Dr. Travis L. Gosa, Ph.D - Cornell University – Research Profile (Updated 02-2012)

Research Agenda

In the tradition of Du Boisian social science, my research interrogates multiple dimensions of racial inequality, with an emphasis on the social lives of African Americans. Like W.E.B. Du Bois, I seek out theoretically and empirically grounded analyses of the status of black Americans. My research examines how racial inequality is (re)produced through both racial structure and expressive culture. As Lawrence Bobo, W.E.B. Du Bois Professor of the Social Sciences at Harvard University observes, Du Bois’ concern for the cultural determinants of black inequality is too often ignored by sociology:

Modern sociologists have abandoned, more often implicitly but sometimes quite explicitly so, a perspective on racial inequality that embraces a role for racial identities, attitudes, and beliefs [emphasis added]. The result has been energy misspent in well-worn race versus class polemics and a failure to understand the social underpinnings of a changing but durable racial divide. (2000, p. 187)[1]

Identity and meaning cannot be separated from racial stratification. Social structures such as economy and violence create racial hierarchy, but the racial divide is also maintained by symbolic meaning systems embedded in expressive culture. A major theme in my research is a focus on racial ideology, including how language (“racial framing”), music, popular culture and media, and racial performance (“doing race”) are used to recreate and challenge racial inequality. My perspective that racial inequality is maintained through control of symbolic belief systems is similar to that of prominent sociologists including Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Patricia Hill-Collins, George Lipsitz, and Joe Feagin.

I also associate my research philosophy with Du Bois’ legacy as a way to highlight the need for “transdisciplinary” social science. I have a PhD in Sociology from The Johns Hopkins University, but a full understanding of black life requires pushing the boundaries of sociology, and engaging the segregated disciplines of politics, economy, and education. As Assistant Professor of Social Science, my work has been explicitly inter-disciplinary. I want my research to speak to multiple audiences, and I tend to pursue research topics that can be translated to those outside of the ivy tower. In these ways, my research philosophy on social science also fits the model of intellectual tradition established by Cornell’s ASRC for the past 42 years.

Substantively, my research (and teaching) on racial inequality contributes to the broad topics of African American education, families, racial discourse, and popular/youth culture. Specifically, my research agenda focuses on the social and cultural worlds of African American youth. I seek to understand how the overlapping spheres of family, schooling, and the larger context of race intersect to place black youth at risk while creating advantages for others. In addition, my work addresses how black youth make sense of their own social worlds, particularly how they (re)construct identities and meanings that challenge and/or (re)produce their social status.

In my early career, I have been building a body of research that uses hip-hop as a critical framework for exploring these topics. Few sociologists study hip-hop, but as Houston Baker (1993) argues, hip-hop has the potential to decenter and disrupt accepted intellectual discourse, and can used to reinterpret “traditional” topics in “new” ways.[2] What, exactly, does it mean for a sociologist to conduct hip-hop-related research?

Part of my research agenda involves unpacking the implications of “hip-hop studies,” including the disciplinary formation and impact of hip-hop in teaching and research. In the 1990s, scholars such as Tricia Rose and Todd Boyd demonstrated the salience of a cultural studies model of hip-hop. One of my goals is to articulate the use of theory and research methods in a social science-based approach to hip-hop. In terms of the former, my work engages rap lyrics with insights from German (Max Weber) and British (Colin Campbell) sociologists, the American critical race theories of John J. Jackson, or the cultural anthropology of John Ogbu. Empirically, I want to advance the application of serious research methods in hip-hop
research. For example, my two most recent journal publications are based on computer-assisted, textual analyses of large datasets.

My push for social science into hip-hop studies (and vice-versa) is encouraged by a growing number of scholars who are publishing hip-hop-related manuscripts through large, university presses. S. Craig Watkins (Sociology and Media Studies), Anthony Kwame Harrison (Sociology and African American Studies), and Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar (History and African American Studies), for example, have been tenured and promoted on the basis of their hip-hop-related writing. These individuals are exemplars in the emerging social science field of hip-hop studies, and provide some clues on where to find audience and venues for my research.

**Research Publication Areas**

To date, I am first-author of eleven (11) publications ranging from journal articles, book chapters, and book reviews. My research agenda has been characterized by an interest in racial inequality, with an emphasis on the cultural expressions of black youth. Based on this research perspective, I have published several pieces on race and popular politics; knowledge production and racial discourse; black youth, digital inequality, and social media; hip hop and mothering ideology; and, educational inequality and pedagogy. I am currently doing research in the following three areas:

1) **Black Youth Culture and School Achievement**

Education and “oppositional culture” researchers have primarily focused on micro-level schooling transactions and individual student aspirations, while ignoring the representations of race and achievement (re)produced in the broader youth culture. My research explores how hip-hop culture promotes anti-school behavior, and how we can use insights from hip-hop to reengage black students. I have done similar work in my dissertation, and have spent the last few years rewriting chapters by observing hip-hop in the daily lives of high school students, film, and hip-hop-based education reform efforts. I see a need to interrogate teacher beliefs about youth culture and achievement, including how they make sense of “urban”/“hip-hop” infused fashion, language, and music. I am concerned that black male, teachers/administrators, in particular, seem to police youth expressions. Second, I am extending this research by interviewing rappers about their own school experiences, beliefs about the importance of education, and their (“often strange”) engagement in educational philanthropy. Third, I am using this research to develop hip-hop-based education programs for middle and high school students. I want to know whether the use of hip-hop culture/rap music can boost student engagement and achievement.

2) **Digital Inequality**

Previous research shows that low-income, first-generation, and/or minority youth are not equipped with computer and social media skills. As schooling and the labor market become more “digital,” these youth may be put further at-risk of underachievement and dropout. There is a need to gauge the digital skills of these subgroups and to develop strategies to close the digital gaps. A few of my published writings touch on this aspect of inequality, and my teaching emphasizes the development of new media skills.


I am in the planning stages of a third manuscript on the social and culture history of South Bronx, NY, the birthplace of hip-hop. This project will make contributions to cultural and visual sociology, music and youth culture, social history, and urban studies. Most empirical studies of hip-hop culture (those that go beyond cultural criticism) tend to rely on content analysis of substantive themes in rap lyrics or cultural ethnography of today’s productive spaces. Few researchers have sought to systematically explore the primary documents of hip-hop’s genesis in the 1970s. This project will use Cornell’s Hip Hop Archive— including 1,000 records and live party recordings, the photo collection of famed photographer Joe Conzo Jr. (hip-hop’s first photographer), and more than 500 party and club flyers—to reconstruct hip-hop’s
beginnings. I am interested in exploring the images, language, and vision of those attempting to define and articulate the “new” cultural movement of the early 1970s that had yet to be named as “rap music” or “hip-hop.” In this project, I will seek to combine insights from these primary artifacts with an examination of the political economic of South Bronx to explain how and why this cultural movement emerged. The project is one of revisionist history, as most books on hip-hop history focus on a small set of iconic pioneers in the post-1979 commercialized era. My work will contribute to the literature by focusing on the “forgotten pioneers” and the “lost relics” of the mid-1970s. I am currently seeking additional funding for the project.

Current Book Projects

1. “Remixing Change”: Hip Hop & Obama, A Critical Reader with Erik Nielson (University of Richmond). The purpose of this collection is to explore the political, social, and cultural significance of hip hop in the age of Obama. This volume will offer the first systematic, scholarly analysis of the “Obamafication” of hip hop and the resurgence of political consciousness in mainstream rap music. Through reading Obama’s connection with the hip hop community in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, the volume will help illuminate the contentious and complex interactions between popular culture and contemporary politics. In addition, this book will detail the linkages between youth mobilization, political organizations, identity, and rap music in the US and in global protest movements like the “Arab Spring.”

2. “The School of Hard Knocks”: Hip Hop and the Fight Against Unequal Education. This book examines hip hop and the underachievement of black students. It contains chapters on 1) quantitative content analysis of anti-school lyrics in more than 30,000 rap songs, 2) qualitative interviews and focus groups with black high school students, 3) evaluation of hip hop-based curricula and pedagogical materials used in schools, and 4) the visual analysis of mainstream films involving white teachers who “save” urban schools through hip-hop.
