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## **TOWARDS A HIP HOP PEDAGOGY OF DISCOMFORT**

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## **Abstract**

In this article we offer philosophical reflections on our participation in a hip hop network and seminar series in which British hip hop artists, activists and educators meet to deliberate over the politics of their work. We analyse this dialogic cultural space with reference to Megan Boler's notion of a "pedagogy of discomfort". We argue that the productive tension of the seminars owes much to the diversity of the participants. We discuss how these participants, despite a common interest in hip hop, may have to bridge epistemological and ontological divides in order understand and accept each other. We examine how dialogue can founder on intransigence and dogmatism when discomfort becomes too difficult to tolerate. We conclude that these reflexive encounters can, however, cultivate a willingness to "stay with" discomfort. This, we insist, opens up new educational and activist horizons within and beyond UK HipHopEd, which are alive to transformative encounters.

## **Keywords**

Hip-Hop Education, Hip Hop Pedagogy, Critical Pedagogy, Dialogue, Pedagogy of Discomfort

## **Introduction**

In their introduction to "Hip-Hop(e): The Cultural Practice and Critical Pedagogy of International Hip-Hop", Porfilio and Viola note that hip hop

"has gone from being purely an urban and North American phenomenon to a worldwide global counterculture that reflects the voices and activism of youth around the world who are struggling to

subvert the neoliberal logic of profit and exploitation inherent within the privatization of schools and social life.” (2012: 6-7)

We wish to consider this claim in the context of the UK hip hop education movement through a shift in focus from the implied binary of “dominant culture” and “counterculture”, to an examination of the tensions that arise when educators with diverse and divergent interests in the use of hip hop for justice-orientated ends meet to dialogue on practice. In this article, we discuss one now significant expression of this movement, the UK #HipHopED, seminar series that began in 2012. Drawing on the work of philosopher Megan Boler, we argue that this dialogic cultural space produces a highly generative “pedagogy of discomfort”. We attempt to demonstrate through theoretical reflection and concrete examples how staying with the discomfort in these encounters may make an ethical contribution to understandings of self and others in relation to social power, and by this to hip hop activism. After setting out the context for the article we briefly discuss the methodology behind the selection of theoretical ideas and empirical examples. We outline a framework for a pedagogy of discomfort then move on to discuss the form it takes within UK HipHop Ed, with a particular focus on how discomfort is distributed amongst participants. We conclude with a call to stay with discomfort. We propose that as a form of border crossing, both institutional and epistemic, staying with discomfort offers the possibility to embrace encounter without guarantees.

## **Context**

The authors of this paper, both male, have different disciplinary backgrounds and racialised identities and first met at a UK Hip Hop Education seminar in early 2013. Darren Chetty is the founder and co-convenor of the series (henceforth referred to as UK HipHopEd). He is a former primary school teacher who devised a hip hop education arts project, “Power to the Pupils”, that ran for five years in two London primary schools. He is currently a Teaching Fellow and doctoral candidate at UCL, Institute of Education. Patrick Turner is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Bath Spa University whose PhD research examined hip hop activism and educational projects in the UK. He is the author of the book, *Hip Hop versus Rap: The Politics of Droppin’ Knowledge*.

In the UK, one form of hip hop activism that has grown remarkably over the past ten years, gaining attention from mainstream media, is the inclusion of hip hop in a range of educational settings. This has taken many forms, often shaped by the particular skills and interests of those providing the classes and workshops. Notable examples include The Hip Hop Shakespeare Company lead by UK rap artist Akala, Student of Life lead by the rapper and poet Breis, and the educational work of Breakin’ Convention’ lead by hip hop theatre practitioner Jonzi D (see Turner 2017).

As of April 2017 UK HipHopEd comprises just over 500 people in the UK with an active interest in the growing field of hip hop education and hip hop pedagogy. This includes schoolteachers, hip hop artists, youth-workers, poets and spoken-word educators, students, academics, and activists. Many people would describe themselves using two or more of these terms. Diverse in terms of its social and cultural characteristics, UK HipHopEd embodies

what Perry (2004; see also Turner 2017) has identified as one of hip hop's signal features, its "ideological democracy". The network has its origins on twitter, where a small group of teachers who work with hip hop in their schools came into contact through the weekly #HipHopEd chat hosted by Tim Jones and Dr Chris Emdin of Teachers College, Columbia University. The Official HipHopEd website describes HipHopEd as "a weekly cyber cypher (chat) where stakeholders within Hip Hop and Education come together to discuss issues that impact the youth and adults within our local, national and global communities. #HipHopEd Chat is a virtual form of professional development for Educators, workshop for Parents and other Adults and a brainstorming session of Hip-Hop practitioners."<sup>1</sup> In the US, the field of hip hop pedagogy is well-established with a growing number of publications from scholars and practitioners in a wide array of established and emerging disciplines (see Lamont-Hill 2009). Emdin, for example, has published two books that address hip hop education (2010, 2016).

We now offer a brief account of the development of the UK HipHopEd seminars. Sensing the absence of a space for those engaged in hip hop education to share, critique and improve practice in the UK, Chetty organised the first UK HipHopEd seminar in 2012. With it, a community of practitioners was born. Participants would be able to develop their activism beyond the seminar but also, crucially, contribute to the educational activism of the seminar. A number of factors informed the initial approach to the structure of the seminars, one of which was Chetty's critique of an overly procedural approach to dialogue in the field of philosophical inquiry (see Chetty 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hiphoped.com/hiphoped-chat/> accessed 30/6/16.

Hence, in the UK HipHopEd seminars, ground rules would be kept to a minimum: (1) turn taking would be encouraged but not enforced at the expense of the rhythms of discussion; (2) care taking would involve caring for oneself, for others, and for the subject (See Sharp 2004). Chetty had also observed that well-intentioned hip hop education projects often aimed to provide positive educational experiences for racially minoritised and working class young people. He realized, however, that they may in fact have done little to interrogate racist educational practices – and even by their existence, could be buttressing them. The potential benefits to hip hop educators (also often racially minoritised and working class) of being able to gain employment thus needs to be considered in tension with this. Gosa and Fields (2012) make a similar observation in asking “Is Hip-Hop Education Another Hustle? The (Ir) Responsible Use of Hip-Hop as Pedagogy”. These authors do not accuse hip hop educators of literally hustling. They do however suggest that insufficient cognisance of the socio-political and ethical dimensions of their practice can render hip hop education

“a clever distraction from the structural sources of both school failure and success, such as segregated ‘apartheid’ schools, the school-to-prison pipeline, or the increasing corporatization and privatization of schooling.” (Gosa and Fields 2012: 208)

These concerns are not unlike those voiced in recent years about educational discourse more broadly. Gert Biesta notes “the push for evidence-based education” (2007: 6), and how this diminishes both normative educational

inquiry and the professional judgment of educators. He insists that education should be recognised as “a thoroughly moral and political practice, one that needs to be subject to continuous democratic contestation and deliberation” (Biesta 2007: 6).

In an educational climate where “what works” is viewed as the most important question, the question of what it means for an educational practice to “work” is sidelined. Yet this question is central to educational activism as it relates to further questions of what it means to create a more just society. Marc Lamont Hill and Emery Petchauer (2013) highlight that issues of culture, power, identity and policy in hip hop based education remain under theorised in the current literature. Thus, questions that concern the aims of hip hop education, education more broadly, and what might constitute good (and bad) practice remain alive for those who attend UK HipHopEd. Here hip hop and education are viewed as potential sources of knowledge that may enrich understandings of the other whilst not being separable categories. It is with these concerns in mind that the style of UK HipHopEd seminars has developed.<sup>2</sup> We consider the seminars themselves as both activism and educational work and find support for this in the words of Martin Luther King Jr:

“Education without social action is a one-sided value because it has no true power potential. Social action without education is a weak

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<sup>2</sup> UK HipHopEd seminars are co-convened by Darren Chetty and Poet Curious. Other organisers include, Sam Berkson, Shay D, Kate Ryan and Jeffrey Boakye.



expression of pure energy. Deeds uninformed by educated thought can take false directions.” (2010: 164)

## **Methodology**

The theoretical discussion in this article has not emerged from explicit data collection. Rather it represents the fruit of many informal conversations between the two authors about participating in UK HipHopEd over the past five years. If there is an element of ambiguity as to the particular interests we pursue in playing an active role in a network and public forum directly related to these fields of scholarship then, given our academic work, this is perhaps unsurprising. To clarify, we are involved primarily as participants but this experience is inevitably filtered through the reflexive lens of research problems and methods of enquiry. Questions as to the nature, purpose and politics of UK HipHopEd linked to our respective research agendas drive and give purpose to our on-going involvement. Each participant has his or her own motives for wanting to network and debate. Amid this Babel of voices we have sought to be as transparent as possible about our own.

If it is possible to speak of a conscious methodology for the selection of the ideas and reflections we explore in this article then we might tentatively refer to it as an organic form of participant-observation. In keeping with the normative and thematic focus of the article this has been pursued within a space of discomfort and doubt. As individuals with a longstanding connection to UK hip hop culture, we are at once insiders and outsiders. Our concrete form of enquiry is thus as full participants in UK HipHopEd and as observers of our own and others participation (see Gobo 2008). This means that in

Boler's terms, we aspire to be "witnesses" within a collective rather than individual "spectators" to the subject matter (1999: 176). Typically, seminars begin with a shared starting point. This might take the form of a reading, a video or one or more presentations. This is usually followed by a dialogic inquiry framed by the questions and concerns of the seminar participants. In this article, the "unit of analysis" is the dialogue that emerges through these activities.

### **Pedagogy of discomfort**

As well as being the means by which we have been able to produce the ideas herein submitted, doubt and discomfort, as both subject and object, are its theoretical lens. This is not, we may add, in order to make a fetish of uncertainty but rather so as to be able to arrive at a more complex and credible account of truthfulness. If we are to better understand the activism of participants in UK HipHopEd, in terms of how ideology relates to practice, then we believe it important to become reflexively attuned to the biases and vulnerabilities that arise from socially produced frames of reference – our own included. We try actively in this article therefore to embrace the discomfort of a threshold location as enquirers. In this way we hope to honour the aforesaid conditions of indeterminacy, the better to commend discomfort and doubt as an ethical model for activist pedagogy. To assist us in this endeavour we turn to the work of Megan Boler and particularly her book *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*. In the final chapter of this book, Boler outlines "a pedagogy of discomfort":

“A pedagogy of discomfort begins by inviting educators and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others. Within this culture of inquiry and flexibility, a central focus is to recognize how emotions define how and what one chooses to see, and conversely, not see.” (1999: 176-177)

Whilst she advocates a reflective educational encounter, Boler warns against a type of self-reflection that is too individualized, one that operates as “a form of solipsism, a kind of ‘new age’, liberal navel-gazing” (1999: 178). As an alternative, she proposes a “collective witnessing”, a process in which we are “always understood in relation to others” (ibid). By this we can become cognizant of personal, social and cultural histories, their material conditions, and how they impact educational encounters. Such an approach gives space for us to offer our experiences as evidence, but given the contextualizing work we must all engage in, not as uncontested evidence and not to the exclusion of history (see also Mills 1959/2000). Such a collective critical inquiry, seen as a “space between binaries” (1999: 196) such as good/evil, innocence/guilt, reason/emotion, and experience/ history is, she emphasizes, a “call to action”. Our own ethical responsibilities are thereby brought into focus through “an engaged and mutual exchange, a historicized exploration of emotional investments” (ibid).

Boler also argues against the separation of reason and emotion in consciousness-raising and educational practices so as to draw our attention to “how deeply the oppositions between feeling and intellect are built into

Western paradigms and language that shape educational work and scholarship” (1999: 109). She acknowledges that the desire to order chaos through “simplified schemas” is a strong one, but urges us to resist a conception of understanding that coincides with simplification and the removal of ambiguity, however comforting perceived certainties may be. Rather, what is required is the cultivation of a paradoxical comfort with discomfiting encounters, ones likely to invoke a fear of change and trouble fixed notions of self-identity. As Boler puts it,

“The aim of discomfort is for each person, myself included, to explore beliefs and values; to examine when visual ‘habits’ and emotional selectivity have become rigid and immune to flexibility; and to identify when and how our habits harm ourselves and others.” (1999: 186)

Often in dialogic pedagogies, expressions of anger are viewed as a potential harm and are discouraged either explicitly through ground rules such as “stay calm” or implicitly through invocations to adopt a “positive body language” (see Chetty 2014 for further discussion). Boler, however, recognises the educative potential in expressions of anger. She attempts to sensitise us to the politics of anger, so that we better make sense of it. As she explains,

“To respond in anger does not ‘mean’ the same thing in every circumstance. The reasons for the anger, its etiology, differs and these differences matter. In educational settings, a historicized ethics offers a

more complex lens than that offered by the reductive model of innocence.” (1999: 188)

In this way, a pedagogy of discomfort differs from the type of dialogic encounter where safety from strong emotions is paramount. Zeus Leonardo observes that the latter can give rise to a “a pedagogy of politeness” which “only goes so far before it degrades into the paradox of liberal feel-good solidarity absent of dissent” and ultimately a “democracy of empty forms” (Leonardo, 2002: 39). In keeping with Boler, we see the UK HipHopEd seminar as an attempt to “collectively... step into this murky minefield and come out as allies and without severe injury to any party” (1999: 176). Whilst injury is to be avoided, discomfort is not. This warrants our attention now to the specific form discomfort takes within UK HipHop Ed, with a particular focus on its distribution amongst participants.

### **The distribution of discomfort**

The majority of those who come to UK HipHopEd, despite divergent histories and geographies, arrive with sufficient understanding of hip hop’s idioms and vocabulary to participate, whether this means to listen, talk or perform artistically. But this diversity also means that the line between agonistic and antagonistic is easily crossed (see Mouffe 2007). Based on our experience of UK HipHopEd so far, how this plays out ultimately depends upon the kinds of social, cultural and affective resources and competencies (ones that have little or nothing to do with hip hop) individual participants are able to draw upon in the crucible of encounter. In activism and education more generally, structured inequalities plague egalitarian and idealistic attempts to forge

relationships and alliances between people who are differently positioned in social, cultural and economic terms (see Packer 2011: 316). Boler writes that,

“A central focus of my discussion is the emotions that often arise in the process of examining cherished beliefs and assumptions. I address defensive anger, fear of change, and fears of losing our cultural and personal identities. An ethical aim of a pedagogy of discomfort is willingly to inhabit a more ambiguous and flexible sense of self.”  
(1999:176)

This, however, requires risk-taking in discussion, an ability to put across and hear unpopular or unorthodox views, to go against consensus and received wisdom, to issue and receive challenges and rebuttals, and to be prepared to be unpopular but also to change one’s mind and stated position. This assumes a certain degree of intellectual confidence and emotional robustness, but also curiosity, sensitivity, flexibility, and not a little articulacy. Yet in any public event that operates an open-door policy, it would be naïve to assume that everyone will arrive with the same behaviours and expectations regarding listening skills or an understanding of the need for turn taking during discussion, let alone the capacity for critical reflexivity. In this well-attended public discussion where the risk of uncomfortable exposure is present, modes of speech, of listening and emotional reception, are palpably determined by unspoken real world issues and social structures, particularly of class, gender, race and politics (Lawler 2013; Skeggs 2005). As Wetherall puts it, “the personalisation of affect is a product of relational histories made up of

repeated interactions, narratives and habitual bodily routines” (Wetherall 2012: 121). Affective styles differ and matter. We all convey, according to context, different qualities of self: warm, cool, expansive, reserved, strident, tentative, loud, quite, and so on. This can be unifying but also – depending on interlocutors – a source of misunderstanding and antagonism (see Burkett 2014).

Because of this, we have witnessed and been part of conversations in UK HipHopEd where people have talked past, misconstrued and upset each other, where hackles have raised and defences come up. This situation of discomfort has probably nowhere been more in evidence than during those moments of direct confrontation between, what we would call, for economy’s sake, organic and traditional intellectuals. The “battle”, here is, we suggest, often one between knowledges, rhetoric and animating concerns that enjoy unequal status and legitimacy.<sup>3</sup> Critical race theorists have highlighted how the experiential knowledge of people racialised as other than white has, historically, been diminished (Hill-Collins 2006). At UK HipHopEd, there is an implicit understanding that testimony and creativity that invoke something of hip hop’s origins in black, working-class urban life – often implicitly coded in gender terms as masculine – should be accorded a particular acknowledgement and respect. Hip hop as an artform created by African-American and Hispanic youth remains a site where counter-narratives are articulated, with potential educative power for all persons. The “practical consciousness” of the hip hop organic intellectual with its hard-won “road” capital thus exudes subcultural and countercultural authority. However, the

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<sup>3</sup> Although, as we discuss, this hierarchy is typically inverted in hip hop culture.

concept of “realness” contains an entire hip hop belief system which may be used in ways that are both generative and restricting, creative and policing (Low, Tan & Celemencki 2013:118). This only serves to highlight a tension between a commitment, on the one hand, to take the experiential testimony of hip hop organic intellectuals seriously, particularly in the light of historical oppressive practices, and, on the other, a wish to draw upon a range of evidence when engaged in deliberative practices. Joan Scott highlights the limitations of attending only to the former:

“When the evidence offered is the evidence of ‘experience’, the claim for referentiality is further buttressed – what could be truer, after all, then a subject’s own account of what he or she has lived through? It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence and as an original point of explanation...that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference. (Scott, cited in Boler 1999:178)

If the “evidence of experience”/authority of perspective tends to be static and inner, through an appeal to “realness” and fixed notions of authenticity (see Harkness 2012), Boler offers a productive alternative, “the process of becoming” (1999: 178-9). With the latter, one’s identity has not been discovered and then inured against external threats (i.e. a defended self; see Sen 2007). Rather, identity is a relational achievement bound up with others and our socio-cultural affordances (Appiah 1994).

In keeping with the aspiration of UK HipHopEd to encourage cultural bilingualism, knowledge exchange and trans-cultural understanding,



encounters of difference were actively encouraged from the outset. One of the aims of the seminars has therefore been for mainstream and alternative educators, and academics to develop their hip hop knowledge and for hip hop activists to improve their familiarity with pedagogy and political theories of education.<sup>4</sup> However, the conditions required for this to be anything that might approach a democratic and reciprocal exchange were, by definition, ones that could *only* emerge iteratively through the deliberative process of the seminars. This has entailed working to establish trust and mutual understanding, not to mention the need for a sufficient cognizance of the different idiolects in play. In this situation of unequal symbolic and cultural capital this has needed to be emergent and collective in order to sustain the commitment of participants to the seminar.

If this allows for change, the question is: change for/to what? Change as an ethical proposition is equivocal. As Hall reminds us “we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation which we bring to them” (2003: 3). Whilst we might be happy to proclaim the generative potential of this pedagogy of discomfort we also need to be mindful as to how discomfort is actually distributed amongst the different participants in UK HipHop Ed. We will now describe some of the challenges and obstacles we have experienced and observed around this and reflect upon some lessons learnt for the seminars.

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<sup>4</sup> We would not want to give the impression that we subscribe to any kind of rigid intellectual typology. At UK HipHopEd there are a few academics, and a number of professional schoolteachers, who identify as lifelong hip hoppers, and could be said to straddle and complicate the ‘traditional/organic’ divide. Despite this fact, cultural and epistemological tensions of the sort we sketch below have been a consistent and we believe significant feature of the seminars and events.

*Working with the insider/outsider: tensions not binary*

At a seminar, one of us, Turner, had some testy exchanges with a couple of other participants when he raised objections to the oft-expressed narrative that at its inception hip hop was an activist social movement that only got diverted from its progressive path sometime around the late 1980s/early 1990s with the advent of gangsta rap (see Asante Jr 2008). The lodestar for this is Afrikaa Bambaata's community organising amid the urban entropy of 1970s South Bronx (Dyson 2007; Marable 2003).<sup>5</sup> During this particular exchange, Turner argued that this Ur narrative involved a historical misreading that seemed to conflate the creative and entrepreneurial agency, collective conviviality and bodily pleasures of hip hop's Black and Hispanic youthful originators with contemporaneous black and Latino power movements (see Neal 2004: 377-378). He acknowledged that the former as a youth subculture was certainly resistive in key particulars to the social injustice and exclusion visited upon these young people by racism and geography. But, Turner insisted, this was quite distinct from the concrete political activity, revolutionary rhetoric and consciousness of the latter.

On reflection, it now seems his words would have been heard as a familiar rejection of hip hop as a force for good (see the Barbican debate).<sup>6</sup> In the ensuing discussion, Turner's interlocutors, two well-respected ethnic minority male rappers and activists, began to challenge his authority to pronounce in this way. Where did this viewpoint come from: first-hand cultural

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<sup>5</sup> For film treatments of early hip hop culture that broadly agree with this perspective see Charlie Ahearn's 1982 (2007) fictional *Wild Style*; and Tony Silver's (2007) 1983 documentary on New York graffiti writers *Style Wars*. The second of these is somewhat less prone to the romantic mythmaking (for all its virtues) of the first.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3-7Y0xG89Q> accessed 29/08/2017.

experience and vernacular knowledge or from academic theories? Did it not occur to him that external explanatory categories might misconstrue hip hop's own epistemological framework? Whose agenda did it serve to downplay hip hop's politicised origins? The two hip hop heads were emphatic that a social and experiential gulf separated theirs and Turner's divergent accounts. Turner's apparent dismissal of hip hop's *essential* progressiveness in combination with an arrogant indifference to which of the competing narratives was the more edifying and vindicatory had, for his interlocutors, confirmed this. The debate now became reduced to a battle between competing singular social positions: the proverbial cultural and racial insider versus outsider. Each in its singularity would be seen to articulate its dogmatically asserted truth and stand its ideological and epistemological ground.

In the heat of argument Turner attempted to turn the tables on his antagonists, through a counter-appeal to the authority of perspective. He declared with some passion and not a little anger that his stated position derived not only from professional scholarship, research and fandom but also from an active involvement in early UK hip hop as a rapper. And, what is more, most of the significant privileges he now enjoyed as a white middle class academic had been accumulated with some struggle over the course of mature adulthood. Turner felt a sense of hurt at the epistemological challenge to his scholarship. But what hurt more was the misrecognition on the part of his interlocutors who seemed to perceive him as merely an entitled academic. This he felt was a denial of the poverty and insecurity he had experienced as a child, as critical to his formation as all of his academic study. He was determined that they would know that the structural conditions and

experiential affordances that gave rise to working-class youth subcultures like hip hop were ones he *could* pronounce on with first-hand authority. In short, he could congratulate himself on being able to muster the scholarly and experiential.

The key question here, of course, was what was at stake for the parties to this contentious exchange? We would not presume to speak for the others. However, it would be fair to surmise that for all involved related issues of recognition and authority loomed large (Taylor 1994). Turner's interlocutors felt not only that their knowledge of hip hop history was being publicly questioned but also their identity and public legitimacy as artists and "conscious heads". Heard as a challenge, such discussion can stir proprietary emotions and incite "defensive anger, fear of change, and fears of losing our personal and cultural identities" (Boler 1999: 176). What is more, the particular origin narrative invoked occupies for some a hallowed position in hip hop lore. We think it significant to a reading of the situation that respected artists in a culture created by people of colour articulated this position. For his own part, Turner felt his scholarship and identity as an academic had been publicly tested but also, in light of his whiteness, the normative value of his own "insider" testimony. Of course, this whole discussion was (in the context of UK HipHopEd) freighted with competing cultural registers in terms of the discursive resources respectively mobilised: e.g. subcultural capital versus bourgeois scholarly capital. However, in that moment in the somewhat liminal cultural-pedagogic space of UK HipHopEd the predominant antagonistic struggle was over whose particular insider/authentic perspective would prevail.

Did the evident discomfort displayed by all parties to this debate begin to help us, in Boler's words, "to inhabit a more ambiguous and flexible sense of self" (1999: 176)? Obviously, this is a difficult question to answer with any degree of certainty outside a carefully designed empirical study. If both sides were somewhat guilty of intransigence we would hope at least that the heat generated compelled reflection over how we can learn to tolerate challenges to our "cherished beliefs and assumptions" and in the process "come out allies [...] without severe injury to any party" (ibid). Coming to an awareness of how others see us can make us open to possibilities of change and different understandings.

We have attempted here to provide an instance of how participants at UK HipHopEd may well debate from within seemingly incommensurable analytical and ideological frames that are also ensnared in a vulnerable sense of self. This is indexed to an aspiration on our part to foster the kind of encounters in which a more flexible form of selfhood can emerge. But it is also intended to underscore the social character of individual horizons, internal reflection and public speech, and by this frame pedagogical discomfort as collective inquiry (Boler 1999: 177). And this requires we go beyond a solipsistic understanding of reflexivity. To develop, as Boler puts it, "*genealogies* of [our] positionalities and emotional resistances" (1999: 178) is to trace both their dialogic constitution and capacity for change. Indeed, the public dispute we sketched above had its own "chorus", many of who made their responses to what they heard and observed palpable through gestures, expressions and comments. For some participants the imperative was to supportively fend off what they regarded as an impertinent challenge to the

insider authority of the two rappers; for others it was to dial down the heat and try to reach an accommodation between the conflicting accounts and positions. Some voices entreated us to attend with greater sensitivity to the manner in which we each expressed ourselves in this debate so as to better facilitate mutual listening and comprehension. As a party to this antagonistic exchange Turner was moved to acknowledge how his own defensiveness, born of a fear of being socially misunderstood and misrecognised in public, could in its own way appear to deny the importance of the experiences and achievements of people of colour. We conclude that in this particular context, an unequal distribution of discomfort was ethically justified in light of racialised and classed inequalities between Turner and his interlocutors. Boler writes that

“The path of understanding, if is not to ‘simplify’ must be tread gently. Yet if one believes in alternatives to the reductive binaries of good and evil, ‘purity and corruption’, one is challenged to invite the other with compassion and fortitude to learn to see things differently no matter how perilous the course for all involved.” (Boler 1999: 176)

In sum, if we are to recognise these kinds of fears in ourselves and in others, and are able to stay with the discomfort they produce, we may be able to move beyond individualised solutions and toward a flexible “process of becoming” understood as collective and activist. Listening, as we now discuss, may help us to stay with discomfort by holding things in tension.

**Listening: holding things in tension**

Pragmatist philosopher Eddie Glaude (2007) invokes the blues and “the blues scale” to conjoin the themes of philosophical critical inquiry, music and listening and to root them in an African diasporic tradition. Weisethaunet (2001) explains how the blue note enjoys an equivocal relation to the Western classical scale. He argues “that the harmonic foundation of blues [...] represents [...] a totally different conception of harmony to that of the Western functional (tonal) harmony” (2001: 99). This discordance might provide a useful metaphor for dialogue, where articulations that do not chime in with classical Western thinking can be met with the advice that “one changes one tune”. In light of this, we suggest that key to hip hop activism is the cultivation of a better listening ear – for perhaps listening is the first skill in music, in education and indeed in dialogue. Hip Hop may be less dependent on the blue note of jazz – depending on what is sampled – but as a culture it offers space for discordant articulations.

If we push this metaphor of the discordant a little further in relation to listening we return to the difficult matter at hand: what arises out of encounters of social and cultural difference in our seminars? Boler urges we attend to the “politics of listening”. For, “[h]ow we speak, how we listen, when and how we ‘confront’ one another matters a great deal” (1999: 199). This, then, requires that participants in UK HipHopEd try to create the conditions for a careful and diligent listening on the part of all, where discussants are under no obligation to agree with, like or collude in what they hear (see Back 2007). Only through careful listening can we be open to when our interlocutors show reflexive insight, mistaken understanding, or offer challenging propositions. Not only is such close listening an ethics, it has epistemological ramifications.

It avoids the twin perils of (a), what amounts to a naïve notion of realism and reciprocity: “I can hear and thereby become a vehicle for the *other’s* pristine truth”, and (b), an instrumentalist disregard for different frames of understanding, regardless how fallible these may seem (see Winch 1958/2008). Chetty and Suissa show how this openness to difference means that “[w]ho speaks and who speaks back is important to recognize, as is who speaks with ‘common sense’ and who speaks against ‘common sense’.

Speaking against common sense may mean saying something uncommon” (2016 15). In terms of how “traditional” and “organic” intellectuals transact this, we have already stressed the importance of “treading gently”. But equally, the former pays the latter the highest respect only when they listen closely and critically to their words rather than evade them through a misplaced deference to the “authority of perspective”. This requires a hermeneutics of empathy and one of suspicion – perhaps encapsulated in the notion of “loving critique”, a term used by Cornel West amongst others. The alternative is a hard cultural relativism that invokes notions of incommensurability – and thereby avoids discomfort and change only, ironically, to leave established hierarchies intact.

Hip Hop activists and educators, working with students and with each other need to cultivate a willingness to stay with discomfort to ensure that they are alive to the that fact that the struggle to understand may be shaped by the social distance between the speaker and the audience and the space in which they find themselves. The stories we are able to tell about ourselves are produced at the point at which “personal lives” intersect with “social institutions”. It is because of this that, as C.W. Mills argued, “individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social



positions” (1959/2000: 5). This suggests that it is not merely inter-personal dynamics, in terms of identity and power, which is of most salience in the encounter of discomfort, as the joint capacity to identify, locate and elucidate the misrecognition brought to light by this encounter. As Boler insists,

“The first sign of the success of a pedagogy of discomfort is, quite simply, the ability to recognize what it is that one doesn’t want to know, and how one has developed emotional investments to protect oneself from knowing.” (1999: 200).

In other words, UK HipHopEd can be said to aspire to a pedagogy of discomfort that acknowledges that public speech can be at once the site of personal and political insight, declared projects *and* misrecognition (see Archer 2003).<sup>7</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Hip hop activism entails working at – and crossing – the borders of subculture, counterculture and mainstream institution. It requires the development and maintenance of collaborations between different cultural identities, sectorial interests and social networks. It involves a plethora of concrete activities: participation in social movements, the creation and delivery of formal and informal arts and educational projects. It takes activists into a wide variety of civic and state spaces: inter-alia, the street, youth club, school, prison, theatre and art-gallery. This activity may be individual or collective, autonomous or

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<sup>7</sup> Part of what we wish to do here in collaborating on this piece of writing is to take stock and reflect over what we have learnt about UK HipHopEd’s possibilities and limitations with a view to feeding back and informing its ongoing development.

externally regulated, unsupported or funded. All the while, the hip hop activist abides in the pained knowledge that to many people their culture is merely a global pop genre distinguished by displays of ghetto fabulousness and brazen irresponsibility. Meanwhile national austerity destroys local project funding for the kind of work they do, whilst the a-moral economic system it serves engulfs evermore victims, generating further opposition and protest. We believe that all this requires the mature capacity for coming to terms with undecidability.

The idea, then, that “traditional intellectuals” might be on hand at UK HipHopEd to donate their superior intellect and forms of knowledge to benighted insider-activists who cannot see the urban woods from the hip hop trees is brazenly elitist and easy to dismiss. But if the corollary of this is that these academics then indulge in ritual self-denunciation – “calling out their own privilege and power” before someone else does, offering a temporary vow of silence in deference to the “authority of perspective” – all this manages to achieve is a looking-glass version of cultural elitism. In a bid to demonstrate solidarity with “the least favoured” we then conflate, with the best of intentions, ethics and epistemology. The decision to offer only a one-sided hermeneutics of empathy, to strategically ditch the hermeneutics of suspicion, may, given the enduring nature of social and cultural inequality, be a laudable gesture of solidarity “with the least favoured”. But that way a therapeutic form of artificial consensus lies, with all the unintended condescension (see Taylor 1994). If academic knowledge is fallible so too, if differently and with different socio-political consequences, are all other forms of knowledge, and that includes hip hop’s fifth element (see Sayer 2000). The importance of a pedagogy discomfort is that no standpoint enjoys absolute privilege. Instead it tries to

make visible what domination and confused understanding obscures regardless of standpoint.

We suggest, then, that the cultural relativist stance exaggerates the extent to which different perspectives between and within cultures are incommensurable, ignoring all the customary ways in which we manage to translate and reach mutual understandings despite significant differences. What such a position fails to grasp in its dogmatic theorising is that just because all understanding between actors is penumbral and fallible it does not follow that there is no understanding. Further, in prescribing a safe distance from which to view and listen to the other, encounters of discomfort and their potential for igniting transformation are made highly unlikely. A partial understanding is still an understanding. For Graeber the problem lies with the antipodes of positivism and subjectivism (2001: 51-53). For neither former nor latter in their rigid adherence to “‘perfect descriptions’ of reality are prepared to entertain a high level of ambiguity with respect to the radically uncertain, ‘becoming’ nature of ‘reality’”(Graeber 2001: 51-52). A pedagogy of discomfort aspires to foster encounter without guarantees.

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