

Shots Fired in Oakland: Using Hip Hop to Cultivate Public Intellectuals Reclaiming Culture

by Gerald Reyes

*They fail to put an end to the word minority
but they don't know there's nothing minor about me
and since when did minority become about the colors we see
'Cause it's the mayorities' who are the colored in the streets
They are also the mayorities in prisons today
while only 15% white boys end up in the CYA²
CYA wrote this rhyme
I wanna tell you the truth about the world this time
They expect us colored to commit a crime
They look at us in Oakland where the death toll is high
And they say many more will die
It's not a question about how many more are gonna die
It's a matter about how many are gonna stay alive
This is simple mathematics*

- Jesus Limon, Grade 7

My 7th grade sociologists know that they are not inherently born with access to certain rights in society. In order to improve their social access, they know that they cannot only be consumers of culture in society. They must also be active *producers* of culture. To do that in the 2005-2006 school year, they needed to take back the messages that mainstream Hip Hop radio had to offer and present their own perspectives. They needed to reclaim their Oakland, a city on track to double the homicides from the previous year, in a way that countered the more common negative expectations of what youth do

So that is what Jesus and the 51 other students in my Humanities class did with our multi-media show, *Shots Fired In Oakland: Images and Words Fired to Inspire Social Change*. I took the context of our lives in Oakland and armed my students with the weapons of 21st century public intellectuals. I armed them with urban sociology. I armed them with critical multi-media literacies in urban photo-ethnography, graffiti writing, spoken word poetry, and emceeing (rapping). I armed them with the Hip Hop that did what local M.C. Rashidi Omari of Company of Prophets meant when he spit, "I aspire to go higher; spit flames that will inspire."

The excerpt above from Jesus Limon's "Mathematics", an original piece, was modeled after socially conscious rapper Mos Def's song under the same title. Held in front of an audience of his peers, family members, community organizations, artists, and educators at the Youth Uprising community center in "Deep" East Oakland, Jesus performed "Mathematics" over an instrumental version of "Tell Me When To Go", a Bay Area favorite representing the new *Hyphy* Hip Hop Movement that is sweeping the nation. The words, however, do not represent "hyphy" at all. For those of you who do not know, "hyphy" in general can be associated with a certain wild and exuberant street culture, style of music, and style of dance that originated in the San Francisco-

Oakland Bay Area

Here in the Bay, a synonym for "going hyphy" is "going dumb". However, as a result of our learning expedition this past year, Jesus wrote "Mathematics" from a counter-hegemonic perspective to combat the idea of "going dumb", which is so prevalent in mainstream commercial rap in general. And along with "going dumb", mainstream Hip Hop emphasizes messages that glamorize sexual promiscuity, exploits women, and emphasizes excessive consumerism. So to combat that mainstream, capitalistic hegemony, Jesus went from "going dumb" to "going smart", as we said in my class community. For us, "going smart" meant to resist the pop culture messages that large record companies and radio stations use to divert youth culture from being conscious and active about issues in our world. "Going smart" to us, meant to reclaim words, ideas, music, and culture. For Jesus, that meant to reclaim the beats in the commercial song "Tell Me When To Go", and use the inspiration gained from the Mos Def's original *Mathematics*, to produce culture on his own; to use his own story to influence others; because if he did not accurately tell his own story, then who would? Behind Jesus' version of *Mathematics* and all the academic, sociological, and media literacy skills that intersected with his own experiences, he was contributing to the discourse of one of the other teachers in our classroom: *We never can win freedom and justice and equality until we are doing something for ourselves* - Malcolm X (Haley, 1964)

*Latinos are 43% of the youth population
19% of youth getting arrested
and 45% of the CYA incarceration population
Because of these XIV X3s
Norte, Sur, and BBs
What you claim?³
What's your turf?
50s, 60s, 70s
Who does your bangin' hurt?
Oakland?
You hear them songs
Go 18 dummy lean wit it rock wit it
Instead of going smart
they going dumb wit it
Getting into problems all the time
so many youth going to jail
I just got locked up when I hit that last rhyme
Enough of the crime
I wanna see a new headline
One that says Oakland kids find
a new claim
They reclaim
the streets under a new name*

¹ The root "mayor" is word play from the Spanish word *mayor*, meaning "greater"

² California Youth Authority

³ In Oakland, youth might claim the street area ("turf") they live in, such as 50th street, or they might claim a gang such as the Norteños (aka XIV), Sureños (X3), or Border Brothers (BB)

*Peace Love Hope Freedom
Now no one's going dumb'*

-Isabel Gonzalez, 7th Grade

Behind the Rhyme

Let me first give some background context around my students and the big ideas behind our learning expedition. Without providing context, readers might be likely to say, "My kids can't do that." By providing context, readers have more of a chance to have a vivid picture of the reality, a glimpse into the process, and a greater social imagination of how my successes and challenges relate to their own communities.

Jesus and Isabel were among the 52 total students in my 7th grade Humanities class at Lighthouse Community Charter School, a small school located in the heart of downtown Oakland, California. They were among the 85% Latino students in the 7th grade who were English Language Learners. Jesus, in particular, was 1 of the unknown amount of students who was grappling with his identity as either a creative and critical intellectual or as a blue-clad Sureño gang member.

Jesus, Isabel and the rest of my 7th grade Sociologists embarked on a learning expedition I designed that was called "Civilization Conquest and Resistance". We used the sociological ideas of Karl Marx (Social Class and Exploitation), Michel Foucault (Power, Knowledge, and Language), and Talcot Parsons (Social Reproduction and Systems of Socialization) to serve as the lens to explore the following guiding questions around the Classic Aztecs, the collision of the Aztecs and the Spaniards, and modern-day Oakland:

1. What is a civilization?
2. What happens to people in a civilization facing conquest?
3. How do people in a civilization resist conquest?

Throughout our explorations, we discovered how power, knowledge, language, and socialization became the basic tools for conquest, oppression, and exploitation. We saw it in societal structures in contemporary issues such as Immigration Rights and with the Prison Industry Complex. We saw it in socialization forces like those in music videos, television, movies, radio, music, and print media. After being aware of those forces, we needed to deconstruct them, so that we would know how to actively resist and combat those forces. That is where they needed a framework. To empower my young sociologists, I created a "10-point Doctrine of Active Social Resistance" that was modeled after the Black Panther Party for Self Defense's 10-Point Plan and their Liberation Schools. Like the Panthers, I took my youth along the journey of involving them in the creation and the reasons WHY they needed the Doctrine. Like the Panthers, it was important for me to convince my youth of the urgency to raise their consciousness and state of mind; that having this knowledge was larger than the often emphasized ideas of getting a grade, getting into college, or getting a job. This was about the liberation of self and others using the mediums that could free our minds and mobilize our community. What is the use of studying the history of conquest and resistance if we, ourselves, could not apply our learning in our own context?

So that is what we did. As critical readers, graphic designers, graffiti writers, photo-ethnographers, spoken word poets, and M.C.s, we brought in local experts to help us with authentically becoming producers of culture in our society. Prior to our explorations, my youth were not unlike fellow Oakland educator Jeff Duncan-Andrade's, "They often passively received these media messages through their youth culture, and so they remained unclear about ways that they could critique and disrupt these lowered expectations of them" (Duncan-Andrade, 2002). Resulting from our explorations, we learned that if we are only passive consumers, then our choices get limited, and we are only left to follow others.

In the Classroom

The Hip Hop element of Emceein (MC-ing or rapping), in particular, revolutionized the thinking and empowerment of my youth. Here Stephanie talks about her dreams for Oakland.

*A place to have fun and not run
from gang bangers showing off their guns
Instead of shooting each other
we should love one another
not control each other
but recognize one another
Help youth to mobilize
so they realize
the positive things in life
instead of the negative lies
Be active
Do something about the issues in Oakland
Don't be passive
and sit around for changes to happen
Be a leader not a follower
Be a culture producer
Make your own, be your own
Be a movement mover
This is my conscious mansion*

- Stephanie Ceja, 7th Grade

It is really quite simple. Using Hip Hop is not unlike introducing a lesson on biodiversity or persuasive writing or studying the Harlem Renaissance. Particularly in the inner cities, Hip Hop is credible, relevant, street wisdom. In *Hip Hop and Philosophy Rhyme 2 Reason*, Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby asserted that Hip Hop "represents the funky ways that philosophy is carried out in everyday life." (Darby, Shelby, 2005). Hip Hop, whether No Child Left Behind acknowledges it or not, is part of the real-life context of many children. Cornel West challenged us by asking, "Does not the love of wisdom require that we interrogate in a Socratic way the voices and views that have emerged from the killing fields and gangsterized hoods of the American empire?" (Darby, Shelby, 2005).

The basics of using Hip Hop can use the standard models of doing an in-depth unit of study. Invite what they know. Build upon what

they know by equipping them with new knowledge. Arm them with the relevant tools and language. Provide opportunities and structures to discourse. Support them with credible resources & learning opportunities (texts, multi-media, experts, fieldwork). Cultivate their identities. Give them an authentic purpose with real products they create for real audiences. Push them further with critique. Heighten their awareness through reflection.

It is critical that these basics are employed. As educators, we cannot continue to say that pop culture does not need to be introduced into our classroom communities in ways that bypass the essentials of good solid teaching. Should Hip Hop be more creative and multi-modal than teaching other disciplines? Certainly not. As a matter of fact, perhaps we should use the creativity and multiple modalities that Hip Hop invites to energize and inspire the way we teach other topics.

The potentially challenging part of using Hip Hop is transforming oneself as an educator into a credible resource or facilitator. An educator teaching the Unification of Ancient China or the wisdoms in *Letters to a Young Poet* for the first time would diligently work towards being literate in as many aspects of those subjects as possible. Likewise, if an educator is not literate in the diverse elements of Hip Hop, then that educator should work towards being literate. And when one does perform research, it is just as important to analyze and listen to the morally reprehensible content of Li'l Jon as it is to analyze and listen to the revolutionary ideas of Dead Prez or Immortal Technique.

The M.C.

Be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given to you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will gradually without noticing it live into the answer.

— Rainer Maria Rilke

I like to use questioning particularly with youth because often times, they are often taught to focus on “the right answer”. With the right line of questioning, I can often create the spirit of continuous learning and conscious endeavor. Specifically with becoming an M.C., which has traditionally been referred to as the one-time role of “Master of Ceremonies”, I wanted my M.C.s to fit more of the model of the progressive Hip Hop

M.C., which basically refers to “Moving the Crowd”. To guide our journey to evolving as M.C.s, we used the following guiding question: “What is it like to be me in Oakland?”

I wanted to make sure I obviated my youth getting caught up in the common problem of “saying a whole lot of nothing”. So, for my youth, their writing became intense with complex ideas and rich experiences because of the interweaving of intellectual knowledge, ideas, language, and their own lives. This is where public intellectuality got particularly stressed. Developing public intellectuals meant to equip them with the knowledge and skills to communicate as experts around subject matter that they knew in depth to both informed and uninformed audiences. To participate in “the discourse”, my youth needed to be literate in what other M.C.s were saying. With the basics of urban sociology as part of our arsenal, we found concrete examples of Exploitation in Li'l Jon's “Get Down”. We found concrete examples of Social Reproduction from analyzing a series of old and new songs from KRS 1, NWA, Too \$hort,

DUE: Dec. 15

The California Association of Teachers of English presents the

CATE 2007 Creative Writing Contest

QUERENCIA

All of us have a *querencia*, a place where we feel most at home, most comfortable, most ourselves. Sometimes it's not a place. Sometimes it's a time of day or a favorite shirt, a certain kind of weather or music.

Write about your *querencia*. You may do this as a poem, a story, or a memoir.

from Georgia Heard's *Writing Toward Home*

AWARD CATEGORIES:

Awards will be given in the following divisions:

- Grades 3-4
- Grades 5-6
- Grades 7-8
- Grades 9-10
- Grades 11-12
- College

AWARDS:

Statewide winners in each category will be published in *California English*.

TO ENTER:

Entries must be judged at the local level before they are eligible for statewide consideration. See local contacts below.

DEADLINE: **December 15, 2006**

Local Council Writing Coordinators

Greater SAN DIEGO	•Don Mayfield	•1835 Sunset Boulevard • San Diego, CA 92103	•donmayfi@cox.net
IUCATE	•Carol Surabian	•589 E Sycamore • Reedley, CA 93654	•csurab132@yahoo.com
CENTRAL	•Liz McAninch	•3626 20th Street • San Francisco, CA 94110	•lmcaininch@mercyhs.org
SOUTHLAND	•Pamela L. Devlin	•Etiwanda HS • 13500 Victoria • Etiwanda, CA 91739	•devlinp@aol.com
REDWOOD	•Stacy Hoffinger	•(no address given, must e-mail entries)	•sh37@humboldt.edu
CAPITOL	•Susan Karpowicz	•620 Juanita Way • Roseville CA 95678	•susank@quiknet.com
FACEI	•Cathy Cirimele	•713 E Peralta • Fresno, CA • 93704	•cmcirimele@aol.com
UPPER	•Bonnie Enmark	•2550 Sandra Ct. • Redding, CA 96001-3701	•bonnieenmark@charter.net

RULES FOR THE WRITER:

1. Submit your entry to your teacher.
2. You may submit a poem, short story, or memoir.
3. Your entry must be typed (double-spaced) or neatly written.
4. Your entry cannot exceed five pages.
5. Please number each page of your entry.
6. Please put your full name, grade level, your teacher's full name, and the name of your school on each page.
7. Your entry must be your own work from this school year.
8. Your entry must be edited, proofread, and ready for publication.
9. Only your teacher may submit your entry to the contest.

RULES FOR THE TEACHER

- #### SUBMITTING THE ENTRY:
1. There is a limit of three student entries per teacher.
 2. Each entry must be an original work from the current school year.
 3. The cover sheet must include: entrant's full name, address, phone number, and grade level in school; and teacher's full name, school name and address, phone number, and school district.
 4. Each entry must include the following information on every page: Author's full name, grade level, teacher's full name, school name.
 5. Lost entry forms or incomplete information may invalidate an entry.
 6. **Electronic versions (sent via e-mail) are acceptable, appreciated, and encouraged.**

Tupac Shakur, Wutang Clan, and 50 Cent, that reflected urban violence. We examined Systems of Socialization by performing a "Radio Watch" by listening to and documenting the songs from the 2 dominant "Hip Hop/ R and B" radio stations. Then we used models that would aid our writing towards the question of "What is it like to be me in Oakland?"

The 3 socially conscious songs that we used as models for our own writing were:

1. *OAKLAND*, by Company of Prophets
2. *Mathematics*, by Mos Def
3. *Thugz Mansion*, by Tupac Shakur and Nás

I approached these 3 models in a progressive series so that we could write pieces from the "inside out" *OAKLAND* allowed us to write about who we were and what was around us. *Mathematics* allowed us to use factual statistics to be critical about the community around us. Finally *Thugz Mansion* allowed us to write about what we wanted to be free from and what our dreams were for Oakland.

Let me be clear about the writing process I used, the same one most skilled teachers of writing use. Start with a question. Have a dialog. Do a brainstorming prewrite (sometimes using idea webs, sometimes using categorical charts). Analyze an exemplar model (the songs). Write a draft using graphic organizers, sentence starters, or sentence frames to support writers who need it. Peer Critique. Teacher Feedback. Revision. Peer Share. Revision. Open Mic. Revision. Rehearse. Revision.

To add to the experience of blooming as socially conscious M.C.s, I brought in Rashidi Omari from Company of Prophets to work with the youth. What this also did was put a face to a Hip Hop crew that was not on MTV or on the radio. It put a voice to a rich underground movement that makes Oakland so much more than the ghetto thug life image that is so prevalent. Finally it connected my youth with an active member of the progressive and artistic Oakland community.

Rashidi Omari certainly helped with the blossoming identities of my youth as performers. However, I am a Spoken Word Poet myself, and have been creating the culture and developing the skills of performance and stage presence with my youth for some time. The *performance* is important in Hip Hop. To guide my young culture producers, I wanted to be sure that they would be guided in the footsteps of inspirational and skilled models. Yes, part of performance is talent but ethics, discipline, hard work, and solid skills will turn talent into greatness. Hip Hop is public, so to be counter-hegemonic to how Hip Hop is perceived in the mainstream, not only the writing, but also the performance needs to be critically guided. I did not teach writing and then shove my youth onto a stage. I had to teach performance and stage presence. For instance, to make performance concrete, I taught these basic elements of "How to make your Spoken Word Poem come alive: 1. Volume, 2. Tempo, 3. Facial and Body Movement, 4. Eye Contact Connections, 5. Pauses"

The End of the Beginning

In the end, *Shots Fired In Oakland* provided many opportunities and authentic products. It was a performance with 52 stars from our school. It showcased student-generated photography that visually told their stories. It showcased graffiti writing boards that displayed messages

of justice and critical consciousness. It produced saleable copies of a professionally printed perfect-bound anthology of student writing and photographs. As transformative as that was, it was still based on "a rigorous curriculum: a marriage of youth culture and canonical culture that would bring the vigor and vitality of my students back into the classroom" (Duncan-Andrade, 2002).

In the end, Hip Hop was just a representation of our reality. In the bigger sense, Hip Hop has grown in almost 3 decades from being a youth movement in the Bronx, New York to being a transnational culture that continues to evolve in unimaginable ways. Hip Hop has a rightful place in academia and curricula. As educators, we can no longer remain what writer, Ishmael Reed called, "confined to an intellectual cave: the limited vision of American missionary education that's driving blacks and Hispanics from the classroom" (Reed, 2003). We need to recognize that "Black and Hispanic students pack the slam poetry events and write hip-hop verse themselves, but doze off in the missionary classroom and receive low scores in reading and writing on the missionary's SAT." (Reed, 2003). In recognizing that, we can innovate more ways for Hip Hop to be used as a medium of instruction.

This is just the beginning. Explorations using Hip Hop should not occur once and then end. We must continue to create new beginnings. We must accept our responsibility in contributing in critical and contextual ways to the discourse, evolving language, evolving knowledge, evolving education. Otherwise, we risk perpetuating a cycle that limits certain youth. That must stop. But for Hip Hop, that is not an option. As said by countless many, "Hip Hop ya don't stop".

Resources

- Darby, D., Shelby, I (ed.) (2005) *Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing
- Duncan-Andrade, J. (2002). Why Must School Be Boring? Invigorating the Curriculum with Youth Culture. *Teaching to change LA*. Vol. 3, No 1-7
- Haley, A. (1964). *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Ballantine
- Reed, I. (ed.) (2003) *From totems to hip-hop*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.
- Rilke, R. (1934) *Letters to a young poet*. London: WW Norton and Company

About the Author:

G Reyes is often seen walking in deep thought through crowded hallways of youth, sharing passionate secrets and wisdoms with microphones, and guiding souls of teaching & learning towards seeking their own liberation. G is a warrior using transformative education, words, and concise ideas as weapons as an educator, teacher coach & school reformer in the Oakland public schools, the Bay Area Writing Project, after school programs, and teacher education programs. He aspires to serve educators and youth towards transforming the self, schools, communities, language, knowledge, and the profession of education. For more information on the full Learning Expedition or cultivating Hip Hop performers, email Gerald Reyes at geraldtreyes@lighthousecharter.org