surely met or surpassed the teacher's curricular expectations. The political implications of such pedagogical appropriations are worth considering, however. I reflect in this article on my own experiences as a white art teacher and hip-hop enthusiast working with students of color in a large city. Drawing on Black Studies theorists associated with a tendency known as "Afro-pessimism," I make larger connections between the philanthropic aspirations of white teachers like myself and the experiences of Black and brown students in American public schools, as well as the troubled history of sentimentalist anti-racist white mimicry in education and American culture more generally. While I used graffiti art in several lessons over the years, my most meaningful classroom encounter with hip-hop was whimsical and accidental, when a sound project took an unexpected turn. Using this experience as an informative example, I contend that the sensuality, humor, and resistance that appears throughout much of Black popular culture, while fascinating to non-Blacks in and beyond the U.S., remains inaccessible to an anti-Black institutional gaze. It seems to me that hip-hop thrives in Black and brown public schools via infiltration, rather than through an instrumentalization that, in its politics of respectability, seeks to negate the pleasure that gives it life.

Prominent Black education scholar Christopher Emdin has advocated on many platforms for the use of hip-hop as a means of engaging students of color, including his recent guide on cross-racial pedagogy, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and the Rest of Y'all Too* (2016), as well as in a TED Talk and on the PBS NewsHour. The idea of white teachers as potential anti-racist allies, promoting meaningful social change in and through education, is not new with Emdin. The literacy interventions of renowned Black women scholars Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009) and Geneva Smitherman (1997, 2006) have been central in the development of multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy, and, by extension, the use of hip-hop in the classroom.

For more than two decades, a number of white teachers in majority-nonwhite public school classrooms have been using uplift-focused lyrics by renowned 1990s rappers/lyricists like Lauryn Hill, and acts like Arrested Development as a means to draw students into reading and performance. Beat looping and graffiti-style lettering have accompanied many lessons in music and art as well as literature and history. Years along, with many books and journal special issues to its name, hip-hop education is essentially its own educational subfield (Dimitriadis, 2001; Runell & Diaz, 2007; Hill, 2009; Petchauer, 2009; Broome, 2015), as well as being a subfield of “hip-hop studies” (Forman & Neal, 2004). The use of hip-hop in education has spread far beyond the U.S. to many places touched by American popular culture (Viola & Portfilio, 2012; Söderman & Sernhede, 2016).

My interest in this essay is not in condemning Emdin, or any Black educational thinker who is endeavoring to combat the alienation of young Black people from places and practices of learning, an alienation that rap lyrics have often made explicit (Madden, 2015). But, speaking from my personal experience as a teacher, I hope to make a case for why white teachers, of any age or level of pop-culture literacy, should reconsider their employment of Black popular culture forms as a vehicle for the delivery of curricular content. My argument boils down to a concern, developed through both reading and personal experience, that students of color generally, and Black students in particular, may have very little reason to believe that white teachers have done the work necessary to recognize the age-old and ongoing role of everyday actions by “good white people” (Sullivan, 2014) in reiterating and shoring up the American ideology and structure of racialized exclusion.

Therefore, why should students trust that a white teacher is appropriating a nonwhite cultural form with any investment in understanding or preserving the elements that make the form meaningful to communities of Black and brown people? What these teachers are mostly doing, I would contend, is attempting precisely not to understand, but to defuse the power of Black and brown culture through employing an educational form of respectability politics, a program toward which their students are often highly skeptical (Kerrison, Cobbina, & Bender, 2018).

Just as working-class young white people have identified themselves in opposition to an unwelcoming middle-class educational culture memorably described in European contexts by British cultural studies thinkers following E. P. Thompson (1963/1964), as well as throughout the writings of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the aforementioned alienation of Black students and students of color from spaces of schooling has everything to do with these spaces being coded as white. Scholars like Ladson-Billings and Smitherman, among

countless others, have not only repeatedly made analogous points in the context of African-American schooling, but have intervened to ameliorate these circumstances

My intention is not to denounce these vital contributions, but to be more specific with regard to the remit of the white teacher who works primarily or exclusively with Black and brown students. In a nation where public schools are increasingly nonwhite (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), and teachers are persistently predominantly white (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), the work of self-awareness is emphatically not to be waved off in the name of empathy and good intentions. The student, not the teacher, should be the main concern.

That being said, I am addressing teachers—primarily fellow white teachers. I will try to define “white empathy” and give some background on my own long unilateral relationship to hip-hop culture, using this experience as a backdrop for my own years of work as an art teacher with Black and brown students. In making my own autobiographical connection to the world of hip-hop I invoke Macklemore, a successful and sincere but mediocre white rapper who worked to pacify the pleasures of rap, taking part in a long history of literal and liberal blackface. I go on to introduce the ideas of Black thinkers directly or peripherally associated with a recent school of thought known as “Afro-pessimism,” a philosophical point of view that understands world history through a descriptive lens of anti-Blackness.

Through this lens the well-meaning sincerity of white education professionals towards students in Black and brown schools can be understood, at least in part, as a form of paternalistic voyeurism. Following this, I share an anecdote of a class project I led in which I felt that hip-hop was deployed to good effect, largely because the musical element emerged without my curricular intention or control. My conclusion summarizes the points I hope to make about ways in which race and culture are not static specimens for disciplinary deployment in the classroom, but are living sources of tension and conflict that upset any presumed consensus regarding the school as a neutral, ahistorical space.

Funk lessons¹

I love hip-hop culture and I love working with young people. I am a white man who grew up in a white suburb in the 1980s listening to Run-DMC and the Fat Boys, among others, and became a young adult in the 1990s listening to A Tribe Called Quest and Wu-Tang Clan, among others. Around that time, in the late ‘90s, I also became an art teacher in a large Midwestern city, working with groups of Black and brown young people. My teaching drew on ideas expounded in *Bomb*

*the Suburbs*², a 1996 collection of essays on graffiti art, hip-hop, and city life by the local white writer Billy “Upski” Wimsatt. In addition I took inspiration from *Subway Art*, Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant’s 1984 collection of photos of New York transit graffiti pieces and the artists who made them, and the 1983 hip-hop documentary *Style Wars*, which Chalfant collaborated on with director Tony Silver.

I’m also a lifelong draughtsman who was trained as a painter, and so I not only admire but can copy and riff on elements of the vivid graffiti to be found in big-city train yards, past and present, with pencil, marker, or paintbrush—though rarely in spray paint. I have shown graffiti exemplars to many of my groups and classes, and I once taught a class on graffiti art to teenagers in the county foster care system. When I became a full-time art teacher in the city’s public schools, I did keep spray paint and varied caps on hand for poster and mural projects. All of this was rewarding, and resulted in some nice art, usually made with rap and R&B pumping in the background. Inspired by fellow white teachers who did hip-hop-themed recording projects, I once led a project with a four-track, and later downloaded beat-making software in my classroom. In 1998 or so, a white friend recorded a rap I wrote to help a class of eighth-graders of color learn about the Constitution. In 2007, this friend and I recorded our own goofy rap album. But through it all, I never forgot that I was a poser.

I don’t mean that I was a poser for loving hip-hop music and culture. Anyone can be a fan, of course. But the bar for authenticity is high when a teacher invokes a living cultural form in the classroom, and it’s way higher for a white teacher working with students of color. I don’t share the under-represented history of communal resilience and resistance that my students shared; I inhabit the historic position of free whites who have been granted advantage, visibility, and power through implements of law and culture, founded on and maintained by institutions that enacted violence, deprivation, and neglect upon nonwhites. This is worth dwelling on, not in order to devalue the enjoyable play with expressive materials and cultural forms happening in classrooms or anywhere else, but, when borrowing or

appropriating popular culture, to recognize that this culture emerges not only from an aesthetic tradition, but from a largely unrecorded, perhaps untranslatable community history. It is valuable for all

2 In *Bomb the Suburbs*, a point relevant to this discussion is made in Wimsatt’s interview with graffiti artist and teacher Lavie Raven, who opines that the purpose of hip-hop is not to reform but to bring about the end of standard education (“wack public schools”) in urban Black and brown neighborhoods (p. 105).

teachers to recognize that the cultural assets of marginal groups are in fact assets, not indications of lack or ignorance (Eller, 1989). But pursuing the understandable pedagogical urge to replace the idolatry of art forms found in Eurocentric museums with racialized popular culture can risk an unfortunate drift toward condescension.

Though he was after my time, I recognize a similar inclination toward white empathy in Macklemore, a white rapper who debuted in 2005, and who has ever since performed a “woke” or “positive” self-awareness. Macklemore recorded songs critiquing homophobia (“Same Love,” 2012), materialism (“Thrift Shop,” 2012), and white privilege, twice (“White Privilege,” 2005, and “White Privilege II,” 2016). Illustrating his flair for performing a politically conscious stance, he took to Twitter in 2014 to publicly self-flagellate after he won four Grammy Awards, beating out a number of Black rap artists, but magnanimously telling Black rapper Kendrick Lamar that Lamar was “robbed” (though without offering to give up his Grammy).

At one point early in his career, Macklemore (known as “Professor Macklemore” for a while) spent time facilitating writing workshops at a juvenile detention facility (Matson, 2011, para. 12). Clearly, while Eminem³ proved that talent (and misogyny) could make a white rapper famous, Macklemore demonstrated that preachy ethical posturing is another route to successful hip-hop self-branding. But I submit, as a white person who shares some of Macklemore’s tastes, beliefs, and life experiences, his example highlights the drawbacks, aesthetic and otherwise, of white folks instrumentalizing hip-hop as a teaching tool. These dangers are demonstrated throughout the history of American performance.

In the Jim-Crow-era tradition of blackface, white performers (though not only white performers) donned black tar or burnt ash on their faces and performed stereotyped Black roles for white audiences that were comic, melodramatic, or often both. Hartman (1997) writes, “The blackface mask... fortified a restrictive and repressive notion of blackness, which, although elastic enough to permit white self-exploration, could not trespass the parameters established to maintain racial hierarchies” (p. 29). Blackface affectations can be seen to persist to this day in the work of many white musicians, as well as that of reform-minded white liberals, teachers included. Kyla Schuller (2017) links dominant white American ideas of evolution in the nineteenth

3 Eminem is an enormously successful white rapper who debuted in the early 2000s. Early on, his authenticity was bolstered by working with the legendary “gangsta” producer Dr. Dre. Eminem quickly gained renown for his savagely clever wordplay, improvisational skill, and unique lyrical delivery.

century to a “sentimental biopolitics” whose most visible expression may have been Harriet Beecher Stowe’s bestselling 1852 abolitionist tearjerker, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a story which would become a staple of the blackface “minstrel” theater. Bringing this sentimental narrative of “transracialism” into the twentieth and twenty-first century, scholar Alisha Gaines (2017) looks at the history of spectacular attempts by liberal-minded white journalists and other racialized “impersonators” to create notoriety through disguising themselves as Black and publicly attesting to the suffering they experienced (cf. the now-infamous cases of Rachel Dolezal and Jessica Krug). Such histories need to be in the front of white teachers’ minds when trying to pedagogically operationalize Black culture. Weighty considerations remain key to negotiating the interpretation of culture in school.

Wokeness on snooze

Afro-pessimism is a bracing theorization of race that draws from and critiques both radical Black political theory and the Continental philosophical tradition. The psychic, phenomenological, and structural forces that Afro-pessimist thinkers are concerned with are summed up under the heading of “anti-Blackness,” a tendency that underpins but is distinct from white supremacy. The significance of white supremacy is to some degree acknowledged by progressive whites, including many teachers. Such teachers often bring cultural forms associated with nonwhite groups into their classrooms, seeking to disrupt assumptions that all important cultural figures are white, but not to disrupt the beliefs that underpin their own authority. Anti-Blackness as a term that identifies the production of Black suffering as psychically necessary for sustaining the everyday economic, political, and legal functioning of civil society.

Acknowledging the delusion of superiority can be a cathartic gesture, but anti-Blackness, which names a default exclusion of Blacks from all non-Black social spaces, and which feeds on white people’s charitable intentions, persists. Macklemore again provides an instructive example. Like progressive white teachers, he announces that he has privilege, thereby reinforcing a sense of moral superiority for white fans, but not sparking their self-awareness, nor centering the work and voices of Black or brown people. “One never really knows which is more severe,” Afro-pessimist scholar Frank B. Wilderson III (2008) reflects: “the blithe disregard of White Americans, or the pious remorse through which they purify themselves” (p. 112). My unease with the white curricular employment of Black culture in an educational system permeated by ever more subtle forms of oppression finds articulation (although little comfort) in this school of thought, in which racial stratification is fundamental and historical scars are largely permanent. In the 2013 zine *The Wanderings of the Slave: Black Life and Social Death*, the author R.L. states:

The violence of anti-Blackness produces black existence; there is no prior positive blackness that could be potentially appropriated. Black existence is simultaneously produced and negated by racial domination, both as presupposition and consequence. Affirmation of blackness proves to be impossible without simultaneously affirming the violence that structures black subjectivity itself. (p. 3)

This might be one way of summing up the tenets of orthodox Afro-pessimism. For Afro-pessimist thinkers, working in a specific interpretive lineage of the acclaimed anti-colonial philosopher, psychologist, and partisan Frantz Fanon, there cannot be a thorough social or cultural recognition of Black people as full human beings, let alone citizens. This is due to the irredeemable abjection of the category of Blackness, a category that arose alongside and facilitated colonial subjugation and modern chattel slavery.

Blackness thus represents a form of existential deadlock, even as some Afro-pessimist theorists posit Blackness as a fundamental condition or position for all meaningful theorizing (Spillers, 2006; Sexton, 2012). Through the widespread perpetuation of anti-Blackness as a shared psychic and political reality, Black people continue to inhabit the slave's subhuman position, enduring "social death" (Patterson, 1982). From this perspective, it would seem unlikely that appropriations of Black artists by white-dominated institutions would benefit the young people whose forebears and elders created, and whose peers are creating, the culture being appropriated in spite of, and in opposition to, white-dominated institutions. As the eminent Black educational theorist Carter G. Woodson (1933/2009) observed long ago, "the philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching" (p. 4). If race is a fundamental phenomenological (rather than biological) category of the modern era, as Afro-pessimists maintain, there is something cynical in presenting cultural forms back to the subaltern communities⁴ they came from as a gesture of *noblesse oblige* made by the dominant group.

Speaking of the philanthropic white "friends of the Negro" that descended on the American South following the Civil War, Black historian and Afro-pessimist Saidiya Hartman (1997) recalls how

4 This paper runs the risk of falsely suggesting that Latinx communities (who clearly suffer under xenophobic white supremacy) were and are less than central to the development of hip-hop culture. A postcolonial critique of hip-hop education drawing on Latin American scholars could productively overlap with this one focusing on Afro-pessimism.

“teachers, missionaries, and plantation managers strived to inculcate a self-interested ethic that would motivate the formerly enslaved to be dutiful and productive laborers” (p. 128).

While this applies to a somewhat distant historical moment, it’s hard not to see the connections to the ongoing phenomenon commonly referred to as the “white savior complex,” a notion which has fueled the educational deskilling of teachers and privatization of schools promoted by groups such as Teach For America (Brewer and deMarrais, 2015; Waldman, 2019). A similar “empowerment” ethos is applied to the use of hip-hop as a teaching tool by Samuel S. Seidel in *Hip-Hop Genius* (2011), a book promoting the High School for Recording Arts charter school in St. Paul, Minnesota. It’s not the case that all teachers in either of these programs are homogeneously white⁵, nor that they are uniformly lacking in musical or teaching ability. But a push toward entrepreneurial self-improvement links these initiatives with Reconstruction-era philanthropy, as well as with contemporary neoliberal policies that presume a post-racial world.

There still remains the matter of whether a white teacher can collaborate with youth of color in an urban diasporic Black and brown musical and literary tradition that has been used in large part to critique and oppose white institutions, often in subtle, indirect, or occluded ways. The presumably transgressive act of bringing hip-hop into the K-12 curriculum may be viewed instead as a negation of transgression. Jared Sexton (2008), another noted Afro-pessimist, comments on theories of multiracial identity in terms that resonate with the educational appropriation of hip-hop, noting that “critical discontinuity is... covered over as the processes of representation are effaced in favor of a supposedly self-evident product” (p. 50). The discontinuity that Sexton locates is specific to the term “representation,” a word which, as postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak points out, has two distinct meanings; there is the recognized *subject* of political representation, and the appreciated or interpreted *object* of artistic or metaphorical representation (as cited in Sexton 2008, p. 50). As the history of colonial spectacles attests, the representation of a community’s tradition under an external locus of (aesthetic) authority doesn’t translate into that community being granted power.

Important questions and difficult experiences have been discussed for years in rap music, sometimes but by no means exclusively by rappers who meet schools’ criteria for respectability (Bowen, 2014;

5 Terrenda White (2016) examines and addresses the direct effect that Teach For America has had on the declining numbers of Black teachers working in public schools.

Cooper, Morris, & Boylorn, 2017). But the situating of such music in a classroom as a teaching tool may be a hard sell for students of color, precisely because of the kind of obstacles that Sexton describes, both within and outside the institution of schooling. What makes it harder is that the violence explicitly on the surface of some rap music, even when expressed in terms that a teacher can countenance, even when centuries of repression are acknowledged, also communicates an “unthought” violence to some listeners and not others (Hartman & Wilderson, 2003; Hartman, 2008). The restaging of this violence is linked to what Sexton (2010) calls “an inadequate understanding of the relations of power,” (p. 89) in which schools themselves are implicated. “Black optimist” scholar Fred Moten, a sympathetic critic of Afro-pessimism and an admirer of Hartman’s thought, references Black art’s “enfleshment of the un- or sub-representable” (2007a, p. 218). This traumatic kernel is not readily available for class discussion, perhaps especially when the discussion is facilitated by a white teacher. In addition, while it is not the case that the content of rap music is immune from critique, the anti-Black impulse to police and suppress a perceived “excessiveness” of Black bodies, culture, and pleasure, sometimes with deadly violence (Fleetwood, 2011; King, 2013; Winters, 2018; Strings, 2019), cannot be bracketed out of a critique of hip-hop by a white spectator.

When Black and brown alienation and aggression are detoured toward uplift by a teacher, astute observers of hip-hop pedagogy might identify “a metanarrative thrust” that Saidiya Hartman (2008) says is “always towards an integration into the national project.” “(P)articularly when that project is in crisis,” she notes, “Black people are called upon to affirm it” (p. 185). Contextualizing resistance among many youth of color to national projects such as public education, Moten invokes Black leader Fannie Lou Hamer’s injunction to “refuse that which has been refused to us” (Hartman & Moten, 2016, 34:20). In an earlier piece, Moten (2007b) also speaks of Black music as “resistance to constraint and instrumentalization” (p. 3). Given that many low-income Black youth may have come to perceive the role of white-dominated schools to be policing and punishing rather than providing valuable skills and knowledge, a sufficient level of shared understanding may not exist in dissociative spaces where those very young people find their expression muffled and hijacked.

Inside the class, outside the culture

One of the most amusingly off-the-rails projects I ever facilitated during my decade teaching art in an urban majority-Black neighborhood public high school was one in 2006 involving the creation and recording of vibrations using homemade contact microphones. I had written a grant for an audio project, and we

had spent a couple of weeks using hand tools to make “canjos,” functioning stringed instruments made from large cans, boards, guitar strings, and adjustable tuning pegs. I shared examples of improvised instruments that appeared throughout the history of African-American music, and I brought in a white friend who is a sculptor, musician, and sound artist to show students how to use inexpensive supplies to create contact microphones, also known as pickups, that permit recording and amplification. The visiting artist showed how these pickups could be used to record any vibration on a solid object to which it was mounted. Additionally, there were a handful of cassette recorders on hand, and I encouraged students to manipulate recordings by placing masking tape over the erase head when recording with their pickups.

As it so happened, barely any students were enchanted by the avant-garde possibilities of creating *musique concrète* (European connotations intended). I had thought there would be experiments with percussion, along with musical loops on the canjos, but pretty much every student held the contact microphone to their throat and recorded themselves rapping. I had no principled objection to this, but the content of the lyrics was, by and large, thoroughly unfit for the ears of school administrators, or of parents and family members for that matter. Profanity was just the tip of the iceberg. Lyrics about sex, drugs, and violence were varied, imaginative, hilarious, and altogether appalling. There were familiar themes of neighborhood and consumer pride, and impressive insults. While I did try to keep a lid on targeted verbal abuse, much of the content would likely be described by many adults as inappropriate for a school setting. Regardless, students were as happy and engaged as I had ever seen them.

I ended up keeping all the tapes—which was one way I could avoid getting in trouble for having allowed students to record such brazenly taboo content in my class. I didn’t share them with anyone outside my classroom, as I obviously hadn’t solicited permission from the creators’ guardians. Still, I had a strong though unrealized urge to create an education-as-empowerment-themed display with headphones as part of my final grant presentation, in order to see the looks on listeners’ faces. I did organize a final event in a local arts center featuring a local electroacoustic instrument builder and musician, at which event visitors could try out canjos, pickups, and recorders, but no local rap artistry was on offer. I do consider this project a success, and it could be called a classroom deployment of hip-hop culture. But what made the final recordings so special, from my point of view, was their total lack of pedagogical direction.



Figure 1. *Display of canjos, recorders, pickups, and handouts at a local arts center, May 2006*

It wasn't that I failed to offer directives, procedures, or hands-on guidance, or that students failed to attend to my facilitation. But the deliberate choice of students to depart from my recording suggestions was what created something like a glorious mess. In the end, students got access to new tools, and they used them in ways that were entirely outside of my curricular intent. This may be the only way in which a truly critical school project can be said to succeed-- particularly in the public schools of a segregated city, particularly in the deindustrialized wasteland of white flight where I taught, particularly in the classroom of a suburban white rap fan like myself.

Beats, rhymes, and discipline

Despite my claim of success, my lesson could easily be seen as a failure (Spillane, 2012), either as a lesson on sound art or as a lesson on hip-hop. While teaching in the city I did several other projects that would be better candidates for examples of success and solidarity, as well as of my own self-branding. But what makes the sound project such a success, to me if to nobody else, is that it was an unexpected result that did not respond in any way whatsoever, positively or negatively, to institutional intentions. To the best of their ability, the students simply ignored the classroom. As it happens, rap was what made that possible: rap not as an articulation of a difference-transcending American diversity narrative, but rap as a tradition rooted in exile from any American narrative whatsoever. The amateur rappers in my classroom declared a refusal to cooperate, while taking advantage of my white fantasies of respectable Black

and brown transgression. They asserted what Édouard Glissant (1990/1997) termed *the right to opacity*.

The recordings my students made comprised a meaningful act of refusal, but not because Black and brown students can't learn and grow intellectually with adult guidance. It's because the kind of educational services provided to segregated majority-Black communities derive from racist practices and policies that very few teachers, including me, have the ability to subvert, even though those services are necessary, underfunded, and very difficult to replace when taken away (as they frequently have been in American history, and particularly in the recent history of my city). Whether or not the recordings my students made were subversive, they were evasive, evoking a quality Moten has described as "fugitivity" (2007a, 2007b, 2008). For Moten, fugitivity is a necessary element in Black cultural flourishing, given the impossibility of recognition by white institutions of learning and culture.

Black people have overcome immense hardship to educate themselves and their children (Green, 2016). But the education provided by white people in powerful positions to Black communities has always reflected apartheid distinctions in discipline, implicit and explicit, that echo patterns of policing practice and housing segregation. Discipline in white schools has traditionally been an inward-directed virtue of self-control that authority figures aim to instill, whereas in Black and brown schools admonishments regarding personal responsibility are accompanied by external penalties, attested to in innumerable analyses of the "school-to-prison pipeline." And in my city (as well as elsewhere) this punitive ethos extends to the level of the school system, where nonwhite-majority neighborhood public schools such as the one where I worked are frequently slated for total administrative overhaul, if not outright closure and replacement by charter schools (Jankov & Caref, 2017), a process that reduces rather than expands opportunities for many Black families (Waitoller & Super, 2017).

The white empathy curriculum of pedagogical hip-hop extends this discipline, even as it presumes a shared sense of resistance and solidarity. When John Rankin, an earnest abolitionist cited by Saidiya Hartman (1997), describes in a letter the "incoherent song" voiced by a coffle of enslaved people he encountered (p. 22), he takes it upon himself to imagine himself and his family in their circumstances, and thereby to render their suffering legible. But Hartman blisteringly scrutinizes the presumption of these sorts of projection, which find titillation and outrage in the most grotesque displays of torture, while repeating the denial, then enshrined in law, of Black people's capacity to offer their own witness. The violence of the institution can only be brought into view by extreme examples of incineration

and dismemberment, or by placing white bodies at risk. (p. 21) Both like and unlike the blackface minstrel shows of yesteryear, Black and brown popular culture has a complex relationship with white institutions. It enacts defiance, even as it exists both in reaction to and reliance upon those institutions, and their thirst for violence.

Rap has undoubtedly been absorbed into and formed by “fugitive” forms of informal learning that have ensured the cohesion and vitality of Black communities for centuries, while also feeding the fantasies of white fans. But focusing on the pedagogical aspect of the music eclipses its affective functions, which respond to marginalization and trauma with provocative and politically significant expressions of autonomy, struggle, and rage, not to mention transgressive violence and pleasure. Pedagogy flattens the music, draining its meaning, by foregrounding a false transparency that reassures white teachers.

Without a doubt, teachers who lead hip-hop lessons care about their students. My goal here is not to dissuade white teachers from expressing concern for their students, white or nonwhite, nor from treating them with care and respect. Rather, following Hartman (1997), my goal is “to highlight the dangers of a too-easy intimacy... and the violence of identification” (p. 20) when, for empathetic whites, “the central term of this identification (is) suffering” (p. 22). For caring white teachers, caring is not the problem. The problem is the uncritical indulgence of empathy, which needs to be understood as a paternalistic assertion of authority (Gaines, 2017). While white teachers can offer many resources to their nonwhite students, including kindness, openness, and patience, there are limits set by history on what can be shared, either in words or through unspoken understandings.

But, as my class project shows, this limitation can yield expression. Drawing on the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the philosopher Alain Badiou, Derek Hook (2013) seeks to address the psychological dissonance in post-apartheid South Africa through “raising impotence to impossibility,” saying “that this ‘irresolvable’—that which cannot be explained away or fully recovered from—undergoes a form of mediation in view of a forward-looking commitment” (p. 118). Putting that lesson into this context, the autonomy of open-ended artmaking can have surprising results, while forced efforts at empathy may inhibit the spontaneity that could enhance mutual recognition.

Following the argument of Fanon’s essay “The Negro and Recognition” in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/1986), Afro-pessimists are often skeptical regarding recognition, whether interracial, individual, or “intramural” (Spillers, 2006), let alone sanguine about solidarity (Sexton, 2010; Wilderson, 2010). What Afro-pessimism suggests, however, is that, especially but not exclusively in white-

dominated institutions, contradiction, conflict, and deadlock may be more honest and relevant themes than respectable “urban education” motifs of self-discipline, overcoming, and uplift. For art teachers particularly, the creative potential of dissonance and refusal is hard to direct, but it is also undeniable. As pedagogically unsatisfying as it may be, there may be something inspiring in the ceaseless provocation that, while not a dynamic in Macklemore’s oeuvre, can be detected throughout the art and music of the neo-colonial Black diaspora. As Geneva Smitherman (2006) herself acknowledges, “the Black musical tradition represents an outlaw musical form” (p. 98).

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