

Coining Phrases for Dollars

Jay-Z, Economic Literacy, and the Educational Implications of Hip-Hop's Entrepreneurial Ethos

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This study is theoretically informed by the work of Brazilian educator, philosopher, and activist, Paulo Freire (1970). From a close reading of the original Portuguese by the third author of this study, Correa, we found an important insight regarding the specific working of ‘oppression,’ and by contrast, the ‘praxis’ which informs the process of liberation. Freire actually employed a viral metaphor when describing oppression by saying that the oppressed act as a ‘host’ of the oppression. This symbiotic relationship between the oppressed and oppressor is implied in the published text when the passage states that “the oppressed, . . . are at the same time themselves and the oppressor whose image they have internalized” (p. 43). This viral conception of the oppression process is also reflected in the dynamics of Freire’s conception of the oppressive teacher-student relationship when he writes, “A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally narrative character. This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness (p. 52).

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We found these viral conceptions to be compelling as we worked with young African American men and women for whom the schooling experience had become ‘lifeless and petrified’ and was clearly “detached from (their) reality” (ibid). In contrast to the oppressive teacher-student relationship, the students began a process of “naming” their world through the cultural tools afforded by hip hop culture. Because of the comparative lifelessness of their schooling experiences, members of our group found themselves gravitating toward activities involving drugs and violence. In short, they were acting as hosts of oppression. As the research of Alexander (2010) has found, it is precisely young African Americans with low levels of drug and gun involvement who comprise the majority of the U.S. prison population. An archetypal figure in the use of hip hop skills to name and articulate into existence an alternative destiny apart from the destiny etched into oppression’s viral code was the artist Jay-Z and the entrepreneurial ethos of hip hop.

JAY-Z AND THE ENTREPRENEURIAL ETHOS OF HIP-HOP CULTURE

The Wall Street Journal, Forbes Magazine’s “400 Richest People in America,” and Black Enterprise Magazine are not publications in which one would expect to see articles on Hip-Hop. But over the course of the past several years, Hip-Hop icon Jay-Z has been featured on the cover of each publication. Apart from the obvious purpose of using the celebrity of Jay-Z to increase the sales of the publications, Jay-Z’s presence on the covers of such prominent financial and business publications speaks to the power of the business and entrepreneurial ethos of Hip-Hop culture. Notwithstanding the highly publicized nature of Hip-Hop’s entrepreneurial impact, research examining the educational implications of Hip-Hop has yet to look at the educational possibilities embedded within Hip-Hop’s entrepreneurial ethos. Previous research examining Hip-Hop and education has almost exclusively examined Hip-Hop’s connection to literacy and literary education (Morrell, 2002; Hill, 2009; Fisher, 2007). The purpose of this paper is to examine the educational implications of Hip-Hop’s entrepreneurial ethos. Using the lyrics and the story of Jay-Z as a framework, this paper will conduct a detailed examination of the educationally relevant skills embedded in the business practices of Hip-Hop culture. In the following paragraphs, there will be a description of a Hip-Hop and education program called Bassline Entertainment, from which the data will be taken. The subsequent section will examine three prominent economic literacy themes found in the lyrics of Jay-Z and the manner in which the economic themes in the lyrics of Jay-Z coincide with the educationally relevant entrepreneurial skills cultivated by youth within the Bassline Entertainment program.

BASSLINE ENTERTAINMENT, HIP-HOP AND EDUCATION

The data for this paper were collected over a five year period in a Hip-Hop and education program called Bassline Entertainment. Bassline Entertainment began in 2002 when a middle school teacher Mrs. Lux observed a group of boys during the lunch period freestyling. As she observed the boys, she realized that they were employing vocabulary, sentence structure, and literary devices that she knew that they were not incorporating into their schoolwork. She shared this information with the authors who collaborated with her to create the Bassline Entertainment Hip-Hop and education program. The students of the program under the guidance of Michael Anthony “Tony” Anderson, engaged in several elements of Hip-Hop culture emphasizing writing, composing, performing and recording original music. The program began like previous studies as an examination of the literacy skills employed in this composition, recording and performing process. However, following the completion of the initial recording, the students realized that their CD represented a marketable commodity and desired to engage in the entrepreneurial aspects of Hip-Hop culture. At this point, the authors realized that a host of new educationally relevant skills and competencies became necessary to act on the students’ desires. This paper examines the educational and professionally relevant skills learned and employed by the students as they engaged in the various elements of Hip-Hop culture connected to their artistic, financial and professional aspirations.

WORD PLAY, WORK ETHIC, AND THE ECONOMIC POWER OF HIP-HOP NARRATIVE

Word-Play and the Underlying Power of Thought in Wealth

Jay-Z (2010) asserts that word-play lies at the core of the ‘aesthetic’ of the Hip-Hop MC as evidenced by “the challenge of moving around couplets and triplets, stacking double entendres.” (p. 17).

Describing the verbal aesthetic underlying the Hip-Hop topical staple of boasting, Jay-Z compares the creative verbal challenge to that of writing a Sonnet, focusing specifically on the often narrow range of subject matter and the creative language challenges required of both forms:

(Sonnets) also (have) a limited subject matter. They are mostly about love. Taking on such a familiar subject and writing about it in a set structure, forced sonnet writers to find every nook and cranny in the subject and challenged them to invent a new language for saying old things. It is the same with braggadocio in rap. When we take the most familiar subject in the history of rap—why I’m dope—and frame it within the sixteen bar structure of a rap verse, synced to the specific rhythm and feel of the track, more than anything else it is a test of creativity and

wit. . .if you can say how dope you are in a completely original, clever, powerful way, the rhyme itself becomes proof of the boast's truth (Jay-Z, 2911 p. 17).

Connected to the entrepreneurial ethos of Hip-Hop, Jay-Z's particular method for asserting his supremacy as an MC involved using word-play to articulate his superior business and financial acumen. In other words, he is a superior MC because he possesses more business and financial know-how than his rival MC's. Among the financially-relevant skills which Jay-Z claims to possess is the ability to use his mind to envision and to engage in the accumulation of wealth. On his debut CD, "Reasonable Doubt," (1996) in the song "Can I Live," Jay-Z posits the source of his superiority when he proclaims, "Don't be fooled, my game is mental." A prototypical exemplar of this practice can be found in in the song "Cashmere Thoughts" from the same CD. The song, the title of which is a word-play highlighting the connection between his thoughts, cash accumulation, and the finer things in life such as the fabric cashmere, is a kind of Hip-Hop "Think and Grow Rich" (Hill, 1960). This relates to the entrepreneurially vital skill of achieving desired outcomes in one's mind in the present as a mental prerequisite to achieving the outcomes in the future. In the song, Jay-Z composes an extended metaphorical boast suggesting that his ability to produce wealth and compose hits extends to the depth of his DNA:

Cashmere chromosomes make a nigga Jigga Jay-Z. . .Eighteen carat gold pen, when it hits the sheets Words worth a million like I'm rappin em through platinum teeth.

In the passage, in addition to this thoughts, his DNA chromosomes are said to be 'cashmere,' transforming him into the legend Jigga/Jay-Z, who boasts that his "Words worth a million," a play on the name of the iconic poet William Wordsworth, transforming the name from a literary association to a financial one.

One of Jay-Z's most famous and publicized battles or "beefs" with a competing MC occurred against the MC 'Nas.' In one of his most devastating verbal attacks against Nas, Jay-Z exhibits the depth of his business acumen. Jay-Z asserted that his superior knowledge of intellectual property rights was a reason for his superiority. To understand the attack, some background is in order. While Nas and Jay-Z became fierce rivals, earlier in his career, Jay-Z employed a sample from one of Nas's songs in his own song, suggesting by such a sample, that Jay-Z must have inherently respected Nas's skills since he used his music in his own song. However, Jay-Z dismissed this by first, suggesting that he did more with the material and finally and resoundingly, claiming that Nas's financial skills were so weak that while he sampled Nas's work, Nas had no ownership of his work as Jay-Z paid "Searhlight Publishing" and not Nas for the sample that he used:

So yeah, I sampled your voice, you was using it wrong. You made it a hot line,
I made it a hot song. And you aint got a coin. . .I know who I paid, Searchlight
publishin (Jay-Z, 2001)

Notwithstanding the obviously different professional levels at which they were functioning, youth from the Bassline Entertainment program employed a similar practice of word-play and wealth envisioning as Jay-Z. What must be kept in mind is that while these envisions may contain similar thematic content, the students' subsequent work over the years allowed us to see that these statements were an initial salvo in a struggle to shape their lives after the manner of their own vision. A particularly powerful example of this connection between literacy skills and financial possibility is found in the work of DJ who, at the outset of the Bassline Entertainment program composed the following rhyme:

I couldn't get off the block, so I signed to the heat/I only rap for one reason, to
keep my mind off the street/ and also to make you mad/watch the ink turn to
fire as soon as it hits the pad/It's your boy shorty D aka the one taker/I'm broke
but there's a million dollars up on my paper/So watch me spit these rhymes and
a dope hook/Aint it funny how the tip of your pencil can burn a hole into your
rhyme book.

Another Bassline MC, "One," made a similar claim in terms very similar to those of Jay-Z in "Cashmere Thoughts":

Diamond encrusted pen for every word written in ink is worth a million and
hundred words written equals a billion.

Lest one is lead to believe that such use of financially infused verbal wordplay and skill consciousness operated on the somewhat unrealistic level of Hip-Hop millions, the following composition by One demonstrates that the aspiration for wealth was tempered by more moderate objectives that also recognized the need for ongoing education:

I make a livin from writing rhymes with skill and precision/I may go through
hard times, but I never give in/ I feel my rhymes should leave an impact/like a
crater leaving a big whole in the ground intact/ I go on believing that I could be
achieving getting a diploma cause it's high school I believe in/

Analogous to Jay-Z's attack on Nas based upon his knowledge of intellectual property rights, Bassline MC's One and Amaru asserted their superiority over competing MC's based on their analysis of broader socioeconomic dynamics. In their transition from middle to high school students, the Bassline members began to desire employment as a means of gaining money for themselves independent of their parents. As soon as this became apparent, Bassline members were encour-

aged to use their Hip-Hop skills to earn money versus taking jobs in the service economy. This accomplished two necessary objectives for the group. First, they would not have to sacrifice valuable rehearsal time in order to meet the requirements of the job. Secondly, they began to see that they earned more money working parties as a DJ, promoting teen parties, and performing their own material compared to working minimum wage at a fast food restaurant for example. One member of the group “Natalie” earned upwards of a thousand dollars cash for each teen party that she promoted in collaboration with a local club owner. In the following passage, Amaru describes Natalie’s business venture and the manner in which it influenced other teens to look at their economic situations:

Natalie saw that as something that she wanted to do and she took all the knowledge of networking, and business skills that she watched me do, and she applied it to herself and basically quadrupled her turnouts for parties and whatever she made off the parties. And that was a good feeling for me but at the same time I was like dag I should have just been a business partner from the get go. But I was proud to see her do what she did. She kind of started a revolution around here because now all the teenagers want to throw parties. They want to be like her. They want to throw parties and make money off of throwing the parties. Natalie has been able to buy herself a new car, she been able to pay certain expenses. She’s got a nice little dress game going on right now so people are watching that. And it feels good to know she started out watching me.

One and Amaru eventually began to integrate this economic and artistic advantage into their compositions as they asserted their superiority over competing MC’s. ‘One’ noted how his financial independence enabled him to hone his writing craft rather than engage in fast food labor:

...while you’re flippin burgers on the floor and grill em again, I’m getting kind of ill with the pen.

In another rhyme, One not only distinguishes himself based upon his artistic labor, he separates himself from what he considers to be his peers wasteful spending habits, putting money into clothes versus improving their Hip-Hop skills:

Six days a week three times for practice/ multiplied times two rewind it backwards/while you Buyin fly h.a.t.’s, when it comes to these beats I lay down the high h.a.t.’s /I rip shows off of one hour of sleep, since I don’t put in work at no Target.

In the passage above, One describes the consistent level of practice he engages in week after week and engages in word-play comparing the ‘h.a.t.’s’ that his peers spend their time and money on, to the ‘high-h.a.t.’s’ percussion cymbals that he uses to make hot beats for his music. He closes the verse with a description of

the time he is able to put into his craft because he is not obligated to the service economy symbolized by the Target retail chain

Finally, Amaru also distinguishes himself from peers working in the food service industry as an example of how he can separate himself from MC's who merely talk:

All you do is talk and talkin just don't equate /all you want is streets and with
the streets I made a merger /I was rapping out lines while you was wrapping up
burgers.

Work Ethic and Separation from the Competition

Another consistent theme found in the lyrics of Jay-Z is that of work ethic and the manner in which hard work constitutes a crucial attribute underlying financial success. Interconnected with the theme of wordplay and the superiority of financial knowledge, the theme of hard work in the music of Jay-Z is put forth as a way to demonstrate his superiority over competing MCs. The theme of hard work, not only in his lyrics, but in his recently published book "Decoded" (2010) is most consistently found in his descriptions of his lyrical craft. One prominent example of this pattern can be found in the song "Lyrical Exercise" from the CD "The Blueprint (2001). Lyrical Exercise consists of an extended metaphor in which the honing of his lyrical skills is compared to the preparation and rigor of a physical workout:

I spring train in the winter /Round early December /Run suicide drills over
and over
With the weight of the world on my shoulder /That's why they call me
"Hova" /I'm far from being God /But I work goddamn hard I wake up the
birds who in the nerves is sleep I'm catching my second wind the second the
first one end I am "focused man"

His own work ethic eventually is explicitly compared to that of his adversaries:

Suckers /Get your weight up /Not your hate up /Jigga man is diesel
When I lift the eight up /Y'all ain't ready to workout with the boy /Your flow is
brain on drugs
Mines is rap on steroids /I lift every voice when I sing /My ability /Make yours
look like an exercise in futility /Bring your squad /Biceps, Triceps, and Quads /
We don't struggle with undeveloped muscles /Y'all ain't real /that's y'all Achilles
Heel

Jay-Z goes on to elaborate on the role of hard work in his artistic ethos in a comparison between himself and Michael Jordan:

His laser-like commitment to excellence. That's something I always respect, especially in people who have great natural talents already. Making music requires a lot of that same discipline and commitment. It's true that I'm able to sometimes come up with songs in a matter of minutes after hearing a track, but that's a skill that I've honed over hundreds of hours of practice and work since I was nine (Jay-Z, 2011 p.23).

The lyrics of the students in Bassline reflect this theme of hard work again in the song "Driven." The title of the song was influenced in part by the fact that at the time of its composition, there was a Hip-Hop television show on MTV by the same name. The MTV show focused a spotlight on the work ethic and determination displayed by successful artists in Hip-Hop as well as other forms of popular music. The title of such a show featuring entertainers highlights the prominent role of work ethic in Hip-Hop's conceptions of success. As anyone who works with adolescents can attest, helping young people to understand the indispensable nature of hard work as it relates to success is a major accomplishment. This connection between Hip-Hop and hard work enabled the members of Bassline to cultivate a discourse of hard work and an ethos of hard work in their recording and performance culture. The connection between the Bassline students and the theme of work ethic actually began to solidify following the initial delivery of the first shipment of CD's from their first effort at recording. Again, many of the participants in the Bassline program were some of the more educationally disengaged students in the school and many were told not only by students, but by more than a few teachers as well, that nothing was going to come of their work in Hip-Hop. But the delivery of the CD's significantly impacted their perception. In the following passage, Amaru describes the impact of the CD's being delivered and the message it conveyed to the students about hard work:

We actually got to see the product come from our hard...working all the time. I think it took about half the school year. I think it started about November or something like that, the actual recording finished by the time we were about to graduate from eighth grade so we got to see our hard work pay off in hard form.

This realization regarding the importance of hard work led young artists to make "work" a central theme in their lyrical output. The song "Driven" begins with a verse by "One" in which he asserts:

I never go to sleep the pressure to keep the rhymes unique and non formulaic isn't hard for me.

Amaru follows up that verse with one in which he compares his work ethic to that of competing artists and in the process, identifies the financial advantages of his investment in skill development:

While ya'll was sitting in the house lounging on the couch, I was in the studio tapping the beats out. While ya'll was playing with the game devices, I was working on my skills trying to raise the prices.

Finally, the chorus of “Driven” is one in which “One” and Amaru compare competing MC’s to peacock’s who strut, but are unable to fly like One and Amaru because the competing MC’s have not cultivated a strong work ethic as Amaru and One have done.

Peacock’s strut man because they can’t fly/ Don’t worry bout you because Imma get mine. I work too hard, but either way I stay fly/ You want to match my skill you got to match my grind.

As stated above, the liberatory process in Freire’s conception of liberatory praxis involved a renaming of the world according to one’s own experiences and perceptions. As Gates (1987) has written, African Americans have historically used the literary genre of biography to engage in this liberation praxis. Notwithstanding the literary roots of this practice, hip-hop artists have discovered the financial and economic possibilities of this art form. Similarly, the young artists of Bassline began to examine the possibilities inherent in their own biographies.

The Economic Power of African American Biography.

Throughout history, the United States and Europe have had a strong fascination with African American biography. In the late 18th and throughout the 19th Century, slave narratives were among the best selling of literary genres (Andrews, 1986). African American writers throughout history have situated the autobiography as the central genre in African American letters. Gates (1987) suggested that the slave narratives were a kind of Horatio Alger story from an African American perspective. Not only in written form, but the public testimony of recently freed slaves held endless fascination for those on both sides of the Atlantic. Boyd (2004) argues that it is just this sort of unvarnished, raw and explicit perspective on life experience that has made Hip-Hop narrative the multi-billion dollar industry that it is. Boyd suggests that Jay-Z in particular has been the most visionary with respect to deploying this narrative fascination on behalf of his own success and others who participate in the Hip-Hop art form. Boyd cites a line from Jay-Z’s song “Come and Get Me” as particularly illustrative of the logic of Hip-Hop’s narrative appeal:

I ain’t crossover I brought the suburbs to the hood/Made em relate to your struggle, told em bout your hustle/Went on MTV with do-rags, I made them love you.

By bringing “the suburbs to the hood” Jay-Z captured the manner in which Hip-Hop has tapped into the longstanding mainstream fascination with Black biography. CLR James (1993) discussed the ongoing contradiction in American life in which the theoretical ethos of ‘freedom’ is belied by the proscribed lives of most of the people living in America. This creates a situation in which the masses of American people have an inherent fascination with any figure that lives outside of these proscribed limitations. James argues that the American mass audience was created by the figure of the ‘gangster’ who became an icon of freedom and license as he lived beyond the boundaries proscribed for masses of Americans. Jay-Z and others in Hip-Hop have tapped into this ethos with the narrative figure of the “gangsta” (Jay-Z, 2010). Additionally, Powell (2003) discusses the shift that took place in hip hop following the release of “The Chronic” by Dr. Dre. “The Chronic,” which narratively celebrated the “gangsta” lifestyle was the first platinum selling Hip-Hop CD and cemented Hip-Hop music as a mass commodity, able to generate millions in sales with the potential to elevate to billions as an industry. Jay-Z himself made the very important point that the sales of “The Chronic” were indirectly supported by Hollywood in that the imagery of the CD was reflected in the movies of the time such as “Boyz n the Hood” and “Menace II Society.” This symbiotic relationship between Hip-Hop music, Hollywood films and later to be joined by the fashion industry created an archetypal career arc for many artists who while beginning in Hip-Hop music, add film and fashion into their professional trajectory and become genuinely multifaceted. This adds millions to the artists’ financial possibilities and added incalculably to the power of Hip-Hop branding in the business world. Therefore, in addition to the financial possibilities contained in their art, Hip-Hop artists began to take in additional millions not only from movies and fashion, but through corporate sponsorships. Jay-Z, 50 Cent, Ice Cube, Queen Latifa, Snoop Dogg, Master P, Outkast, and the Wu Tang are just a few of the artists who have connected across these multiple domains. Jay-Z himself provided a profoundly insightful explanation underlying the logic of Hip-Hop’s corporate appeal:

We gave those brands a narrative.. . One of the reasons anyone buys anything: to own not just a product, but to become part of a story (Jay-Z, 2010 p. 83).

Bassline and the Economic Power of Biography

While the lyrical content of Bassline music did not incorporate gangsta narratives and hustler themes, the lyrics did acknowledge this financial continuum in Hip-Hop and one member of the group, in particular, focused his lyrical output on cultivating the narrative power of his life story and set out to foster the professional agility required to move between fashion, film and music.

Bassline recorded one song which acknowledged the financial continuum between the Hip-Hop music industry, and the fashion and movie industries. The song “Across the Seas” is their own collective story of how their group began and celebrates the fact that from their humble beginnings, they were able to travel to England to tour and perform. Within the context of this celebration, the song acknowledges their own proximity to Hip-Hop’s professional/financial continuum in the line:

Now we’re flying on planes and jets. We’ve got our own clothing line, Bassline T’s and sweats.

More than any other Bassline member, Amaru consistently drew upon his biography for lyrical content. In many ways, he possessed the most dramatic lifestyle which, in true Hip-Hop fashion, was most distant from the “suburbs.” As he describes the genesis of the song “Work,” Amaru describes how he drew upon his biography, particularly his relationship with his father and the struggles which his father endured:

“Go To Work” was about basically working hard. For me personally when I wrote the song I was talking about my father. He was a Vietnam Veteran, you know, he got out the war, but he never got his just dues, what he was owed. He never got any assistance from the VA. And you know me and my father we lived in a house for three years with no electricity, no running water, nothing... none of the necessities for life that people are accustomed to. So eventually I got taken out of that situation ... And went to go live with my grandparents. But my father, he had to stay in the situation that he was in, living in a house with no heat, no water or nothing like that. And you know, he used to help people around the area in the winter to shovel their snow, like the older people, the seniors. And he got cold and he went home and he didn’t have any heat so...he used to drink also. And I’ll talk about that for a little bit. You know a lot of time when you drink, you can’t feel when you’re cold, so he had a heart attack and he died in the house. He was laying in the house for about three days when they found him. So I talk about that in the song because you know, at my age when I found out, it didn’t really process, I kind of blocked it out. But as I got older, and I thought about it, it made me more and more angry.

Notwithstanding the difficulties experienced in his upbringing, Amaru was the most ambitious and visionary with respect to his future. While in high school, Amaru took the unusual step of starting his own clothing line, drawing upon the authors’ connections to the fashion department at a local University to actually create prototypes:

I also started a clothing line called BARAGOS which is an acronym. It stands for Believe All Rejections Are Gestures of Success, you got that? Because it normally takes a little while for people to process it, like what that again? But yeah, actu-

ally a couple years back, I wrote up a business proposal – that’s one of the skills that I learned from Bassline – how to write business proposals and things of that nature. I wrote up a business proposal, it was real basic at the time. It had basic figures as far as what I needed money-wise to start the company. And you know I started pitching it around to different places where Bassline would go, any executives that I met. I actually brought it to DU [University of Delaware] and it impressed some of the professors in the fashion department. And DU decided to fund the upstart for the company to fund the prototypes and over a period of two years, I started out with one person, sorry I forgot her name now. It’s been a while. I’m thinking...thinking...Carol. I’m sorry. But I started out with one young lady named Carol and she basically took my designs and put them into computer format. So all my drawings, she actually made them in proportion. She took them from being just drawings to actual technical specs so they could actually be sewn and made and things like that. And then the next year I actually got a senior class of students that developed my clothing line further.

Following high school, Amaru enrolled in Full Sail University, a media arts college with strong connections to the music and movie industries in order to study film scoring. During his time in Full Sail, he produced several film projects in addition to continuing to cultivate his music and music production skills, fully realizing the music, film and fashion continuum in his young life.

CONCLUSION

From the entrepreneurial ethos imbedded within Hip-Hop culture, the young artists from Bassline Entertainment cultivated many educationally and professionally relevant skills, dispositions, and practices, reflecting those of the most financially successful Hip-Hop artists such as Jay-Z. Often undervalued within the context of schooling, but prominent within the members of the Bassline collective, was a sense of future vision and purpose in which the cultivation of their literacy skills in particular was seen as a means of creating a lucrative financial future for themselves. This ability to invest time in their skills and craft versus time in the service economy and fast food industries was seen as a way of asserting their artistic superiority to their Hip-Hop contemporaries. Such decisions were validated not only in the quality of their production of Hip-Hop texts, but in the actual levels of income which they were able to generate as high school students. By deploying the entrepreneurial skills developed within the context of Hip-Hop, the Bassline artists were able to earn greater levels of income than peers who were confined to minimum wage positions in the service economy. Through their participation in Hip-Hop culture, Bassline artists experienced first-hand through their art, a principle of success that would likely not have been possible for them as disengaged students within the school experience (e.g. the principle that ‘hard work pays off.’) This initial experience with the principle evolved into a highly

developed and functional work ethic that was integrated into their artistic and personal discourses. This sense of work ethic became such an ongoing part of their artistic and personal character that they began to compose and record compositions in which the theme of work played the central role. In fact, within the context of Hip-Hop boasting and one-ups-manship, the Bassline artists used this work ethic to distinguish themselves and assert their superiority over their Hip-Hop contemporaries.

Finally, by engaging in the entrepreneurial aspects of Hip-Hop culture, Bassline artists began to see their biographical experiences as a source of power. Traveling internationally and throughout the US, the Bassline artists experienced a level of prominence and attention that most urban teens never experience. Not only did they travel internationally, but as ambassadors of the constructive and educationally relevant aspects of Hip-Hop culture, Bassline artists garnered significant media attention, appearing on England's most popular BBC morning radio show in addition to television and newspaper coverage of their visit. Such experiences provided them with experiences of possibility that made the professional/financial continuum in Hip-Hop between music, fashion and film seem palpable. Again this continuum was integrated not only into their Hip-Hop compositions but lived out into their sense of professional future.

Not to be lost within the students' decision to invest in and cultivate their own visions of their future is the manner in which such an investment disconnected them from their 'host' relationship to oppression. As disengaged African American school students, without the athletic skills to pursue higher education through athletic scholarships, they were highly vulnerable to the traps of drug involvement and violence that kill and incarcerate so many of their peers. However, through an instructional invitation to engage their future through hip hop culture, they were able to act as agents of change and embrace the praxis of articulating and developing a future of success. It must be emphasized that the fact that the students' forays into an engagement of Hip-Hop culture, resulted in a tangible media product. The production of this musical commodity set in motion a string of associations that enhanced the relevance of education and schooling. Schooling began to take on significance as its subject matter could subsequently be seen as providing the skills necessary to achieve and fulfill their personal visions. Amaru's vision of fashion and film, led him to establish relationships with a local university and to continue his education at Full Sail University. In fact, each of the Bassline participants pursued higher education. Instead of being perceived as an obstacle to educational achievement, the serious engagement of Hip-Hop culture and its inherent skill development should be regarded as an important tool to provide purpose, meaning, and structure to the disengaged students' school experience.

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