"Tell Me a Story"

A Critical Hip-Hop Framework for Storytelling in Higher Education

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The author presents an approach to writing student stories that integrates elements of arts-based inquiry, critical race theory, and hip-hop culture. Focused on her community college composition class, the author reflects on her concern for students who have continually struggled to learn to write. She writes aspects of her students' stories through a reflective process after conversational interviews. Writing stories about her students helps her gain greater clarity about the students she serves.

Storytelling can surface in higher education classrooms in many ways. Sometimes teachers tell stories to their students and sometimes instructors use stories to understand their students. In my teaching in a community college, many of my students have struggled to succeed in school. It is critically important that I know my students. I have experimented with a strategy that allows me to write stories about my students to take me inside their experience.

It is no accident that the most disenfranchised people struggle with learning to write. I teach English composition in a California community college and I often encounter students who have difficulty writing their ideas. English curriculum often makes those of us with rich ethnic legacies of othered languages feel less than. We walk away from experiences in writing classes feeling like we are

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speaking and writing the "wrong" way. In this article, I offer a unique form of storytelling that can help teachers reflect deeply on their students' stories and may lead teachers to try new pedagogical practices. As an African American woman, I acknowledge my positionality within the context of this offering—hence the inclusion of myself in feelings of being othered.

I am offering a framework for gathering data and composing stories about our students' lived experience within and beyond the classroom during the time we work with them. This framework is informed primarily by arts-based narrative inquiry. As explained by Kim, an arts-based narrative inquiry is a distinctive form of inquiry that uses "art as a mode . . . to move toward a research paradigm in which ideas are as important as forms. . . . Researchers write stories that are presented in a literary form as a research product" (138). These research products can take any art form, such as fiction, poetry, or drama. My framework is informed by critical race theory (CRT), thus the "critical" component of the approach. What CRT offers educators is a language and theory to support the explicit dismantling of white supremacy in our classrooms and the institution of education as a whole. While CRT was originally a theory specific to the legal field, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate outline three propositions pointing to the relevance of CRT in education (48). They argue that racism is a significant factor contributing to inequity in the United States, that property rights are paramount to human rights in the United States, and that the intersection between race and property ownership provides a powerful analytical tool for dissecting white supremacy in our education system. Their emphasis on the power dynamics behind property ownership is particularly relevant here, since homelessness and housing displacement is a significant issue that my students face, including the student showcased in the following story.

A third component of the storytelling framework I am offering is an infusion of hip-hop culture, which "both exclaims and fosters a way of being in the world and encompasses several practices including deejaying, emceeing, break dancing, and tagging (purposeful graffiti)" (Forell 29). Many scholars across various disciplines and grade levels have researched the integration of hip hop culture into classrooms. They have created: theories on hip-hop approaches to higher education on college campuses (Petchauer, "Sampling Practices" 370); hip-hop pedagogy for use in secondary English classrooms (Hill 120); critical hip-hop pedagogy for engaging students in college-level ethnic studies (Akom 54); and hip-hop literature curriculum for high school English (Kelly 53).[1] My framework

builds on these approaches by offering a storytelling approach by which the teacher practitioner can reflect on her own subjectivity as a hip-hop educator within the context of teaching in an inequitable system. It is particularly influenced by Akom's theory of "critical hip hop pedagogy" in which he asks, "What is the relationship between hip hop and critical pedagogy?" (53). Although influenced by the question he poses, my framework is a departure from his theory in its focus on CRT and storytelling motivated by a similar question of, "What is the relationship between hip-hop culture, arts-based inquiry, and critical race theory?"

Altogether, these components—arts-based inquiry, critical race theory, and hip-hop culture—make up the critical hip-hop storytelling framework. This framework calls on educators to use storytelling as a means of reflecting intentionally on the issue of racism as it relates to inequities in education. Most important to consider within this framework is the connection between critical race theory and hip-hop culture since a close look at hip-hop's history reveals a connection to the problem of housing displacement among disenfranchised youth (Chang 10). Thus, within this critical hip-hop storytelling framework, I would like to challenge educators to tell stories about the connections between the places we (students and educators alike) inhabit in our learning lives while considering what hip-hop teaches us about those connections.

Doing so may help to develop "students, teachers, and administrators who are able to negotiate within the terrain of popular culture to constantly remake their own identities" (Leard and Lashua 258). This practice may offer a range of opportunities, including sharing these stories with students, with fellow educators, with administrators, and with policy makers creating statutes that directly impact the success of what we are attempting to accomplish in our classrooms. So far, I have found great insight in merely holding the stories as data to inform and improve my own teaching practice, though I plan to share these stories with students in the future.

What makes critical hip-hop storytelling distinct from other forms of storytelling is that it can be a space for minoritized educators and students alike to give voice to their stories. As a "hip-hop aesthetic form," this type of "second wave" hip-hop framework allows educators to use hip hop "ways of doing and being" along with hip hop content in our classrooms (Petchauer, "Starting with Style" 79). In fact, using the content of students' experience to create a new story models the hip-hop practice of sampling, which is using music beats or dance styles from another source to create something new (Petchauer, "Sampling Practices" 365).

Inhabiting a minoritized positionality, I am most perceptive of the usefulness of this approach for students and educators of color. However, I imagine that this approach could serve white educators as well. White college instructors may be able to help marginalized students tell their own stories and begin to interrogate their own positionality using the propositions offered within the CRT framework. Regardless of our race, the deep reflection that this approach requires may benefit a range of students and practitioners by helping us tackle educational inequity by creating solutions to the problems that our critical hip hop stories teach us.

Tricia Rose, author of the seminal hip-hop text *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, puts this another way:

> Let us imagine . . . hip hop principles as a blueprint for social resistance and affirmation: create sustaining narratives, accumulate them, layer, embellish, and transform them. However, be also prepared for rupture, find pleasure in it, in fact, plan on social rupture. When these ruptures occur, use them in creative ways that will prepare you for a future in which survival will demand a sudden shift in ground tactics. (qtd. in Petchauer, "Starting with Style" 88).

Toward this aim, I have begun writing stories of my students after I engage in extended conversations with them. I require office hours, and my conversations last at least an hour. In the conversation I ask questions about the learning lives of my students. I try to empathically understand how they think about school and I work to listen to their experiences.

After those conversations I make notes in a journal. I reflect on my notes and often turn the conversation into a graphic. Reflecting on the graphic, I write aspects of my students' lives in order to reflect deeply and draw me closer to them. What follows is an example of my process. I have changed the name of my student to protect his identity.

Pipeline Shuffle

"Here at Sac City Continuation School, you have been given a second chance at school life," said Mr. Howard. He stood squarely in front of an auditorium full of fifty new teenage intakes, mostly fifteen-year-old Black boys. A few Latino young men and Black women sprinkled the crowd.[2]

"Now, all of you are going to have an interview this week with Mrs. Williams," continued Mr. Howard. "She's going to set you up on an education plan." Mr. Howard pointed to a young Black woman standing to his right. She waved at the audience of teenagers with their eyes fixed on the stage.

"I don't know why," snickered Mr. Howard.

"But we're going through those motions people. Now, you're going to be dismissed into your classes and called out when it's your turn for the interview. I don't want no funny business," said Mr. Howard.

Devontay sat in the audience in row three. He watched the tall, lean white man in front of him walk off the stage. Mrs. Williams followed not too far behind Mr. Howard. Devontay followed the group being ushered out of the school's auditorium and walked to the classroom number scribbled on the sheet of paper in his hand. Classroom number 22.

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"Looks like you have *well* below a 2.0 average," said Mrs. Williams. It was finally Devontay's turn for the interview. It had been hard for him to concentrate on what his new teacher was saying. He was anxious about the interview. Every time the hall aide came into the room to call a new a name, he sat on the edge of his seat. Now that he was finally in Mrs. Williams's office, he was even more nervous.

"Math. F. Science. F," said Mrs. Williams. "Your cumulative average from ninth to eleventh grade is a 1.2 GPA. Just how did we get here, Mr. Jackson?"

Devontay sat across from Mrs. Williams silently. He looked down at his shoes, a fresh pair of blue and gold Jordans, not knowing what to say.

"Well?" said Mrs. Williams.

"I don't know," Devontay said finally.

Mrs. Williams shuffled through the papers on her clipboard.

"Thirteen different schools in the last eight years? That must have been tough," she said.

Devontay nodded.

"What do want to be in life, Mr. Jackson?"

The question surprised Devontay. No one had ever asked him that.

"What do you mean?"

"What do you want to be when you grow up? Who do you see yourself becoming?"

"I don't know," said Devontay.

"C'mon, there's gotta be something you're good at . . . something you enjoy doing," continued Mrs. Williams.

"I don't know," said Devontay. "I like math."

"Aha," said Mrs. Williams. "There's something. So, what can we do to get your math scores up?" Mrs. Williams flipped through Devontay's transcripts. "Not looking too good here, but that don't mean nothing."

Devontay looked at Mrs. Williams. There was something different about her. Devontay met her kind eyes. He noticed that she leaned into him when she talked instead of backed away. She seemed to really care about his performance in school.

"You seem like a bright young man. What brought you to Sac City Continuation?"

Another surprising question from his new guidance counselor. Wasn't the answer obvious?

"You can't tell from my transcript?" Devontay quipped, his voice wavering.

"That's just one side of the story," Mrs. Williams insisted.

"The same thing that brought everybody else here," said Devontay.

Mrs. Williams laughed. "Fair enough."

"Well, all right, Mr. Jackson," said Mrs. Williams.

"That's it?"

"That's it," said Mrs. Williams.

Devontay left the counselor's office a bit stunned. The visit was different from any other visit he'd had in a school administrator's office.

He walked back to his classroom and tried to remember what brought him to Sac City Continuation.

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Ms. Lavender, the third grade teacher at Brown Elementary, was a white woman with short brown hair. She held Devontay and Damon back from recess as punishment for playing pencil pop in class.

"Hopefully, missing recess will teach you two a lesson," said Ms. Lavender.

"Man, I wanted to play basketball," said Damon.

Ms. Lavender glared back at Damon.

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"We're moving again," said Devontay, still sad about missing recess earlier that

day. He looked at his older brother Leon for answers. Leon was graduating high school in two days.

"I haven't even gotten used to my new school good, made any friends," continued Devontay.

"You'll be a'ight," said Leon. "You're only in the third grade. You'll have plenty of time to make new friends. Pretty soon, you'll be stunning like me," continued Leon. He held up his shiny blue graduation gown and looked in the mirror. "Boy, I'm ready!"

Devontay watched his brother strike a pose in the bathroom mirror. He definitely wanted to be like his brother someday; he looked up to him like a father.

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"Bro, you got to get it together man," said Leon. "What do you want to do? You want to end up on the streets? You got to finish school man."

Devontay was in high school . . . should have been in high school. He had just been expelled.

"I know, man," said Devontay. "I just . . . it's like . . . as soon as we get settled some place, then we move again," he explained to his older brother. "It's hard for me to focus . . . to even take school seriously, you know?"

Leon did know.

"But you can do it," said Leon. "Look at me! If I can graduate from high school, anybody can."

Devontay laughed. His brother had a rocky start but was turning out to have a good finish. Maybe he could make it. Be like his big brother.

Devontay was being expelled from school for truancy after receiving four warnings.

"I can't believe this is happening," said Devontay. "How am I going to tell Mamma?"

"Yeah, good luck with that one," said Leon.

Devontay was happy that his mother didn't keep her cell phone on at work and hoped that the school hadn't left a message. He wanted to break the news to his mother gently.

When Aileen walked into the door, her two sons greeted her in the living room.

"What did I do to deserve this type of treatment? A special welcome home

greeting from my two favorite boys," she said. The smile across her lips quickly faded. "Who's in trouble?"

"Devontay has something he wants to tell you, Ma," said Leon.

"Ma, I want to get a job so I can help you out," Devontay started.

Leon looked at him and shook his head.

"I mean, I need to quit school," he tried again.

"What he's trying to say is . . . " Leon started. ". . . is that the school called."

Aileen threw her hands in the air. "Oh my goodness! What is it this time?"

She instinctively reached for her phone, which she'd been unable to check all day.

Aileen stood in front of Devontay and Leon listening to the message. When it ended, she dropped the arm holding the phone to her side.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Devontay?" she asked quietly. She let the phone drop to the hardwood floor.

His mother's quietness when she became angry scared Devontay. He preferred that she just yell at him.

"You know my teachers don't like me," Devontay started.

"That's what you've been saying since the third grade," Aileen said.

"It's true," insisted Devontay.

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That night Aileen put her two boys out of the house.

"You two are going to live with Big Mamma," explained Aileen. "Get your stuff."

"All of it?" asked Leon.

"All of it," replied Aileen.

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Devontay remembered all of these events that brought him to Sac City Continuation. The school was in Sacramento, where his grandmother resided and where he now lived. He missed his mother but not her new boyfriend, who he later found out had convinced his mother that she should kick out her boys.

Understanding Self and Student in Teaching

Devontay's story was challenging for me to write. The sense of incompletion I have around this story intrigues me because it mirrors my own relationship with the Black men in my life. One reason Devontay's story was particularly challenging to write was my own subjectivity as a "good student." I enjoyed school from beginning to end, as evidenced by my continued studies.

Enveloped in this subjectivity, what I found most shocking and disheartening was the amount of schools that Devontay had attended. I could only imagine what type of impact that had on his ability to learn. I asked him more questions to learn why he switched schools so much. I discovered that his mother received government housing assistance and worked different jobs, which made moving necessary. This experience points to the importance of considering the issue of property ownership and housing displacement in relation to education inequity.

Despite the negative impact of moving around, Devontay found his older brother and caring friends to be positive peer models for him. He referenced a "play brother" and "play sister" throughout his interview. This practice of naming "fictive kin" is an important one in African American communities and points to the means by which community and family is formed even when traditional family structures are out of place.

Anecdotally, as a student in my course, Devontay was consistently even tempered and kept a smile on his face. I could not tell from looking at him that he had endured such hardships, though I question what I would expect a student such as Devontay to appear as. Mainly, it is his jovial and relaxed disposition that I find to be in contrast with his experience. He earned a fair grade at the end his semester in my class by keeping up with the assignments and writing thoughtful essays, though his grammar skills still needed improvement. However, for a student with a history of school instability, displacement and homelessness, he exhibited amazing resiliency and determination, which is why I believe it is important to note his coping mechanisms.

When writing his story, I was tasked with finding a balance between telling a story of his challenges as a high school student with his current-day challenges as a college student. It was hard to focus on his college years, since after learning his story I gathered that it was truly his high school years that affect his performance today. The story that resulted focuses on the school years prior to Devontay's community college enrollment. The intention here is to highlight the

determination and resiliency that led to his successful enrollment. Despite these experiences in high school, he is in community college. He completed my English class successfully. His relationships with his family continue to keep him going.

Recommendations

Figure 1

10 ELEMENTS OF HIP HOP IN BRIEF*

BREAKING: The dance element also called "break-dancing," with dancers referred to as b-boys/b-girls.

EMCEEING: "Moving the crowd" by rhyming lyrics.

GRAFFITI ART: Using aerosal paint to "tag" public spaces.

DEEJAYIN: Scratching and mixing records/music to showcase the "break beat."

BEAT BOXING: Using the lips as an instrument to imitate sounds that a speaker makes.

STREET FASHION: Dressing in a manner that embodies hip-hop culture.

STREET LANGUAGE: Vocabulary and speech influenced by language variations spoken by minoritized discourses and used in rap lyrics.

STREET KNOWLEDGE: Knowing about self in connection to both an immediate and a historic community.

STREET ENTREPRENEURIALISM: Marketing talents/services to a marginalized community.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS: Expressed commitment to healthy habits such as eating a plant-based diet, sobriety, and regular exercise.

*Fig. 1. 10 Elements of Hip Hop (Tucker)

I recommend reserving this practice as a tool for giving voice to students who are most marginalized within institutions of higher education, which aligns with the CRT tenet that racism continues to be a significant issue in the United States (Ladson-Billings and Tate 48). This group has historically included African American, Latino, and Native American students. Critical hip-hop storytellers should attempt to classify the student's story by connecting the student's primary

experience to one of the hip-hop elements, since this is what makes the story specifically "hip-hop."

In Devontay's story, I connected his story to the hip-hop element of breakdancing. His movement from school to school was a sort of dance through the education system, hence, the story's title "Pipeline Shuffle." The reference to a "pipeline" is a direct one to anecdotal evidence suggesting that there is a school-to-prison pathway for Black children beginning as early as third grade. Without this explicit connection, the story could be categorized as simply arts-based inquiry as aforementioned, which is also valid; however, I am arguing specifically for the effectiveness of a hip-hop connection, given hip-hop's origin as a means for marginalized youth to speak truth to power. Given the growth of the hip-hop elements to include ten elements today, there is ample room for critical hip-hop storytellers to classify these student stories according to the hip-hop element that most embodies their story.

I understand that time constraints and our responsibilities to fulfill our learning outcomes may inhibit the use of critical hip-hop storytelling in every composition classroom. Thus, I would like to conclude by offering a modest list of suggestions toward this aim:

- *Create brief affirmative stories about your students in the tradition of flash fiction*. Short fiction is one avenue to use to exercise our imaginations in the realistic busyness of the semester. Fiction pieces in the short fiction category can range from three hundred to fifteen hundred words.
- *Invite at least one student to share his/her story with you during office hours*. Instead of interviewing a whole class, select one student each semester. Let students answer the call to a broader invitation. I would recommend inviting previous students so that their participation does not suggest an impact on their grade.
- *Require one-on-one office hour appointments*. Make an office visit a part of students' class participation grade. Often in the office setting, students will share bits of their story. This sharing may assist with the creation of the shorter fictional stories you are creating for your own personal work as an instructor.
- *Adopt a critical hip-hop instructional stance*. The hip-hop elements I have outlined here may serve as a power base for your instruction. You do not have to explicitly use the hip-hop elements to be a hip-hop scholar. Freeing yourself enough to "emcee" your classroom instruction, for example, can be

a powerful means of moving beyond traditional instructional approaches to create a more inclusive classroom environment.

- *Invite students to write and share their own stories*. Assigning stories is an effective means of accumulating data to inform your work. One of the first assignments I give in basic composition is the literacy autobiography, inviting students to share a story about their earliest experiences of reading and writing. Asking students to tell their own stories can become a powerful first step toward inhabiting their stories yourself.

Society

Today, we are not lacking in examples of Black men being stereotyped to death, in the literal and figurative sense of the word. Unfortunately, just a quick perusal of headlines in the past year will prove as such. As critical educators and storytellers, we must make it our business to bring stories to light and life that will showcase the humanity of Black students. A critical hip-hop story is one small way to begin doing so. In the process of telling the story of one of my Black male students, I found myself confronting my own notions of Black masculinity, relationship, and scholarship. This storytelling endeavor, for me, begged a greater question: What is our relationship with Black men as a society? I hope to continue exploring this question as I move forward.

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NOTES

1. Hip-hop is spelled with a hyphen, as "hip-hop," or not, as "hip hop," when done so by the work's original author.
2. The author chooses to capitalize the "B" in Black to stand in solidarity with Black writers, scholars, and thinkers who support the need for Blacks to have a space that holds the reality of slavery's consequence of disruption.