



# “Take another route ‘cause we ain’t scared in the South”: Lessons from Hip-Hop to Social Studies Educators Amid Bans on Critical Race Theory in the Classroom

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores Southern hip-hop as a source of resistance and sustainment amid legislative bans on purported “divisive concepts,” which has led to the systematic censoring of critical and equity-oriented discussions in K-12 education. Social studies teachers, in particular, face punitive backlashes as they navigate conversations around culture, power, individuals, and institutions. Through this backdrop, the paper asks: how do we, as social studies teacher educators, make sense of our role in this politically contentious atmosphere? This conceptual analysis focuses on artists like Wacotron, BigXthaPlug, and Flippa T, drawing insights from their lyrics to illuminate strategies for subverting, resisting, and innovating in the face of educational challenges. Embracing themes of fugitivity, community, and refusal, this paper advocates for a mentality of resistance in critical work, reminding educators of their roots in a legacy of Black Southern resistance amid legislative attempts to stifle justice-oriented discussions.

**Keywords** critical race theory, hip-hop education, Black educators, social studies

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## INTRODUCTION

The current wave of white backlash (Jefferson & Ray, 2022) sweeping through the United States has manifested in the systematic censoring (Crenshaw, 2022) of critical and equity-oriented discussions through legislative bans on purported "divisive concepts" such as critical race theory, LGBTQ+ topics, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. The beat of this backlash seems to drum loudest in the U.S. South<sup>1</sup>, where discourse in the public sphere has turned justice-oriented educators into boogeymen, ultimately bringing into question K-12 educators' right to freedom of speech in the classroom (Bissell, 2023). Amid this wave of backlash, K-12 teachers have reported exacerbated stress and increased fears over what is considered acceptable speech in the classroom (Jayakumar & Kohli, 2023; Marrun et al., 2024), which often manifests in silence around topics of race and racism (Copenhaver, 2000; Martell, 2016). This termed intentional "chilling effect" (Filimon & Ivănescu, 2023) is bolstered by the historic inability of teacher education programs to adequately prepare educators to engage in conversations about race and racism (Howard & Denning del Rosario, 2000; Kohli, 2021; Kohli et al., 2021; Matias, 2016; Zembylas & Matias, 2023).

Amidst these legislative bans, social studies teachers are often subjects of punitive backlashes (Teitelbaum, 2022), given that the field of study calls for examining culture, power, individuals, and institutions (National Council for the Social Studies, 2018). The critique of how social studies teachers engage in conversations about inequities is especially "chilling" (Filimon & Ivănescu, 2023) on conversations about race and racism because the field of social studies has struggled to engage in equity-oriented, anti-oppressive teaching and learning since its' inception (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Woyshner & Bohan, 2012). This race-adverse, and at times racially hostile, approach to social studies education has continued to exist in social studies curriculum, standards, textbooks, and practice (An, 2022; Eargle, 2016; Lucy et al., 2020; Shear, 2015; Garcia, 2022; Templeton & Harvey, 2022).

## THE RESEARCH

### **Hip-Hop as a Source of Resistance and Sustainment in the Social Studies**

As teacher educators who live and work in Georgia, which is being impacted by the "divisive concepts" legislation HB1084, we—Kelly, a Black woman, and Delandrea, a Black Southern woman— began

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<sup>1</sup> Who and what makes up the South is often debated. For us, the South comprises the states below the Mason-Dixon line and those that made up the Confederacy, where the stain of institutional slavery runs deep, and "Blackness is at the heart of [its cultural] making" (Perry, 2022, xviii). It is the place where life moves slower, where vowels are longer, and where Black resistance pushed the country forward.

fielding questions like: “I want to tell the truth about our history, but I’m scared I’ll get fired. What can I do?” and “Is critical work even possible in this context?” While there are no simple answers to these questions, as teacher educators, researchers, and individuals engaged in hip-hop culture, we see possible answers in hip-hop.

Hip-hop culture was created amid layers of racial, economic, and social inequities and spans beyond music to include norms, sensibilities, and ways of being (Chang, 2005; Rose, 1994). Hip-hop culture has been incorporated into education through *hip-hop education*, an approach to learning that incorporates hip-hop culture and sensibilities into the learning experience (Adjapong & Emdin, 2015; Emdin, 2018; Hill, 2009). Given hip-hop’s emergence as a culture amidst systemic oppression and racism, central to the implementation of hip-hop as an educational approach is an understanding of systemic racism and oppression (Runell & Diaz, 2007). Through this lens, research on the implementation of hip-hop education in social studies contexts has explored the potential of hip-hop to cultivate Black joy (Duncan et al., 2023; Allen, in press), civic inclusion and belonging (Hall, 2023), and promote critical reconceptualizations of social studies concepts (Allen, 2022, 2023; Shanks & Hall, 2021).

For this paper, we are particularly drawn to the current wave of Southern hip-hop—hip-hop from the “Dirty South” or Hip Hop’s “Third Coast” (see Westhoff, 2011)—who are simultaneously criticized and revered for their ability to explicate the level of wit and knowledge necessary for navigating the hood. Having to push back against narratives that treated Southern rap contributions as “anti-intellectual and unsophisticated” or inferior to its East and West Coast counterparts (Younger, 2020, para. 3), Southern hip-hop artists have come to dominate the scene. Their prowess in the industry provides a helpful blueprint for subverting, resisting, and innovating in the face of power and trying to keep people from doing good work. Specifically, we highlight the work of Wacotron, BigXthaPlug, and Flippa T to illuminate what educators can learn about fugitivity, community, and refusal amid the current climate surrounding critical work. While we advocate for utilizing hip-hop texts in classroom practice in our broader work (see Allen, 2022; 2023), in this article, we encourage educators to think about what hip-hop sensibilities—“habits of body and habits of mind” (Petchauer, 2015, p. 80)—they can take from the identified songs, employing them as a lens, and implement their insights into their practice.

## FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

### “Take Another Route ‘Cause We Ain’t Scared in the South”

The title of this paper comes from lyrics that are part of a Wacotron track entitled *Take Off*. In this song,

he reminds us that to live and exist in the South as a Black person means being able to adapt and maneuver according to your current conditions. This continual maneuvering can be described as *fugitivity*, or a continual "straining against" a confining force (Givens, 2021, p. 15). Wacotron exemplifies this most poignantly through the line, "take another route 'cause we aint scared in the South," (Wacotron, 2021) which highlights the ways the legacy of anti-Blackness and white supremacy make fugitivity a necessity. Givens (2021) applies the notion of fugitivity to education through *fugitive pedagogy*— "physical and intellectual acts of subversion engaged in by black people throughout their educational strivings" (p. 9-10). Whether fugitivity is leveraged in the hood or in the classroom, embodying fugitivity requires ingenuity to make the most of what you have in the moment and being willing to reassess, recalculate, and redirect your steps when necessary.

Hip-hop has embodied this notion of fugitivity through repurposing material (i.e., sampling), remixing, making something out of nothing, and utilizing subversive language to communicate messages while obscuring them from the mainstream. When applied to the current racially hostile education environment, we learn from fugitivity that while the work may not look the same, it can and must continue without reservation. For example, teachers can become knowledgeable about the legislation they are expected to adhere to so they know precisely what they can and cannot do. From there, teachers can engage in fugitivity in ways similar to Monreal (2019) by using the mediums young people frequently engage with (i.e., children's literature, young adult and graphic novels, poetry, art, music) and traditional curriculum content (i.e., the Roman Empire burning books, McCarthyism, etc.) to draw through lines to current issues involving race, racism through student-driven analysis. In other words, by engaging students in an analysis of historical events that have had similar outcomes (i.e., book bans, anti-intellectualism), students can come to their conclusions about these current events without specifically mentioning the banned topics.

### **"We Always Strapped, We Keep Our Weapons"**

In his song *Texas*, BigXthaPlug talks about the cultural specificities of residing in Texas. Throughout the song, communal knowledge of place and survivance is exemplified through lyrics like "if you ain't from my state, then you should know don't fuck with Texas...Ayy, we always strapped, we keep our weapons" (BigXthaPlug, 2023). Through this lyric, we see BigXthaPlug acknowledging the collective Texan identity and a willingness and ability to defend it. This attention towards communal survivance and knowledge is instructive for educational spaces, as grounding in community has always been essential for critical Black educators (Anderson, Haddix, et al., 2016; Turner & Allen, 2022). Particularly in the South, community has been necessary to the survival of Black life in the face

of white rage that historically and contemporarily threatens Black liberation (Anderson, 2016). To do critical work in our current moment, there must be a robust understanding of the contexts we are working in and the need to nurture communal connection. This grounding in community and having an intimate understanding of the context we operate within has always been an integral part of hip-hop through the element of knowledge of self. To engage in this element of knowledge of self, teachers can explicitly attempt to find a community of educators that understand the importance of critical work in the current moment. Additionally, working alongside community organizations that actively resist oppressive legislation and building relationships with students, parents, and other community members is an imperative step in reminding us that liberation is a continual, collective endeavor.

### “I Ain’t Worried”

In her song *No Worries*, Flippa T’s unabashed style and lyrics reveal the power of refusing conventions of respectability and power. This is succinctly captured within the lyrics as she exclaims, “I ain’t worried bout yo shit, his shit, her shit, they shit, fuck shit, bull shit, hoe shit, fake shit” (Flippa T, 2023). Through this lyric, we see her unapologetically refusing the notion that she should be burdened by individuals and situations that detract from her joy and individual strivings. Stewart (2021) explicates the notion of refusal regarding Black joy, noting that refusal is a rejection of the white gaze that commits to an “emotional indifference towards whites” (p. 9). Through this indifference, instead of “actively fighting” against white people and whiteness, time and energy are diverted to focus on the cultivation of Black joy and communal survivance (Stewart, 2021, p. 9). This sentiment of refusal is embodied by several critical race theorists, who refused to entertain outright lies about the aims of critical race theory (i.e., Kaepernick et al., 2023; Ladson-Billings, 2022). Part of this refusal lies in the understanding that racism is endemic; therefore, so is white rage, and the continuous cycle of backlash is to be anticipated (Crenshaw, 1994; Ladson-Billings et al., 1995; Stovall, 2005). We argue that there has to be a mentality of refusal in critical work—sometimes you have to say, “I ain’t worried bout yo shit” (Flippa T, 2023) when resistance inevitably comes. This mentality of refusal calls on educators to identify positions (e.g., the institution of slavery was harmful and racist) and practices (e.g., not writing referrals for dress code) that you are unwilling to change or alter, even when asked via administrators or legislation.

### Conclusion

The legislative surveillance we have seen enacted throughout the South means we are once again confronted with figuring out how to navigate systems that attempt to chill critical discussions and, ultimately, thwart Black liberation. In this current context, it is important to remember that we come from

a legacy of Black Southern resistance that surrounds us as we navigate the unsteady waters toward liberation. In other words, as Black Southern educators, "we're not new to this, we're true to this" (Gang Starr, 1998) and the marathon continues (Nipsey Hussle, 2011).

## Q & A WITH KELLY R. ALLEN & DELANDREA HALL

### Question #1

#### **Teacher's Question:**

Why is the incorporation of hip-hop education an important and useful method of connecting today's youth with critical issues? What research supports this strategy?

#### **Kelly and Delandrea's Response:**

Numerous studies have investigated the impact of incorporating hip-hop into education, revealing its potential to enhance student engagement (Gage et al., 2020) and increase academic achievement (Hains et al., 2021; Kelly, 2019; Uca et al., 2022; Cherfas et al., 2021). For example, Irby et al. (2013) highlight the engagement and autonomy experienced by Black students in hip-hop cultural production spaces, suggesting that educators explore these environments as models for fostering engagement in school settings. Irby et al. (2013) emphasize the potential for activities like beat-making, event promotion, studio management, and other modes of hip-hop cultural expression to engage Black boys and young men in educational contexts. Further, Emdin (2010) explored how incorporating hip-hop into the curriculum increases feelings of connectedness to the curriculum.

Going beyond enhancing curriculum connections, hip-hop instruction has been proven to yield tangible academic benefits, such as increased test scores and enhanced understanding of curricular relevance (Hains et al., 2021; Kelly, 2019; Meacham et al., 2019; Uca et al., 2022). Research in this field has explored how hip-hop facilitates content acquisition, and teaching strategies such as call and response, co-teaching, and explicit incorporation of hip-hop elements have been identified as effective methods for promoting content acquisition (Cherfas et al., 2021). Additionally, hip-hop music and lyrics can serve as valuable tools for connecting academic concepts to students' lived experiences, further reinforcing the practical benefits of hip-hop instruction (Hains et al., 2021; Meacham et al., 2019; Uca et al., 2022).

### Question #2

#### **Teacher's Question:**

How could teachers practically use the analysis of hip-hop lyrics to analyze historical events? Examples?

#### **Kelly and Delandrea's Response:**

Teachers can use the analysis of hip-hop lyrics to analyze historical events in several ways. Specifically, Allen (2022, 2023) explores how teachers can use hip-hop lyrics to support students in understanding the



messages conveyed in primary source documents. For example, Allen (2022) discusses how Meek Mill's song *Trauma* can be used to discuss the 13th Amendment and mass incarceration. Through student-driven inquiry, Allen (2022) explains how the lyrics of *Traumacan* can be analyzed alongside the 13th Amendment to help students decode messages about the lineage of enslavement in the current carceral system. Similarly, Allen (2023) describes how to scaffold lyrical analysis for students. Specifically, Allen (2023) discusses the importance of providing printed text and specific analysis questions to guide student analysis. Through this discussion, Allen (2023) also describes how lyrical analysis provides an analytical lens for students to create their playlists about a historical event or time period as an assessment strategy.

### **Question #3**

#### ***Teacher's Question:***

What advice would you give to Black teachers who haven't been teaching this content but want to start?

#### ***Kelly and Delandrea's Response:***

All educators should consider their positionality prior to engaging in hip-hop education. The Framework for Hip-Hop Educator and Researcher Positionality conceptualized by Adjapong & Allen (2023) draws on Milner's (2007) Framework of Researcher Racial and Cultural Position to offer educators specific reflection questions around the following tenets: Researching the Self, Researching the Self in Relation to Others, Engaged Reflection and Representation, and Shifting From Self to System. For insight into the specific reflection questions, see Adjapong & Allen (2023).

### **Question #4**

#### ***Teacher's Question:***

What are some specific ways that Black teachers can push back if/when they meet white resistance?

#### ***Kelly and Delandrea's Response:***

A key step in being prepared for resistance is understanding what is being expected of you from your administrators and legislation. Expectations and procedures vary greatly from state to state, and even within states the process can differ between districts and schools, so it's important that teachers have an understanding of what is expected of them specifically. First, educators should read legislation that has been passed in their state. To stay informed, and to help make sense of the often dense language utilized in the legislation, educators should connect with local organizations that have an understanding of legislation that has been passed in their state. Many organizations are hosting free webinars about recently passed legislation, and recordings of these are often uploaded to YouTube for viewing. Finding webinars hosted by local organizations about legislation in your state can help provide insight into what exactly is being said in the passed legislation.

Second, educators should initiate conversations with school administrators about the expectations they have regarding the current legislation. School culture varies greatly from school to school, and even within the same school district different administrators may have different expectations of what their teachers will do in their classroom. Some states have instituted *formal complaint* procedures for parents, guardians, and community members to follow if they have a grievance about instruction. This is different from a standard complaint, which may be fielded by a teacher or administrator. Below, you can find some questions teachers can pose to their administrators to begin the conversation about expectations and complaint procedures amid legislative bans:

1. Given the current climate on critical race theory, LGBTQ+ topics, and diversity, equity, and inclusion, what expectations do you have from teachers who are still actively discussing topics such as race and racism, gender and sexuality, equity, etc. in the classroom?
2. If a parent, guardian, or community member reaches out with a complaint about a teacher teaching about race and racism, gender and sexuality, equity, etc. in the classroom, what process do you currently have in place to address this complaint?
3. If a parent, guardian, or community member reaches out with a complaint about a teacher teaching about race and racism, gender and sexuality, equity, etc. in the classroom, what support can teachers expect from you as an administrator?
4. What is our district's process for filing a *formal complaint* under our state's legislation?
  - a. What role do you play in the formal complaint process?
  - b. What agency do teachers have in the formal complaint process?
5. What support can teachers expect from you as an administrator if a formal complaint is filed against them?

Understanding the answers to these questions can help you prepare for resistance, as what you can realistically do when faced with resistance will vary depending on your specific school context.

## **Question #5**

### ***Teacher's Question:***

As the authors, what do you see as the next steps for classroom teachers educating in current times?

### ***Kelly and Delandrea's Response:***

The next steps for teachers educating in the current times include grounding themselves in the community. This grounding in community and having an intimate understanding of the context we operate within has always been an integral part of hip-hop through the element of knowledge of self.

To engage in this element of knowledge of self, teachers can explicitly attempt to find a community of educators that understand the importance of critical work in the current moment. Teachers must find other educators they can connect with who share similar commitments to equity. By sharing best practices and



brainstorming how to address challenges in our practice, teachers can be exposed to new approaches for navigating the current times.

Additionally, collaborating with parents and guardians about their expectations for their students can provide important insight. Similarly, we must engage in intentional conversations with students about how they think about and engage with the world, both within and outside of hip-hop. Lastly, collaborating with community organizations that advocate for educational equity can amplify teachers' voices and push for policy changes that promote equity and justice in education.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### Kelly R. Allen

I am an Assistant Professor of Curriculum Studies in the College of Education and Human Development at Augusta University. Ultimately, I aim to illuminate the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness in education and center the experiences and perspectives of Black students, teachers, and communities. My research centers this aim, and specifically explores the influence of race and racism in the implementation of hip-hop education. Informed by my time as a social studies teacher at an Afrocentric high school that centered community engagement, I remain committed to cultivating strong connections with community organizations and individual community members. Therefore, as a newcomer to the Augusta, Georgia area my own professional development efforts have been focused on community engagement and reciprocity. Outside of my role as a professor, I enjoy attending hip-hop concerts, watching reality TV shows, going to the beach, and gardening.

### Delandrea Hall

I am an Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education at the University of North Texas. The ultimate goal of my work is to share disruptive practices that challenge traditional notions of social studies curriculum and teaching. Through my work with teachers, I seek to support efforts towards transforming social studies classrooms so that they become spaces where all students feel seen and heard. My research therefore centers the practices of Black and Latinx teachers who attempt to remake the Social Studies, particularly by utilizing Hip-Hop Based Education/pedagogy and critical economics. Informed by my experiences as high school social studies teacher and coach of eleven years in the Dallas area, as well as my work as a professor, I am committed to learning with and alongside the various school communities who exist in the same area and region where I grew up. My professional development comes from listening to their voices and engaging in generative conversations. Outside of my professional pursuits, I love watching anime, reality TV, sports, and political news. I also love to relax by listening to music and working out!!