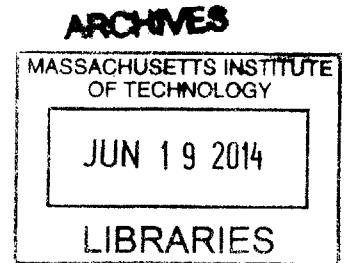


Children of Moses's Experiment:
Youth, Mental Health, and Hip-Hop in the South Bronx

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Bachelor of Arts in Environmental Analysis
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Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning
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ABSTRACT

Urban youth have developed ways to overcome trauma and promote wellness in their lives through the art and culture of hip-hop. This paper asks, "how is hip-hop music and culture being used as a tool for mental health promotion amongst urban youth, and are these methods effective?" In recent years, mental health professionals and social workers have begun to realize the therapeutic powers of hip-hop. Due to the diverse nature of hip-hop culture, many fields of thought intersect with the subject, such as psychology, music therapy, urban history, and youth development. This paper draws from literature on these topics and from interviews with leaders in many of these fields in order to develop a theoretical understanding of how hip-hop can be used therapeutically with urban youth. Using these theoretical discussions as a compass, this paper then delves into a hip-hop therapy program in the Bronx, NY called Beats, Rhymes, and Life (BRL). Interviews with youth, social workers, and youth workers at this program elucidate the strengths and challenges of the hip-hop therapy model. The piece concludes with specific lessons for practitioners of hip-hop therapy, and broader takeaways for urban planners and policymakers concerned with improving under resourced urban communities.

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I. Introduction

Hip-hop was born in the South Bronx in the 1970s when the borough was left to burn. The Bronx fell into such severe disrepair that some landlords decided it was no longer worth it to hold on to their buildings, and hired arsonists to help them collect their insurance money (Chang, 2004). During that tumultuous decade, an urban planner named Robert Moses led a white exodus out of the Bronx. His plans cleared space for highways through the Bronx, fragmenting communities and displacing thousands of working class residents. Iconic images from this era depict a war zone: piles of brick litter the streets, victims of drug addiction take refuge in the charred shells of buildings, and neglected youth find family and security amongst each other in gangs.

At that time, youth gangs and organizations in the Bronx began to experiment with music, dance, aerosol art, and intellectual traditions to express what they were seeing and feeling in their communities. They grew up in neighborhoods that were abandoned in the name of "urban renewal." These youth were "the children of [Robert] Moses's grant experiment", and they developed forms of expression and storytelling that have evolved into the global phenomenon we now call hip-hop (Chang, 2004). The history of hip-hop culture is a tale of a generation of urban youth left to fend for themselves and find their own unique political voices and cultural forms. Young people growing up in the Bronx today are the children and grandchildren of this innovative generation.

Modern hip-hop looks and sounds much different than it used to in the 1970's South Bronx. The art form still finds its home in many black and brown urban neighborhoods, but it has expanded worldwide. An array of races, classes, and genders partake in the culture. Entertainment companies have closely observed how youth gravitate towards hip-hop, and have created a multi-billion dollar industry out of rap music. Critics argue that the commercialization of hip-hop through the rap music industry has taken it away from its social and political roots. Much of popular rap music is criticized for appealing to the lowest common denominator by rewarding artists that focus on violence, objectification of women, and the glorification of drugs and alcohol (Rose, 2008). They claim that what was once used for empowerment and liberation is being used to perpetuate negative stereotypes of people of color, and promote systems of oppression like patriarchy (Rose, 2008).

While there is truth to hip-hop's contemporary criticisms, particularly of commercial rap, the art form continues to be used for many of its original purposes: to have fun, to share the struggles of street life, to broadcast the messages of political movements, and to empower individuals through lyrical bravado and performance. Hip-hop's growth in cities such as the Bronx and Oakland offer insight into how it can be used to empower and heal youth who are growing up in traumatic conditions. There has been a growing amount of initiatives in recent years that use hip-hop to build awareness of health issues amongst urban American youth. For example, First Lady Michelle Obama recently partnered with the organization Hip Hop Public Health (HHPH) to release an album

called "Songs for a Healthier America," featuring popular hip-hop artists who preach messages of good health (DJ Skee, 2013). The songs try and instill an appreciation for healthy living, and give advice to youth on improving their health through exercise, healthy eating, safe sex, and other lifestyle choices.

Youth educators and public health officials have recognized the value of hip-hop to communicate public health messages to urban youth, but it is unclear whether their messages are having an impact. Many public health projects tend to be short-term, tacky, or boring to youth. They often do not provide longitudinal experiences for young people to directly engage with health professionals and other youth in a healing process. Moreover, many urban public health initiatives for youth emphasize physical health, and mental health seems to be largely left out of the picture (De La Cruz, 2014).

Hip-Hop and American Cities

While planners, policymakers, and youth educators have recognized the influence of hip-hop on youth, they continue to categorize it as simply a tool to reach youth, or as a by-product of oppression and impoverishment. By pigeonholing hip-hop as a mere tool or as a reaction to urban abandonment, communities are robbed of their agency and history. Hip-hop draws its aesthetics from black, Latino, and American cultures, and builds on these traditions. It is about more than "fighting the power;" it conveys many other aspects of urban life such as growing up in the city, finding ways to pay the bills, representing your community, and partying all night long (Chang, 2004). However the oppressive conditions from which hip-hop was born have remained a part of the art

form, particularly in underground hip-hop music (Skinner, 2014). This helps to ground hip-hop in its founding mission to amplify the voices of a city's most marginal residents.

Since hip-hop was born in the 'hood, it remains a culturally relevant discourse for many communities of color in American cities. Those that plan the future of cities—politicians, urban planners, and policymakers—have largely failed to acknowledge hip-hop as an urban discourse (Terrell, 2014). On the contrary, hip-hop has been pegged as a by-product of moral corruption and mental illness in communities of color. For example, when New York City Mayor John Lindsay launched his "War on Graffiti" in 1972, he targeted young black and Puerto Rican males whom he called "insecure cowards." He saw graffiti as a manifestation of their mental health problems, and in turn stigmatized their mode of expression (Chang, 2004).

Urban leaders like Lindsay refused to see graffiti as expressive art and as a way for youth to stake their claim in cities that often ignored them. During this time, urban theorists and criminologists began to invent connections between hip-hop and crime. Commenting on the "graffiti problem," Nathan Glazer wrote, "while I do not find myself consciously making the connection the between graffiti-makers and the criminals who occasionally rob, rape, assault, and murder [subway] passengers, the sense that all are of one world of uncontrollable predators seems inescapable" (Chang, 2004). This dismissive argument evolved into Harvard criminologist James Q. Wilson's famous "Broken Windows Theory," which postulated that if a broken window went unfixed in a community, or if a wall remained covered in graffiti, the neighborhood would spiral into

disrepair (Wilson, 2003). This theory profoundly shaped urban policy from the 80s to the present day, and has excused politicians and planners from addressing the structural issues around class and race that lead to the broken windows in the first place.

Graffiti, and other forms of hip-hop cultural expression, became a way to label and criminalize youth of color. As hip-hop historian Jeff Chang writes, "the reaction to graffiti would become one of the hinges on which the politics of abandonment would turn towards a politics of containment...both these politics would profoundly shape the hip-hop generation." The graffiti writer SKEME encapsulated the tensions between youth of color and the people that sought to contain them when he sprayed a graffiti mural on the side of a New York City subway declaring, "All you see is...CRIME IN THE CITY" (Chang, 2004).

As a result of the criminalization of urban youth engaged in hip-hop, people who are responsible for planning cities have not listened to what urban youth have to say through hip-hop, which remains a powerful discourse on cities. The urban planning field's recent revelation that the "creative class" will renew cities is emblematic of this continued dual neglect of hip-hop and urban youth of color (Peck, 2005). Planners and urban theorists such as Richard Florida posit that artists, musicians, and technology workers who move to cities attract business, capital, and even more creative, well-educated, and tolerant people to those cities. This focus on courting the creative class, according to Florida, leads to sustainable economic development for regions, unlike former project-based planning paradigms that called for shopping centers, business

districts, and stadiums (Florida, 2005). Florida's ideas have spurred many cities into a "high stakes 'war for talent' that can only be won by developing the kind of 'people climates' valued by creatives" (Peck, 2005). The "creatives" want to live in the inner city, and often reject suburbia and the edge cities. By crowding the creative class into urban neighborhoods, cities are continuing to marginalize communities of color, and eroding the diversity that Florida claims is an essential component of a city's success.

As Florida and other "New Urbanists" implore American cities to attract the creative class, they forget a whole class of creative young people who are born in those cities and express their talents through the music and art of hip-hop. Cities have yet to develop methods by which to support these young people's creative talents and to utilize their interests in hip-hop as a source of community engagement, education, and healing. Contrary to popular belief, hip-hop can be utilized for empowerment and healing (Travis Jr. & Deepak, 2011). The subject of this paper, hip-hop therapy, is an example of how a creative class of urban youth, social workers, and hip-hop artists are innovating through hip-hop and using it as a vehicle for personal and social change. If this isn't creative, then what is?

Research Question

Many urban youth in America are no strangers to violence – on the street, in school, in the home, and in the corrections system. Research shows that youth who experience loss or grief due to violence in their communities display serious impairments in their social lives, sense of well being, and their ability to succeed in school (Alvarez III, 2012).

Schools and other community institutions often do not have the resources or capacity, such as youth counselors or social workers trained in mental health, to provide therapeutic services to help youth process their trauma (Skinner, 2014). Most public schools in U.S. urban areas instead deal with the young people's acts of aggression and frustration with punitive methods such as suspensions or demotions to special education (Richards-Calathes, 2014). In cities like New York and Oakland, the rate of suspensions amongst African-American and Hispanic males is disproportionately higher than other groups (Alvarez III, 2012).

Most public schools and juvenile detention centers are not providing urban youth with the therapeutic services they need. Meanwhile, youth have continued to use hip-hop music, dance, and visual art to tell their stories of growing up in the 'hood. Those stories range from narratives about the camaraderie and sense of identity that come from being in a youth gang, the struggles of growing up in under resourced housing projects, or the trauma of witnessing violence and oppression. The storytelling powers of hip-hop have created communities of young people across the world that share their experiences and music styles with each other, which is made easy by the growth of digital music on the internet (Clayton, 2014).

The history of resilience and political resistance at the foundation of hip-hop culture can inform efforts to help youth overcome mental health challenges they face. The stressors in the environments of urban youth are often tied to the oppressions of poverty, and perhaps by understanding these forces and reacting to them through the music and art

of hip-hop, the youth are able to feel empowered to overcome trauma. As many youth in urban public schools continue to be dealt with punitively for their untreated mental health issues, the history of resistance in hip-hop could be a tool for them to understand structures of power that they live within (such as the school system), to help them navigate their paths to healing, and to even empower them to change these systems. Hip-hop could also be an effective medium to build intergenerational solidarity, since it has evolved over many decades and provides a line of communication between generations.

Since hip hop is an art form and lifestyle that many urban youth of color take part in, this paper asks if it can be used as a form of expressive therapy, a gateway to mental health services, and a source of personal and political empowerment for youth of color in American cities who are experiencing trauma in their neighborhoods. Further, this paper analyzes the theory, history, and therapeutic strategies behind a hip-hop based youth therapy program in the Bronx in order to investigate how such programs encourage youth to process trauma from violence, poverty, and harassment, and improve their senses of well being and purpose.

Methodology

In order to investigate the strategies and impacts of hip-hop based therapy and youth development, this paper delves into the work of youth development practitioners, teachers, and mental health professions in New York City. This is an ideal research location for this paper for a few reasons. Firstly, I worked for two years as a community

organizer in coalition with several youth development organizations in the Bronx that use hip-hop as a pedagogical tool in after school programs and youth organizing efforts. My relationship with these organizations made it more convenient to find youth workers and programs that use hip-hop for therapeutic purposes. Secondly, many hip-hop historians identify the Bronx as the birthplace of hip-hop (Chang, 2004). There are several organizations in the Bronx that seek to preserve hip-hop culture and use the art for social change, such as The Point Community Development Corporation in the Hunts Point neighborhood. Many people from the Bronx identify strongly with the history of hip-hop and take pride in the art form as a tool for expression, social change, and personal empowerment. I was interested how this local culture influenced youth sense of self and identity, and if it could be used as a source of self-empowerment. Thirdly, the location was fairly close to my current home in Cambridge, MA, and allowed for frequent visitation for interviews and data collection.

Data for this paper was collected through semi-structured interviews with practitioners who are using hip-hop for youth therapy and/or youth development in New York City. To gauge the broader methods and theories of therapy and youth development through hip-hop, I interviewed a wide range of youth workers: the coordinator of an alternative to incarceration programs who use hip-hop to help youth in the corrections system, a principle of a middle school that has built hip-hop methods for teaching and expression into their curriculum, youth organizers that use hip-hop to build political

awareness and campaigns, and social workers that utilize rap therapy to access the emotions of young men of color.

For this paper's case study at the Beats, Rhymes, and Life (BRL) program in the Bronx, data was collected through observation of a community based youth hip-hop program supported by a social worker and youth workers trained in mental health. I conducted interviews with youth workers, social workers, and most importantly, the young people in the program. The main goals were to investigate if and how this hip-hop therapy program at a community based organization was a tool to help youth overcome the trauma caused by violence and poverty.

To find an organization and program to study these potential impacts of hip-hop programs on youth well being, I contacted several youth organizations to gauge their interest in the project. The criteria that I used to select potential youth hip-hop program sites are listed below:

- Creates a safe space for at-risk youth to open up about their experiences through creative methods including, but not limited to, hip-hop music, dance, and visual art
- Identifies with the history of hip-hop in the Bronx and seeks to educate youth and the wider community about that history through their programming
- Acknowledges the impacts of violence, poverty, mass-incarceration, and other stressors on the mental health and well being of youth, and have staff who offer counseling, mentorship, and/or referrals

- Designs their programs for marginalized youth in a culturally responsive manner by engaging mental health professionals, clinicians, social workers, and/or artists in the program that are themselves engaged in hip-hop culture
- Acknowledges the detriments of the current mental health system on youth of color in America cities, particularly the dangers of labeling youth with pathology.
- Offers alternatives to the pathology-based way of conducting mental health work, such as strength-based resilience promotion and adaptive coping skills
- Empower youth through community organizing projects or political education that take place within the hip hop program or other youth programs at the site
- Within a four hour bus ride from Boston, MA
- Has at least 10 youth enrolled in the program per project term

Site Selection for Case Study

I used the above criteria and my previous relationships with youth organizations in the South Bronx as guides towards choosing the Beats, Rhymes, and Life (BRL) program at The Point Community Development Corporation (The Point CDC) as the case study for this paper. BRL was started by social worker T. Tomas Alvarez III in 2004 in Oakland, CA.

His main goal was to use the production and performance of rap to help engage urban youth, particularly young men of color, in mental health services like group therapy.

Tomas Alvarez and his cofounder, Rob Jackson, expanded the program throughout schools in the Bay Area, and in 2011 they made BRL a 501(c)3 organization focused on rap therapy programs for urban youth.

BRL recently partnered with The Point CDC in the Bronx, NY to expand their rap therapy and hip-hop education program to the east coast. Alvarez III, Jackson, and their

colleagues in the Bronx believed it would be powerful and symbolic to establish BRL in the same South Bronx streets that birthed hip-hop music and culture in the 1970s. The Point CDC has a long history of hip-hop education, youth programming, and community organizing efforts, and was therefore an ideal location for BRL. The BRL program at The Point CDC teaches youth the basic tools of hip-hop while also cultivating an awareness of the political and social legacy of hip-hop culture. Hip-Hop is used as a pedagogical and reflective tool in these sessions to help youth deal with traumatic experiences and express strong emotions they may have as a result of violence and other traumas. Moreover, the program encourages youth to think about how they can use their art form to empower their communities for social change. The details of the case are discussed in greater depth in the case study section of this paper.

Data Collection Approaches

In order to assess the effects of the hip-hop program on youth, I used a range of data collection methods. The main methods were 1) semi-structured interviews with youth and youth workers at BRL, and youth workers from other NYC hip-hop programs, 2) participant observation, and 3) gathering written or visual documentation that chronicles the development of BRL or other NYC hip-hop programs. Interviews were recorded using the iPhone audio recording function. I interviewed four youth from BRL, four youth workers from BRL, and seven youth workers from other relevant hip-hop programs in NYC. I initially planned to interview and observe youth and youth workers at the start of the program, at a midpoint, and at the end. However, due to the

cancellation of the Spring 2014 term, the interviews were structured as a reflection on the Summer 2013 term and the program as a whole. This turn of events prevented me from observing the program directly and charting potential changes in the youth's behavior as the curriculum progressed. However, the youth workers and youth reflected on their experience over the course of the program, and were able to speak to changes that they witnessed over that time.

II. Review of Existing Research and Literature

There is a growing volume of research on hip-hop as a tool to promote mental health amongst youth. The research has evolved from early investigations on how hip-hop can be adapted to existing forms of music therapy into more recent inquiries into how hip-hop's own unique forms and history can be used to promote wellness in urban youth.

There are many other bodies of literature that are related to this topic, such as literature on the history of hip-hop or on the psychological impacts of trauma. These broader topics will be discussed in the Section III of this paper titled *Theories of Hip-Hop Based Youth Development*. This section introduces the research at the foundation of the nascent field of hip-hop therapy, and gives a snapshot of emerging research in the field.

Hip-Hop as Music Therapy

Music therapists and neuroscientists have revealed how music can palliate the impacts of neurological disease, heal psychological illness, and enhance human function. There has also been significant research into the effects of art therapy on mentally ill patients. Music can help people with mental illness, such as those afflicted with anxiety disorders or Turret's syndrome, to overcome the shackles of their illnesses and gain control over the rhythm of their daily lives (Sacks, 2010). Like other forms of music and art, hip-hop also has a capacity to heal through the cathartic powers of music and self-expression. However, hip-hop is arguably different because it is a form of expression that is deeply rooted in black music, and has a history of being produced by marginalized youth of

color (Chang, 2004). This history and the diverse forms of hip-hop rooted in black music provide potentially unique ways to heal mental illness amongst urban youth of color.

Many of these youth—from Oakland to the Bronx—are growing up in the neighborhoods where hip-hop was born and continues to evolve. Hip-hop began as a platform for the voiceless to find a microphone and an audience. Hip-hop music, dance, and visual art can provide opportunities for youth to process their experiences with trauma and establish a sense of control through their creative capacities (Alvarez, 2012).

Foundational Literature in Rap Therapy

As mentioned earlier, an increasing amount of attention in the last two decades has been paid to how hip-hop public service announcements and youth programs can improve the physical health of urban American children. For example, the Hip Hop to Health Jr. program piloted through the national Head Start program has been significantly researched, and championed in many studies as a tool for positive health outcomes in urban youth (Fitzgibbon et. al., 2005). While not as large a body of literature, there is also a growing academic appreciation of the ways hip-hop can be used as a therapy and mental health tool with urban youth who take part in hip-hop culture.

Clinical psychologist David Elligan's article (2000) and book (2004) titled "Rap Therapy: A Practical Guide for Communicating with Youth and Young Adults Through Rap Music" gave the mental health and education communities a starting point to understand how hip-hop can be used a tool for healing in youth therapy settings. His early foundational

thesis was "considering the ubiquitous presence of rap and hip hop in the lives of young African American men, psychotherapists who work with this population should become familiar with constructive ways to utilize these stimuli in the interest of treatment" (Elligan, 2000). Elligan proposed five phases of rap therapy: 1) assessment, 2) alliance, 3) reframing, 4) role play with reinforcement, and 5) action and maintenance. The assessment stage allows the therapist to determine if hip-hop plays a significant role in the client's life, and if it could therefore be used as a tool for therapy. During the alliance stage, the therapist forms a bond with the client by reinforcing and supporting his/her interest in rap music. The goal of the reframing stage is to "broaden the client's scope of appreciation for rap music" so the clinician "can attempt to promote further cognitive restructuring of what rap music means to the client" (Elligan, 2000). In the role-playing with reinforcement state, the clinician facilitates written exercises for the client and "reinforces styles of rap that are consistent with the treatment plan" (Elligan, 2000). The clinician initiates the last stage of action and maintenance when the client has begun to write about issues that are specific to the treatment plan. During this final stage, the young person practices behavior modification by experimenting with new ways of writing and rapping, and is reinforced by the clinician in these efforts.

Since this landmark methodology was developed, community organizations, schools, and mental health workers have taken Elligan's framework to try and promote the well being of mainly youth of color. Hip-hop researchers and practitioners have also expanded the scope of Elligan's somewhat limited thesis and methodology. Elligan

limited his early writings to African American men, but hip-hop therapy programs such as Beats, Rhymes, and Life (BRL) in Oakland and the Bronx have proven that hip-hop is a tool in therapy with youth of a diverse range of backgrounds, races, and genders (Alvarez III, 2012). Other researchers have shown how it can be adapted to work with youth in group therapy settings with a mix of racial, cultural, and gender identities. Hip-hop therapy practitioners have also questioned Elligan's claim that "rap therapy should neither endorse nor admonish rap music's presence and influence" (Elligan, 2000). Many music therapists and practitioners choose to take a more subjective stance by lifting up the history of hip-hop as a source of pride for youth of color, and as a tool for them to empower themselves (Alvarez III, 2012; Richards-Calathes, 2014). Researchers have shown that youth respond positively when their interest in hip-hop music is encouraged and promoted by the therapist. Hip-hop educators have also revealed that learning about the positive impacts of hip-hop on communities that face oppression promotes intellectual curiosity and a higher sense of self- and community-regard amongst underprivileged youth (Travis Jr. & Deepak, 2012).

Despite these criticisms, Elligan's seminal work has helped mental health professionals to problematize the common notion that hip-hop music promotes antisocial behavior in youth. When Elligan began writing in the late 1990s, many politicians, conservative activists, and religious leaders admonished hip-hop as a violent and morally corrupting force in society (Rose, 2008). At that time, "Gangsta rap" was growing into a popular genre within rap music, and it contained lyrics that were more violent, sexual, and

explicit than previous forms of rap music. Politically charged songs like “Cop Killer” by Ice-T caused politicians such as George Bush Sr. to call for banning the sale of many rap albums (Chang, 2004). In the context of these politically and racially tense battles over censoring rap music, Elligan pushed his peers to consider other forms of rap such as “conscious rap” and “spiritual rap,” and to withhold judgment of clients for listening to violent, misogynistic, and materialistic lyrics. He encouraged therapists to use rap lyrics as conversation starters about their client’s lives and to ask their clients why rap lyrics speak to their experiences, desires, or fears. He also introduced methods for writing raps, as opposed to simply listening to rap and analyzing it, as a new way of doing therapy with marginalized youth.

Building on Elligan’s Seminal Work

Witnessing the growing influence of hip-hop and rap on youth culture, music therapists such as Andrea Frisch Hara have worked to break down rap music to its historical roots and foundational musical forms so that therapists can comprehend and appreciate the depth of therapeutic possibilities in the genre. Many other music therapists and psychologists have made arguments that hip-hop is a culturally relevant tool for working with urban youth of color. However, Frisch Hara dives deeper into the “culturally-sensitive” argument for rap therapy, and looks for specific musical forms of rap that make it a compelling tool for therapy with youth, particularly black youth (Hara, 2012). For example she describes how the forms of hip-hop are connected to the African-

American experience, which may help with ego formation and personal empowerment amongst marginalized groups:

Historically, rap music is the first genre originated by African Americans that has gone beyond their community, has simultaneously been created and performed by them, and remains primarily attached to them. This is an important phenomenon, for both societal and therapeutic reasons. I believe that one reason rap music is so popular and controversial within our culture is because of the empowerment it represents...This speaks to the inherent strength and pride that rap lends to the desperate contemporary adolescent; it can signify the triumph of the underdog and the righting of the wronged (Hara, 2012).

Frisch Hara asserts that rap music is primarily seen as a culturally black form of music, but she also recognizes that the strength and resilience expressed by black communities through hip-hop is also empowering for other community's and individuals that are oppressed. They too are in the position of the "underdog" in society because of their race, class, gender, or other identities (Hara, 2012).

Music Therapist Michael Viega also identifies hip-hop's common depiction of the triumphant underdog and describes this aesthetic form as a Jungian archetype. He argues that this archetype of the underdog, which he calls the "Hero's Journey", can be useful in therapy. Viega outlines anthropologist Joseph Campbell's conception of the Hero's Journey, which includes narrative stages such as "the call to adventure," "trials and tasks," "reaching the nadir," "receiving the boon," and "the return" (Viega, 2012). He goes further by explaining how the history of hip-hop, which began in the neglected streets of oppressed communities and transformed into a worldwide movement, embodies a meta-narrative of the Hero's Journey (Viega, 2012). This meta-narrative provides a platform for adolescents to model their own transformations into a

productive, happy, and moral adult life. The underdog hero archetype that is so common in hip-hop can be a tool for helping youth to build resilience and take on the structural, social, or familial forces that hold them back.

The emerging research cited above on the therapeutic uses of hip-hop is meant to offer the reader a snapshot into this body of literature, and is not a summary of the whole field. Additional research is being done on how hip-hop can be used for therapy with specific populations, such as youth who have been incarcerated, or young women who have been abused (Hadley & Yancy, 2012). This is an exciting time for the mental health, music therapy, and youth development fields, as new culturally relevant methods are being researched and developed to promote well-being amongst diverse groups of marginalized youth.

III. Theories of Hip-Hop Based Youth Development

The subjects of hip-hop, urban youth, and psychological wellness intersect in fascinating ways because hip-hop is not only a musical form, but also a political tool for youth, and a historical and cultural knowledge base for communities of color. This chapter aims to give the reader a broader background on relevant discussions within these topics, such as the traumas that marginalized youth face in their lives, ways of doing culturally sensitive therapy, and the medicalization of mental illness in youth of color. Interviews with youth development practitioners and mental health professionals in New York City have helped to scope this chapter and provide perspectives on the major themes in hip-hop based forms of pedagogy, youth development, and mental health practice. The salient issues in hip-hop wellness promotion identified in this chapter will provide the historical and theoretical background to analyze the Beats, Rhymes and Life (BRL) case study in the Bronx.

Young people who are growing up in the urban American communities where hip-hop first emerged from—the Bronx, the East Bay, the Southside of Chicago — often experience stress and trauma due to social, political, and economic structures that maintain oppression in their neighborhoods. Youth workers who were interviewed for this paper spoke extensively about their youth dealing with trauma in their lives. They told stories of young people coping with the loss of a family member or friend to street violence, facing personal problems with drug addiction, confronting the impacts of

abuse or rape, and internalizing the indignities of poverty and hunger (Terrell 2014; Richards-Calathes, 2014; Skinner, 2014).

When youth seek help from the mental health system, they are usually assessed by a mental health professional and labeled with pathology in order to gain access to clinical services. They may have acted out or had a tantrum in class, and found themselves labeled by a school psychologist with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). They may not be able to stay focused in class because of hunger or trauma, and subsequently given the diagnosis of attention deficit disorder (ADD). Data on New York City schools shows that too often these youth are punished with suspensions, mandated counseling, or even expulsions (Alvarez III, 2012).

Punitive methods do not identify or address the structural forces that often cause youth to “act out” or “tune out” in class. Instead, their behavior is labeled as a personal deficiency that they must individually take responsibility for. Whitney Richards-Calathes, a New York based hip-hop educator and psychology PhD candidate at the City University of New York, offers insight into this phenomenon:

A lot of the narrative with young people of color around the challenges they face in life is really pathologized, as if they suffer from some sort of personal deficit. It is important to pull back from that approach and allow young people to see some of the larger intrapersonal, structural, neighborhood, and environmental issues. Without exposing them to these larger social forces, it can be really easy for them to internalize their oppression and feel like “yes, black and brown people like me are all lazy and deficient, or yes, I’m not smart enough because I’m black” (Richards-Calathes, 2014).

Bronx social worker Myrtho Gardiner finds that youth who want to access mental health services “have to say there is something wrong with them to receive talk therapy, and they have to go to a clinic and have professionals constantly repeat their diagnosis and what is supposedly wrong with them.” Gardiner believes that many mental health professionals in his field are not trained to understand how structural forces in society, such as racial inequities or lack of access to quality education, impact the mental health outcomes of youth. In his view, the mental health and psychology theories that they learned in professional schools “weren’t created for urban youth of color.”

Gardiner finds that social workers and mental health professionals that come from similar neighborhoods and backgrounds as their clients are more likely to be able to relate to the youth and identity with their struggles. His colleague Tomas Alvarez III, founder of the Beats, Rhymes, and Life (BRL) program, points out that 72 percent of social workers are white women (Alvarez III, 2012). Gardiner stresses that white social workers he knows are well intentioned and willing to understand the backgrounds and struggles of youth of color, but their difference in culture and appearance makes it difficult for youth of color to trust them.

Understanding Trauma

There are many mental health problems and stressors in the lives of young urban American youth. However, the discussion and case study of this paper focus attention to the impacts of trauma because research supports that trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are potent triggers of depression, substance abuse, addiction,

anxiety disorders, panic disorders, phobias, and other mental health disorders. Earl Skinner, director of the Beats, Rhymes and Life (BRL) program in the Bronx, offers an example of this: "I am working in the context of a marginalized community where there is a lot of depression, but that depression is a side effect of unprocessed trauma that is not acknowledged" (Skinner, 2004).

How is trauma defined? Trauma refers to an experience or event that imposes severe stressors on an individual. In its popular usage, trauma is often tied to a physical event that threatens physical safety, but trauma is also triggered by emotional and psychological abuse that is often non-physical. Figley puts forth a comprehensive definition of trauma as "an emotional state of discomfort and stress resulting from memories of an extraordinary catastrophic experience that shatters the survivor's sense of invulnerability to harm, rendering him/her acutely vulnerable to stressors" (Figley, 1988). Psychologists also distinguish impersonal trauma, such as a natural disaster, from an intrapersonal trauma, such as a rape or an assault. Intrapersonal traumas have different impacts since survivors feel betrayed by the perpetrators. This betrayal can lead to distrust of a group of people that the survivor associates his/her stressor with, which is common in children who experience abuse or neglect from a caretaker (Basham, 2011).

Several factors influence an individual's predisposition and response to trauma. They may have trauma resulting from experimentation with sex and drugs, or exposure to violence. As Calathes-Richards notes, "there are a lot of feelings of PTSD especially

when you see young people's experiences with gun violence and lock up...you can see that manifesting with young people who can't sit down because they've been traumatized by being locked up and feeling caged, and want to go outside and not feel confined." Post-traumatic stress can be particularly harmful in children and youth, and if it is left untreated in childhood, it can evolve into complex-PTSD. Children with complex-PTSD often have compromised identity formation and use disassociation to cope with traumas they faced during their childhoods. Symptoms include distorted identity, diminished self-esteem, re-experiencing, numbness, and hyper-arousal (Basham, 2011).

Recent research has also revealed neurochemical pathways by which parents transfer traumatic memories to their offspring. Shariff Clayton, the director of CHOICES alternative to incarceration program for youth in New York City, offers insight into how trauma is passed down: "When I meet the mothers I understand what happened because the mothers are the children of the crackheads, and they suffered a lot of trauma from the crack era and the breaking of families and communities...now those children are having children, and they never had a stable household so they are passing down the trauma they experienced." While Clayton's explanation is not based in neurochemistry, it is a common perception of how trauma is recycled and reproduced in low-income communities of color (Basham, 2011).

An individual's ability to respond to their trauma with resilience is impacted by several factors, such as the severity of the stressors in their lives and the amount of support they

have from their community. As Bartone (1999) states, "constitutional hardiness, socio-cultural factors, family and community support, and preparation/education regarding trauma-related effects may all mediate the potentially negative effects of trauma." With this in mind, one can infer that youth of color from marginalized neighborhoods will have many barriers on their journey to mediate their unprocessed trauma. Research on the influence of race and class on an individual's ability to heal from trauma confirms that "sociocultural factors can also serve as moderating or mediating factors in developing stress disorders; for example, class and race served as mediating factors that increased PTSD for Vietnam veterans" (Kulka et. al., 1999).

In recent years, rappers and other voices in the hip-hop community have begun to draw comparisons between the post-traumatic stress disorders that veterans suffer after returning from war and the post-traumatic stress that youth suffer as a result of the "war going on in the streets" (West & Jay-Z, 2011). Exposure to combat is certainly one of the most severe stressors a person can experience in life. In 1980, psychologists included PTSD in the DSM-III after witnessing the clear existence of the disorder in Vietnam War veterans (Basham, 2011). In 2008-2009, the number of people killed in homicides in Chicago exceeded the number of American soldiers killed in Iraq. This prompted the Chicago rap community to label their city with the name "Chiraq" (Prier, 2013). In his song with Jay-Z titled "Murder to Excellence," Chicago native and world-renowned rapper Kanye West raps, "is it genocide? / 'cause I can still hear his mama cry / know the family traumatized /... / It's a war going on outside we ain't safe from / I feel

the pain in my city wherever I go / 314 soldiers died in Iraq, 509 died in Chicago" (West & Jay-Z, 2011). Kanye West's lyrics convey that similarly to the veterans of Iraq, the young men and women fighting and experiencing the trauma of street violence are facing the mental health challenges of war.

Youth who engage directly and indirectly with violence in their neighborhoods also develop similar psychological skills that soldiers learn in basic training. They learn to control fear and suppress emotion, and "devise ways to survive and parse information while restricting communications" (Basham, 2011). However, similar to when soldiers return home, when these young people return from the streets or from prison to their schools or communities, they are alienated and have trouble connecting with other youth, their families, and their communities (Alvarez III, 2012; Clayton, 2014).

Labeling Youth with Pathologies

Police, the criminal justice system, and other authorities often label urban youth of color as criminals and gangsters (Clayton, 2014). Mental health professionals are also guilty of detrimentally labeling these same youth (Skinner, 2014). Blackness and being a person of color has a long history of being pathologized in the psychological and psychiatric fields. As Richards-Calathes articulates, the psychology field has "labeled black people and blackness as problems, and these are proxies that stand in for blackness to make it less overt" (Richards-Calathes, 2014). For example in the 60s, intelligence tests were developed and implemented by mainly white psychologists. Their research continually found that black children were not performing as well as white children. That research

produced a narrative that black children were not as capable as white children, which still persists today in debates over the “achievement gap” between black and white students in American public education (Richards-Calathes, 2014).

Research institutions in the United States have for decades taken a strong interest in the mental health of children of color, particularly black and Hispanic youth. Poor children of color are overrepresented in nontherapeutic and stigmatizing medical research. Black children represent 26-32 percent of the child subjects in non-therapeutic studies, which is significantly high since black children represent only 13 percent of the general child population (Washington, 2006). This disparity is in part explained by the medicalization of violence in black and brown communities and the stigmatization of black and brown boys as “born criminals” (Terrell, 2014).

Medical experiments that put the mental health of children of color at risk are nothing new in the history of American medical research. U.S. crime reached unprecedented high rates in the 1960s-70s, and black communities began to rebel against discriminatory urban policies that confined and abandoned their communities (Washington, 2006). Researchers interpreted this violence to mean that African-Americans are more violent than white Americans. They conducted numerous studies with this hypothesis, attempting to establish a genetic basis for black violence. This fundamentally racist notion still perseveres into present day psychological and medical research (Richards-Calathes, 2014).

The range of mental health studies done on black and brown children is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the 1992-97 fenfluramine study conducted by New York State Psychiatry Institute and Columbia University is particularly illustrative of how black and brown children in New York City have been pathologized and abused by the mental health research community. This study generally attempted to establish a link between genetics and violence, but was confounded by many ethics and research flaws. Fenfluramine is a precursor to the neurotransmitter serotonin, which the researchers believed was tied to aggression. If serotonin levels spiked in the child test subjects that were given fenfluramine, the researchers concluded that this signaled a tendency towards aggression. However, this link has no evidence-based standing and has been criticized by the scientific community for decades (Washington, 2006). The 126 boys in this study were all black and Hispanic, between the ages of six and ten, and had also been selected because their older brothers had contact with the probation system. Probation officers identified individuals with violent behavior for the researchers. The research was confounded by the mere fact that no white children were included in the study (Washington, 2006).

The ethical violations of this study are too numerous to list. Perhaps the most glaring violations of the fenfluramine study were that it exposed children to life-threatening side effects, and that it had never been given to such young test subjects before. The boys were subject to "risky experimental procedures such as fasting, repeated hospitalization, a low monamine diet, blood sampling, exhaustive psychological and

educational assessments” (Washington, 2006). More important to the subject of this paper is the general understanding of how such experiments impact the mental health of children of color. In her book *Medical Apartheid*, Harriet A. Washington (2006) acknowledges the damaging effects the fenfluramine study had on the children:

University psychiatrists had diagnosed these boys with such psychiatric ailments as conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, diagnoses that describe children’s disagreeable behaviors and that are often assigned to children who break the law, Such a psychiatric diagnosis, whether it describes an actual mental illness or not, can consign a child to a limbo between the law and psychiatric medicine, making him vulnerable to stigmatization by both...Such a diagnosis also moves a child from the free world of the normal into the civil rights desert of the mentally ill.

The fenfluramine study in New York is not an isolated incident, and is part of a lineage of research studies that try to say that black and brown people are predisposed towards violent behaviors. Such experimentation harms test subjects by making them feel like they lack the free will to control their “genetically-predisposed” behaviors and to determine their futures (Gardiner, 2014). This pathologization has made parents of children of color skeptical of the mental health system, and has led them to withhold their children from both therapeutic as well as abusive research and healthcare services (Washington, 2006). As Calathes-Richards notes, parents and youth “often don’t trust doctors, counselors, or social workers because these are all people have been a part of their trauma; for example, social workers often separate families, and many youth who are entering jail report being sexually assaulted for the first time by doctors during their pre-incarceration physical exams” (Calathes-Richards, 2014).

Perhaps the most insidious side effect of the medical community's myth that black and brown youth have a genetic propensity for violence is that society has been excused from the moral obligation to fix defunct and discriminatory social institutions. If the violent behaviors are tied to the genetics of a whole class of people, what can society do but incarcerate and punitively control these populations? As Washington (2006) writes, "what good is better education, better nutrition, safe, clean housing, social and psychological support, and a more nurturing home and school environment to a born monster?"

Hip-Hop as an Alternative to Pathologization

As a result of the indignities and isolation that people of color face in traditional mental health treatment, mental illness is often seen as taboo in many communities of color (Terrell, 2014; Skinner, 2014). This is especially true for men, because admitting to a personal deficiency or weakness is sometimes perceived as feminine, and strikes at the core of the patriarchal systems that give men of all colors a sense of power and control. Gardiner believes that hip-hop therapy is a way un-stigmatize therapy because urban youth are already using hip-hop to heal themselves, whether it is expressing the trauma they've been through or building higher self-regard by perfecting their skills. Gardiner asserts that mental health professionals can use the tools of hip-hop to do therapeutic work without using the word "therapy." Moreover, he believes that hip-hop programs should be open to all youth, and shouldn't require a mental health diagnosis in order to access the program. The simple act of choosing to be in the space, rather than being

forced to see a mental health professional, as often happens in schools and jails, can be an empowering decision for young people to make. Gardiner explains the power of having his hip-hop therapy program in a well-known community center in the Bronx:

It provides a therapeutic service without being labeled as therapy or without someone having to have to be labeled with pathology in order to go there. I explain BRL by saying we might have youth in the program that have issues, but they might not be there because they have issues...you might have sold drugs or whatever, but you're not at the program because you did that. The youth's own agency brings them to participate, and that decision is empowering in itself.

Gardiner and several of his social work peers that use hip-hop as a therapy tool believe it is very important for their young clients to know that they are not sent to BRL because they did something bad, or that they have a disorder. As Earl Skinner points out, "we try to operate from a place of empowerment rather than pathology. We are affirming the youth and whatever that is revealed through this work, we are going to trying to support them through it." Alvarez III, founder of BRL, finds that by labeling youth with pathologies and sending them through the traditional mental health services, mental health practitioners miss opportunities to engage young people's interests and talents in the therapeutic process. This is where hip-hop can be helpful for youth to feel comfortable partaking in an activity they enjoy, expressing their thoughts and feelings in a familiar way, and ultimately having agency in their own healing.

Empowerment Through the History of Hip-Hop

Hip-hop's history and growth in cities such as the Bronx and Oakland also offer insight into how it can be used to empower and heal youth who are dealing with trauma. The

history of hip-hop culture is a story of a generation finding its political voice and asserting its cultural legitimacy. The roots of hip-hop are in the music of the African Diaspora – Jazz, Funk, Rock and Roll, Reggae, and Gospel. All of these art forms have helped marginalized people build community and encourage movement to overcome injustice (Chang, 2004).

Every youth worker or mental health professional that was interviewed for this paper agreed that hip-hop history is a powerful way to engage youth in therapy, and included hip-hop history in their practice. Educators and therapists in the Bronx particularly find the history of the birth of hip-hop in the streets of the Bronx to be powerful because the youth can see that history around them, and use it to take pride in their neighborhoods (Skinner, 2014; Terrell, 2014; Gardiner, 2014). Gardiner finds the symbolism of early hip-hop in the Bronx to be a powerful teaching and therapy tool: “one of the most poignant things I believe of about early hip-hop was they were having these dances in the park and they would plug up the speakers to the street lights, and they were literally taking the power from the city and using it for their own use because they knew it was a place they could go and party and be themselves.” Identifying this sort of symbolism is powerful because it shows how youth were able to create new ways to express themselves even under the conditions of abandonment and neglect that still persist in the Bronx.

Julien Terrell, a community organizer and hip-hop educator in Harlem and the South Bronx, also uses hip-hop history as a way to encourage youth to take pride in their

neighborhoods. He works with youth from the Bronx River Houses in the southeastern Bronx, a place where “hip-hop was born in, and where you can see the conditions of that time represented in the music” (Terrell, 2014). Terrell teaches youth about what was happening in the 70s in Bronx River—the creation of the Universal Zulu Nation, the police crackdown on the Bronx River Houses, and the impacts of massive highway construction projects on local health. He states, “it is a lot easier to teach this through hip-hop music from that time period.” Through this music, an educator or therapist can do “political education, music education, education of a neighborhood, self-empowerment and development of identity.” Terrell states that “when you connect to the fact that I’m walking into the same building that Afrika Bambaataa (the founder of the Universal Zulu Nation) lived in, or I’m walking into the space where the first gang truce in the Bronx that brought together a lot of different races and people, that gives you a certain pride. It ends up creating a foundation for a strong identity, and that has a lot of positive impacts.”

Terrell emphasizes that the goal of his programs is not to produce good writers and rappers, but to help the youth understand the oppressive conditions they are growing up in. He believes this knowledge will help motivate them to organize other youth to tackle inequality and institutional discrimination (Terrell, 2014). Richards-Calathes supports this point, and asserts that by including hip-hop history in therapy or education, youth learn not to blame the individual or themselves for problems in their lives which may result from social, political, and economic inequities. Through hip-hop’s

history, “they can learn a story about young people who saw the problems in their society as beyond their deficit, and that they still had gifts to bring even in these conditions” (Richards-Calathes, 2014).

Hip-Hop as a Pedagogical Tool

Since its founding, hip-hop has been used as a pedagogical tool and a way of sharing information and opinions with the masses. However, most of this work was done informally on the streets rather than in the classroom (Gardiner, 2014). Hip-hop’s rebellious and free-spirited nature contradicts the often overly structured character of public school curricula. NYC public school teachers are not educated about the positive impacts of hip-hop and are not trained in hip-hop pedagogy. Unfortunately, they often see rap music as an antisocial force that promotes violence, misogyny, and offensive behavior (Rose, 2008).

Despite these setbacks, hip-hop has managed to find its way into schools, and this could be a starting point for including hip-hop in school programs that are meant for wellness promotion. English and history teachers in New York City have found it useful to use hip-hop to encourage creative writing and reflection on lyrics that have historical content or poetic structure (Richards-Calathes, 2014). More recently, hip-hop is being used to help New York City public school students to prepare for the citywide Regents exams. They are given pre-recorded raps filled with information on topics from the U.S. constitution to classical literature. Students memorize the raps and use them to review

for the exam. Early studies have shown improved grades for children that use this hip-hop review method (Clayton, 2014).

Community Centers: An Ideal Environment?

While hip-hop has found its way into New York City schools and correctional programs, many practitioners question whether these are effective environments in which to get youth to open up about the struggles they are dealing with (Skinner, 2014; De La Cruz, 2014). Bronx-based social worker Myrtho Gardiner believes that existing community centers that are based in the neighborhoods where youth are from are the ideal locations for hip-hop based wellness and therapy programs. The space is more accessible in a practical sense because it is close to where youth live. Additionally, community organizations often provide a more nurturing environment than the common punitive disciplinary systems that exist in schools and detention facilities. Terrell states, "young people are dealing with multiple forms of oppression while they are also developing their identities, and that's why our space needs to equip them to think critically about their circumstances but also have a space that is safe, loving, and also challenging them too." Schools and correction intuitions may not be willing to provide the space for youth to think critically because the youth will likely identify these institutions as being part of the oppression or trauma in their lives.

Community institutions may also be a more ideal place to conduct hip-hop wellness programs because there is a history of these programs faltering from funding constrains in schools. Terrell finds that most public school administrators do not see hip-hop as a

musical form or as an educational tool. Even if they listened to hip-hop when they were younger, Terrell states that they may be nostalgic of the “Golden Era” in hip-hop in the 80s-90s, when there was supposedly more stylistic diversity in hip-hop. They also mistakenly associate commercial rap as the sole form of modern hip-hop (Terrell, 2014). Because of the negative perceptions of modern hip-hop and lack of respect for hip-hop as an art form, many hip-hop programs do not last long in New York City schools (Terrell, 2014).

Many community centers in the Bronx, particularly arts-based centers, seem to provide more ideal locations for hip-hop education and therapy (Richards-Calathes, 2014). Staff members at arts-based community centers are more likely to appreciate hip-hop as a powerful teaching tool, and they many have more flexibility to incorporate the music and aesthetics of hip-hop into youth programs. However, schools still have the highest volume of youth due to compulsory education, and hip-hop programs could therefore reach more youth in this setting. Practitioners like Terrell and Gardiner acknowledge this and believe that more work needs to be done to recruit teachers and administrators that have appreciation for hip-hop as a pedagogical and wellness-promoting tool. By doing this, they believe that school curriculums will include hip-hop in key subjects such as music, history, writing, and wellness programs.

IV. Case Study: Beats, Rhymes and Life in the Bronx

Organizational History

The Beats, Rhymes and Life (BRL) hip-hop therapy program was envisioned by social worker Tomas Alvarez III in 2004. He started the performance-based therapy program to engage young men of color from Oakland, CA in culturally responsive forms of therapy and other mental health services. While at Smith College of Social Work, Alvarez III and his classmates, some of whom are still involved with BRL, began to think of ways they could incorporate hip-hop into their social work practices. They recognized that hip-hop music allowed them to empower themselves, develop and take pride in their identities, build community, and express their feelings and social conditions.

While working towards his Master's in Social Work (MSW), Alvarez III was influenced by clinical psychologist Don Elligan's writing on culturally sensitive therapy with urban youth through rap. His work is discussed in the Literature Review section of this paper. Alvarez sought to build on Elligan's work by making rap therapy more than just about getting urban youth to open up. He started BRL as an after school group therapy program at Oakland High School in 2006 (Alvarez III et. al., 2013). In 2011, BRL became a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, giving it latitude to expand its funding sources and staffing capacity. This also allowed BRL to partner with additional schools and large-scale systems of care in the Bay Area, such as the Alameda County Health Care Services Agency and the Alameda Behavior Health Services. BRL uses these partnerships for

referrals and to reach wider populations of youth in the Bay Area who are dealing with mental health issues, and who could be more easily engage with mental health services through hip-hop.

These partnerships also led BRL to increase their efforts to serve transitional age youth (TAY) because they saw a service gap for this population. The Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Service reports that TAY represent the most under-served age group in the county, largely because many TAY are no longer eligible for mental health services after turning 18. Because of this, BRL began to focus more of their therapy efforts on this vulnerable demographic, and tailored their programming to the settings where they are likely to work with TAY, such community centers, halfway homes, and hospitals (Alvarez III et. al., 2013).

In 2011, BRL also hired John Gill as their Chief Operating Officer, leading to an unexpected partnership for the organization. Gill, like Alvarez III, earned his Masters in Social Work from Smith College. Before joining BRL, he worked for eight years at a mental health service organization in the South Bronx called UNITAS. The organization is housed at The Point CDC, a unique community center that offers arts and activism programs for South Bronx children and rents space below market-rate to many local businesses with social missions like UNITAS. In the South Bronx, John developed a keen understanding of how poverty and social exclusions can lead to mental health issues, and he witnessed the barriers to mental health services that exist in low-income communities or color (Skinner, 2014).

John also saw how hip-hop was a tool for community building and personal empowerment in the South Bronx. When he relocated to the West Coast, BRL was an ideal fit based on his interests and experiences in the Bronx. When John joined BRL in the East Bay, he saw there was a need for similar work in the Bronx, and connected his former colleague from The Point CDC, Earl Skinner, with Tomas Alvarez III. Skinner had extensive experience as a youth worker in the Bronx, and also wrote and performed his own hip-hop music. He was intrigued by BRL's hip-hop therapy model, and decided to take a 4-month sabbatical in 2010 to learn hip-hop therapy methods from BRL in Oakland, CA. After working and being trained in a hip-hop therapy after school program at Oakland High School, Skinner decided he wanted to use the curriculum he learned from BRL in Oakland, but "incorporate The Point CDC's pedagogical practice in line with our motto of '*where community and creativity connect*'" (Skinner, 2014). The Point CDC works to educate youth and empower them through youth organizing and youth art projects that have social and political purposes. Skinner hopes that BRL in the Bronx will reflect this institutional culture. In 2011, Earl Skinner began leading a BRL program for youth at The Point CDC, and brought in Myrtho Gardiner, a former classmate of Gill and Alvarez at Smith College, for social work support.

BRL in the Bronx operates out of The Point CDC, unlike the flagship program in the Bay, which began in a high school and has expanded to mostly school-based settings.

Because of BRL in the Bronx's setting, and the uniquely flexible and creative nature of The Point CDC, BRL in the Bronx is evolving in its own unique way. The concluding

section of this paper will delve into BRL in the Bronx's evolution due to The Point CDC's mission to connect arts to activism.

Program Structure

BRL's Hip Hop Therapy program have traditionally been organized into 20-week or 15-week semesters; however, The Point CDC has repackaged the original curriculum into a 6-week version to fit into their summer youth program schedule. BRL has been operating at The Point CDC for three years, and during that time Skinner has overseen three 15-week school year cohorts, and two summer cohorts.

The Point CDC's program has focused on recruiting transitional age youth, ages 15 – 23. Since Skinner did not have strong relationships with citywide mental health service organizations like Alvarez III did in the East Bay, he relied on key partnerships he had with local schools and relationships with local residents and organizers in order to recruit youth. In the first year of the program, he relied on word of mouth, distributing informational fliers, speaking about the program at community events, and seeking referrals from teachers and youth workers at local high schools who identified youth they thought could benefit from hip-hop therapy. As the program has evolved, Skinner has established relationships with youth service organizations like the alternative to incarceration program at the Center for Court Innovation. Their youth workers identify youth from the South Bronx who have been traumatized and refer them to BRL at The Point CDC. Skinner says that even with these relationships, the most effective way to

recruit young people is by “youth recruiting youth” and reaching out to their friends to join the program (Skinner, 2014).

Skinner has limited his programs at The Point to 6-8 youth. BRL’s model requires for one youth worker with hip-hop performance experience and one social worker to always be present with the youth during program (Gardiner, 2014). Both individuals should have a background in hip-hop culture, history, and pedagogical methods so that they can relate to the youth and assist them in their creative processes. Since BRL at The Point currently has only one youth workers (Earl Skinner) and one social worker (Myrtho Gardiner) they have capacity to work with 6-8 youth. Skinner states, “from a social work perspective you don't want more ten youth in a group because it’s hard to give attention to the mental health issues that are coming up for each individual.”

Gardiner adds, “limiting each cohort to 6-8 youth is ideal for youth to build friendships because the quieter voices don’t get lost in a large group.” Currently, BRL in the East Bay serves 70-80 youth per year, and BRL in the Bronx serves 20-25 youth per year.

Skinner had not focused on solely recruiting youth with diagnosed mental health issues, since he believes that the program is meant for all youth who are likely dealing with the mental health stressors of poverty, violence, and discrimination. Moreover, he recognizes that many youth avoid mental health services because in order to access them, they must be diagnosed with an illness or “pathologized” (Skinner, 2014).

Therefore, he sees BRL as an alternative that does not make the youth feel deficient.

The groups of 6-8 youth in the BRL programs are called Therapeutic Activity Groups (TAGs). Each TAG follows a curriculum that includes activities that encourage the youth to share their stories and experiences, and use what they share as inspiration for their music, lyrics, writing, and performances. The curriculum focuses on five areas of learning: self-esteem, trust & safety, mutual aid, positive self-expression, and adaptive coping strategies (Alvarez III, 2012). The curricular elements below are used to help encourage youth to meet these learning goals, and to provide structure and inspiration for their hip-hop lyrics, productions, and performances.

Key Programmatic and Curricular Elements

The BRL program structures their program into four main elements: group exercises, reflections, writing workshops, and recording and/or performing songs. The exercises, which are described below, are meant to provide the inspiration for the youth's writing and to get them focused on specific themes or topics. Reflections allow for youth to discuss the outcomes of exercises and bond over common experiences, which may have been revealed in the exercise. Skinner states, "in my opinion the reflection is most important because it allows youth to get the inside out, and get that validated by the group." In the writing workshops, BRL staff and youth listen to the lyrics of other youth and offer their thoughts and critiques. This is a key part of the curricular sequence because youth are pushed to move beyond generic themes in rap music and find their own voice. Lastly, the final production and/or performance is meant to motivate the

youth to reach a performance or recording goal they can take pride in and share with their family and communities (Gardiner, 2014).

Below are a few of the main curricular components of BRL's hip-hop therapy program.

This paper does not reveal the detailed structure of BRL's curriculum because of the organization's wishes to keep the details private so that other groups do not plagiarize their methods without giving the organization credit. Therefore, I will focus on a few of the main curricular components and themes and write about them in broader strokes.

Taking Pride: The History of Hip-Hop

At the start of BRL's hip-hop therapy program, the teaching staff takes the youth on a journey through the history of hip-hop and the social conditions from which the music emerged. For the program in the Bronx, this is a very local history because youth gangs that created hip-hop, such as the Black Spades, came from the same Hunts Point neighborhood where The Point is located in the Bronx (Chang, 2004). Alvarez III claims that through exposure to this largely undocumented history, the youth learn "the intention of early hip-hop, and they can see it as a vehicle for overcoming oppression" (Alvarez et. al., 2013). The history of urban youth in both Oakland and the Bronx when hip-hop was emerging in the 1970s is a story of youth of color speaking out against their oppressive conditions, finding creative ways to have fun, and finding family in youth gangs. This history resonates into the present context of the youth, and is meant to inspire them find their own voices, and recognize the power they have to change themselves and their communities.

Alvarez III also acknowledges that due to the nature of the recording industry, "modern hip-hop is perpetuating a lot of negative stereotypes, and we want to offer youth the chance to hear the original music" (Alvarez III et. al., 2013). BRL staff play early rap like KRS-One and Tupac so that the youth can see how early artists rapped in different ways and also rapped about a diverse range of issues (Skinner, 2014).

Fostering Trust in a Safe Space: Three Wishes

BRL uses group activities to help youth generate content for their rhymes. One of these activities called "Three Wishes" encourages the youth to share positive wishes they have for each other, themselves, and their communities. This activity has three purposes. The first is to help the youth reflect on what they want for themselves, and identify what makes them happy and feel whole. For example, youth in BRL Bronx's program have wished to improve their rhyming skills (Gardiner, 2014). The second purpose is to foster group bonding and encouragement since the youth wish for each other to overcome some of the hardships they are going through. For example, young people may wish for a friend in the group to mend a relationship with a family member (Skinner, 2014). This helps build community in the group and encourages more open communication. Lastly, the activity encourages the youth to imagine changes in their community. Common wishes in this activity include streets without gang violence, no police brutality and suspicion, and better schools (Skinner, 2014).

Because of lingering traumas and the expectation to project toughness, many youth do not feel comfortable revealing emotions, such as the love they may have towards family,

friends, or their communities. Moreover, youth may perceive it as a weakness to identify things they want to change about themselves (Gardiner, 2014). Therefore, this activity encourages youth to step outside of their comfort zone and expose what may be looked at as a vulnerability to the group. The final step is to express your wishes by including them in raps. This gives the youth an opportunity to feel agency by voicing their wishes for themselves and their communities.

Mutual Aid: BRL Academy

BRL labels their therapy methods as "community defined" forms of healing (Alvarez III, 2012). Their hope is that youth will be a part of continually updating and redefining the curriculum since they have the most knowledge of what other youth may need. In light of this goal, BRL has established leadership opportunities for graduates of the therapy program. In 2009, Alvarez III and his colleagues in BRL East Bay created the BRL Academy, which is an 11-month internship program for BRL youth who have completed the therapy program and want to learn more about mental health careers and services. After completing basic social work and job readiness workshops, the BRL Academy interns work as peer counselors in the Therapeutic Activity Groups (TAGs) that they once participated in. The interns support the youth through talk therapy and the development of their writing, rapping, and other hip-hop skills. Interns also meet regularly with a clinical case manager and an Independent Living Skills Counselor so that they can reflect and learn from their experiences as counselors.

BRL Academy's main goal is to create a pipeline for young people of color into the helping professions, such as social work and clinical psychology. BRL encourages all of their graduates to apply for the internship because they believe it helps promote broader life skills and professional development regardless of whether youth decide to go into helping professions. For example, youth learn about scheduling their time, showing up on time to work, and fostering self-sufficiency in the workplace (Gardiner, 2014).

Forming an Identity: Who am I?

Rappers, producers, and other hip-hop musicians come up with very creative MC names that oftentimes tell a part of their story and form their persona. Names like Ghostface Killah, Jay Electronica, and Childish Gambino give a snapshot of the diversity on MC names in hip-hop. BRL utilizes the attention paid to the MC name in order to get the youth to think deeply about their identities. In the "Who am I?" exercise, youth reflect and write about their past experiences, who they are now, and who they want to be (Skinner, 2014). They create MC names to reflect the different stages of their growth. BRL Bronx director Earl Skinner calls this exercise the "cocooning process" because the youth get to think about their evolution as people and MCs throughout the program and develop names to reflect those shifts (Skinner, 2014). They share their personas during the final performance, and "their persona at the end is the persona they present to the people at their performance, and they talk about how they arrived at that MC

name” (Skinner, 2014). This allows the youth to take control of their identity formation and develop a narrative for who they want are and who they want to be.

Processing the Past: Life Map

The main goals of the “Life Map” exercise is to get the youth to think about key events in their lives that have shaped who they are, and to encourage them to share those events with the group. Skinner states that “we ask questions about key areas, starting with early life at home, and life through the different stages of school, and this gets the youth thinking. We then get to high impact events like someone’s passing” (Skinner 2014). This sharing allows the youth to observe common trends amongst the group. For example, many BRL youth have lost someone they love to street violence or to the criminal justice system. Skinner asks key questions like “who has a one parent household?” and he says “that the hands raise and people see how they are not alone, and you see those youth collaborating and kickin’ it with each other more often.”

Critical Reflection

BRL does much of their therapy through group reflections on the lyrics that youth write during the program. Many of the conversation in the activities discussed above, such as Life Map and Three Wishes, become a part of the songs that youth write and perform. Youth who are new to the program oftentimes write lyrics that reproduce the antisocial themes and imagery of popular rap music. This lyrical content may objectify women, have homophobic views, or glorify violence and drugs. Founder of BRL, Tomas Alvarez

III, acknowledges that “without support and guidance, [hip-hop] could also be a tool for perpetuating a lot of negative stereotypes and messages that do not serve young people or their communities” (Alvarez III et. al., 2013). Therefore, BRL strives to provide a safe space where youth feel comfortable sharing what is on their mind, but also making sure that lyrics do not offend or isolate people in the group. BRL has a few programmatic tactics to deal with this tension.

If youth want to write about potentially harmful behaviors such as drinking alcohol or smoking marijuana, the program staff will encourage them to reflect on why they are writing about these activities, and to include that reasoning in the raps. For example, this kind of reflection can transform lyrics that glorify reckless consumption of expensive alcohol to lyrics about the reasons for alcohol addiction and the impacts it has in the community. Some youth may continue to write problematic lyrics even after these reflections, but BRL does not want to censor their writing unless the lyrics directly offend a member of the group or people that attend performances (Gardiner, 2014).

BRL gets youth to think beyond negative rap clichés by structuring the writing process and getting them to ponder specific topics. The most recent topic at BRL Bronx was the Trayvon Martin murder case. The youth rapped from different points of view, such as George Zimmerman (Trayvon’s assailant), Trayvon’s girlfriend, and a young black child learning about Trayvon on the nightly news. Instead of simply voicing their anger at the situation in an aggressive and laconic way by saying “f*ck the police” or “f*ck George Zimmerman”, the youth were able to put themselves in other people’s shoes. This tactic

is meant to help them articulate their emotions and opinions about a situation, topic, or person.

Lastly, the organization sets expectations for the youth by holding the quality of their writing to a high standard and encouraging them to work towards the goal of performing at the end of the semester. Over the 10-12 week semester, BRL staff continually asks the youth to look into what they are saying and how they are projecting themselves to the world. They are also told that their words represent BRL, their peers in the group, and themselves. This makes the youth think more about what they are saying. When the youth mature in their lyrical content and style and move beyond basic rap forms and clichés, they are showered with praise by the BRL staff (Gardiner, 2014).

V. Findings and Discussion

This section analyzes and reflects on the BRL program primarily through the testimony of the youth in the Bronx program. Four young people from the BRL Bronx program were interviewed. Their ages range from 17-23, and they all reside in the South Bronx. They will be referred to by pseudonyms in order to protect their identities. These interviews shed light on the successes of the program, its challenges, and lessons for how hip-hop therapy can be most effectively implemented with urban youth.

Two of the youth interviewees, Andre and Jennifer, had several years of experience writing hip-hop lyrics and performing freestyle raps. The other two youth interviewees, Malik and David, were introduced to writing lyrics and rapping through BRL. Despite their different skills levels and musical preferences, the youth all report being immersed in hip-hop culture during their daily lives. Andre explains, “even if I’m not rapping, hip-hop is in the way I walk, the way I talk, the way I dress, the way I think, it’s everything I do.” Jennifer believes hip-hop is “a freedom of speech” rather than a specific way of speaking. It gives her freedom “to be able to say something you wouldn’t on a normal basis.” The BRL youth also see hip-hop as a way to communicate their lives to people outside of their communities since “hip-hop has moved out of the hood, and it has brought a lot of things to perspective for people about how we live in the hood” (Andre, 2014). Malik, a 19-year-old BRL youth who has done the program twice, views hip-hop

as a way to build community between different people because “it helps them relate to each other about their struggles and makes you think ‘I’m not alone’.”

As discussed in earlier sections, BRL attempts to move away from therapy approaches that diagnose and stigmatize youth, and instead takes a “strength-based approach” by encouraging coping methods and resilience (Alvarez III, 2012). This helps to engage youth in therapeutic group sessions by avoiding the confrontational dynamic of traditional one-on-one therapy. Malik explains, “therapy turns people off ‘cause they really don’t think they need therapy or could benefit from it”, but he also acknowledges, “therapy helps a lot of people in their personal life, and also in relations with each other...doing hip-hop with other youth helps me communicate with people” (Malik, 2014). Because of BRL’s more culturally sensitive way of doing therapy through hip-hop, Malik has been able to begin addressing his social anxiety. By receiving affirmation from his peers for developing his rapping skills, he has gained more confidence in his abilities to communicate with other young people.

Despite the taboo nature of the word “therapy” in many communities of color, BRL does not try to hide the concept of therapy, and instead attempts to ease therapy into group sessions as youth become more comfortable with each other and begin sharing aspects of their lives together. Program director Earl Skinner adds, “[the youth] eventually acknowledge the therapeutic aspects but don’t call it therapy.” The two youth with previous lyric writing experience felt that BRL “was a way to just focus on our writing and music” and, “only at the end did we realize that it was therapeutic” (Andre,

2014; Jennifer, 2014). Both of these youth were previously exposed to traditional forms of therapy, and felt that BRL "is a better way of doing therapy than doing tests and assessments and stuff" (Jennifer, 2014). They both report not realizing that BRL was a therapy program run by professionals who were trained in mental health. To them, the group therapy setting felt natural and wasn't a confrontation like traditional one-on-one therapy. Hip-hop helped unify the youth "because by having people in the group with us that feel the same way about music, writing, and songs, it was therapeutic knowing I wasn't the only one that looks to music to escape" (Andre, 2014).

While the BRL youth praise many aspects of hip-hop therapy and believe that it should be offered to other youth as an alternative to traditional therapy, they also realize "it's not for everyone 'cause not every kid is into hip-hop" (David, 2014). They acknowledge that hip-hop music is a "great outlet" for them, but just because they are youth of color and are growing up in an urban neighborhood, it doesn't necessarily mean they like hip-hop (Malik, 2014). South Bronx youth at The Point CDC also listen to and are exposed to a wide range of music in addition to hip-hop, such as Bachata music from the Dominican Republic and salsa music from Puerto Rico (De La Cruz, 2014).

Therapy Through Skill Development

BRL avoids the confrontational nature of traditional therapy by presenting BRL as a way for youth learn or improve upon their hip-hop skills, whether it be writing, rapping, performing, recording, or producing beats. This is part of BRL's "strength based approach" which is meant to avoid the stigmatization of being labeled with pathology.

Rob Jackson, co-founder of BRL, states, "essentially what we are trying to do is get the youth to take an introspective view of their lives, and get them to see themselves from a strength based perspective" (Alvarez III et. al., 2013). Their goal is to use the hip-hop production and performance processes to challenge the youth to accomplish a clear goal. Achieving these creative goals helps young people build self-esteem and resiliency. Jackson states, that it is through these processes by which "they start to see themselves as not deficient, and not less than, but someone who is really strong and capable."

BRL makes youth feel comfortable in the group therapy setting by affirming them even when they do not reach their goals or "mess up" their raps (Malik, 2014). David, an 18 year old who was new to rapping, recounted, "BRL was a place for me to learn how to rap, and I was a little nervous at first but I learned that I can overcome anything...I might mess it up, but I don't really care, I'll just pick myself up dust myself off and try again...this was definitely a safe space to share my raps." BRL aims to help the youth communicate deeper thoughts and open up about their lives and struggles as the program progresses. The early emphasis on hip-hop skill building is successfully designed to give the youth the tools to open up to their peers and to themselves. Malik recalls, "it wasn't about the therapy part to me early on", and instead it "was about learning something new for me, and it helped me learn to communicate with a whole bunch of people." Malik detailed his first time rapping in BRL, and how he could only rap about his nickname, which he picked in the "Who Am I?" exercise. However, he was

able to improve his rap vocabulary when he “felt the love and energy of BRL...so I add my own story to it, like what me and my friends do...so my raps became more like stories” (Malik, 2014). The youth’s testimony reflects that they feel supported in honing their craft, and this helps build trust and camaraderie between the youth and with the program staff.

BRL also uses other forms of concrete skill building that encourage personal development. By learning and honing rap skills in BRL, the youth are also able to use the language of hip-hop to build relationships and respect in their communities. Malik reports, “my brother actually raps, and BRL helped me with my relationship with him ‘cause when he comes at me with raps, I can get back at him so he shows me a lot more respect now.” Andre describes another way BRL helped him develop beyond his writing and performing skills:

BRL is like an outlet to express yourself, but also an outlet for other things. For instance, at the end of BRL, Jennifer and me were the hosts of the showcase where we performed to The Point community. I’ve never done that before. That was a great experience because I’ve always considered myself very open and upbeat, but never had that kind of opportunity to show that side of myself.

Youth workers at BRL identified that Andre had a penchant for working a crowd of people, and used the opportunity of MCing the final showcase performance as a way for him to develop leadership skills and self-confidence. This method of youth development is in line with BRL’s overall goal of maintaining a “strength-based practice”

where youth are encouraged to develop skills and character, and not focus on their deficiencies.

Group Therapy and Co-Creation

The previous case study section detailed how BRL aims to create a pipeline for youth through the “BRL Academy” in order to help youth develop skills in therapy and potentially pursue careers in mental health or social work. BRL Bronx has not yet developed a BRL Academy program for youth who have already gone through the hip-hop therapy program and are interested in the “helping professions” (Skinner, 2014). However, the program design still encourages the youth to help each other and build community with other youth. By immersing the youth into a group talk therapy setting from the beginning, the BRL staff is able to work out power dynamics between the youth and also foster a sense of a shared purpose. Director Earl Skinner asserts that “members of the group may start taking over, and others may fall back and be quiet,” Therefore the activities are designed to encourage participation from everyone by tempering the dominant voices and lifting up the quieter voices. Over time “the group tends to support everyone because of their shared struggles and interests, and the youth challenge each other because they feel inclined to improve their skills through healthy competition” (Skinner, 2014).

They soon realize that sharing their stories and their rhyming abilities with the group is therapeutic and “they may say that ‘I had this bad day today and came here and feel better’ so they recognize that they can go through a shitty day and hang out with the

group and feel better” (Skinner, 2014). Social worker Myrtho Gardiner recounts, “their self esteem goes up by doing songs, doing videos, and performances and you can hear it in the group...when some youth first come in they speak very low, but over time their self esteem grows and their voices get louder.” Skinner also acknowledges the therapeutic effect that the group setting has on adult program staff: “we feel tired from our day jobs, but we feel good seeing the youth get stuff off their chest.”

Interviews with the BRL youth confirm the therapeutic aspect of doing hip-hop therapy in group settings. When Jennifer first came to BRL, she was consigned to the belief that the people she met at BRL weren’t going to be her friends since she felt she wouldn’t see them again after the program. However, the program staff made her comfortable and helped her open up: “when I met Earl I was very defensive and didn't want to be friends with him or the other people in group...but once it started feeling therapeutic I started to like people in the group that I didn’t think I would like.”

Of the four youth interviewed, Malik felt most uncomfortable with hip-hop and rhyming. He overcame many of his fears of rapping through support from other youth. He states, “other BRL members like Andre and Jennifer helped me learn how to rhyme and stay on tempo.” This fits well into BRL’s model of co-creating the therapeutic effects of the program alongside youth, and involving them in shaping their own therapy. Malik further affirms this successful element of BRL by acknowledging the trust-building aspects of group writing exercises: “we have to write out lyrics together in teams and find a common voice, and my group members helped turn my voice and lyrics around

to sound better...and I knew they weren't going to make me feel foolish 'cause I have a lot of trust in them." The trauma that these youth have faced at home, school, and on the streets makes it difficult for them to open up to their peers and the youth workers. In sum, BRL has found important ways to ease youth into therapy by getting them to help each other in their writing, raps, and personal development.

Comparing Traditional Therapy to BRL

Two of the four youth interviewed for this paper had gone through traditional one-on-one talk therapy and psychiatric services as children. Their comparisons between their previous experiences in therapy and BRL allow for interesting distinctions between these approaches to therapy.

Andre started therapy after his mother died traumatically when he was a small child. Andre reports disassociating himself from the event and basically erasing his memories of his mother's death. His aunt believed he "wasn't expressive enough and needed to go to therapy" (Andre, 2014). He started therapy when he was nine and continued until he was 18, however Andre says he didn't "start talking and opening up to her until he was 17 or 18." Jennifer started therapy when she was a young teen because of violence she had witnessed in her home and in her community: "I had seen family members of mine getting into trouble and go to prison, and friends of mine getting killed...so I was like what am I going to do?"

Both Andre and Jennifer's memories of childhood therapy shed light on how the traditional methods of therapy often stigmatize youth. Andre remembers that during the first days of his therapy, the therapist asked him penetrating questions about what was going on at home and he felt "that it was too early." Moreover, they were running behavioral tests and diagnostics to see what was wrong with him, without letting him know what they were doing. Andre felt that "in your mind you are standoffish because you feel like they are trying to put you in a box...you can't open up to someone who is trying to say you are special-ed or some kind of monster." Andre's experience reveals how labeling youth with pathology has the opposite of the intended effect of therapy; it prevents youth from opening up about their thoughts and feeling supported. Andre states, "I just wanted to be normal with my friends, and when someone is trying to say you are not normal you don't open up to that person." Andre felt a strong desire to be "normal" because he didn't want his friends labeling him as "special-ed." This would have severe impacts on his social life at school and in his neighborhood, something that his therapists may not have considered (Gardiner, 2014).

Jennifer's experience in therapy also reveals the impacts of pathology-based practice, and the cultural barriers to therapy that often exist in communities of color. It was hard for Jennifer's mother to see how her daughter could benefit from therapy because "she is Dominican so she believes that stuff is crap, like it doesn't mean anything" (Jennifer, 2014). However, Jennifer's grandmother finally convinced her mother to take Jennifer to therapy after witnessing the depth of her depression. Like Andre, Jennifer felt that

her therapists, "tried to put a label on you, and for me I'm trying to be different and be who I am, and [the therapists] are trying to put me in a category with others." Jennifer wanted to be acknowledged for her unique attributes, and felt like the assessments and diagnoses tried to erase her uniqueness. Jennifer reports that as a Dominican, she doesn't believe that form of therapy works for her because Dominicans she knows usually do not "admit they are down, but pump themselves up instead." She strongly asserted: "don't pull me back when I'm trying to go forward, but let me go through my struggle and drag myself on the floor before I get up and walk." She believes talk therapy doesn't consider her as a whole person who has the capacity to heal herself. She needed a therapist who could help guide her through her own process of healing.

Andre and Jennifer also criticized the overreliance of therapists on prescription drugs and saw it as a sign of their unwillingness to help guide them through their healing.

Andre was worried that if his assessments weren't good, the therapist would "slap him with some pills and ask him to do an activity a certain amount of times a week." He felt like taking medication and doing mental health exercises at home were very "hands off, like on your own you got to do all this stuff, and they aren't going help you with the tough day-to-day things." Jennifer was also prescribed medication for her depression, and she "said 'no' because I felt that they couldn't heal my feelings with medication."

The emphasis on medication signaled to her that the therapist was not going to help her talk through the emotions of her depression.

The youth's testimony also shows that they appreciate that the staff at BRL are well versed in hip-hop music and can relate to their lifestyles and backgrounds. Because of this, the youth are able to see the staff "as friends and not therapists" and build trusting relationships (Jennifer, 2014). The youth's comparisons of their former therapists to the BRL staff also help to answer questions of who should be doing therapy with urban youth of color. Jennifer notes, "I was attracted to Earl because of the way he was speaking and because it showed he knew how to write and had things to teach us with our own writing." The way that Earl carried himself and spoke signaled to her that he was engaged with hip-hop culture, and made Jennifer feel like he was someone she could talk to.

Andre also believes that hip-hop is a profound connector between the youth and the youth workers. He found that "in other music and therapy programs they bring people from outside the community that don't get hip-hop and don't get who we are. They are nice and mean well, but they just don't get who we are." Andre acknowledges that therapists may have difficulty relating to the lives of the youth and how their struggles impact their mental wellbeing. He explains, "with Earl we know we have a friend, and we know that he understands where we come from...with therapists, I don't think most of them know how we live or grew up the way we did...so we have a hard time trusting them."

Lifting the Voices of Female Participants

BRL, and many other rap-therapy programs, were initially designed for young African-American and Latino men. BRL now includes young women participants in both the Bronx and Oakland hip-hop therapy programs. As a feminist hip-hop youth worker, Whitney Richards-Calathes believes that “young women I work with have serious mental health and social-emotional issues, and I’ve seen very few hip-hop based programs that create a safe space for them.” She and several other hip-hop theorists like Tricia Rose have exposed the ways in which hip-hop culture and music is largely male dominated (Rose, 2008; Richards-Calathes, 2014). Because of this, she asserts, “When you are not creating a gender responsive space where you intentionally and explicitly discuss gender, then it’s not friendly to young women.” Much of the music that the youth are listening to and reproducing at BRL has content that is disrespectful to young women. Moreover, there are not any female social workers or youth workers at BRL in the Bronx. This may make it harder for young women to open up since they may feel uncomfortable speaking about gender and sexuality issues with male program leaders. Jennifer was the only young woman from BRL that was interviewed for this paper, and she reports feeling comfortable talking about women’s issues with the group. However, she also identified ways that her peers treat her differently: “I have a lot of friends who do music and they don’t take me seriously because in the rap game you hardly see any females.” She believes that since she is a female, people in the hip-hop world “don’t think I have anything to say, and females in rap are there to be looked at by men...

people don't hear what they have to say most of the time." BRL tries to address misogyny in their curriculum by using offensive lyrics as conversation starters about gender. However, if the youth do not bring up these topics in their writing, the curriculum is not designed to directly address gender inequality issues in hip-hop. BRL must address the sense of voiceless that young women like Jennifer feel in the hip-hop community because this could ultimately hinder them from feeling safe in group-based hip-hop therapy.

Censoring versus Conversation-Starting

As discussed in the case study section, BRL seeks to move youth away from writing exploitative and offensive lyrics by encouraging them to identify a purpose in their lyrics and to consider the impact of their words on the larger group. Andre states, "the way Earl wants you to write here, you got to clean it up and make it neat." Both Andre and Jennifer believe that this "cleaning-up" process can be a problem for a lot of youth because "they can't get out of the bubble of talking about women, and money, and power, and chains" (Andre, 2014). However, they do believe that BRL can help youth "break out of that mold by giving you a topic to spark your curiosity" (Jennifer, 2014). Skinner reports that he has never directly censored a young person's writing, but has made sure that the group has conversations about certain lyrics to understand the impact that the words have on their peers and their community. For example, some youth may use the words "bitch" or "ho" in the rhymes, and Earl will bring young women from the group into the discussion to comment on how the words make them

feel (Skinner, 2014). The youth also feel pressure to “clean” their lyrics because they are worried that they will not get studio time to record their music if they have profanity in their rhymes (Skinner, 2014).

Skinner and Gardiner also report that there can be tensions between BRL East Bay and BRL in the Bronx over the political content that the youth write and rap about. For example, in the summer of 2012 several BRL East Bay youth took a trip to the Bronx to learn about hip-hop history and meet the BRL Bronx youth and staff. The trip helped to build solidarity between the east coast and west coast chapters of BRL, which is significant given the historic tensions between the coasts in the rap community. To demonstrate their solidarity, the youth wrote and recorded a song together about police brutality in their communities. Many of the youth have suffered indignities at the hands of the police, so their lyrics became emotional and had angry content about the police. The BRL Bronx staff pushed the youth to avoid such language and develop their thoughts more articulately, but did not censor their emotions in the end because they understood that the youth were angry. This language was more of a problem for the BRL East Bay staff, and they wanted to take out the profanity. However, they still produced the song. This tension reflects the institutional differences in the ways that BRL East Bay and BRL Bronx are growing, which will be discussed further.

Hip-Hop History and Empowerment

As introduced in the case study, BRL imbeds the history of hip-hop into their curriculum as a means of empowerment and identity formation. Learning the history of rap, from

the progenitors of hip-hop to modern MCs, can be empowering for youth as they realize they are part of a broader tradition and culture. Gardiner drives home that point by asserting, “the Bronx in the 70s was one of the most marginalized communities in the country, and most pathologized, and for the youth to be able to connect the beats and samples to the originators is really powerful for them in terms of feeling part of something bigger.” Andre admits, “a lot of us in the younger generation don’t know about the history of hip-hop, graffiti, b-boying, and all that happened in the South Bronx.” He thinks that by knowing this history, “I can look at my environment, at all the graffiti and stuff, and see how it bleeds hip-hop.” Andre feels like he takes more pride in his community now that he knows that hip-hop emerged from his neighborhood (Andre, 2014).

BRL also seeks to connect the youth’s personal journey to their community’s struggles to overcome institutional oppression. BRL Bronx’s summer project on the Trayvon Martin case is one example of this. Skinner and Gardiner of BRL Bronx report that many of the youth in their program are traumatized by their experiences with the police in the streets and in their schools. The Hunt’s Point neighborhood in the South Bronx is less than 3% white, so many of the white people that the youth see in their lives are the police (Skinner, 2014). The Trayvon Martin case was a rich example through which the youth could explore these issues of race and authority. Andre states, “the Trayvon Martin idea was brought to us by Earl, but we took it to a new level by adding all the different perspectives and writing from different people’s points of view.” The youth

acted and rapped from the perspective of Trayvon Martin, his killer George Zimmerman, black children learning about the murder on television, Trayvon Martin's girlfriend, and a news reporter recounting the events to the public. Andre and Jennifer report that the experience was cathartic and allowed them to release their feelings of being targeted by the police for being black and brown youth. Malik also felt that it was a good opportunity to display solidarity with the larger black community: "the Trayvon Martin video was basically to show that we were there for [Trayvon's] family and basically show our love to every young kid that goes through this type of stuff." Malik says that his favorite thing about BRL is the "freedom of freestyling" because he can "rap about revolution." BRL gave Malik the tools to rap and voice himself, and also introduced him to history that he finds to be empowering and "revolutionary" (Malik, 2014). The youth's testimony shows that BRL has made significant strides to connect the youth's personal healing to larger social issues in their communities.

BRL's Growth in the Bronx

The unique growth of BRL in the Bronx offers insight into how BRL and hip-hop therapy programs in general can take root in urban communities where youth are struggling with trauma and stress. Unlike BRL East Bay, which started in a High School, BRL in the Bronx is growing within a community center. The Point CDC is a very unique organization that houses a range of social and youth services. The space is known to be extremely flexible, and allows their staff to creatively approach their work (Skinner, 2014). This has led to certain advantages and drawbacks for the BRL program at The

Point CDC. BRL in the Bronx is being shaped by The Point CDC's mission to connect arts to activism. Before leading BRL at The Point, Earl Skinner led several after school art programs and activism workshops with youth. He believes that The Point CDC's social justice mission brings "a whole different lens that BRL East Bay doesn't have yet."

Unlike youth in BRL East Bay, BRL Bronx youth are asked from the beginning: "how do we take the music and affect change with it" (Skinner, 2014)? For over a decade, The Point CDC has taught youth about the political history of hip-hop and introduced them to rappers, graffiti artists, and producers from the Bronx. Therefore, they are already well suited to build on BRL's hip-hop education curriculum. Skinner also believes that BRL East Bay does more of its therapy in one-on-one settings and "uses the MC as a way of building identity"; however, The Point CDC's communal culture amplifies the "group work aspect of BRL therapy" and the youth are rarely alone during program. Skinner believes that The Point CDC's flexible culture, social justice mission, and experience teaching hip-hop history have made BRL Bronx distinct from BRL East Bay.

The flexible nature of The Point CDC also presents challenges to BRL. In BRL East Bay, almost all the staff members have backgrounds in social work and/or have experience working with marginalized youth of color. However, at The Point CDC, not everyone is a youth worker since much of the staff works in community development, policy change, and community organizing. Skinner states, that since The Point CDC is flexible and staff mentor youth outside of their own programs, "you have a lot of people taking on mentoring and serving as role models but don't have the youth development and

mental health framework that is required for BRL.” While this mentorship is well intentioned, much of the staff does not have training in mental health practice or therapy, and are not equipped to deal with these difficult issues. Additionally, many sensitive issues can come up in BRL’s therapy program, and Skinner worries that The Point’s flexible culture may hinder the privacy that is required for youth to feel comfortable and safe at BRL.

Tokenizing Hip-Hop Therapy

As the youth interviewees mentioned, not all youth who are from urban neighborhoods listen to hip-hop. Even though there is a good chance they are exposed to hip-hop culture, therapists and youth workers cannot assume that all youth in urban neighborhoods listen to hip-hop. The mental health and social work professions have a disproportionate number of white professionals who serve mostly black and brown clients in American cities (Alvarez III, 2012). Because of this imbalance, social work education often emphasizes that white professionals in the social work and mental health fields learn to provide culturally sensitive services to their clients (Basham, 2011). It would be a mistake for these professionals to assume that all black and brown youth will be open to or respond positively to hip-hop therapy. Like all young people, youth of color could respond positively to the range of therapeutic services that are available – whether that is talk therapy, group therapy, other forms of music therapy, or medication-based therapies. Moreover, the benefits of hip-hop therapy should not lead people to conclude that anyone with a background in hip-hop or mental health can do

hip-hop therapy. As the case has shown, it is important for a team of people with expertise in hip-hop production, social work, and mental health therapy to conduct hip-hop therapy with youth.

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations

Informed by the discussion of findings, this paper concludes with key recommendations to help guide youth workers, mental health professionals, and social workers that seek to implement hip-hop therapy programs in urban communities. Moreover, this section includes thoughts on how planners and policymakers can use the lessons of hip-hop and hip-hop therapy to transform the ways they plan cities.

Recruiting Effective Hip-Hop Therapists and Youth Workers

People who lead hip-hop therapy should be well versed in youth development, mental health, and social justice areas of practice. The BRL youth felt most comfortable around staff that made their own hip-hop music and could encourage the youth to grow as rappers and writers. They also felt comfortable opening up to staff that understand how the social and economic conditions of their neighborhood influence their mental health. Therefore, it is highly important that youth workers and therapists in hip-hop therapy have a deep appreciation for hip-hop music and can engage with the music creatively. In addition, it is imperative that they have an understanding of the politics of hip-hop music and how the history of the music can be used to empower young people. This will help to avoid stigmatizing the young participants, and get them to see how social and political forces are also involved in creating the traumas in their neighborhoods. All of the staff people in hip-hop therapy programs do not have to have expertise in each of these areas, but the team as a combined whole should have skills in hip-hop

production, youth mental health service, and a social justice framework for teaching hip-hop.

As this paper has shown, the mental health fields have a long history of pathologizing urban youth of color. However, the “strength-based approach” of BRL may not work for all youth, and building resilience in youth shouldn’t be the only tool for therapy. Some youth may not respond well to hip-hop therapy, or their mental health conditions may call for outside referrals to additional therapists or psychiatrists. Therefore, practitioners of hip-hop therapy should be well connected to the mental health community in their region so that they can provide referrals to professionals that have culturally sensitive practices. Hip-hop therapists must be navigators of the mental health system for youth.

Lastly, staff with expertise in hip-hop that lack training in mental health or youth work should not be put in positions where they conduct therapy with youth. Tomas Alvarez III, founder of BRL, states, “arts organizations are engaging young people with history of trauma, but they are often engaging them without the adequate support and resources to do that kind of healing” (Alvarez III et. al., 2013). The arts, including hip-hop, are powerful tools to heal youth from the impacts of trauma, but all youth deserve to be counseled by professionals that have training in clinical mental health services.

Otherwise, organizations risk providing services that may be of detriment to the mental health and wellness of youth, and they could be liable for providing harmful services.

Elements to Build Program Capacity

Hip-hop music is not easy to produce. In order to record the youth's music, BRL in the Bronx buys studio time from a local hip-hop studio. Not only is this expensive, but it prevents the youth and staff from establishing a sanctuary for their music and therapy. Myrtho Gardiner, the social worker of BRL Bronx, states, "our program would be better structured if we had our own space for only BRL purposes because The Point's open atmosphere prevents us from focusing on BRL and building it out." Earl Skinner, the director of BRL Bronx, dreams of having a studio so youth could more easily record their music, and could be enriched by watching other MCs and musicians in the community produce their own music. Moreover, the youth could learn how to make beats and produce hip-hop music, in addition to writing and recording rhymes. With these insights from Gardiner and Skinner in mind, it is ideal to house a hip-hop therapy program in its own space with its own studio. Not only does this give youth the space to readily create music, but it also gives them the privacy that is needed to open up about traumas and stressors in their lives. Gardiner also believes that by having program and studio space, BRL will "attract a lot more youth and increase the visibility of BRL in the Bronx."

In order for a hip-hop program to grow and build capacity, an adequate amount of staff must be hired to manage and conduct the program. BRL is designed so that a youth worker and social worker supervise groups of 6-8 individuals during group therapy. Skinner acknowledges, "if you make groups too big, the therapeutic element goes

away.” In larger groups, it is harder for the youth worker to create balance between dominant and quieter personalities, and it is more difficult for the social worker to give due attention to each youth’s mental health concerns. Therefore, hip-hop therapy programs that operate through group therapy like BRL should strive to have a mental health professional (social worker trained in mental health, therapist, etc.) and youth worker to preside over no more than 8 youth per session. If youth are being trained to help other youth with hip-hop production and therapy, as is done in the BRL Academy program discussed in the case study, then additional staff would be needed for training support.

Lastly, organizations conducting hip-hop therapy programs should build capacity to support the mental health of staff. Many mental health service providers in under resourced settings often suffer vicarious traumatization (Basham, 2011). They repeatedly engage with the traumatic experiences that youth suffer, and if it goes unprocessed, it can lead to burn out and even severe depression. BRL schedules regular meetings for staff to talk through the things that they hear from youth, and to build community amongst themselves. An organization practicing hip-hop therapy should support its staff in this way and make sure providers are not alone in their practice.

Connecting Community to Creativity

At The Point CDC, BRL has grown to have a focus on youth empowerment through community involvement. Much has been written on the advantages of doing individual healing alongside community empowerment (Travis Jr. & Deepak, 2011). The case

study and findings show that the youth at BRL are developing a sense of agency by taking on larger social issues, such as the criminalization of black and brown youth, that impact their wellbeing on a daily basis. BRL Bronx is located at The Point CDC, and therefore can connect youth more easily to community organizing and development efforts. Hip-hop therapy programs that are not located at community centers with social justice programs should seek to build alliances with youth organizations and community institutions that are working to improve their neighborhoods. Learning about community development and organizing can help the youth understand how to change the social, political, and economic forces that create many of the traumas in their lives. Hip-hop therapy program staff can introduce social and political topics for youth to write about. They can also ask them to write about a community service or organizing experience that they were exposed to through the program.

Learning the history of hip-hop is another way to connect the youth's creativity to their community. The history of hip-hop in the Bronx is well documented. It may be more difficult to find a written local history of hip-hop in many other cities. However, hip-hop therapists should work to build relationships with rappers, graffiti artists, dancers, and other practitioners of hip-hop who can speak to the local history and culture of hip-hop in their communities. As BRL has shown, this helps youth take pride in their neighborhood and feel like they are a part of a creative community.

Lastly, youth should be encouraged to share their creativity with their community. A big part of BRL's therapeutic process is helping the youth to build self-esteem by working

towards concrete goals. The most significant goal of BRL is performing at the showcase that takes place at the end of each program. Friends, family, staff, and caretakers are invited to these youth-led performances. BRL Bronx staff members have noticed that final performances “boost their confidence, self-regard, and self esteem in a way that other aspects of BRL cannot” (Gardiner, 2014). Hip-hop therapy programs should not neglect this powerful leadership development opportunity for youth to showcase and take ownership of their work. It also creates an opportunity for the larger community to affirm the positive work the youth are doing and to acknowledge their resilience to heal and empower themselves.

Broader Recommendations for Urban Planners and Policymakers

As discussed in the introduction section, the planning field has not acknowledged a “creative class” of young people born in cities who use hip-hop for creative expression. Urban planners and policymakers must pay attention to hip-hop and urban youth for several reasons. The planning field claims to value the wishes of local residents, and encourages and sometimes even requires that planners engage the communities they operate in. There is a wide body of literature on how to use arts and culture to engage people in planning and decision making processes; however, hip-hop has not been looked to as a vehicle to engage urban youth. Planning processes would be more culturally relevant and accessible to youth of color if they included the language and aesthetics of hip-hop, as opposed to the convoluted jargon that often plagues the discipline.

Hip-hop could also be the bridge between low-income communities of color that utilize hip-hop for creative expression and the middle-class transplants that currently fall under the umbrella of the “creative class.” Increased communication between these communities would lead to mutual benefits; for example, local hip-hop artists could share the artistic history and traditions of the neighborhoods, and newer residents could provide access to resources that cities and funders have invested in urban “maker communities.”

Planners should also recognize ways that youth have reshaped the built environment through hip-hop. Hip-hop is often looked at narrowly through the lens of rap music, and the other aesthetic and cultural elements are forgotten. Youth have taken hip-hop to every corner of American cities: to the nightclubs, to the blank canvasses on the sides of buildings, in the soundscapes of city parks, and to their classrooms. For example, four blocks of West Farms Road in the South Bronx have for decades been a place for youth to showcase their graffiti art. Auto body shops and other businesses along the roadway have commissioned work from famous graffiti artists, leading it to be dubbed unofficially as the “Bronx Wall of Fame.” Famous street artists from New York, Brazil, Japan, and many other countries have made their mark on this open-air art museum. However, plans are in place to raze this historic temple to graffiti in favor of a large housing development (Terrell, 2014). Community members, young and old, are opposed to destroying the Wall of Fame, but it does not have any landmark status or special designation to protect it.

There are thousands of walls, streets, and buildings of fame in American cities that contain the history and culture of hip-hop. Planners must study the importance of these spaces so that they can learn how to preserve and encourage hip-hop, rather than destroying it in the name of redevelopment. Hip-hop could instead be used as a tool for "placemaking," which is a popular term in modern planning for imbuing local culture and history into the built environment. Planners can encourage hip-hop for placemaking through public arts projects, youth programs, concert series, and other urban interventions that promote the arts and culture.

However, hip-hop shouldn't just be seen as a tool for engagement, inclusion, and placemaking. Hip-hop is also a critique of the planning and policy fields' failures to address the structural oppression of low-income urban communities. If planners are taught to listen to the analytical content of hip-hop music, to see the graffiti writing on the wall, and to read the poetry of rap coming from the communities they seek to improve, they will learn about public housing disasters, mass incarceration's toll on black and Latino communities, and many other areas for planning and policy to improve. Planning and policy schools must consider how writings and aesthetics of hip-hop can be used for pedagogical tools in professional training. Moreover, as delineated in this paper, people in urban America are experiencing a range of traumas and stressors in their communities. Hip-hop will help planners and policymakers understand the root causes of trauma. Using the lessons from the youth who were interviewed for this paper, planners must ask themselves: what does it mean to be working in a place where

people are traumatized by decades of harmful city planning, and what are urban communities already doing to reverse this history?

VII. References

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