

The Publishers of (un)Truth And Learning How to Remix

Befriending the Truth edited by Jeffrey Dudiak

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Introduction

Many changes are afoot within culture and the Quaker tradition. As Quaker practitioners continue to develop contextual theology within their contexts, we can expect that these remixes and attempts at renewal will in many ways look and feel different from the pre-existing Quaker communities. Questions arise from within this changing climate: what is happening when remixes within any given tradition are made, how can these pre-existing communities think about these remixes in a way that creates space for them to develop and can this kind of practice be nurtured within the Quaker tradition?

On the one hand, there is much for the Quaker tradition to learn from being in with Hip-Hop culture's practice of remix. Remix is an ecosystem of old and new living together seamlessly. It is a concrete image of what it looks like to have tradition honored, while something new is birthed. Remix is what it looks like to try and carry one's tradition forward into new contexts. On the other hand, remixes are often not welcomed, especially by those who see themselves as the "defenders of copy-right." Instead, remix is often perceived and treated as though it were untruth; something blasphemous and heretical. A remix seen as an untruth is something that is rejected at once. And yet, embedded within the early Quaker tradition was this impulse to remix. This might explain why "Primitive Christianity Revived" was often received about as well as a goblet filled with hemlock.

The First Publishers of Remix

The first renditions of the Quaker movement expanded rapidly but it was not because the way before them was an open-road. At almost every turn the truth they preached was met with opposition. At the heart of the Quaker tradition is a tension with copy-right, or as we may say within more theological circles, "received truth." As early Quaker experience suggests: truth often first arrives as untruth. "Impossible!" "Heretics!" "Excommunicate the infidels!" Or a little closer to home: "kick those churches out because they see things differently from us." "Fire those pastors, staff, faculty, because they are different from us." These are some of the phrases we hear from the "defenders of

copy-right” today, and these are the same kinds of things early Friends heard from “defenders of the truth” back then. This is because prophetic truth, truth that pushes a community towards new life, is threatening to the status quo.

Not only does truth of this kind disrupt the status quo with new life but it can often appear that these purveyors of this new remix are playing fast and loose with sacred doctrine. Consider for example, the response that early Friends received after Fell’s “Women’s Speaking Justified,” the constant theological debates around whether early Friends were Trinitarian, or their refusal to affirm the church’s creeds. There were well-known, and accepted ways of interpreting texts like 1 Timothy, plenty of received theological arguments and the Trinity, and acceptance of the creeds yet, drawing on the same biblical texts, Fell and others came out with very different interpretations. They challenged the copy-right of the received truth and took it in new directions.

Poaching Within Participatory Culture

One way to understand what early Friends were doing is to draw upon insights from participatory culture where this is understood as “poaching” (Jenkins 1992). Within participatory culture, poaching is cultural bricolage where there is an interplay of new light shed on old texts. In Michel de Certeau’s, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), he argues that those on the margins, or those who operate from a “weak” perspective, use this tactic to create new meaning. Poaching is a tactic of rereading. Fans appropriate favorite texts within their lives, showing how it connects emotionally and socially. This describes an active, participatory process where fans within a subculture make a break with bourgeois interpretive strategies. It is a,

...Series of ‘advances and retreats, tactics and games played with the text,’ as a type of cultural bricolage through which readers fragment texts and reassemble the broken shards according to their own blueprints, salvaging bits and pieces of the found material in making sense of their own social experience. (Jenkins 26)

In Fox’s time, broken shards is what was left of Christianity after Christendom’s triumph. Today, after imperialism, late-market capitalism, and modernity, the same can be said again. We live in a world of fragmented narratives and identity. Broken shards wait to be reassembled within new contexts, salvaging both Quakerism and Christianity in its aftermath.

Critical to understanding the reaction against such tactics is that poaching is not authorized by the “experts of the law” and the “high priests” of our time. Often, poaching circumvents such tradition authority and challenges the interpretations that have maintained the status quo of a community. As Jenkins argues:

...Fans enthusiastically embrace favored texts and attempt to integrate media representation into their own social experience. Unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise, the fans assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons. (Jenkins 1992: 18)

Poaching makes space for many voices to be lifted up, bypassing expert paradigms. Collective intelligence and decentralized notions of authority are central to participatory culture (Daniels 2015: 86–94). Poaching is itself one of the tools that makes this decentralization possible. Just like early Friends, fans who poach are often people writing from the margins of society whether it is culturally, economically or politically. They are those who have been silenced by popular culture, or mainstream media and yet refuse to remain “spectators” in their lives. To summarize, poaching is a move from consumer of culture to a producer that makes space for many voices and challenges institutionalized power’s singularity of meanings (cf. Daniels 2015: 69).

There is Nothing New

Like poaching, remix is a collage of texts, songs, or other art forms that is derivative in nature. The power of remix is in its ability to leverage symbols, pay homage to the past while creating something new, and challenge received understandings of whatever text it draws upon. As Lawrence Lessig writes in his book, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in The Hybrid Economy*,

“Whether text or beyond text, remix is collage; it comes from combining elements of [Read Only or Copy-right] culture; it succeeds by leveraging the meaning created by the reference to build something new.”

Remix culture finds its origins in Jamaican reggae of the 60’s and 70s. The first rappers and the most important trio of early deejays all hailed from Jamaica. Jamaican born DJ Kool Herc is the “God father” of hip-hop. Without Kool Herc there would be no Run DMC, Tribe Called Quest, J. Dilla, Mos Def or Jay-Z. These early hip-hoppers took the idea of sampling to a new level by using readily available digital technology to borrow fragments from old records and combine them with new ones. Hip hop scholar Dalton Higgins writes, “To some, sampling is a way of paying homage to legendary music masters who might otherwise have been forgotten.” Today, the term “remix” is not only used within Hip-Hop culture but in other forms of music, video, art and literature (Cf. Navas, Eduardo, et al). Rapper Jay-Z says that:

Part of how contradictions are reconciled in rap comes from the nature of the music. I’ve rapped over bhangra, electronica, soup samples, classic rock, alternative rock, indie rock, the blues, doo-wop, bolero, jazz, Afrobeat, gypsy ballads, Luciano Pavarotti, and the theme song of a Broadway musical. That’s hip-hop: Anything can work—there are no laws, no rules. Hip-

hop created a space where all kinds of music could meet, without contradiction. (Jay-Z 2010: 240)

There is much to be said about the characteristics of remix but three factors are central. First, remix at its most basic takes a “sample” of an original song, text, or other form of art and puts it in dialogue with something else. This is often something that is reflective of the remixer’s own cultural context. The selection of what is being remixed is not willy nilly. That which is selected is chosen because of its symbolic power or because of its seemingly stark contrast with that which it is put in dialogue with.

One example of this is found in Jay-Z’s remix of the popular Broadway musical *Annie*, “Hard Knock Life.” In an interview with Terry Gross, Jay-Z says that he remixed the song because it resonated with his own life, “‘When the TV version [of *Annie*] came on, I was drawn to it,’ he says. ‘It was the struggle of this poor kid in this environment and how her life changed. ... It immediately resonated’” (Gross 2010). Because the song held meaning, not only for him personally, but within the broader culture he leveraged its reference as a means to discuss life in the ghettos of Brooklyn.

I wasn’t worried about the clash between the hard lyrics (where all my n**** with the rubber grips, buck shots) and the image of redheaded Annie. Instead, I found the mirror between the two stories- that Annie’s story was mine, and mine was hers, and the song was the place where our experiences weren’t contradictions, just different dimensions of the same reality...I felt like the chorus to that song perfectly captured what little kids in the ghetto felt every day “‘Stead of kisses, we get kicked.” We might not all have literally been orphans, but a whole generation of us had basically raised ourselves in the streets. (Jay-Z 2010: 240)

Jay-Z shows how artists within remix culture build upon pre-established meanings and symbols of “cultural artifact and compress that meaning—through image, repeated chorus, or another well-known reference—to make a new ‘recontextualized’ creation even more meaningful” (Daniels 2015: 91).

Second, remix is one of the ways artists in our culture pay homage to the past while creating something new. As Henry Jenkins writes, “one cannot be expected to be celebrated without being appropriated.” Remix is honest about its sources. The purpose of a remix is that those consuming the product “get” the reference while be surprised by its new application. A sample or track within a remix that is too obscure to catch the listener’s attention loses its power and meaning. It works the other around way too. A sample or track that overrides the remixer’s own creativity or sounds too much like the original borders on simply being a “copy-cat” or “cover.”

There is a dramatic and important difference between a cover and a remix. A good cover is one that is as close to the original as possible. It also pays homage. A cover band is playing music it loves and

wishes to keep alive. But there is little ingenuity in being a copy-cat even if there is a lot of musical skill and respect for the subject to do it well. A remix requires love, skill and ingenuity. It requires that one has both the desire to pay homage, while at the same time the courage to transgress boundaries. Remix is doing things with texts that haven't been done before and seeing if it works. It requires a commitment to the original piece of art, as well as a playfulness and freedom that looks from the outside a lot like complete disregard. Another way to say it is that a remixer is someone good at "faithful betrayal" (Daniels, 2010).

Third, remix, just like poaching, challenges the status quo. This is in large part because of its emergence out of marginalized experiences and communities within Hip-Hop culture and its playfulness with often-sacrosanct texts and artifacts. It is also because remix is many-voiced. It thrives of open-ended participation of people who are often not recognized as "experts" in one way or another. Appropriating and reinterpreting stories, texts, and practices within new contexts, especially when it is in service to those who are marginalized, further pushes remix to the margins. A good remix will challenge and even interrupt sanctioned expert interpretations or understandings.

Therefore, remix is often in conflict with those wishing to protect copy-right. Those who are interested in maintaining a "read only" culture will struggle to or downright reject remix culture. Remix threatens "read only." But remix culture does not try to abolish copy-right either. Remix embraces hybridity. We might say that remix reveals the interplay between the old and the new, between tradition (read only, R/O) and innovation (read write, R/W). Or in theological terms, it exists in the overlap between priest and prophet. Both poles need to co-exist, "In protecting R/O culture, we shouldn't kill off the potential for R/W" (Lessig 2008: 90). Remix holds the tension of tradition and innovation, working together to create something new without being antiquarian or starting with a clean slate.

Remixing Nude

One compelling example of how some are embracing remix culture is found in rock and roll. After the release of their now infamous pay-what-you-want 2007 album "In Rainbows," the British rock band Radiohead launched a website that invited fans to take apart their song "Nude" and remix it. To make this as easy as possible, and undoubtedly to capitalize on fandom's inevitable response, they split the song up into five separate stems or tracks (guitar, vocals, bass, drums, etc.) that could be downloaded from iTunes for a dollar each and then edit the song in their favorite music editor. Once the track was done fans could upload it to the radioheadremix.com (no longer available) and people could vote for their favorite remixes.

The response was incredible. In all, the group received 2,254 remixes of the song. They received 274,181 votes and 2,522,031 unique visitors to the site in all (Daniels 2013: 78). Two notable remixes are the Spor's remix and the Ricardo Rergis' incredible music video where recreates the song using obsolete technologies. Radiohead is one of a few "mainstream" rock bands to so fully embrace remix culture like this (Cf. Ubben 2011). By inviting fans to remix their work - something they continue to do with subsequent albums - they are keeping fans engaged, helping to spread their work, keeping it relevant and contextual. This is one example of what it looks like to embrace remix participatory culture.

Becoming a Publisher of (Un)Truth

It is not easy to make a remix, let alone a good one. It takes more than just skill. It takes commitment to one's subculture or tradition. Remix was born out of a desire to honor the masters of R&B, Soul, Gospel, and Motown. Early DJ's and rappers weren't remixing stuff they didn't have an emotional investment in. They were drawing on stuff they cared deeply about and knew well.

A good remix takes knowledge and discernment to know what the most vibrant and lively samples are that and which ones do not help move the music forward. A deejay must have certain virtues or dispositions that help him or her adjudicate between samples, to know the context of the group she or he is playing to, and know when to drop a properly-placed beat. Therefore, it is critical that someone who wishes to remix well be an apprentice of his or her tradition (Cf. MacIntyre 1990: 61-62). They must know it inside and out, like the back of their hand. They must know what the obscure "tracks" are, and which ones have lost meaning. They need to know the contexts, the trials, the sufferings, the stories behind the original artwork before they can faithfully appropriate it within new contexts. Like a good Jazz improvisationalist, a remixer must first find oneself thoroughly within the tradition before they are able to innovate out of it (cf. Chad Stephenson 2010). Henry Jenkins puts it:

Historically, young artists learned from established masters, sometimes contributing to the older artists' works, often following their patterns, before they developed their own styles and techniques...these young artists learn what they can from the stories and images that are most familiar to them. Building their first efforts upon existing cultural materials allows them to focus their energies elsewhere, mastering their craft, perfecting their skills, and communicate their ideas. (Jenkins 2006b: 182)

It is also true that one must not always remain an apprentice. Ideally, the apprentice eventually becomes the master-craftsman. Apprentices must move from simply repeating what they have been told toward gaining control of and expressing their own style. They need to learn how to read and

write. Just reading is not good enough. Cover bands have their place, but this isn't the kind of creativity that is going to bring about the kind of renewed significance Quakers long for today.

Five Features of a Good Remix

The pressing question that arises out of this discussion is what constitutes a good remix? Some remixes work better than others. Even less are brilliant. But every attempt to remix is itself an attempt to internalize one's tradition in new and creative ways. Every act of remix is itself a practice run or as Friends might say, "an experiment in truth." And if the remix is done well it will have a lasting impact. Gamaliel, the pharisee, showed a proclivity towards remix when he he said,

"So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" (Acts 5:38–39 NRSV)

So how do we go about thinking about the qualities of a good remix? Or to move further back in this argument, how do we know when something really is just "untruth" and when it is something new of God emerging from out of the old?

Building on my previous work, I argue that a good remix within the context of traditions, has at least five components to it (cf Daniels 2015:39–40; 61–62; 111–112).

First, the original piece of art should still be recognizable. As missiologist Stephen Bevans argues, a new "synthesis" within contextual theology shows that the main intentions of the prior tradition remain intact and is leveraged in new ways. As mentioned above, Jay-Z's "Hard Knock Life" is a helpful example. The chorus from the Broadway musical is sampled in a way that ties the new song together.

Second, there is something new about the remix. There needs to be a contextual component, some genuinely new insight or connection that is made, that in turn reveals something new about both the apprentices' context and the original art.

Third, a good remix works. They take various threads and put them together in a way that make sense, they are on key, the beats line up, regardless of whatever the tensions are on the surface. As Jay-Z said above, "Hip-hop created a space where all kinds of music could meet, without contradiction." In Bevans' terms, this is the criteria of orthopraxy. "Any theology that appears Christian at first but leads to non-Christian practices is not 'orthodox.' While, conversely, a theology

that may at first appear to be non-Christian but leads to clearly Christian oriented practices is justifiable” (Daniels 62).

Fourth, remixes that last are affirmed by a consensual process. There may be a DJ at work, helping to bring various threads together, but it must be affirmed within a community-wide discernment process. Within the Hip-Hop community, for a good remix to work it must move the people on the dance floor. When the crowd moves to beat you know you have a good remix on your hands. Within a tradition that “crowd” are those within a community of shared practice and belief. “A community that knows a good remix from a bad one will be better able to know what parts of the context that should be kept and which part should be exorcised” (Daniels 2015: 112).

Fifth, the new remix must itself remain open to new remixes, new revisions, as a means of extending the tradition. In MacIntyrean thought, it is seen as “the best account so far.” Meaning the apprentices who remix will expect themselves to be remixed and will even help teach others how to do it. This means that for those who understand remix well, the subsequent remix within a tradition is not protected under copy-right but is shared via Read-write status as we saw in the Radiohead example.

Primitive Christianity Remixed

What made early Quakerism alive was that it was remix in real-time, embodied by a beloved community, powered by the leadership of Jesus who is present (and who is and was himself quite the remixer). They did all the things that have been talked about here in this essay. Their teachings and practices around women was a remix. Hat honor, a remix. Refusal to take oaths, a remix. Waiting worship as communion with Jesus, a remix. Naylor’s Palm-Sunday-like processional into Bristol, another remix. And on and on. George Fox and Margaret Fell and many early Friends were some of the greatest theological deejays ever to live. They were steeped in the Christian tradition, the biblical texts, the practices that were essential to a lively faith. And as apprentices of their tradition they also creatively engaged with finding new ways to breathe relevance and significance into their tradition through practices that look a lot like remix today.

And yet, their “remixes” while successful in some segments of society were vehemently rejected as “untruth” by those in power. Early Quaker remixers were met with the same kind of resistance and outright violence by those wishing to protect “copy-right,” just as prophetic voices often have been, and as new artists and innovators and remixers are today.

The ability to bring about renewal within a tradition will be dependent upon the capacity of its leaders to make space for and even nurture the kinds of apprentices needed to bring about the renewal Friends desire. If it is a good remix the new creation that is created will clearly be able to demonstrate its shared convictions with its predecessors while also being something recognizably

new and contextually significant. If the remix is good people will get out on the dance floor and start to move.

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