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Promoting Academic Literacy with Urban Youth through Engaging Hip-hop Culture

ERNEST MORRELL AND JEFFREY M. R. DUNCAN-ANDRADE

The *Digest of Education Statistics* forecasts that, during the next decade, the number of ethnic minority teachers will shrink to 5 percent, while the enrollment of ethnic minority children in America's schools will grow to 41 percent. As classrooms across the country become increasingly diverse, determining how to connect in significant ways across multiple lines of difference may be the greatest challenge facing teachers today. Teachers in new century schools must meet this challenge and find ways to forge meaningful relationships with students who come from different worlds, while also helping these students develop academic skills and the skills needed to become critical citizens in a multicultural democracy. This challenge also presents a tremendous opportunity for progressive, critical educators who wish to promote curricula and pedagogies that value and affirm the cultural practices of urban students and members of urban communities.

As English teachers at an urban high school in northern California, we witnessed the impact of Hip-hop music and culture on all of our students. We saw at the same time that its influence seemed to transcend race, as students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds were strongly influenced by the culture (Mahiri). At the same time, through looking at the literacy practices associated with engagement (Barton and Hamilton 7–15), we also saw that students in this non-mainstream cultural practice (Ferdman 181–204) were exhibiting the critical and analytical skills that we wanted them to bring to academic texts from the canon. We ultimately decided that we could utilize Hip-hop music and culture to forge a common and critical discourse that was centered upon the lives of the students, yet transcended the racial divide and allowed us to tap into students' lives in ways that promoted academic literacy and critical consciousness.

Baker, Farley, and George all argue that the creative people who are talking about youth culture in a way that makes sense happen to be rappers, and the youth are responding in many ways. Hip-hop artists sold more than 81 million CDs, tapes, and albums in 1998, more than any other genre of music. Although Hip-hop got its start in black America, more than 70 percent of albums are purchased by whites. Taking their cue from the music industry, other major corporations are creating advertising campaigns that cater to the "Hip-hop generation." Even mainstream Hollywood, with films such as Warren Beatty's *Bulworth*, is dealing with issues related to Hip-hop. Although the music is largely criticized by politicians, religious groups, and some women's groups, its proponents claim that it is here to stay, as it represents a resistant voice of urban youth through its articulation of problems that this generation and all Americans face on a daily basis.

Rose and Powell argue strongly that Hip-hop music is the representative voice of urban youth, since the genre was created by and for them. Powell states:

> [Rap] emerged from the streets of inner-city neighborhoods as a genuine reflection of the hopes, concerns, and aspirations of urban Black

> youth in this, the last quarter of the 20th century. Rap is essentially a homemade, street-level musical genre . . . Rap lyrics concentrate primarily on the contemporary African American experience . . . Every issue within the Black community is subject to exposition in the rap arena. Hit rap tunes have broached touchy subjects such as sex, sexism, racism, and crime . . . Rap artists, they contend, "don't talk that love stuff, but [rather] educate the listeners." (245)

Many rappers consider themselves as educators and see at least a portion of their mission as promoting consciousness within their communities (Lipsitz 23–48, Rose 277–91). As articulated by Freire, the raising of critical consciousness in people who have been oppressed is a first step in helping them to obtain critical literacy and, ultimately, liberation from oppressive ideologies. The influence of rap as a voice of resistance and liberation for urban youth proliferates through such artists as Lauryn Hill, Pras, Wyclef Jean of the Refugee Camp, Public Enemy, Nas, and Mos Def, who endeavor to bring an accurate yet critical depiction of the urban situation to a Hip-hop generation.

Giroux (27–28, 31) takes a much less celebratory view of the impact of Hip-hop culture on working-class urban youth but, nevertheless, agrees that it is a worthy topic of study in urban schools. His work addresses the crisis confronting youth, whom he labels a generation under siege, where they are enmeshed in a culture of violence coded by race and class. He speaks to the negative connotations of youth culture promoted in popular media that propel youth toward mistrust, alienation, misogyny, violence, apathy, and the development of fugitive cultures. This same media, he contends, has commercialized the working class body and criminalized black youth. Critical educators, he argues, must consider elements of popular culture such as Hip-hop music as a serious site for social knowledge to be discussed, interrogated, and critiqued. Whether the power in its messages can be used for good or ill, few can dispute the impact of Hip-hop culture on the lives of working class urban youth.

We further argue that Hip-hop texts are literary texts and can be used to scaffold literary terms and concepts and ultimately foster literary interpretations. Hip-hop texts are rich in imagery and metaphor and can be used to teach irony, tone, diction, and point of view. Also, Hip-hop texts can be analyzed for theme, motif, plot, and character development. It is possible to perform feminist, Marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytic, or postmodernist critiques of particular Hip-hop texts, the genre as a whole, or subgenres such as "gangsta" rap. As Lee points out, once learned, these analytic and interpretative tools developed through engagement with popular cultural texts can be applied to canonical texts as well. If one goal of critical educators is to empower urban students to analyze complex literary texts, Hip-hop can be used as a bridge linking the seemingly vast span between the streets and the world of academics. Hip-hop texts, given their thematic nature, can be equally valuable as springboards for critical discussions about contemporary issues facing urban youth. Provocative rap texts can be brought into the classroom, and discussion topics may be produced from a listening/reading of the text. These discussions may lead to more thoughtful analyses, which could translate into expository writing, the production of poetic texts, or a commitment to social action for community empowerment.

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Teaching Hip-hop as a music and culture of resistance can facilitate the development of critical consciousness in urban youth. Analyzing the critical social commentary produced by the Refugee Camp, Public Enemy, or Nas may lead to consciousness-raising discussions, essays, and research projects attempting to locate an explanation for the current state of affairs for urban youngsters. The knowledge reflected in these lyrics could engender discussions of esteem, power, place, and purpose or encourage students to further their own knowledge of urban sociology and politics. In this way, Hip-hop music should stand on its own merit in the academy and be a worthy subject of study in its own right rather than necessarily leading to something more "acceptable" like a Shakespeare text. It can, however, serve as a bridge between urban cultures and the literary canon.

Given the social, cultural, and academic relevance of Hip-hop music and culture, we designed a classroom unit with three objectives:

1. to utilize our students' involvement with Hip-hop culture to scaffold the critical and analytical skills that they already possess
2. to provide students with the awareness and confidence they need to transfer these skills into/onto the literary texts from the canon
3. to enable students to critique the messages sent to them through the popular cultural media that permeate their everyday lives

The unit was designed to incorporate Hip-hop music into a "traditional" senior English poetry unit. Our desires were to increase motivation and participation in discussions and assignments and to teach critical essay writing and literary terminology in the context of, among other types of poetry, rap music. We also wanted to situate Hip-hop historically and socially and discuss its inception as a response to urban post-industrialism. Further, we wished to encourage youth to view elements of popular culture through a critical lens and to critique messages sent to them through popular media, as well as to help students understand the intellectual integrity, literary merit, and social critique contained within elements of their own youth culture.

> The second major portion of the unit involved a group presentation of a canonical poem along with a Hip-hop text.

Several goals and objectives for this unit combined our simultaneous agendas of tapping into popular culture and facilitating academic and critical literacy development. To accomplish this, we needed to cover the poetry of the Elizabethan Age, the Puritan Revolution, and the Romantics, which were part of the district-mandated curriculum for twelfth grade English and which they would be expected to have knowledge of for the Advanced Placement exam and college English. It was also important to learn about the poets in the context of the literary and historical periods in which they wrote to gain a greater understanding of the role poetry plays as a critique of its contemporary society.

In addition to a critical exposure to the literary canon, we felt it important to concentrate on the development of issues and ideas presented in poetry and song as a vehicle to expository writing. Our objectives were as follows:

- to develop oral and written debate skills
- to facilitate the ability to work in groups
- to help students to deliver formal public presentations
- to teach students how to critique a poem/song in a critical essay
- to help students develop note-taking skills in lectures and presentations
- to help students become comfortable writing in different poetic forms such as the sonnet, elegy, and ballad

We began the unit with an overview of poetry in general, attempting to redefine poetry and the role of the poet in society. We emphasized the importance of understanding the historical period in which a poem was written to come to a deeper interpretation of the poem. In the introductory lecture, we outlined all of the historical/literary periods that would be covered in the unit (Elizabethan, Puritan Revolution, Romantic and Metaphysical Poets from England, Civil War, Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Movement, and Post-Industrial Revolution in the United States). It was our intention to place Hip-hop music—as a post-industrial art form—right alongside these other historical periods and poems so that the students would be able to use a period and genre of poetry they were familiar with as a lens with which to examine the other literary works and also to encourage the students to reevaluate the manner in which they view elements of their popular culture.

The second major portion of the unit involved a group presentation of a canonical poem along with a Hip-hop text. The groups were commissioned to prepare a justifiable interpretation of their texts, situating each within its specific historical and literary period, while also analyzing the linkages between the two. There were eight groups for this portion who were, after a week of preparation, each given a day to present to the class and have their arguments critiqued by their peers. The groups were assigned as follows:

Group	*Poem*	*Song*
1	"Kubla Khan," Coleridge	"If I Ruled the World," Nas
2	"Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot	"The Message," Grand Master Flash
3	"O Me! O Life!", Whitman	"Don't Believe the Hype," Public Enemy
4	"Immigrants in Our Own Land," Baca	"The World Is a Ghetto," Geto Boys
5	"Sonnet 29," Shakespeare	"Affirmative Action," Nas
6	"The Canonization," Donne	"Manifest," Refugee Camp
7	"Repulse Bay," Chin	"Good Day," Ice Cube
8	"Still I Rise," Angelou	"Cell Therapy," Goodie Mob

Other poems used for this unit were "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes and "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" by Thomas Gray.

In addition to the group presentations, students were asked to complete an anthology of ten poems that contained an elegy, a ballad, a sonnet, and a poem that described a place with which they were familiar. The title of the poem was to be the place that was featured. Also, the students were asked to write a poem that conveyed a mood; a poem that dealt with a political, social, or economic problem that was important to them (e.g., racism, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, police brutality, poverty, homelessness); a love poem; a poem that celebrated a particular facet of life (e.g., first date, summertime, graduation); and two open poems that dealt with whatever subject students wanted and written in any style they desired. Following the group presentations, we held a poetry reading, where each student selected five original poems to read for the class, giving brief comments on each poem such as the context or a special meaning. For the outside of class assignment, students were allowed to pick any song of their choice and write a five-to-seven page critical essay on that song. They were also required to submit a transcription of the song.

The unit was consistent with the original goals of being culturally and socially relevant, critically exposing students to the literary canon, and facilitating the development of college-level expository writing. The positioning of Hip-hop as a genre of poetry written largely in response to post-industrialism was a concept to which the students were able to relate. The issues of joblessness, poverty, rage, and alienation all had resonance to the urban youth culture of which the students were all a part. The forefronting of Hip-hop as a genre of poetry also helped to facilitate the transition to understanding the role individual poets may have played in their own societies.

The students were able to generate some excellent interpretations as well as make interesting linkages between the canonical poems and the rap texts. For instance, one group articulated that both Grand Master Flash and T.S. Eliot gazed out into their rapidly deteriorating societies and saw a "wasteland." Both poets were essentially apocalyptic in nature as they witnessed death, disease, and decay. Also, both poems talk about a message, indicating the role of a poet in society as a messenger or prophet. Another group discussed the role of allegory in their two texts, where both John Donne and the artists from the Refugee Camp utilize relationships with lovers to symbolize the love and agony poets can feel for their societies.

The unit was consistent with the basic tenets of critical pedagogy in that it was situated in the experiences of the students (as opposed to those of the teacher), called for critical dialogue and a critical engagement of the text, and related the texts to larger social and political issues. The students were not only engaged and able to use this expertise and positionality as subjects of the post-industrial world to make powerful connections to canonical texts, they were also able to have fun learning about a culture and a genre of music with which they had great familiarity. Ultimately, our experiences introducing Hip-hop and other elements of popular culture into traditional curricula lead us to believe that there are countless possibilities for urban educators who wish to jump outside the box and tap into the worlds of their students in order to make more powerful connections with traditional academic texts and affirm, in meaningful ways, the everyday lives of those they teach.

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EJ 25 Years AGO

Teachers Withhold Judgment, Gain Respect

"Isn't it true that those teachers we learned to respect and grew to love never saw us as interchangeable faces or inviolate numbers spawned by testing agencies and nurtured in guidance departments? They never presumed to predetermine our station in life, never tagged us as 'promiscuous gum-snapping hairdresser' or 'hung-over auto mechanic.' The best teachers, if they judged us at all, did not look to others for that judgment. They saw not what we appeared to be but what, in truth, we were, and more importantly, what kinds of *humane* beings we might become."

Charles F. Greiner. "Humanizing Education: The Possible Dream." *EJ* 66.8 (1977): 28–31.