Hip Hop, Social Reproduction, and the Possible Selves of Young Black Men

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Abstract: Twenty-seven years ago, the documentary *Hoop Dreams* solidified a theory—that the world of athletics was one of the few places where adolescent Black males could find success. By the late 1990s, researchers were framing athletics as the next direction in the Civil Rights Movement. In this article, I argue that the historical framing of Black boys in athletics—as a way up, a way out—is similar to the contemporary framing of Black boys in Hip Hop Based Education (HHBE). Using an ethnographic case example of the Homeboys, a group of adolescent Black males experiencing homelessness, I maintain that HHBE, without critical implementation and reflection, limits the possible selves of Black boys in socially reproductive ways. Unlike *Hoop Dreams*, which historically created an incentive to stay invested in formal educational settings, HHBE offers little "possible selves" development for young Black men. This research asserts that if HHBE, and the myriad ways Hip Hop is taken up in formal and informal educational settings is not dually paired with the critical process of institutional actors envisioning *all* the possible selves that black boys can become, then it becomes another hegemonic socially reproductive tool wielded by educators.

"The White world—specifically the White community of the United States—finds it difficult to accept blacks as being best in anything except basketball and popular music" (Herb Snitzer, 1991, p. 33)

Introduction

In 1994, Sundance Film Festival debuted *Hoop Dreams*, an intimate delve into the lives of two African American teen boys as they worked to realize their goals of basketball stardom.

The film was heralded as a landmark documentary and labeled as one of the best films of the '90s (Baumgaertner, 2015). The film, flawed in some ways and a triumph in others, provided a much-needed glimpse into the lives of Black youth and their families as they navigate school district bureaucracies, the politics of college athletics, and the thin line between dreams and reality. The two Chicago teens, Arthur Agee and William Gates, went on to college and other careers, but never satisfied their goals to play in the NBA. The film solidified a theory—that the world of athletics was one of the few places where Black males could find success, be accepted, and achieve a slice of the American dream (Singer & May, 2011). While neither made it to the NBA, both went on to finish college degrees. By the late 1990s, researchers were framing athletics, particularly those that led to college scholarships, as the next direction in the Civil Rights Movement (Edwards, 2000; Clark, 1993).

Twenty-seven years after the success of *Hoop Dreams*, there remain few places where young Black men can find success— whether in communities (Dufur et al., 2016; Tolliver et al., 2016; Staggers-Hakim, 2016), in the workplace (Kreisman & Rangel, 2015; Offerman et al., 2014), and especially, in schools (Edwards, 2020; Little, 2017; Harradine et al., 2013). Black male students are disproportionately suspended or expelled (Gregory et al., 2010). Their teachers and peers are less likely to think of them as "smart" or "academically gifted" (Ispa-Landa, 2013; Davis, 2003). And two-thirds of all Black men who enter higher education leave before completing their degree—the highest attrition rate among all races and both sexes (Strayhorn, 2014). The evidence suggests that young Black men are at the bottom of nearly every statistical metric of educational excellence (Harper & Williams Jr., 2013).

To combat the preponderance of negative and deficit-focused narratives of Black boys, researchers have introduced new frameworks to assist educators in not only actively creating meaningful relationships with Black students, but doing so in ways that connect their underachievement to systemic injustices and hegemonic schooling policies. One framework that has grown in volume and scope is Hip Hop culture (Petchauer, 2015). Ranging in name from *Hip Hop Based Education, Rap Pedagogy, Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy* (Akom, 2009), to *Culturally Relevant Hip Hop Pedagogy* (Gosa & Fields, 2012), the primary focus is one of practice—the applications and implications of what teachers do with Hip Hop in the classroom (Petchauer, 2015). A growing body of scholarship has explored the convergence of Hip Hop youth culture and pedagogy to formulate a concept that contemporary scholars have termed Hip Hop Based Education (HHBE) (Hill, 2009). The field of HHBE has drawn from a variety of theoretical and methodological practices that demonstrate how educators use Hip Hop cultural texts to generate favorable educational outcomes, processes, and learning environments. Shaping the framework for HHBE is a mixture of theoretical underpinnings drawn from critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994), critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 1995), multicultural education (Banks, 2001) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2014). It is an expanded vision of teaching and learning that re-imagines the classroom space, not as an educational intervention, but as "a *reinvention*" (Dando, 2017, emphasis in original).

While criticisms of HHBE are few, those that exist are worthy of increased empirical examination. Love (2015) notes the absence of HHBE in the early grades, and in highlighting the positive educational outcomes (such as sophisticated linguistic patterns) of HBBE, pushes the field to incorporate HHBE in early childhood and elementary education. Petchauer (2015) shares that researchers tethered Hip Hop education and pedagogy to teaching practice from the beginning of its formal study, which has led to theoretical underdevelopment, conceptual

murkiness, and methodological stagnation. Further insights from Paris and Alim (2014) recommend a deliberate vigilance against the "white gaze" that considers Hip Hop to be the next trendy thing to hook students, only to draw them back into the same old hegemonic, hierarchical structures. They advise scholars and practitioners alike to question their work and ask: Hip Hop for what purposes and with what outcomes?

I take up these questions in my research on HHBE. In this article, I argue that the historical framing of Black boys in athletics—as a way up, a way out—is similar to the framing of Black boys in HHBE; using a case example of young Black homeless males, I maintain that HHBE, without critical implementation and reflection, limits the possible selves of Black boys in socially reproductive ways. HHBE, specifically the way educational systems and actors have taken it up in pedagogy and practice, should be challenged and revised forward in ways that attach it to all of the possible selves of young Black men. I add that when possible selves are shaped by hegemonic structures and their actors, the result is not a framing produced from the individual's imagination of all that is appropriate or reasonable for them given their experiences and circumstances, but what is permissible based on social constructions of who Black boys are and who they are destined to become in society. The selves of Black boys are, therefore, not infinitely possible but socially constrained and *unimagined.*

Literature Review

Hip Hop Based Education: Promises and Pitfalls

Hip Hop is a growing presence in K-12 public school classrooms, an obvious nod to any casual observer of the expressionistic style and innovation of young people today (Akom, 2009). According to Petchauer (2009), Hip Hop music and culture has become relevant to the field of education and educational research in three distinct ways. He emphasized that (a) teachers are centering rap music texts in urban high school curricula, (b) Hip Hop exists as more than a musical genre, and (c) higher education institutions throughout North America are engaging Hip Hop in an academically stringent demeanor through courses, research, conferences, and symposia (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Petchauer, 2009). Williams (2008) has identified three additional ways that Hip Hop has crept into classrooms: (a) Hip Hop is in afterschool programs where teachers are taking an entrepreneurial approach with students as they are constructing their own music and expressions (Anderson, 2004); (b) Hip Hop has been used to scaffold subject matter in formalized classroom settings at both elementary and secondary levels (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Sitomer, 2004); and (c) Hip Hop is utilized in classrooms to introduce critical analysis of systemic forms of oppression that corrupt society. Forman (2004) argues that Hip Hop is too important for teachers to ignore and that avoiding it "would be irresponsible since literally millions of people worldwide are influenced by Hip Hop on a daily basis" (p. 3).

Indeed, HHBE, particularly as a pedagogy, has emerged as a powerful cultural force seeking to address youths' engagement and motivation in schools and in out-of-school contexts (Baldridge, 2014). Researchers have emphasized that if the curriculum does not reflect cultural relevance, then alienated students will embrace a Hip Hop culture because it readily accepts them (Emdin, 2010; Elmesky, 2005; Paul, 2011; Prier & Beachum, 2008). Educators and scholars have researched and experimented with the use of Hip Hop music and culture to improve the empowerment of students, skills of literary analysis, critical literacy and cultural responsiveness moving toward a Hip Hop Pedagogy (Petchauer, 2009). Author and educator Marc Lamont Hill argued that Hip Hop Pedagogy is not a set of prescribed strategies or

techniques for reaching students through Hip Hop culture. Rather the growth of Hip Hop scholarship over recent years has shown how the nine elements of Hip Hop culture (e.g. rap, deejaying, b-boying, graffiti art, beatboxing, knowledge, street fashion, street language, street entrepreneurialism) are used within classrooms and educational spaces to improve student motivation and engagement, teach critical media literacy, foster critical consciousness, and transmit disciplinary knowledge (Hill, 2009).

There is also a growing realization that students must be actively involved in the *creation* of a Hip Hop curriculum to actively and constructively engage with it. Youth are not just consumers, but *producers*, of literacies. If Hip Hop is rooted in the voicing of previously silenced groups and experiences, then it is particularly important that its incorporation into school includes the very voices that are most often silenced—those of youth (Alim, 2007). Alim (2007) writes:

> *It is one thing to view the culture of our students as a resource for teaching about other subjects, and it is quite another to see our students as the sources, investigators, and archivers of varied and rich bodies of knowledge rooted in their cultural-linguistic reality.* (p. 17)

Dyson (2004) re-affirms the need for Hip Hop to maintain relevancy to those who first helped create and maintain it. Ginwright (2004) realizes that his failure to enact a Hip Hop informed curriculum stemmed from his attempt to decide what is relevant for—rather than with—students. The body of scholarly work promoting HHBE is impressive. However, the field's engagement with HHBE has less often situated the power and possibilities of the art within a larger ethos of responsibility. Researchers now contend that using Hip Hop does not automatically transform the curriculum as more relevant, especially if teachers do not fully embody a Hip Hop worldview or they continue to act as the only authority (Kim & Pulido, 2015). Indeed, researchers have made it clear that the understanding of Hip Hop's place in the classroom must mature beyond the ubiquitous rapping teacher and make better use of the endless complexity, beauty, history, and internal contradictions of Hip Hop culture (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

This embodiment of Hip Hop may be particularly difficult given the current and predicted demographics of the public school teaching force. Of the 3.2 million public school teachers in the US, between 79-85% are White (Howard, 2016; US Department of Education, 2020), 77% are women (90% at the elementary grades), and the average age is 42 (Taie et al., 2017). According to Howard (2016), "The need for teacher preparation is obvious, particularly given the fact that most practicing and prospective White teachers are themselves the products of predominantly White neighborhoods and predominantly White colleges of teacher education" (p. 6). Therefore, the "ubiquitous rapping teacher" (Ladson-Billings, 2014) is statistically likely to be white, female, and removed from the history and context of urban Hip Hop culture.

In this article, I examine the development and implementation of HHBE in an out-of-school educational context and the probable negative outcomes that occur when its place in educational settings do not mature beyond stereotypical definitions and usages. In particular, I explore the implications of the use of HHBE for a group of young black men who are experiencing homelessness and look to the services of a local nonprofit for their everyday needs. In so doing, I use the "possible selves" theory (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006) to frame my argument that Hip Hop, created as a cultural outlet for young people of color to speak back to the hegemonic socio-political and economic systems of the urban context, has evolved into a tool for social reproduction.

Possible Selves Theory

Possible selves are the selves we imagine ourselves becoming in the future, we hope to become, we are afraid we may become, and we fully expect we will become (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). Possible selves theory describes the importance and dynamics of self-relevant, future-oriented self-concepts and how these self-views relate to motivation for present and future action. These self-concepts pertain to "how individuals think about their potential and their future" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954), and may reflect an individual's expectations, including hopes, aspirations, fears, and threats that she or he anticipates in the near or distant future. The formation of various possible selves could include an unlimited and diverse array of future self-projections, but it is important to note that the formation of possible selves is connected with representations of the current self. That is, future selves are derived from individually salient desires, hopes, reservations, and fears, but these aspirations and fears are influenced by an individual's current (and past) specific social, cultural, and environmental experiences. Because possible selves are thought to be created within the parameters of an individual's social context, projections of the self are likely derived from what is valued, or perceived to be valued, within an individual's specific social experiences.

Possible selves are social constructions. Successes and failures are always relative to the attainments of comparable others. Values, ideals, and aspirations are shaped by social contexts (Oyserman, 2001). Specific others and social contexts play an important role in creating and maintaining possible selves.

Possible selves are also tightly connected to racial, ethnic, gender, and cultural identities, and perceived in-group norms. Individuals learn not only who "people like them" can become, but also who people not like them can become, creating both a set (or series) of possible 'me's' and a series of 'not me's'. Adolescents learn about what is possible and what is valued through engagement with their social context (Oyserman & Markus 1993). Social contexts provide important feedback to adolescents and young adults about whether a possible self is positively or negatively valued.

In this paper, I argue that HHBE, specifically the way it has been taken up in pedagogy and practice for this particular out-of-school educational context, should be challenged and revised forward in ways that attach it to all of the possible selves of young black men. I make this call with deep respect for the work I have cited to this point, for it has articulated a necessary stance on the education of urban youth of color who are deeply embedded in Hip Hop culture. The critiques and problematic framings provided in the following pages are not about Hip Hop, urban culture, or young Black men, as the issues defined herein are not about *them*, but are more about the hazards of the white gaze and *structural forces at work in HHBE*. I push for a more intentional teaching and defining of HHBE in a way that speaks directly back to oppressive and reproductive framing of who young Black men are and who they are destined to be in contemporary society.

Methods

This study represents a small segment of a larger intensive 2-year ethnographic research study. Methods used included semi-structured interviews and ethnographic participant observations conducted in the tradition of ethnography and social constructivism (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Given the size of the study and the ethnographic method utilized, the traditional limitations exist and the findings should be read with those in mind. However, the

analytic goal is to speak to how the reported accounts from homeless youth and organization staff members reveal truths about them, the social worlds from which they come or currently live, and how possible selves are imagined. Their descriptions and explanations—or the data—are also examined and presented in such a way that the final analysis provides readers with an understanding of the consequences of the adolescents' and staff members' constructions of participants' lives and behaviors in relation to their socially constructed identities.

Data Collection

I interviewed 12 homeless young adults with the recruiting assistance of the nonprofit organization Empower (pseudonym), which provided temporary shelter, counseling, educational support, and other services for homeless adolescents in a Midwest metropolitan city. Empower served young people between the ages of 10 to 20 and was almost always at full capacity; the demand for the services that Empower provided, including family counseling, food and clothing pantries, and temporary housing, far exceeded its institutional capacity. I spent more than 150 hours conducting participant observations at Empower in an effort to understand the young clients' seemingly typical, or common, interactions with one another and Empower staff. I composed observation fieldnote memos after each visit. I paid particular attention to client-client and client-staff discussions about educational experiences, occupational histories, and aspirations.

Data Analysis

My method of analysis involved an iterative process between data collection, coding, and memo generation as informed by constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 2002) and the possible selves theory. I created an initial coding scheme that reflected the following categories: social class, homelessness, educational experiences, race/ ethnicity, gender-related issues, and the intersections among and between them. I selected these categories based on what is specified in the relevant literature and my broader interests in the educational experiences and occupational aspirations of homeless young adults. For example, I created a descriptive code, "educational barriers," that was based on current scholarly literature (Tierney et al., 2008). This initial coding scheme enabled me to stay attuned to important issues related to homeless young adults, while also remaining open to disconfirming evidence.

Table 1
Homeboy Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Gender	Educational Status
Benji	17	Black	M	Enrolled in H.S.
Frank	18	Black	M	H.S. Graduate
Henry	19	Black	M	Drop-Out
James	14	Black	M	Enrolled in H.S.
Jeremy	16	Latino and Black	M	Drop-Out
John	17	Black	M	Drop-Out
Karim	18	Black	M	Drop-Out
Manuel	18	Latino and Black	M	Drop-Out
Michael	17	White	M	Drop-Out

Nathan	18	Black	M	Enrolled in H.S.
Terrance	19	Black	M	Drop-Out
William	17	Black	M	Enrolled in H.S.

I utilized Atlas.TI to analyze the interview data using open and focused coding methods (Emerson et. al., 1995), a process in which during the open coding process, all codes were identified in line-by-line inductive coding (e.g., "good at math and science"), with a continued focus on the analytical frame of possible selves. In the focused coding phase, I refined and synthesized the inductive codes to put "like" ones together, making the overall number of codes more manageable (e.g., synthesizing "good at math and science" and "loves English class" to form a broader theme of "positive school experiences"). At the same time, I deductively identified theoretically relevant themes (e.g., "internalized failure"). The primary codes of interest to this article fall under the parent code *occupational aspirations*. Analyses concluded with thematic saturation and when I achieved a high level of coherence.

Findings: The Possible Selves of the Homeboys

With this study, I sought to determine how Empower aims to serve its diverse population of homeless youth. Based on observations and interviews, I found that within the population that regularly relied on Empower, there were three peer subcultures: the Homeboys, a mostly Black male group; the Sistergirls, an all-Black female group; and the EmoCores, a mixed-gender all White clique. The staff at Empower, in their efforts to serve the clients in relevant and personally engaging ways interacted with these subcultures in intentionally disparate ways. These markedly distinct interactions influenced the enactment of educational opportunities Empower provided its clients. Enactment, or execution, of these opportunities had the effect of bolstering, in some cases, challenging or weakening the educational and occupational aspirations of the youth in these different sub-cultures. This paper focuses exclusively on the Homeboys, their educational and occupational aspirations, and how Empower used HHBE to engage them in organizational programming.

The Homeboys and Hip Hop Culture

The Homeboys were a distinct sub-group of young men at Empower. Nearly all members of the group embodied an affinity for Black male Hip Hop culture, a speech pattern that portrays their love of rapping and rap music, collective hobbies, and a shared background of adversity, abuse, and isolation that has resulted in self-ascribed and diagnosed mental health concerns. While they also identified and championed several of the other aspects of Hip Hop culture (e.g. deejaying, street art/ graffiti, etc.), they failed to have the resources to engage fully in them. The Homeboys, as regular attendees at Drop-In, represented about half of Empower's clientele. There were between 8-10 Homeboys at the Drop-In on any given night, and that number grew to 15-20 on evenings when music-based events were scheduled.

The Homeboys were a racially diverse group of young men (see Table 1) led by charismatic leaders John, Nathan, Frank, and Will. The youngest Homeboy was James at 14 and the oldest was Marcus at 20. The group was a closed system; all of the members were homeless or unstably housed. The Homeboys all shared the same single-minded occupational goal—to be famous Hip Hop rap artists. While they enjoyed playing video games and basketball, their

favorite pastime was writing rap lyrics, performing them in front of their peers, and listening to the music they create. For example, writing rap lyrics was Karim's hobby in the evening.

Author: *What do you do in your free time?*

Karim: *Not much free time. But when, like at night or when I get a chance I work on my rap lyrics, write them down. I have a notebook where I keep all of them. Just trying to perfect the lyrics.*

It was also Terrance's go-to activity:

Author: *What do you do in your free time?*

Terrance: *I just work on my lyrics. I write a lot of lyrics and try to come up with new beats.*

Writing rap lyrics was William's pastime at school:

Fieldnote, July 11, 2014: I sat with William most of the evening today. He brought his lyric notebook so that I could take a look. It is a two-subject blue composition book, and it is about 1/3 filled with rap song lyrics that he has come up with. Just glancing through, most of the lyrics seem to be about the same things: money and violence. No dates-- I asked him how often he wrote in the journal. He said almost every day, mostly when he is at school.

And an activity John shared with his brothers:

Author: *What do you do in your free time for fun?*

John: *I work on my lyrics, I write new songs.*

Author: *What's getting a lot of play on your IPod now?*

John: *Oh, my music, me and my brothers' music. That's what's gettin' the most play.*

Author: *You and your brothers make music together?*

John: *Yeah.*

Author: *You play that a lot around the house?*

John: *Twenty-four seven, well, if I'm around my mom, there are certain songs that I don't play. I can't play them all because some of the lyrics are—they're kinda explicit, but yeah, I play our music every day, and then when I'm tired of listening to me rap all day, I'll listen to some songs by like Frank Ocean or some old songs by J. Holiday or something like that.*

This process of coming up with new rap lyrics was not a secret hobby. Like John and his brothers, the ultimate goal was to record the songs and let others hear them. The Homeboys typically shared their musical creations with each other at the Rhapsody and Rhyme nights. The performer list was filled with Homeboys, and while others in the Drop –In expressed an interest in performing, they were often put on the schedule by Empower staff at the end of the allotted 2 hours, leaving little time to display talents outside of the Hip Hop genre.

The Homeboys and Education

All of the Homeboys were school-aged at the time of this research, and as such, education remained a relevant, non-threatening topic of discussion for me to initiate in my daily interactions with them.

Fieldnotes, April 18: I played video games with Henry and Lance today. I asked them if they were in school, and they both started laughing and said no. I asked why that was a funny question, and they first looked at each other. Then Lance said, "I don't know, most

people don't ask us that question." I asked Lance how old he was. He said 16. I then asked why he wasn't in school. He smiled and said, "Because I got grown people problems."

The topic of school often emerged between me and the Homeboys (brought up by myself) over video game sessions or during mealtime. Information about their homeless status or family background emerged over weeks of building trust and came in small segments, giving me the task of putting the stories together. The most delicate stories emerged during our private one-on-one interviews. But the Homeboys were at ease speaking about their schooling experiences and their educational status, often talking about their classroom encounters with me in the common areas as other homeless young people and staff members listened.

Few of the Homeboys were enrolled or attending local high schools. The "grown people problems" comment was revealing, as Henry and Lance were representatives of several of the Homeboys who, due to circumstances beyond their control, had to leave formal educational settings. For example, Karim had to quit school to take care of his younger siblings.

Karim: *I remember one day my mom said I had to stay home to watch my siblings. I cried because I couldn't go to school. And that's why I'm out here today. I'm trying to get my GED finished and stuff like that. It sucks I've got to settle for a GED, but it's a credential. I can't really complain, but I rather had gotten a diploma though……You know, I go on Facebook and all my friends from high school and stuff talking about they're graduating. Oh, my goodness. I haven't been on Facebook in a while because every time I go on there, it's like either prom or graduation because you know everybody is getting out of school this week, so that's all I see in my newsfeed is like oh, I'm finally graduating, I'm done with high school, blah, blah, blah. It sucks, but whatever. Yeah, just rolling with the punches and that's how I ended up out here.*

Through no fault of his own, Karim missed the typical high school experience, which included more than the academic components. He also missed important social events, and he seemed aware of how foregoing these traditional rites of passage differentiated him from his peers. Empower filled an important social role for the Homeboys, giving them a peer group and activities that, even though they were homeless and dealing with tremendous challenges, allowed them to feel and act their age.

The Homeboys did have options for formal education and its credentialing, however, and a select few remained continuously enrolled in school despite the hardships in their personal lives. Empower held various types of educational workshops and GED (General Educational Development) preparation seminars for all interested homeless youth. Young people who resided in Empower's temporary housing must remain enrolled in school, and the organization becomes the educational advocate for them. I asked Faith, Empower's case manager, how they assisted youth with their educational needs:

Author: *So, what help do you give the kids who are still in school?*
Faith: *Well, we used to do "Homework Help Wednesdays" but the program was discontinued because the kids would either not come in or they would leave because they didn't want to participate.*
Author: *The ones in school didn't want to do their homework here? Why not?*
Faith: *I don't know. It could be because maybe they didn't think it was cool,*

> *especially for the boys. They come here to hang out and socialize, so doing work was not something they wanted to do. They would leave and go to the public library or to the park and hang out. We hope to start the program again though. I hope it's better next time and that the kids use it.*
>
> Author: *What about the GED workshops?*
>
> Faith: *Now those are popular and we push those a lot to the kids. They show up for those workshops and we try to let them know what will be on the test, how to study, and we help them register for the exam and everything.*

There was much complexity in Faith's answer, but what was compelling here was the push for the GED workshops. Empower staff often spoke of the young peoples' pressing needs—a stable home, food and clothing, and financial security, and traditional schooling limited the hours in a day young people could acquire these necessities. Instead of pushing the Homeboys to study and stay enrolled in their local high schools, Empower staff encouraged them to take the GED in order to move past the formality of "schooling", get the credential, and obtain the financial means to take care of themselves. Although the staff often mentioned the GED workshops when I asked about educational programming, I never saw a workshop take place or any flyers advertising the possibility in my many months of observing and participating in the space.

      The Homeboys still enrolled in a traditional comprehensive high school were the minority, which may be why most boys failed to attend the Homework Help Wednesdays. William was one of the few exceptions. He remained in school and was tracked into a college preparatory program called the Early College Alliance Program. It provided college credit for courses and students remained at their high schools throughout the school day. The program also provided college application counseling and financial aid workshops, as well as some intrinsic skills:

> William: *I'm in the Early College Alliance program. And they kind of broke the shackles of public schooling. They basically give you the tools that you need to teach yourself, educate yourself and be educated. You know, they let you go on your own personally educational journey, you know, instead of trying to build onto you like an assembly line, you know, they allow you to expand, you know, and grow. They give you college assignments.*

William was the only Homeboy in a college preparatory program. His educational and occupational aspiration, however, was to be a Hip Hop rapper and, in his words, "a Hip Hop holistic mogul". The more common experience for the Homeboys in traditional high schools was a vocational training program.

> Nathan: *Well, I wanted to take the automotive classes because I want to be a mechanic in a few years. Work on cars and motorcycles.*
>
> Author: *What did you end up taking?*
>
> Nathan: *My counselor said that I didn't sign up soon enough, so I took culinary arts again. I took that last year too, and I'm in it again this year.*
>
> Author: *Are you interested in being in the culinary field? A chef or cook?*
>
> Nathan: *Not really. I mean I am now. I have the most courses in it, so I think I could do it.*

Like Nathan, the Homeboys had limited options in the local vocational programs. None of them were enrolled in the more prestigious automotive, health occupation, or construction programs that provided additional credentialing. Because the young people were very transitory, they often

registered in new schools late, and as such, they settled for culinary arts or beginner automotive or construction for the second or third time.

The majority of Homeboys had some experience as a high school dropout, even the ones who go on to be enrolled in alternative schools or those who eventually finish with a high school diploma or GED. Michael spent a year out of school deciding which institution to enroll in after being suspended from his local high school. Frank spent periods of time out of school, moving from one school to another as his housing situation changed before he finally graduated with a diploma. The Homeboys not enrolled in any schooling institution all shared that they all had every intention to enroll in another school or a GED program, and when I asked them how one makes it in the United States, they all offered the answers "hard work" and "higher education". Even Lance, who quipped that he was not enrolled in school because he had "grown people problems," added later, "I'm going to go back to school soon though and get my diploma. As soon as I get a little more stable."

Future Occupations: Hustle and Flow Ideology

The Homeboys are familiar with the dominant achievement ideology—the widespread belief that society is one of equal opportunity and that education and hard work leads to economic and social success. They verbally encouraged other homeless youth, including the Sistergirls, to stay in school and go to college or get their GED. They acknowledged that formal education is important, but they did not believe that higher education, and by extension the dominant achievement ideology, worked for their particular lives. Strikingly, it had not worked for their family or community members, and this could be the reason they never internalized the ideology as one that could work in their lives. Some of their parents graduated high school and had stable jobs but were still unable to make ends meet financially. With the exception of William (whose mother received her real estate licensure after high school) none of the parents of the Homeboys attended post-secondary schooling. They could name several friends who were high school graduates but were still working minimum wage jobs side by side with high school dropouts. Discouragingly, some of the Homeboys worked hard in school, stayed out of trouble, but correspondingly, experienced peer violence and teacher indifference. Thus, the dominant achievement ideology, while valid for other young people, was expressively not an ideology the Homeboys believed relevant or true for their lives- it existed only as a possible self for others. The following sections offer insight into why the Homeboys believed this—from the available culture they see in their communities and the media, to their occupational role models.

Emulating the (visible and available) culture

The Homeboys are a subgroup of homeless youth who express through dress, speech, and hobbies an affinity for Hip Hop and Black male-centric culture. The social location of the Homeboys narrows this conception to Black males who 1) they access through their families or local communities or 2) are visible in the narrow renderings of the mainstream media. The African American men in the community that the Homeboys knew and had access to gained economic success through other means than education. According to the Homeboys, most of the men in their families or communities sold drugs. Others dabbled in illegal markets, selling stolen goods or using violence to secure money and other resources. These community members promoted their lack of formal educational credentials and how school was not a factor in them becoming, as they saw it, successful entrepreneurs. The Homeboys seemed to embrace this philosophy—an ideology I call hustling and flowing. The Homeboys maintained that if they

hustled hard enough and long enough, that the money and success would begin to flow their way regardless of how many educational credentials they had. Hard work in the conventional, academic way was traded for a different type of hard work, one they were more accustomed to engaging in to survive their circumstances. Every day I asked Nathan how he was doing, and his standard reply was "*You know me, I stay hustlin'*".

The other Black males the Homeboys had access to were ones who are visible in the mainstream media—particularly the music-based programming like MTV and BET. The artists, the lyrics, the commercial endorsements, and the music videos are selling a lifestyle that is steeped in material consumerism and monetary excess (Pope, 2005). It requires (through de facto means) an adherence to these and other cultural codes, such as fashion and speech, to prove or confirm belonging, all of with the Homeboys do and maintain as a component of Homeboy membership (Thomas, et al., 2008; Hammond, 2002). The Homeboys spend their extremely limited money and resources (legal or not) acquiring the latest jeans, t-shirts, and shoes that are being marketed by Hip Hop moguls. Few of them can afford these items; hence they repeatedly wear the items they have acquired over and over. If their ambition is to become rappers, then they must "walk the walk" in order to be considered legitimate.

Individual Responsibility and Role Models

Interestingly, the Homeboys did not ascribe to the dominant achievement ideology for themselves, but they did not blame institutional or systemic bias on their potential to make their dreams come true. The only thing that stood in their way of making all their dreams come true was the amount of hard work they were willing to put into it. To them, they could be millionaires before their 21st birthdays if they wanted it bad enough, if they hustled fast enough. All but William answered with a non-hesitant "yes" when I asked if they thought the playing field was level for everyone in US society. William was the only Homeboy to mention issues of racism, prejudice, and social class oppression in his interviews and daily conversations. He was acutely aware of his social position and that of his less fortunate friends, and he often tried to "educate" the others on the inner workings and conspiracies of "the man".

The Homeboys may internalize their success and failure as a personal, individual attribute because of their occupational role models. The Homeboys' role models were drawn not from a diverse array of successful men in society but only from rap and Hip Hop icons who have gained great success rapping about their unfortunate circumstances growing up. For instance, these popular rap lyrics by Lupe Fiasco could often be heard in Empower:

> *I was once that little boy*
> *Terrified of the world*
> *Now I'm on a world tour*
> *I will give up everything, even start a world war*
> *For these ghettos girls and boys I'm rapping round' the world for*
> *Africa to New York, Haiti then I detour, Oakland out to Auckland*
> *Gaza Strip to Detroit, say hip-hop only destroy*
> *Tell em' look at me, boy*

The Homeboys rapped these lyrics over and over in the Drop-In. The Homeboys also listed Kendrick Lamar as a role model. He rose to Hip Hop success at the young age of 17. One of John's favorite songs, and therefore, a favorite for all of the Homeboys, is *Poe Man Dreams* by Kendrick Lamar:

> *This is the ism this is the vision*

You know what I'm talkin' about?
You gotta get up off your ass and get it, man
That's the only way your pockets gonna expand,
I tell you every day, you know what I'm talkin' about
Apply yourself to supply your wealth,
Only limitations you'll ever have are those you
Place upon yourself.

In this song, Lamar puts the onus for success on the individual, telling the audience that if they want something, go get it, as if it is a linear want-it-get-it- process. If you fail, it is because you failed at applying yourself. Like Lupe Fiasco and Kendrick Lamar, the rap stars of today are young prodigies, growing up impoverished and often in communities rife with violence. They are discovered in what seems to be the most serendipitous ways, going from "ghetto to Gucci-living" overnight. For example, Lamar began circulating his mixed tape to people in his community (Southern California, Compton) when he was 16 years old. Within months, executives at a record company heard the tape and offered him a music deal (Collins, 2012).

The Homeboys see little difference between themselves and these successful stars, and as such, aspire to be the next big thing on the Hip Hop cultural landscape—the rapper was their only possible self. To them, rapping was the most viable career option—they already have tragic background stories, they emulate the culture in sincerity, and they seem to wholeheartedly subscribe to the hustle and flow ideology that emanates from the lyrics of successful artists. All that was missing was a lot of hard work and hustle in order for their possible self to be fully actualized. Luck or serendipity was never mentioned as a condition of success.

When pushed, the Homeboys offered other occupations that may make them happy if the music dreams derail—occupations for which they had little to no prerequisite skills. For example, John mentioned to me during our interview that if he needs a "backup" occupation to the music business, he wants to be a mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter. He took some classes as a tool of anger management and while it has been years since he has taken a class, he remembered the teacher telling him he was really good at it. He knew no MMA fighters, however, or how to enter the occupation. Terrance would consider being a psychologist after his music career, but at the time, he knew no one who had successfully navigated this vocation. Benji would like to enter a science field, and Nathan mentioned that he could work as a cook as he took several years of culinary classes in school and already held a part-time job at a fast-food restaurant. William wants to travel the country and find himself:

> *William:*   *Yeah, I'm hoping to start a life in California that will extend all the way out here. I want to travel. I want to find my soul. Yeah. Vegas, or I'm thinking about Portland or Seattle. I've been thinking about New Orleans too or even Miami.*
>
> *Author:*   *So, on this journey to find yourself, where do you see yourself ending up?*
>
> *William:*   *I really want to start a multipurpose studio. I want it to have a recording studio, I want it to have a dance studio, an art studio, a kitchen, a computer room and I want it to be in the ghetto. White ghettos, brown ghettos, black ghettos, you know, just any area where people are restricted...I want to be able to give people a voice. I want to community build. I do.*

Thus, the Homeboys held firmly to the occupational aspiration of becoming rappers or Hip Hop stars through an engagement in a hustle-and-flow ideology, not a traditional educationally

engaged ideology. Their "fall back" occupations require advanced educational preparation, all of which they were not receiving or actively seeking out. One Homeboy stood out as an exception—Michael—who told me during a Rhapsody and Rhyme night that he had no dreams of college. He did, however, have existing social capital in the automotive field that could provide a viable, stable future occupation.

> *Author:*   *Michael, are you going to be a rapper as well?*
> *Michael:*   *Me? No, not me. Let's just say I'm not blessed in that department. In the rapping skills department.*
> *Author:*   *Then what will you do in the future?*
> *Michael:*   *I don't know. Probably be a mechanic. That's what most of my cousins do and they can get me a job.*

The Role of Empower: Selling Hip Hop Dreams

The excitement at the Empower Drop-In was palpable on the day the music engineering and production workshop was to begin. Empower's development office had secured a sizable grant that permitted the purchase of new music production equipment, including a state-of-the-art soundboard, microphone, computer, and editing software, all so that Empower participants could learn the ins and outs of music production. There were over 40 young people in attendance, prompting the staff to find additional seating and reconfigure the workshop space. A 21-year old White male, Dale, was in charge of the equipment and the workshop, and he gathered everyone in the living room for the information session. By the end of the two-hour seminar, everyone who desired to try their hand at performing had an opportunity to do what would become routine at these workshops; they held the microphone, rapped their hand-written or free-styled rhymes, and looked on in wonder as Dale interacted with the equipment and played back studio-quality recordings of their voices.

The music workshop was designed and implemented by Empower staff for the benefit of a large segment of its client base—the Homeboys. In their grant proposal to a private foundation, Empower staff focused on the rise of HHBE, particularly Hip Hop Pedagogy, noting the empirical results of increased engagement, motivation, and enhanced learning and creativity of creating such a curriculum in educational spaces. While all Empower clients were invited and welcomed to participate in the workshop, the Homeboys expressed a single-minded determination to be rappers. To make those dreams come true, they needed music demos to sell locally. With demos in circulation, they believed that their talents would be discovered by music executives who would be compelled to offer them a record deal and access to a different life trajectory.

Unfortunately, the Homeboys have little to no training in music production. The grant-funded workshop on music production resulted in no additional skills for the youth. In all my days of observing these workshops, none of the youth ever put their hands on the actual soundboard or Apple MacBook Pro computer. None of them left the sessions with demos to sell or share. The extent of their talents and accomplishments with the grant-funded workshops rest in writing lyrics and rapping, which is what Empower staff encourages. In separate encounters, I asked staff members Faith, Emilia, and Clinton about John's talents and where they thought John would be in the future:

> Faith: *John is smart, he just doesn't like people to think or know that he is smart. He was enrolled in the really good high school here but he dropped out.*

> *But he could be anything he put his mind to. He is really good at rapping and doing music, so I think he will end up doing something in music.*
>
> Emilia: *I don't know. I think he'll probably do something in music, like rap music. He is interested in it and is good at it.*
>
> Clinton: *John has some skills in rapping and doing music-based things, so I think he will be successful if he keeps focused on that. He is super smart too. He is.*

These staff members encourage John to present at every Rhapsody and Rhyme, and Emilia often allows John to determine who performs and how long they are on the living room stage. They acknowledge John's intellectual and natural leadership abilities, often remarking "John is smart", yet they do not encourage him to explore and find other dreams that may work for him. They also neglect to mentor him in how to fine tune his artistic craft of rapping, as they know nothing about the art of rapping or the entertainment industry themselves.

The more significant issue is that the organization offers little more than lip service to the educational and occupational aspirations of the Homeboys. John shared with me that he is interested in attending a school of the arts in the state, although he is hard-pressed to remember the name of the school or where it is located.

> John: *At first, I didn't really want to go to college unless it—it, I was like open-minded about it. I didn't wanna go, I just wanted to do whatever would get me on a set track to my music career, but then my probation officer started telling me about these colleges for music and stuff, music programs, that have good music programs…But yeah, so then I thought like, alright, I'll do that and it'll help me better like with a trade or whatever. Yeah.*

Here, John expresses an interest in higher education as long as it assists him in his music-based aspirations. His interest was piqued, however, by his probation officer, not Empower staff. This is surprising because the local community college, which is a short bus ride from the Drop-In, offers a certificate in music production and engineering. While I witnessed Emilia, Faith, and Dylan spout seemingly memorized information about registration dates, withdrawal deadlines, and credit hour costs, I never heard them offer information about the music-based offerings of the community college. Instead, they touted their music workshop and the grant that enabled them to purchase state-of-the-art engineering equipment that the young men and women of the Drop-In would never be allowed to touch.

Discussion

The occupational aspirations of Homeboys appear unsullied by glass ceilings or statistics on economic and educational disparities. Although they display symptoms of depression and are at times knocked down by the adversities in their lives, they are teenagers who are optimistic, hopeful, and excited about the trajectory of their futures. It is clear the Homeboys understand the prevalent achievement ideology—they know that education is important and credentials are the key to upward social mobility, but they respond as though those messages are not for them. In the time I spent at Empower, none of the Homeboys who were considered drop-outs enrolled in a formal schooling institution. Yet I witnessed them time and time again supporting their peers in their academic pursuits, seeming to be genuinely happy when a peer achieved a high school diploma or GED certificate.

Based on the Homeboys' affiliation with limited role models, the Homeboys reflect messages of achievement from those in a similar social positioning. Indeed, the voices of rappers speak of an achievement ideology seemingly based on the reality of most Homeboys' lived experiences. Thus, the Homeboys speak of depending on their individual-level hard work, talent, and good fortune as their achievement ideology leading to an eventual occupation as a professional Hip Hop star. This does not mean that they ignore or downplay the role of systemic inequality and rampant bias in society- indeed, they speak of these challenges in their rhymes and their conversations with me- something HHBE has given them the language to engage in freely. But the Homeboys fail to link systemic inequalities in society to *their* lack of opportunity and mobility because their possible selves as Hip Hop entertainers rest *outside* of these constraints. Because Empower staff focuses on Hip Hop as only a skill of words and provides no critical context to the genre, particularly for its anti-oppressive history, the Homeboys were unable to connect the systemic inequalities they often rap about to the difficulties they had in making any of their educational or occupational dreams come true.

Research by Milner et al. (2015) maintained that students, particularly those in urban communities, are often underserved because people in educational systems have "superficial understandings of these students, their families, and their communities" (p. 545). Indeed, in this study, the staff members of Empower too often forged their relationships with homeless young people on narrow conceptions of who they thought they were or should be instead of deepening their understandings. They were unable to translate the Homeboys' aspirations—to be Hip Hop stars—into tangible resources, opportunities to build social capital, and viable occupational outcomes for youth of color. The Homeboys wanted to be Hip Hop stars, and since that was a path that the staff knew as a site of economic and social mobility for young Black males, they seized on its narrow conception and never looked beyond it to envision other occupational futures for them.

Empower staff pushed the Homeboys to pursue their dreams and aspirations to a fault; staff provided this population with a singular occupational track, offered no substitute or additional options, and consequently, gave institutionally supported practice time for their rap dreams without social capital and tangible resources. For example, staff provided no additional counseling for the Homeboys to enroll in the music engineering program at the local community college. The possible selves of the Homeboys were *constrained* by the staff of the organization based on stereotypical conception of who society thinks young Black males and who they are destined to be in the future. Unlike *Hoop Dreams*, which creates an educational incentive to stay invested, Hip Hop based education offers little "possible selves" development for young Black men. This research asserts that if HHBE, and the myriad ways Hip Hop is taken up in formal and informal educational settings is not dually paired with the critical process of institutional actors envisioning *all* the possible selves that black boys can become, then it becomes another hegemonic socially reproductive tool wielded by educators.

Conclusion: Yearning for Hoop Dreams

A few years ago, I was presenting a lecture in which I enumerated the myriad ways in which black people have been used to enrich this society and made to serve as its proverbial scapegoat. I was particularly bitter about the country's practice of accepting black contributions and ignoring the contributors. Indeed, I suggested, had black people not existed, America would have invented them. From the audience, a listener reflecting

more insight on my subject than I had shown, shouted out, 'Hell man, they did invent us' (Bell, 1988, p. 767).

As research indicates and teachers believe, Hip Hop can be a powerful force in the classroom and in society offering a "space for solace" for marginalized young people (Emdin, 2010, p. 2). Learning and teaching, in school-based and out-of-school contexts, are fundamentally cultural processes (Nasir & Hand, 2006; Gorski, 2020), and HHBE can assist disenfranchised students in finding representations of themselves and their stories in the world and empower them to become agents of change (Love, 2017). Critical Hip Hop pedagogy (Akom, 2009), in particular, creates space for and centers the issues of race, racism, and anti-oppressive paradigms. However, if Derrick Bell's postmodern heckler is correct (quote above), and the white gaze is always upon its creation, is it ever possible for Hip Hop based education to be truly liberatory or transformative when wielded by an overwhelmingly White teaching force?

Twenty-seven years after the premiere of *Hoop Dreams,* Black people are still searching for, fighting for, and pushing for meaningful positive movement in the quest for civil rights. While school-based athletics still hold promise for the talented few, the young Black men in this study looked to Hip Hop as a panacea, and unfortunately, their *constrained selves*, not constructed by them but positioned on them, further limit their chances to find upward social and economic mobility. While sports offer, at least in theory, an education-based path to economic stability or mobility, Hip Hop dreams existed outside school walls and formal education often in direct contradiction to how one "makes it" in the entertainment industry. This study maintains that educational scholars and practitioners must critically examine HHBE and any other educational intervention that purports to center Black children and other children of color and ask *for what purpose* and *toward what outcome*?

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