

Hip Hop Hermeneutics and Multicultural Education: A Theory of Cross-Cultural Understanding

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Cross-cultural understanding stands as one of the great pillars of multicultural education and yet rarely do multiculturalists provide a full account of what it is and how it takes place. This paper will serve as an initial investigation into the complex nature of cross-cultural understanding. Drawing on the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, I will layout the framework for a theory of understanding and provide a concept of culture that avoids the pitfalls of essentialism and instrumentalism. I will then raise, as the backdrop for my examination, the issue of authenticity in the hip hop world. This will allow me to put these hermeneutic theories to work by illuminating the interpretive process through which a hypothetical middle-aged teacher might go about gaining an appreciation for rap music to better understand his suburban students who, for him, embody hip hop culture. This phenomenological account of cross-cultural understanding will in turn raise thought-provoking questions about human agency, translation, and the various implications of cross-cultural understanding in the classroom.

Cross-cultural understanding occupies a paradoxical place in the field of multicultural education. On the one hand, it lies at the very heart of the multicultural education project, constituting an implicit goal throughout the multiculturalist curriculum.¹ After all, without the possibility or willingness to understand cross-culturally, multicultural education becomes indistinguishable from the very educational approaches, i.e., cultural assimilation and cultural separatism, that it

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seeks to replace. On the other hand, despite the significance of cross-cultural understanding to both the theory and practice of multicultural education, there is surprisingly little attention afforded to what cross-cultural understanding actually is. The nature of cross-cultural understanding is all too often left undertheorized, as if it is something that we know all too well when we see it. Perhaps the reason for this lacuna lies in the daunting task of presenting a consistent theory of cross-cultural understanding. Doing so involves defining what constitutes understanding, what we mean by culture, and what impact, if any, does cross-cultural understanding have on the cultural object of understanding, its relation to members of the cultural group to which the object refers, and finally, its affect on the person who understands cross-culturally. Presenting a consistent theory of cross-cultural understanding also commits us to staking controversial positions with regard to authenticity, human agency, and translation that might challenge strongly-held convictions about the multiculturalist project and its prospects.

With these complications in mind, this article serves as an initial examination of the complex nature of cross-cultural understanding. Drawing on the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (b.1900–d.2002), I lay out the framework for a theory of understanding and provide a concept of culture that avoids the pitfalls of essentialism and instrumentalism. I then raise, as the backdrop for my examination, the issue of authenticity in the hip hop world. This allows me to put these hermeneutic theories to work by illuminating the interpretive process through which a hypothetical middle-aged teacher might go about gaining an appreciation for rap music to better understand his suburban students who, for him, embody hip hop culture. This phenomenological account of cross-cultural understanding, in turn, raises thought-provoking questions about human agency, translation, and various implications of cross-cultural understanding in the classroom. I address these questions in the second half of this work.

A PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTIC FRAMEWORK

Gadamer is most noted for transforming hermeneutics from an interpretative science originally developed for the exegesis of Biblical and juridical texts into a philosophical theory, known as philosophical hermeneutics, that sets out to express the way we, as human beings, understand ourselves and the world. His magnum opus, *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 1999), is counted among the most influential philosophical works of the 20th century and his interpretations of Plato, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Martin Heidegger are important philosophical contributions in their own right (Gadamer 1976a, 1977, 1986a, 1991, 1994). Of course, Gadamer's place within philosophy is not as important here as what his theories can contribute to the notion of cross-cultural understanding. For that, a general overview of his hermeneutic theories will suffice.

A Theory of Understanding

Gadamer's contributions to ontology, epistemology, and pedagogy turn on the simple question raised in the second introduction to *Truth and Method* (1999): "How is understanding possible?" (xxx). That is, what are the conditions of understanding and how is understanding achieved despite perhaps one's intentions (and that of others) to the contrary? Gadamer's answer to this question does not depend on the application of any particular interpretative method, nor is it limited to the realm of epistemology. Understanding, according to Gadamer, is fundamentally ontological and is, in stark contrast to Cartesian epistemology, historically and linguistically context-bound. That is, one's identity or self-understanding is thoroughly intertwined with one's understanding of the world, an understanding that always takes place as an event—occurring at a particular time and space—made possible through language. Language, as a "repository of tradition[s]" (McDowell 1996, 126) passed down from generation to generation, though transformed anew in every act of understanding, provides us with a horizon of understanding, a *verbal world* that enables us to understand ourselves and the things, events, and people around us. To help us unpack this theory of understanding, we can turn to four central Gadamerian insights.

We are finite, historical beings. We can only view the world through the lens of our own traditions, experiences and prejudices. There is no Archimedean point, no classless, interestless, privileged perspective detached from our own "historically-effected consciousness" (1999, 340) with which to neutrally view the world. "History," as Gadamer (1999) reminds us, "does not belong to us, we belong to it" (276). In other words, we are in a historical context that shapes how we make sense of the world. Gadamer refers to this perspective as our horizon. A horizon, according to Gadamer, is "the unity of the flow of experiences" (245) through which we understand the world. It is a vantage point, a "range of vision" that is not only of spatial, but temporal, significance. As I encounter the world, I draw from my past and project into the future. Like culture, horizons are not static; they are constantly changing, expanding, as we chalk up new experiences in our daily life. In agreement with other philosophers who have made the linguistic turn, Gadamer also argues that our horizons are linguistically constituted in the sense that all meaning is articulated through, and defined in, language. Our horizons, then, constitutes a *verbal world* that is distinct from, although ultimately intertwined with, the (physical) environment that we share with all animals.

Understanding is circular in nature, though not viciously so. This circular structure of understanding is made explicit each time we are faced with a cross-cultural experience—or what Gadamer (1999) refers to as a "fusion of horizons"

(306). A fusion of horizons does not proceed in a linear, positivist manner, but in a spiral motion. When encountering something that requires understanding—be it an event, person, or thing—one projects an anticipated whole to make explicit that which is encountered in a recognizable context. As one proceeds, this anticipated whole (based on past experiences, traditions, and future projections) is continually checked and revised against emerging particulars, which, in turn, are also reinterpreted in light of changing wholes. Understanding is thus a process of continual projecting and revising that progresses in a spiral twirl of ever-increasing sophistication as inadequate prejudgments are replaced by more suitable ones until a “unity of meaning determines itself more clearly” (Gadamer et al. 1988, 72) and horizons are fused. This is what is also known as the *hermeneutic circle*.

Understanding is always self-understanding. We understand ourselves through our understanding of the world. Not only does our horizon serve as the background context within which we understand entities that we encounter in the world (and through which we construct the very standards for judging these entities) but, in any given situation, it also provides us with (and limits) our existential possibilities, or what William James calls “live options” (Whittaker 1983, 203). We are not, as utilitarian and rational choice theorists claim, individuals completely distinct from the very choices and ends implicated in our actions. Rather, in crude ontological terms, we are what we understand.

Understanding is never complete. Unlike Hegelian dialectics that lead to increasing levels of sophistication, until we have the “End of History” when Spirit is conscious of itself, Gadamerian dialectics has no *telos*. We constantly remake ourselves as we encounter new experiences in the world, until the day we die. Understanding, then, is a continual work in process, requiring constant reflection and risk—“To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete” (Gadamer 1999, 302). In admitting this, of course, Gadamer must also acknowledge the fallibility of his own philosophical outlook.

We can therefore summarize our theory of understanding as follows:

1. We are historical beings who understand the world through a linguistically constituted horizon made up of our own traditions, past experiences, and biases.
2. Understanding is circular in nature. A fusion of horizons, or cross-cultural understanding, takes place through a spiral movement of continual projecting and revising of parts and wholes until what was once strange becomes familiar.
3. All understanding is self-understanding—we are what we understand.

4. Understanding is never complete—it is a constant task yet to be fully achieved.

A Concept of Culture

A concept of culture that conforms to the hermeneutic theories of Hans-Georg Gadamer will attain a slightly different meaning than is typically found in the multicultural education literature. Risking some simplification, we can define culture as both the traditions passed down from generation to generation in language and the horizon of meaning that enables an individual to interpret these traditions anew in everyday experience. Culture is essentially the language that we come to inhabit. It is, therefore, not the exclusive domain of either group or individual. Rather, culture acts as a bridge between the two. Human beings are unique in that they inhabit a verbal/cultural world that is distinct (and gives some respite) from the environment they share with all living things.

As I show throughout this examination, this way of conceiving culture is both similar to and different from essentialist and instrumentalist conceptions. Like the essentialist interpretation, which turns on the belief that members of a given group possess core characteristics that are both foundational to their identity and largely unalterable, culture defines our understanding of both self and world. We cannot step out of our culture to view the world on a neutral, cultureless ground. Moreover, cultures represent continuity—they tie the past to the present and pave a way towards the future. Despite these affinities, a philosophical hermeneutic interpretation of culture differs from essentialist versions in that culture is understood as always in flux. Our traditions undergo change as they are brought to bear on new circumstances just as our horizons expand as new experiences conflict with old prejudices and assumptions. What it means to be *American* not only differs through time but also from individual to individual. Although common traditions and experiences help bind together community, cultural boundaries are porous and continually redrawn. This occurs on the group level—as new members come and old members depart—and on the individual level—as horizons expands with each new learning experience.

Like instrumentalist conceptions, which emphasizes social construction and subordinates culture to the achievement of a more fundamental goal or ideal, culture understood hermeneutically exhibits a pliability that underscores the transformational potential of educational experience. Education matters as the child is initiated into society with particular experiences that have consequences for both the individual and the group. Unlike instrumentalist conceptions, however, culture is not a tool but the context in which we make sense of the world. We are immersed in culture and this cultural horizon colors how our experiences are shaped and interpreted. Culture is, therefore, not a collection of detached sets of

beliefs and convictions that we can, a la rational choice theory, pick and choose from the outside. Culture, through language, is something that we always already inhabit; it informs our projects and goals in the process of coping with our daily lives. This philosophical hermeneutic theory of understanding and way of conceptualizing culture has implications for multicultural education. Before we identify these implications, it is useful to turn our attention to a specific case of hip hop and the themes of authenticity, human agency, and translation.

HIP HOP HERMENEUTICS

The question of authenticity, of *keeping it real*, is often raised in the hip hop community, and hip hop scholars theorize about whether the current commodified, sugarcoated, and increasingly suburban manifestations and outgrowths of the music is in fact hip hop. Among the many questions is one that concerns the authenticity of the artists, i.e., should the hip hop status be conferred to hybrids like Linkin Park, White ghetto imposters like Vanilla Ice, or real “White Negroes” (Rux 2003, 15), such as Eminem. More important for my purposes is the question of the authenticity of the audience; assuming that there is a hip hop message to be heard, can a White teenager from the suburbs who knows little about the realities of urban life really understand the meaning of hip hop? Is there an authentic way to consume hip hop music? And more removed still, can a White middle-aged teacher better understand her White suburban students through an appreciation for this popular, yet complex, genre? If so, does she also understand something of the culture of the urban youth who propelled this popular and controversial music into the public eye?² At issue is the very possibility and extent of cross-cultural understanding.

To address these questions, let us examine what a cross-cultural experience might look like. Suppose we have a suburban White male social studies teacher who would like to gain an appreciation of hip hop to better understand his mostly White, although increasingly more racially diverse, middle-class students who listen to such music.³ Say he begins his quest with an album by Talib Kweli, a rap artist recommended to him by one of his students as being “socially conscious.” Before the teacher hits play on his iPod—for he is too insecure to attend a live hip hop event—he already possesses a fore-understanding of hip hop, a horizon if you will, with which he will try to make sense of the words and beat of the particular rap number, say “Everything Man” (Kweli 2007). This fore-understanding will color his interpretation, but not conclusively so, because the song will counter with its own demands if a fusion is to occur. If our White middle-aged high school teacher is typical of his generation and class, his fore-understanding of rap might likely include an array of media biases that reduce the music to manifestations of any number of political and social evils, e.g., misogamy, violence, drug usage, and

the angry Black male rejection of authority (Fried 1996). In addition, the teacher might also expect rap to conform to his experiences with students in his class who, in his mind, embody hip hop culture; their loose baggy pants, expensive designer shoes, and finally, their “inscrutable” slang.

[Intro by Sonia Sanchez]

I don't remember the first time I heard Kweli.

I don't remember what I was doing. There were no remembered witness to my doings.

But it seems like I've known him forever. He who has moved through mornings and midnights, through deaths and dawns, to document our bones, our blood, our lives.

Listen, listen to his exact wings, strumming mists from clouds.

Listen, listen a man always punctual with his mouth.

Listen to his revolution of syllables, scooping lighting from his pores.

Keeping time with his hurricane beat, asking us to pick ourselves up and become thunder [sound of thunder] (Kweli 2007)

As the teacher listens to the beat of the music (following along with the aid of the text conveniently found on lyrics.com) some of his biases are reinforced, e.g., the self-promotion of rap artists who must cultivate a strong public persona, and others are challenged, e.g., there is a social message to be heard beyond the stereotypical materialistic associations of rap. As he strains to make out what the rapper is rapping about, images cannot help but enter his head. Perhaps these images are presented to him like an MTV video. He might imagine a close-up of a Latina woman (Sanchez) before the mike against a backdrop of run-down neighborhoods, expensive cars and shimmering lights of gold jewelry. Or perhaps he pictures a Black rapper, (Talib Kweli) who almost certainly is wearing a baseball cap, oversized and crooked, and is perhaps also, in the listener's imagination, surrounded by women who adore him.

[Kweli]

Yeah, they say you can't please everybody.

Let's go. Yeah. Hey, they ain't know what that sound like?

Feel the heart beat, Feel the heart beat, on your Eardrum we gotta new heartbeat.

Feel the heart beat, Feel the heart beat, on your Eardrum we gotta new heartbeat.

(Kweli 2007)

Although there is only a slight heartbeat heard coupled with the sample of a soul number repeatedly played (an instrumental homage to the Daybreak's 1977 number, also titled, “Everything Man”) with interspersed background vocals of “Everything Man,” he does feel the beat as dictated by the rhythm of the

rhymes, a beat he cannot help but associate with beats and base he often overhears in the courtyard, hallways, or on the street. It evokes a powerful feeling in him.

[Kweli]

YO. What becomes of a dream differed?
 That never makes it to the world to be seen or heard?
 Do it breathe? Do it die the heartbeat?
 Is it alive? Do it leave? Only to become a star in the sky. I believe,
 scratch that I know this ain't my full potential,
 only usin' 10 percent of my mental on instrumentals.
 But incidentally, my energy heavenly, can he be so ill there ain't no pill or no remedy.
 The maker of memories possess the recipe to your fate.
 Make no mistake there ain't no escap'in your destiny,
 especially when the death do us part, like wedding rings.
 I'll be here forever put that on err thing.

[Res]

YOUR EVERYTHING MAAAAAN
 YOUR EVERYTHING MAAAAAN
 (Kweli 2007)

The language of *Ebonics*, which triggers his deep-seated bias that rappers and speakers of Ebonics are less educated and inarticulate, makes it difficult for the teacher to identify completely with the artist. It takes time to acclimate himself to the beat so that he can hear what is said. In fact, he must listen to the number several times before he actually makes out what Kweli is saying. Yet his initial picture, or anticipated whole, has already transformed as the first verse not only fits into his lexicon of rock n' roll lyrics, with its raw emotion and youthful energy, but it also contains a poetry that resonates with him: Death, the human condition, and unfulfilled dreams are themes that he, too, thinks about and that affect him. The allusions, from wedding rings to maker of memories, are familiar too. Perhaps the rapper has something to say to him as well as to his students.

[Kweli]

Your Alpha and your Omega, your beginner and your end.
 Your father, your brother, your lover, your friend.
 The blood in your vein, that gets split and runs in the drain.
 That's right my flow one and the same, enjoyin' the pain, my name.
 Burner that destroy the toy and the train, all city all night I'm enjoyin' the fame.
 I'm a hustler, I'm a gangster and a rebel, with the rank of a General,
 in the battle between God and the devil.
 I lay clean to your spirit your religion, your belief system.
 I do your hitting your catch'in and your relief pitch'in.

This kid proficient in every position, the man in your dreams, in your nightmares
command' in your vision, till it's quite clear, like light beer.

Yeah I'm standin' right here, I get you hot but stay cooler than the night air.

I try to fit it in the same rhyme but realize I can't be everything to everyone at the
same time.

[Res]

Your Everything Man

Your Everything Man

(Kweli 2007)

Already, his understanding has taken another direction than he initially expected. The combination of popular images, e.g., baseball allusions, gangster/hustlers/rebels, destiny and God, a variation of a familiar theme, "Life cannot be controlled—I am only human," and other identifiable themes and phrases, e.g., the Alpha and the Omega, the relation of blood to life and mortality, make the unfamiliar genre more familiar. Already, a more nuanced understanding of the text is achieved, and perhaps the teacher already has a different understanding of the first stanza as it relates to the second. The teacher might now even readily admit that, although hip hop represents a different lifestyle and reality than the teacher's own, there are themes that resonant cross-culturally. It is also a genre with traditions and respect for other art forms as evident in the sampling and wide array of poetic allusions. The beat and poetry is catchy and it is easy to see what attracts his students to this music.

Of course, after just one rap song, the image of hip hop is rather fragmentary and superficial—although new avenues of understanding have no doubt opened. Furthermore, imagine that the teacher expands his repertoire of rap music. Rather than limit his attention to this album, he listens to other types of rap, gansta style groups like 50 Cent, girl bands, mainstream hybrid rap, East Coast–West Coast rap, Old School rap, and other forms of political message rap (both Islamic and non-Islamic) such as Mos Def and A Tribe called Quest. This, in turn, inspires him to read up on the rap literature, both academic and popular, and to attend various hip hop events. He might learn, for instance, that hip hop is constantly changing and, in the words of Awad El Karim Ibrahim (1999), "comprises everything from music (especially rap) to clothing choice, attitudes, language, and an approach to culture and cultural artifacts" (351).⁴ Already, it is clear that rap music is more complex, as is its subject matter, than the teacher's initial understanding of it. And assuming the teacher is open to rap, his understanding of this genre of music and hip hop culture changes in circular fashion with each new piece, each new theme. The reconstructing of hip hop leads to ever complex and expanded views of the subject matter. So much so, that the first rap song would be interpreted quite differently if he were to listen to it again after having already expanded his horizon with other genres of rap and manifestations of hip hop. Although the

teacher's deep-seated reservations against several recurrent themes in hip hop may ultimately remain, in opening up to the hip hop world, the teacher gains a more nuanced understanding of its various threads.

But the description of this hypothetical cross-cultural experience does not do justice to the full force of Gadamer's thought. First of all, rap, or any other art form for that matter, cannot be reduced to a simple accumulation of words and meaning as interpreted through textual analysis. As a popular form of lyric poetry, rap is a paradigmatic genre that reflects how language functions in this process of a fusion of horizons. The *corporeality* of the song, its beats, sounds, intonations, rhymes and rhythm, is central to understanding it, and in contrast to everyday speech that encourages us to forget the medium, rap like poetry addresses us, interrupts us as a "remembrance of language" in its very refusal to be instrumentally understood (Bruns 1993, 6–7). A number like "Everything Man" resists the limitation of our objective renderings to "stand by itself" (Gadamer 1986b, 132).⁵ A work of art, according to Gadamer (1986b), "speaks to us as a work and not as a bearer of a message" (33).

More important, there is an ontological value attached to this hermeneutic experience that is absent from my description. The dialogical relationship between the strangeness of "Everything Man" and the self-understanding of the White male history teacher is one of intimacy as he, to fully understand the work, is called to risk himself by addressing the claim of the work, a claim that may never be fully settled (Gadamer 1986b). Thus, in this case, the *actualization* of the rap song only occurs when it speaks to the teacher and makes the claim that pulls him in and demands to be played with. This, in turn, puts the teacher's own self-understanding and prejudices at play. Understanding the rap song, then, is an event that entails self-presentation just as much as the presentation of the work of art itself. In the process, the very lens through which he sees and experiences the world has changed, even if only a little.

TONI MORRISON, LANGUAGE, AND HUMAN AGENCY

In her acceptance speech for the 1995 Nobel Prize for Literature, Toni Morrison (2007) recounts a childhood folk tale about an old blind Black woman, renowned for her wisdom, who is approached by two skeptics desiring to reveal her as a fake. They ask, "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead." After a short pause the woman replies, "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands" (Morrison 2007). In her speech, Morrison likens the bird to language and the blind women to the writer who is "worried about how the language she dreams in, given to her at birth, is handled, put into service, even withheld from her for certain nefarious purposes" (Morrison 2007). Ultimately, the writer must

trust her readers to shape the string of words and meaning that she labored so hard to beget.

Gadamer, too, has reached a similar conclusion about the relationship between an artist and her work, although his vision of language and meaning may not include the agency that Morrison has in mind. According to Gadamer, the work's source (writer) is secondary to the interplay between the interpreter (reader) and the interpretatum (text). In contrast to Morrison, however, we do not possess the bird in hand, but rather the bird grips us in its talons. As Gadamer (1999) phrases it, "In the word's strict meaning, it would be more proper to say that it is not we who speak a language, but a language that speaks us" (463). To Gadamer, language is the only way that meaning is expressed, and yet, there is always something left out of any expression and always something unintended that is expressed. In this sense, and probably more so than with Morrison, Gadamer's writer is devalued in importance. What is important is the work itself and the play of prejudices that takes place as a work's truths are understood by the audience.

If we turn our attention to an African American oral tradition of the spoken word, we can see this relationship at work in what is known as call and response. The moment that the words leave a speaker's lips, they take on a life of their own as the audience reawakens their meaning through positive and negative feedback. In a real sense, then, the poetry of the performance is the act of performing itself. Like all understanding, there is a *to and fro* mediation between the words and the audience receiving them. Each listener understands these words in a unique way, and yet there is a truth that cannot be denied nor intentionally shaped by the simple whims of those listening. Moreover, the words affect the audience in ways unintended and unanticipated by the speaker. The audience's role in the performance is to open themselves up to the truth of the words and respond with that to which the words elicit. Thus, we can say that the audience belongs to the performance, just as Gadamer (1986b) argues that the "spectator belongs essentially to the playing of the play" (130). Likewise, when the White teacher listens to Kweli for the first time—if he is serious about his endeavor—he, too, opens himself up to the truth of the song, putting his prejudices "at play," and thereby risking himself in the *to and fro* of understanding. In both cases, the actual impact of *play* can neither be predetermined nor controlled; it is a losing of oneself to the force of the words that allows the fusion of horizons to take place.

AUTHENTICITY—TRANSLATION—LANGUAGE

What is central to hip hop—the music, the message, the movement, the ideas, the beat, or the feeling? Are there authentic and, consequently, inauthentic consumers of hip hop?⁶ The problem with answering affirmatively resides in the fact that identifying authentic consumers entails defining hip hop culture in a way that may

not be possible. But if we cannot distinguish an authentic understanding of hip hop with an inauthentic one, then how can we delineate cultures in a meaningful way? Without some standard, do we not destroy, or at least dilute, the voice of others? Not surprisingly, a tension exists within the hip hop community over this very question, especially as it pertains to White, mainstream influences on both sides of the spectrum (performers/consumers.) To exploit an analogy from Gianni Vattimo (1997), many among the hip hop cognoscenti view white suburban listeners as churchgoers view the cultural tourists who irreverently enter a church during mass to view its aesthetic quality.

The cultural tourist, although (as is more and more often the case) unchecked by the sign reading “No entry for tourists during services,” moves with a certain embarrassment and is conscious of being a disturbance, and out of place. Those in prayer regard tourists with mixed feelings, for on the one hand, they should welcome them with a charitable attitude, respectful of their interests and the intentions that have brought them to their church. Yet on the other hand they sense in tourists a foreignness in conflict with what, at least at that moment, seem to them to be the proper meaning of the place. (Vattimo 1997, 58)

The difficulty always lies, as it does with Morrison’s (2007) writer, in the letting go of what is created so that it can be interpreted, translated, or shaped, by the audience. But, can the hip hop tourist abstract the aesthetic beauty of hip hop from the inner city context from which it came? Can the White male teacher really be an authentic consumer of hip hop?

In attempting to translate Poe’s “The Raven” into Hungarian, Dezső Kosztolányi, the early 20th century linguist, poet, and novelist, recognized the sheer impossibility of retaining both the literal and aesthetic meaning of a translated work. In contrast to most of his colleagues (there are, to my knowledge, at least nine translations of “The Raven” published in Hungarian,) Kosztolányi chose to remain “unfaithful to the words rather than the music” of the poem (Kosztolányi 1990, 562).⁷ Translation, to him, was “first and foremost a critical endeavor,” the end result being a “creation” rather than a “copy” (quoted in Szegedy-Maszák 1998, 53).⁸ Because it is impossible to do justice both to the literal meaning of a poem and its music, ultimately the translator must create something new, while at the same time, retain the truth of the old. But despite this paradox inherent in translation, Gadamer argues that if something can be put into language, then it can also be understood by a reader, no matter what culture she comes from. That is why Cornel West (2000) can identify more with the work of Chekhov, a 19th century son of a Russian grocer, than with the fictional works of more recent American writers. Certainly he understands Chekhov differently than did his 19th century Russian readership, and yet, there are truths embedded within the works of Chekhov that still ring true to West and other contemporary readers (West 2000, xv–xvi).

We can thus reject any criticism that conflates Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics with a rigid form of linguistic-cultural determinism or isolationism. Gadamer responds to the problem of bridging alien linguistic worlds by referring to the unique nature of language. Although distinct languages represent distinct cultural worlds, each language is not, as the innumerable cognates in the English language attest, a closed system, but is open to further expansion. Nor are we limited to just one language or culture. As we learn new languages and expand upon our use of old ones, we necessarily inhabit new verbal worlds. Moreover, there is infinite variability even within the bounds of a particular language and culture; we can always express what we find differently. Words, like our horizons, contain within them the possibility of becoming, in the course of new understandings, other than they are. Yet the mysterious way that the word comes to conceptual life, and its seemingly interminable capacity to bridge new contexts, is nothing extraordinary in our daily lives. The *self-forgetfulness* of language simply ensures that this ordinary process is rarely brought to explicit consciousness. This quality also masks the fact that our interpretations of words are far less a result of our conscious will to define them in a particular way than they are, so to speak, forced on us by the imperatives of the moment. Language, and by extension culture, is therefore far more than simply a tool. To quote Gadamer (1976b):

[I]t is in the nature of the tool that we master its use, which is to say we take it in hand and lay it aside when it has done its service. That is not the same as when we take the words of a language, lying ready in the mouth, and with their use let them sink back into the general store of words over which we dispose. Such an analogy is false because we never find ourselves as consciousness over against the world and, as it were, grasp after a tool of understanding in a wordless condition. Rather, in all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own. (61).

Yet, if language is resistant to our complete control and is tradition-bound, it is also, together with these traditions, without fixed borders. There is no sense of a closed-off *world in itself*, both with regard to the existence of private languages, which Gadamer (along with Ludwig Wittgenstein) decidedly rejects, and with regard to historically or culturally distinct language-worlds, which may indeed pose hermeneutic challenges as they represent different perspectives and traditions, yet are nevertheless open to translation. A *fusion of horizons* is always possible because the living language in which one lives stretches beyond the boundaries of any particular culture, nation, epoch or individual consciousness. Language can say far more than what is said, and mean far more than what is meant. It is for this reason that our horizons of understanding are best understood as existing in conversation; they are continually reconstructed in the process of conversing with the things, events, and people we encounter in our daily lives. Conversation, and

by extension understanding, is thus dialogical and not monological. If we converse at all, we talk with and never simply talk at.

The same might be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of rap music. The questions have been raised, is there a right way to listen to rap? Does one have to know the genealogy of the movement; its Bronxian origins of Grandmaster Flash et al. or going back further, its pre-movement inspirations such as blues, jazz and other oral traditions in African American culture, to be an authentic listener of hip hop music? Is the meaning lost to the novice listener? In trying to answer such questions in the affirmative, we risk losing the essence of rap—that which resonates irreducibly in the art form. But not only would it be impossible to reduce rap to a stable set of criteria, it would also be unwise to deny the fact that *everyone* understands them in a unique way. Rap music retains its authenticity without our help because, rap, as with the writings of Chekhov, is not the arbitrary creation of the listener, but contains its own common truths that resonate for all who listen, even if these truths differ from the artists' original intentions.

Of course it is possible to listen to rap music and not understand. One must possess the presumption that rap might have something to offer, something valuable in itself. Without such a presumption, you do not really listen to rap, or anything, because your own prejudices take over denying the possibility of a fusion of horizons to take place. The fact that a large number of white suburban kids possess such a presumption, that rap music has something to say to them, is significant in itself. And yet, it would be equally naive to argue that what they get out of hip hop is the same as its practitioners. If we adopt a Gadamerian interpretation of understanding, then we must conclude that artists do not have monopolies on the meaning of their works. One can seek an original interpretation of sorts, but there is no interpretation that acts as an overarching standard by which others must be judged. In fact, one can never recreate an original interpretation anyway as we must rely on our own historical perspective to grasp anything.

CONCLUSION

A philosophical hermeneutic approach to cross-cultural understanding acknowledges the complexity of culture, authenticity, human agency, and translation. Given this acknowledgement, it is reasonable to ask: What are its implications for the practice of multicultural education? A few initial observations can be made.

Cross-Cultural Understanding Reflects the Hybrid Nature of Culture

Like the art of rap which is enriched by the creative borrowing from, sampling, and mixing a variety of established musical genres and traditions, cross-cultural understanding turns on a combination of continuity and change, tradition and

innovation.⁹ Yet we all too often approach culture with an essentialist prejudice by rigidly emphasizing core characteristics of its members and identifying, in a legalistic manner, rules and patterns that serve to relegate individuals to cultural bubbles (McCarty 1993). Approaching culture thus leads to a resistance to cultural critique, cultural isolationism, and a reductionist view of social life. Although traditions do come down to us from generation to generation in the form of rules, patterns, beliefs, and prejudices, there is always an element of innovation as these rules, patterns, beliefs, and prejudices are applied to changing circumstances. If anything, our exploration of cross-cultural understanding reveals that cultures and their members are the products of cross-pollination and cultural exchange, as well as cultural conservation and continuity. For teachers, this implies that the very question of what constitutes “cross-cultural” experience is open to interrogation. Although natural divisions between cultures clearly exist—there are, for instance, obvious differences between the French and English language—cultural borders delineating ethnic, gender, and class lines are often porous and malleable.

Cross-Cultural Understanding Does Not Unfold According to a Predictable Script

We can also say that the outcome of cross-cultural experience is neither reducible to formulaic expression, nor subject to our full control. Although instrumentalists have correctly identified the hybridity and flexibility of culture, they overestimate the degree to which cultures are tools to be controlled and manipulated. What exactly does our high school teacher learn about his suburban students or urban youth by gaining a greater appreciation for hip hop? Although one might argue that such an appreciation provides greater opportunity for dialogue and a stronger basis for building relationships, or even that our teacher might also have learned something about himself and his prejudices, can we say with any degree of certainty what direction his relationship with his students will take, or whether he now has a deep understanding of urban culture? Certainly not. Perhaps all we can say with certainty is that the high school teacher understands hip hop, and his understanding is different from those of his White middle-class suburban students.

One possible implication of this theory is that it invites multicultural education practitioners to teach cultures with a higher degree of humility and open-endedness. Although role playing, field experiences, and other exercises meant to increase empathy may, in fact, lead to a better appreciation of cultural differences and past struggles, they do not end with the transference of a deep in-the-mind-of-others understanding of different cultures. At the same time, although there is no successful way to bottle up and sell cross-cultural experiences that unfold according to a predetermined script, the value of cross-cultural understanding is not exhausted in false empathy. A teacher who assigns *Fatelessness* (Kertész 2004) as a means to get her students to understand the experiences of the victims

and survivors of the Holocaust or *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Douglass 2002) to send them back to a tragic chapter in United States history, should not expect that her students will know what it was like to be Imre Kertész in a concentration camp or Frederick Douglas as a slave.

Perhaps what is most important is that these experiences speak to their readers in this time and place. There is a moving section in the narrative where Frederick Douglas, after teaching himself to read and write, is overcome by an immeasurable sadness as he realizes that he cannot achieve the freedom that he has read about because he is a slave. It seems to me that this section, and others like it, make the work more than simply an historical artifact representative of the abolitionist perspective; it is also a living work that resonates today, raising issues about the gains and losses of education and what it means to be human, even as one struggles in the face of injustice. Furthermore, the simple fact that the teacher has validated these experiences as worthy of attention provides a basis and direction for further cross-cultural experience.

Cross-Cultural Understanding Involves Dialogue and Risk

Understanding only becomes an issue for us when there is a distance to be overcome, when what we encounter is foreign and requires our hermeneutic efforts. Because a true dialogue is always open-ended, and because the outcome of cross-cultural experience is neither reducible to formulaic expression, nor subject to our full control, there is always an element of risk. This risk is no doubt troubling to teachers who feel obliged to dictate the direction of cross-cultural experiences in the classroom to circumvent painful or mean-spirited conclusions. Instances where students' reactions to cultural difference serve to reinforce negative stereotypes, silence marginalized voices, or strengthen their own false sense of superiority would seem to validate such a heavy-handed approach. But many of these reactions point to a failure of dialogue rather than to its product.

For dialogue to take place, one must have a charitable attitude that one's interlocutor has something meaningful to say. For there to be dialogue, one's assumptions and prejudices must be put to play in a way that makes it likely that all participants will leave the conversation changed in some way. Our high school teacher who listens to Kweli would hardly get anywhere if he were to allow his prejudices to dominate what he hears. In such cases, he isn't really listening. At the same time, our aim is not to completely eradicate one's prejudgments in understanding; one must understand from somewhere. It is through one's prior assumptions—assumptions that are challenged and reshaped in the process of understanding—that one can understand at all. A balance is, therefore, required. As Gadamer (1999) notes, coming to a shared understanding “always means rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but that of

the other as well” (305). It is in this space where the fruits of cross-cultural understanding are to be found.

Because risk is inherent in learning and dialogue it behooves multiculturalists to be attuned to the myriad ways in which cross-cultural experiences transform students. Although some students can hide behind the dominant status of their cultural perspectives, and thus fail to take full advantage of the educational opportunities available to them, others are impelled to risk far more of themselves as they are initiated into mainstream American life. It is the responsibility of the teacher to critically question the appropriateness and extent to which learning should affect students. A philosophical hermeneutic approach to multicultural education would likely pay close attention to the nature of cultural change in each educational context.

Yet, with risk come potential and hope. Cross-cultural understanding can serve as a metaphor for an education that is spurred by mystery, wonder, and awe. It is often a curiosity in the unknown that cultivates an appreciation for multiple cultures and ways of being. This type of learning cannot be reduced to its instrumental value. As Harry G. Frankfurt (2006) has remarked about our reasons for love, we do not love something because we recognize its value. Rather, our love “necessarily acquires value for us, because we love it” (Frankfurt 2006, p. 39).

Although such learning exists and will continue to exist despite our systems of schooling, dominant trends in education today fail to give this type of learning its proper acknowledgment. This need not be the case. With a philosophical hermeneutic emphasis on cross-cultural experience, we can reaffirm and cultivate the kind of education that begets dialogue and leads to the expansion of horizons and cross-cultural understanding.¹⁰

Notes

1. Whether students attend a lecture on ethnocentrism and white privilege, visit a cultural site, interview members of a different culture, participate in role-playing, or read literature with multicultural content, they are constantly reminded of the ability and need to understand cross-culturally.

2. Although the terms *hip hop* and *rap* are sometimes used interchangeably, the two terms generally have different meanings. *Rap* refers specifically to a genre of music and a form of action, rapping. *Hip hop* is more general and all-encompassing. It denotes a way of life, a particular lifestyle that includes other art forms in addition to rap, such as break dancing and graffiti art.

3. Although my use of hypotheticals to elucidate Gadamer’s hermeneutic theories may raise some eyebrows in social science circles, this is a respected practice in the field of philosophy dating at least as far back as ancient Greece when Plato described at length a hypothetical polis to uncover the characteristics of a just man.

4. For a good review of hip hop educational literature see, “Framing and Reviewing Hip-Hop Educational Research” (Petchauer 2009).

5. This is what is meant when Gadamer (1986b) states that poetry is “the aesthetics of refusal” (132).

6. Armond White (1996) distinguishes authentic rap that contains “the effrontery that inspired the first rap artists” from the “radio fodder” produced by the commercial “pop forces” (199).
7. In its original: “inkább a szavakhoz voltam hűtelen a zene javára . . .” (My translation)
8. My translation
9. I thank Edwardo Duarte for this observation.
10. This examination of cross-cultural understanding represents only a modest beginning. It will have served its purpose if it has encouraged readers to reflect on their taken-for-granted notions of culture and cross-cultural understanding, complicated the manner in which we commonly address cross-cultural experiences in the classroom, and introduced the reader to the basic framework of philosophical hermeneutics in a way that invites further exploration. For scholars interested in adopting a philosophical hermeneutic approach to multicultural education, a logical next step would be to go directly to the source and read *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 1999). Gadamer’s appropriation of the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and his treatment of education as *Bildung* offer us a compelling alternative to the prevailing views about the role of culture and tradition in the learning process, the development of student and teacher self-understandings, and the way in which educators interpret and employ in their pedagogical practice the concept of culture and its many manifestations.

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