Music Education and Hip-Hop

Who Do We Think We Are?

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Growing engagements with Hip-Hop music and culture in classrooms, community organizations, and scholarship in the past decade have been inspiring and encouraging. Music educators around the world are increasingly recognizing the significance and potential of these engagements while also reckoning with the historical and contemporary underrepresentation of Hip-Hop in our field. With great enthusiasm for these efforts, I am honored to welcome readers to this book. However, alongside this enthusiasm, I shoulder skepticism, I carry doubt, I cringe, I wince, and I hold my breath. For all the revolutionary potential of this expanding relationship with Hip-Hop, the discipline of music education—and every teacher, scholar, and artist involved in developing and delivering whatever Hip-Hop music education is and will become—is poised to harm as much as help, tokenize as much as decolonize, and alienate as much as liberate. As we move forward together, I implore all of us to pause and question who exactly we think we are in this work.

It is only fair for me to start. I am a White, middle-class, middle-aged, neurotypical, cisgender, heterosexual man who currently lives without a physical disability. I have lived my entire life in the United States; I am a monolingual English speaker; I do not practice a religion; and I have been working at a large university as a full-time, tenure stream (and eventually tenured) music education faculty member for ten years. My relationship to Hip-Hop has been that of a cultural guest. I did not grow up with Hip-Hop as a significant part of my life, and until my doctoral studies in 2011, I would have described myself as only a casual listener to a few specific Hip-Hop artists. In the years since, my relationship with Hip-Hop culture, music, musicians, educators, scholars, and other individuals has grown, but I perpetually maintain the position of a guest. This position is fraught with positive and negative possibilities. In a 2018 article, I described this position saying that "I live on the edges of advocating and ex-

ploiting, of informing and essentializing. I do not intend to speak for Hip-Hop culture or to claim an authority I have not earned" (Kruse 2018: 150).

I have attempted to open my writings about Hip-Hop over the past decade with acknowledgments about my various intersecting identities, my biases and shortcomings, and my past and current relationship with Hip-Hop culture. Part of my motivation for these openings is simply to be forthright with readers—to let them know who I am, who I am not, and how they might consider my positionality as they interact with the text. When reading Hip-Hop scholarship from others, I typically search first for similar acknowledgments to find insight into authors' backgrounds before proceeding with the work in its presented order. I am not looking to disregard anyone based on their background; I just want to know who is speaking, from what authority (or lack of authority) they are operating, and how that contextual knowledge might inform how I engage with their message. Hip-Hop emcees make frequent reference to their contexts and identities to situate their work, and I think it would be beneficial for Hip-Hop scholars to do the same.

Of course, not everyone shares my opinion on the necessity of front-and-center positionality statements. Over the years, I have had some peer reviewers complain that such statements are unnecessary and distracting or that they do not belong at the opening of empirical research articles, which ought to instead center existing scholarly literature. I have sometimes pushed back in the peer review process—with varying levels of success—and at other times conceded to help see my larger efforts reach publication. Looking back, I regret every instance where I gave in to the requests to reduce, reorder, or remove these statements. Perhaps this is overly dramatic, but in these moments, I sacrificed what I believed to be important to the ethos of my work to gain acceptance from authoritative perspectives which could move me one professional step closer to being a hirable candidate, one step closer to promotion and tenure, one step closer to financial security and the privileges of full-time academic employment.

This strategic selling out to play the publication game brings me to the more insidious motivation of why I prefer to lead with my positionality as a Hip-Hop scholar. While I am sincere in my wish to communicate about my background to situate my work for myself and others, critical introspection brings me to understand that I also engage in this approach to excuse myself from authority and to lower expectations. If I claim that my connections to Hip-Hop are tenuous and tangential, perhaps that will explain away my lack of knowledge and my less-developed artistic skill set. If I say that I am only here to help make con-

nections and translate for other conventionally prepared US music educators (i.e., those whose musicianship has been primarily developed in Eurocentric large ensemble settings), perhaps that will lower the bar for critical analysis. If I present myself as the well-meaning and privileged White guy, perhaps this will preemptively reduce the criticism I should be receiving for taking up so much space in a bourgeoning area of scholarship. Big talk from someone waxing poetic in a book foreword, I know.

My point here is that I am capable of both constructive and damaging activity in Hip-Hop scholarship—and that I am likely doing both simultaneously. I have become more aware of this when revisiting pieces I have previously published. Take for example a review of literature I published under the titled, "Toward Hip-Hop Pedagogies for Music Education" (Kruse 2016). While the in-print publication date for this work is 2016, I began writing this article as part of my dissertation, likely somewhere around 2013. At the time, I was hesitantly beginning to step into scholarship related to Hip-Hop and found my lack of personal experiences compared to the wealth of established knowledge and scholarship (albeit largely outside of music education) overwhelming. Building from the work of Marc Lamont Hill (2009), this article introduces possibilities for music educators to engage with Hip-Hop music and culture within the overlapping categories of "Hip-Hop as a bridge," "Hip-Hop as a lens," and "Hip-Hop as practice."

My hope with this article was to encourage music educators to increase (or begin) their activity related to Hip-Hop, and my intention with the bridge-lens-practice framework was to offer possibilities, introduce entry points, and overall encourage the notion that Hip-Hop pedagogies in music education could take many forms. However, alongside those offerings, introductions, and encouragements (as if I had the authority to be inviting others to a party I wasn't hosting), I did not speak explicitly about race and racism as they related to a Eurocentric profession like music education engaging with a foundationally Black American music and culture. I described my shortcoming in this original article in a subsequent article that explored White fragility in the context of Hip-Hop and music education:

> I talked of "inclusivity" and "marginalized, underserved, and/or underrepresented student populations" [Kruse 2016: 254]. I also mentioned "critical perspectives and social consciousness," "often-unheard voices," and "sociocultural issues" [ibid.: 255–256]. What I failed to mention—outside of summarizing the work of other scholars—was race, racism, Whiteness, or

> the inseparable link between Hip-Hop's roots and Black urban experiences in the United States. To be kind to myself, I could claim that I did not know better. To be honest, I avoided talking explicitly about race because it was easier not to and because not naming race directly benefits me as a White person. (Kruse 2020: 146–147)

When I am at my most forgiving to myself, I see that I have learned and grown over time; I have fostered sincere, respectful, and reciprocal relationships with many Hip-Hop artists, educators, and scholars; I have made positive contributions to my community through Hip-Hop workshops and youth programming; and I have developed some adequate musical skills as a beatmaker and emcee. However, when I am at my most cynical, I see the past decade plus of my career as a testament to academia's permission and celebration of White male mediocrity. Perhaps both positions hold some amount of truth. At this point, my primary concern of encouraging music educators to engage with Hip-Hop has shifted to hopefully bringing a more thoughtful and critical perspective to what these engagements might entail, who these engagements serve, and what damage these engagements might cause.

As I currently sit regretting portions of my introduction to Hip-Hop pedagogies for music education, I am compelled to improve in my introduction to this present book. Acknowledging that I remain capable of positive and negative work in this position is hopefully a start. As we all continually strive to know and do better in work related to Hip-Hop and music education, I hope that we can all acknowledge our simultaneous abilities to be productive and destructive. Personally, I do not want to entirely lose the elements of invitation and encouragement I leaned into in earlier works, but as the field of music education increases its involvements with Hip-Hop, I believe all will benefit from a more thoughtful and critical stance. I offer this foreword not to gatekeep Hip-Hop and music education scholarship—I have no interest, no ability, and absolutely no standing to take such a position—but rather to do my small part to help shape the blossoming relationship between music education and Hip-Hop toward something more responsible, more respectful, and ultimately more meaningful.

When it comes to music educators and Hip-Hop, who do we think we are? Of course, we are not a monolith. My own perspective as a music educator within the United States leads me to assumptions that most music educators are not already steeped in Hip-Hop cultural experiences. This has been largely true in my limited experience, but there are absolutely music educators in the

world who *are* primarily Hip-Hop musicians. I would imagine that the readers of this book might be more likely than the average to have deeper connections to and more personal experiences with Hip-Hop. That said, regardless of our individual backgrounds, it is worth asking who we think we are as a profession, and who we would like to be in this work.

- Will we engage with Hip-Hop only superficially to serve conventional interests in our profession?
- Will we explore Hip-Hop only with Eurocentric tools and understandings?
- Will we attempt to validate Hip-Hop via existing notions of privileged academic knowledge?
- Will we wear Hip-Hop as a costume to recruit students via bait-and-switch tactics?
- Will we slap some rap lyrics in a slideshow to appear relevant?
- Will we copy and paste Hip-Hop content into our lessons while leaving the fundamental assumptions of our teaching approaches unchanged?

Or …

- Will we engage with Hip-Hop as a culture, and not just a musical genre?
- Will we acknowledge our positionality to Hip-Hop culture, and embrace our potential personal limitations in our work?
- Will we center the reality that Hip-Hop is a foundationally Black American culture, and will we keep that reality central as we explore global adaptations of Hip-Hop?
- Will we establish and care for mutually beneficial relationships with Hip-Hop artists, educators, and scholars?
- Will we embrace Hip-Hop's powerful potential for healing, community building, and empowerment?
- Will we consider Hip-Hop as an industry, including how capitalism, racism, heterosexism, misogyny, ableism, and other forms of oppression shape and fund this industry?
- Will we allow our notions of Hip-Hop aesthetics to evolve as rapidly as youth culture demands?
- Will we accept Hip-Hop as a form of critique—even when it is we ourselves who need the critiquing?

As we have likely all witnessed the numerous growing engagements of Hip-Hop within the field of music education, I imagine that we have seen the hopeful and the horrifying—the inspirational and the insidious. It is worth carrying forward with us the notion that we all personally house the potential for all of the above. As I stand here at the front door of a party I am not hosting—a party I invited myself to and perhaps have no real business attending in the first place—I simply ask the readers of this book to be skeptical. Ask the authors, ask our field, and ask yourself, when it comes to music education and Hip-Hop, who do we think we are?

References

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