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The Power of Hip Hop and the Library: Narrative, Echoing the Global in the Local, and Connection

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Abstract

Queens Public Library (New York, USA) has presented a variety of hip hop programs and worked with many hip hop artists and entrepreneurs. A holistic examination of the library's hip hop programs and partnerships illustrates a model for analyzing hip hop itself. The authors are calling the three components of this new model: 1) Narrative, 2) the Global Local Echo, and 3) Connection. This article explains this new model in more detail, using examples from Queens Public Library.

Keywords: education; global; hip hop; library programming; Queens (N.Y.)

Publication Type: report from the field

Introduction

Famously, hip hop began in the government-neglected neighborhoods of The Bronx, New York City. From there, it quickly spread throughout New York City, including into Queens, New York (Cramer & Hallett, 2021). Because of the popularity of hip hop music, pop culture often discusses hip hop culture as if it only encompasses the music (Rabaka, 2012). However, hip hop was always about more than the music (Rose, 1994). There were four original elements of hip hop: break-dancing, DJing, graffiti art, and rapping (Buffington & Day, 2019). A fifth element was added by one of the originators of American hip hop, Afrika Bambaataa, as hip hop culture continued: knowledge (de Paor-Evans, 2018). Historically, these elements cross-fertilized and fueled each other based on shared local experience and similar approaches to sound, motion, communication, and style (Rose, 1994).[1] Currently, there are other valid inclusions under the umbrella of hip hop, including fashion (Rabaka, 2012). Our article builds on this rich tradition of exploring the value and complexities of hip hop beyond the music, by presenting three new themes in relation to Queens Public Library hip hop programming: Narrative, the Global-Local Echo, and Connection. Our intent is to demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of hip hop along the themes of Narrative, the Global-Local Echo, and Connection. Thinking about hip hop in this way came naturally to us when we examined the library's history of hip hop programs. Using these themes also allows us to think of new hip hop programming in creative ways and to conceptualize the richness that is hip hop in a fresh way.

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Literature Review

As part of our literature review, we read and consulted a variety of texts about hip hop in academia, learning, and libraries. We also examined texts describing the history and core components of hip hop, along with academic texts writing about contemporary hip hop issues. When conducting the review, we focused mainly on more recent writings. There are classic texts, of course, such as *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop* by David Toop (1984) and *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* by Tricia Rose (1994), but we wanted to concentrate on more recent writings and the contemporary scholarly conversation in our literature review. We do cite appropriate older texts throughout. Here is a sample of some of the articles we reviewed.

There were several articles about using hip hop in education and as a learning pedagogy. These articles gave examples (Villanueva, 2020; Kelly, 2020) and critique (Buffington & Day, 2018; Low, 2011). Several articles discussed various aspects of the global nature of hip hop (Lee, 2012; Dennis, 2011; Illescas Reinoso & Acosta Damas, 2020; Harris, 2019) and one article discussed the national spread of rapping in the U.S. (Cramer & Hallett, 2012). There were a few articles critiquing hip hop more generally (de Paor-Evans, 2018), including an extremely well-researched book chapter from Rabaka (2012). We also discovered articles which critique certain aspects of hip hop, including Jay-Z's and the music industry's commodification of a ghetto identity (Oates, 2020) and the book *Yes Yes Y'all*, which presents hip hop as a phoenix rising out of the ashes of The Bronx's gang culture (Aprahamian, 2019).

We consulted two articles that discussed hip hop specifically in a library setting. Dando (2020) explores hip hop culture and maker spaces. Dando notes that maker spaces do not always support or engage historically marginalized communities. The paper documents a series created by a local public library to engage with community youth in the maker space. The maker series used two "Hip Hop-centered generative practices": beat-making and graffiti writing. Dando reflects on and documents the outcomes of using the hip hop practices in the maker space.

The second article, from Williams & Stover (2019), presents the origins of a spoken word poetry series presented in an academic library. The article notes that academic libraries are growing more diverse. In reaction to this diversity, Williams wanted to present hip hop spoken word programming at the library. The article details the initial resistance that Williams met from the dean of the library, Stover. After some convincing, Stover condoned the program, and it is now an integral tradition at the library. One hurdle described by the article is the fear of noise complaints, which, as described below, is a fear sometimes encountered by our Hip Hop Coordinator.

Statement of Purpose

This article describes three newly-defined themes of hip hop culture that we have identified and that are demonstrated using illustrations from Queens Public Library. Our aim was to present concrete examples of hip hop's potential within a public library. We present a model of our three elements of hip hop and our illustrations. We created this model in response to our longitudinal analysis of our library's hip hop programming. The model, which is a natural fit for our library's hip hop programming, also allows for a novel way of looking at hip hop itself.

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Model

As library staff who work within a public library department that includes a Hip Hop Coordinator, Ralph McDaniels, we wanted to showcase the ways that our public library can promote and support hip hop and the ways that hip hop can support and promote the public library. We started our hip hop programming and made hip hop a focus of the library because of a belief that hip hop is a cultural force and without it the library would not be responding to the needs or interests of our patrons. Although we did not have a pattern or overarching goal as we created our hip hop programs, we realize now that our hip hop program selections illuminated some things about hip hop itself. We were able to coalesce our programs into three overarching concepts: Narrative, the Global-Local Echo, and Connection. As explained below, each of these concepts demonstrates something particular about hip hop, especially hip hop as presented by the Queens Public Library.

Narrative

Our article explores the theme of "narrative" through the lens of hip hop. Hip hop and narrative strengthen each other, change each other, and stand independent of each other. We discovered four main concepts within our theme of Narrative: Hip Hop is Narrative, Using Hip Hop to Narrate, Changing the Narrative of What Libraries Can Do, and Animating the Narrative of Hip Hop.

Hip Hop is Narrative

Although hip hop can be described as a cultural force, it is narrative. Hip hop has been and continues to be a space for narrative; as Miller et al. (2013) states, "Hip Hop remains a sustained voice for many and a space and place to express oneself in a manner that is both contextualized and legitimate" (p. 6). Possibly the most salient example of this is rapping. Although every facet of hip hop can be viewed as narrative, rapping often involves words and phrases, and is therefore an easy avenue to express a narrative. By the same token, rapping is speech. Rapping deserves the same recognition for being a verbal force as other forms of speech, including poetry, prose and political propaganda. Additionally, rapping can, and does, tell various types of narratives, ranging from the emotional with DMX (example: "Do you hear what I tell you? Understand what you hear / Don't let nobody tell you, what to hope and to fear" from 1998) to the political with Public Enemy (example: "But I be knowin' the scheme that of the president / Tappin' my phone whose crews abused / I stand accused of doing harm / 'Cause I'm louder than a bomb" from 1988).

At the library, we use hip hop as a way to raise voices. Some examples include our open mic nights. At our open mic nights, the library opens our space to rappers, singers, and poets and we invite them to perform their works. We promote the events to everyone; generally, the age of participants is between 12 and 35 years. We attempt to create an inclusive atmosphere by encouraging cheering for the participants and performing in languages other than English. Our events have an average of 20 performers and 75 audience members. Another library program that focuses on the narrative capacity of hip hop is our teen podcast. This program encourages narrative using rapping and DJing. The teen podcast began in 2016 and is recorded at two library locations. The podcasts are often teen led, with the participants creating the concepts for the podcasts. We have brought in special guests occasionally, including local hip hop personalities.

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Using Hip Hop to Narrate

Hip hop can be used as a tool to narrate an idea or a story. Hip hop can be part of a culturally relevant pedagogy that teaches in a more effective way than a "Eurocentric curriculum" (Buffington & Day, 2018, p. 3). As explained by Del Hierro (2018), "Hip Hop has learned to engage across communities through recognition of similar nodes of meaning making interpreted through local expressions" (p. 2). Another way to express Del Hierro's idea is that hip hop was and continues to be a communication style that deliberately uses the language of its listeners. At the library, we have employed this aspect of hip hop in our programming. An example of this concept was the library's book talk with Daymond John, of the television show Shark Tank and the fashion brand FUBU, For Us, By Us. This talk used the hip hop aspect of entrepreneurship to narrate Daymond John's life story and hear his advice about business. John provided a 60-minute lecture to hundreds of participants, along with a book signing. This event was promoted to students at a local college. Not only does this event showcase hip hop's power to narrate, but it also demonstrates that hip hop is about more than the music and involves concepts of entrepreneurship and lifestyle.

Another library program used rapping and DJing to explain math concepts. The DJ and producer, Large Professor, illustrated math concepts by focusing on the fact that music and rap is often measured by bars. Dozens of young people created music and rapped over beats during this program. We also used hip hop to encourage community members to take the 2020 Census. Two of our library branches hosted the hip hop radio personalities Fred Buggs and Chuck Chillout, who promoted the importance of being counted and community representation.

Changing the Narrative of What Libraries Can Do

When library Hip Hop Coordinator Ralph McDaniels began to coordinate hip hop programs at the library, he was sometimes met with confusion. People could understand the concept of using hip hop as a tool to convey other information ("using hip hop to narrate"), but some could not understand the purpose of a library program presenting or celebrating hip hop, without some other goal. As explained by McDaniels, the confusion often arose from perceptions of hip hop events drawing large and rowdy crowds. McDaniels has contended with the narrative that public libraries should be a quiet and orderly place. However, library employees and library administration have become supportive of hip hop programming as McDaniels has asserted that hip hop programs "belong" at the library.

An interesting junction that McDaniels has made between libraries and the rapping component of hip hop is libraries' historical connection with words. McDaniels points out that libraries have historically been connected with books and words. From that perspective, rapping is a natural fit with a library, because of rap's high word count and the value put on verbal prowess. According to listener-created research, such as this chart found on Reddit (Textureflow, 2018), rap has the highest word count of any music genre. Libraries, in their role as stewards of the word, can protect and promote hip hop and rap.

As the library's commitment to hip hop programming has endured, we are changing the narrative of what a library can be. We are changing the aesthetics of "The library." This does not escape the notice of library patrons, who often comment on the fact that Queens Public Library is playing the music that they want to hear and presenting programs that they want to attend. The changing narrative of the library has not been confined to simply Queens Public Library. McDaniels and

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others have taken this concept to the larger library world. We attend library conferences; partner with library organizations, such as the Black Caucus of the American Library Association; and instruct Master's in Library Studies students on the power of hip hop.

Animating the Narrative of Hip Hop

Cultural institutions, such as public libraries, are ideally suited to ingest hip hop stories, histories, and narratives and present them in a new or more accurate way. The American Library Association (2019) delineates some of the core values of librarianship, including access, education, lifelong learning, and preservation. Libraries can further these values with a specific focus on hip hop. In fact, hip hop has moved beyond popular and into ubiquitous. "Musically and culturally, the art form dominates streaming services and festival lineups; television commercials and feature films; social discourse and social media" (Phillips, 2019). A cultural phenomenon this far-reaching has an impact and telling the story of hip hop and its timeline by archiving the genre and its roots in Queens is important to the community.

Specifically at Queens Public Library, we have attempted to provide information and to support and promote efforts at archiving and cataloging the hip hop record. Hip hop, including rap, has become a globally popular creative endeavor. The library promotes the accessibility and archiving of hip hop's local connection with Queens in its programming. For example, we provided a Queens "Hip Hop Pioneers" photo exhibition of over 100 hip hop-related people from Queens. This program told the story of over 40 years of hip hop in Queens.

An example of encouraging new perspectives in classifying and archiving that has been done by Queens Public Library from an archiving and classifying angle is the library's book talk with Clover Hope. Hope is the author of *The Motherlode: 100+ Women Who Made Hip-Hop* (2021). In this book, Hope has done the work of researching and categorizing one aspect of hip hop: women creators. As libraries, we can support and promote this schematic and classification work. Queens Public Library hosted a book talk with Hope and made a deliberate effort to purchase and stock her book.

Another example of this type of classic "library work" being used to further the exploration of hip hop is the library's involvement with the sculpture "A Cypher in Queens." "A Cypher in Queens," created by artist Sherwin Banfield, uses three-dimensional art to document and illuminate three hip hop icons from Queens, New York: Jam Master Jay, Phife Dawg, and Prodigy. The sculptures also included an audio output jack, to stream the audio components of the art pieces. According to the artist, the sculptures could be experienced "sonically with acoustics spruced from playlists, streaming services or even the expressive participation of the viewer/audience" (Banfield, n.d.). The library used its position as a public space and an institution of access and archiving to promote Banfield's sculpture. The Central branch of the library hosted the sculpture for six months, and McDaniels created programming involving the sculpture.

The Global-Local Echo

Hip hop is multicultural. Currently, hip hop has spread throughout the globe. The origins of hip hop were also multicultural, although there are different perspectives surrounding the precise nature of the cultural origin of hip hop. Some argue that hip hop did not begin in Bronx, New York, but instead has its origins in the African diaspora (Harris, 2019). For example, Lee,

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citing Smitherman, noted that "'rap music is rooted in the Black oral tradition of tonal semantics, narrativizing, signification/signifyin, the dozens/playin the dozens, Africanized syntax, and other communicative practices and the rapper is 'a postmodern African griot'" (Lee, 2012, p. 142). However, from the perspective of the Latinx and black people (and white people as was often the case with graffiti) in New York City in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including our author Ralph McDaniels, hip hop felt like an extremely local phenomenon that was gaining national and global traction. The interplay between these two ideas is captured by Rose who argued that hip hop, although "propelled by Afro-diasporic traditions", was specifically linked to "urban deindustrialization in the 1970s, the post-industrial urban landscape in the 1980s, and their impact on African American urban communities" (1994, p. 25).

Whether the exact origins of hip hop are the African diaspora, or the potent conditions found in the Bronx in the 1970s, it is currently a global and multicultural force. Further, there is something particular to Queens-made hip hop because of what we are calling the Global-Local Echo. The Echo encompasses the reflective nature of "place" in hip hop, especially New York City hip hop and hip hop as presented by Queens Public Library. As stated by Rose in 1994, "[i]dentity in hip hop is deeply rooted in the specific, the local experience, and one's attachment to and status in a local group or alternative family" (p. 34). Hip hop as we know it began in The Bronx, New York City, where it quickly spread to Queens (Cramer & Hallett, 2021, pp. 261-62). After spreading through New York City, hip hop became a global phenomenon. Queens is the most culturally diverse, heavily populated county in America (Gamio, 2019). Accordingly, the Queens local experience is a culturally diverse experience and Queens hip hop reflects (echoes) the global nature of hip hop, which itself echoes the hip hop culture of Queens, New York. We use the term "Echo" to reinforce the multi-cultural dimensions of both Queens and hip hop. Culture in Queens can echo the diverse nature of global hip hop, because of Queens's identity as one of the most diverse regions on the planet, while hip hop is able to echo the multiculturalism of Queens because of its status as a popular cultural creation with a global position.

This global-local plurality is exemplified in our hip hop programming. Providing library programs that embrace cultural backgrounds can increase community engagement, similar to how culturally responsive teaching can increase student engagement. Citing Ladson-Billing's (1994) research, Cowden et al. (2021) posit that library services that incorporate cultural references provide a "bridge from patrons' experiences to the mainstream culture and validate their ethnic backgrounds and life experiences" (p. 233). For example, Queens library hosted a Latin hip hop program in Corona, a neighborhood where 63% of the population self-identified as Hispanic on the 2010 Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This was a 24-hour program with music and other arts presented predominantly in Spanish.

Another example is the library's Filipino-style dinner and mixtape event in our Flushing neighborhood branch. At this event, the library presented local DJ Neil Armstrong, who came to global prominence when he DJ'd for Jay-Z on tour from 2008 to 2010. Armstrong wanted to present his hip hop-Filipino culture through music and food. He presented a music mix while the library hosted a chef who served traditional Filipino cuisine.

Another example of this Global-Local Echo is McDaniels's work as hip hop Coordinator with Sotheby's Auction house. Sotheby's hosted its first hip hop auction in October 2020. This auction was a recognition of the global importance of hip hop culture. Sotheby's reached out to McDaniels for his involvement and dedicated a portion of the auction's proceeds to the library's hip hop program. Sotheby's recognized McDaniels's role in the global history of hip hop as co-creator of

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Video Music Box. However, McDaniels also has a local role as the Hip Hop Coordinator within Queens Public Library, a foundational local institution.

Connection

Queens Public Library has long recognized hip hop's ability to connect with the community: we have been creating hip hop programs for years and we created a dedicated hip hop coordinator position, with staff support (Kern-Jedrychowska, 2015). Most hip hop programs give the library the opportunity to engage with our community. At Queens Library, hip hop programs draw large crowds, often of people who would not otherwise visit the library. Additionally, McDaniels has observed that hip hop fans can be a "built-in" audience of loyal and interested program participants. McDaniels and other library staff have observed that someone might participate in a hip hop program after being absent from the library for many years. Hip hop programming can be a strong anchor tying the library to our community. The library utilized this connection during its "31 Days of Non-Stop Hip Hop" series. During this program, we provided an immediate hip hop connection with our patrons: when they called the library with information, they were greeted with the voice of DJ G Money and hip hop background music.

Hip hop's power to connect is particularly potent at the public library, where programming is almost universally free and open to everyone. Anyone, from any background, is welcome to hip hop programs presented by the library. There is a long history of hip hop having a spirit of connection and "collective space where contemporary issues … are worked through" (Rose, 1994, p. 59). This connection and collectivity extend to those in the population who are not always represented in the wider culture, including youth and economically marginalized groups (Rose, 1994).

We connected with our hip hop community through a 2017 initiative, in which we scheduled hip hop programs in most of our library locations to welcome new customers to the library. We wanted to blanket the library system in a multitude of hip hop programs. These programs included:

- Our "I Have a Dream" series, which focused on hip hop entrepreneurs
- Our "Hip Hop in the Afternoon" series, which provided old-school hip hop music spun by local DJs
- The Queens Hip Hop Pioneers photo exhibit mentioned above
- An Art of Graffiti class
- Hip hop workout classes, including yoga
- Hip hop health programming
- "The Pain is Real", hosted by hip hop artist Roxanne Shante in a discussion about heartbreak
- Book talks with Love & Hip Hop's Yandy Smith
- Beat-making workshops

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- Hip hop music concerts
- A mass incarceration panel discussion with Maxwell Melvins, founder of The Lifers Group
- Open mic nights
- "Hip Hop Build, Make and Remix" maker workshops

One salient example of hip hop's ability to connect with the community is when the library hosted DJ Chuck Chillout at our local prison. The weekend after his program, he gave shout outs on his New York City radio program to all the men who requested.

Hip hop can be a safe space for people who create. Library hip hop programs foster this safe space and allow for connection with a wider segment of our community. As described by Miller et al. (2013), hip hop is "a place where both marginal and mainstream voices can be heard and flourish" (p. 6). One example of this safe space is the hip hop panel that the library hosted during Women's History Month in 2019. This discussion and panel honored over 20 women in hip hop. The panel of women involved in the program discussed their careers and the challenges of being a woman in a male-dominated field. The panelists emphasized equal rights and their perception of shady business practices by their male peers in corporate America.

The power of hip hop music to connect was highlighted during the pandemic brought on by COVID-19. The library closed all its physical locations in March 2020. One of the library's first virtual programs was our DJ series. Hip hop programs were one of the first activities that the public saw from Queens Public Library during the first days of the pandemic.

The library hosts two of these Instagram programs per week. As part of these programs, Queens Public Library and McDaniels worked with community partners to forge connections and to show the world, and ourselves, that Queens was still surviving. We wanted to use this hip hop programming to showcase what services and assistance were still being offered, to create joy and routine in our listeners, and to create a sense of community within Queens along with a connection to the global, virtual world. McDaniels wanted to connect the library to the community in real time, while staying relevant and accessible. The direct spontaneity of live programming signals to our community that the library is accessible and active during the pandemic. McDaniels felt there was something special about live programming, especially in the early days of the pandemic when the news was confusing and sometimes contradictory, and when so many people were experiencing their world only through pre-recorded messages. Even though our buildings were closed, the library could still be there in real time discussing the community's concerns and playing music to ease everyone's fears. Connecting to the community was reflected throughout hip hop culture during the pandemic. For example, DJ D-Nice, winner of the 2020 NAACP Image Award, created his "Club Quarantine" virtual DJ sets early in the pandemic. These DJ sets provided unity and connection for the community (Meara, 2021).

Conclusion

Hip hop and public libraries can be robust partners. Queens Public Library has presented dozens of hip hop programs and initiatives, as described in this article. When we analyzed our programming longitudinally, we realized that it fit a model of hip hop and its elements.

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After looking at previous scholarship and analyzing our own programs and themes, we decided to put forth a model of hip hop as described above. These hip hop elements of Narrative, the Global-Local Echo, and Connection can be used to describe hip hop and our hip hop programming and can also be thought of as assets for both libraries and hip hop. Using the model of hip hop as Narrative, the Global-Local Echo, and Connection illuminates connections within hip hop programming at public libraries and within hip hop itself. In the future, and partly as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we will be providing more of our hip hop programs online and virtually. We think this will only entrench deeper the elements of Narrative, the Global-Local Echo, and Connection. We invite other libraries to use our model to think about their own hip hop community and how the library and library programs might fit into it.

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Endnotes

[1] In Rose's discussion of hip hop, she does not distinguish between rapping and DJing as singular elements, and she does include an explicit discussion of knowledge as an element.

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