IT'S DEEPER THAN RAP: A STUDY OF HIP HOP MUSIC AND COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

A Dissertation in

English

by

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In this dissertation, I assume that hip-hop as a rhetorical practice should be central to the teaching of composition. I focus on metaphors, techniques, and prominent artists of hip-hop and link them to some well-known concepts and questions in composition studies. Specifically, I link metaphors such as flow and work to the metaphor of voice; techniques such as ciphas, mixtapes, and emceeing to collaborative learning, authoritative writing, and teacher performance; the monumental figure Lauryn Hill to the romantic pragmatic tradition that informs progressive teaching; and the technique of sampling to the practice of critical memory in student writing. In particular, this dissertation aims to contribute to composition studies, African American Studies, and the burgeoning field of hip-hop studies through its focus on hip-hop as a contemporary form of African American rhetoric that is instructive for teachers of rhetoric and writing.
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1. Deeper Than Rap

This dissertation explores why and how hip-hop as a rhetorical practice should be central to the teaching of composition. I link hip-hop texts, practices, and ritual performances directly to composition pedagogy, using their cultural influence to frame writing for youth identities.

This project grows out of several ongoing attempts to produce a coherent understanding of hip-hop as critical practice. Hip-hop culture began as a local youth movement in New York City during the 1970s. Connected to the experimental music practices of local DJs such as Kool Herc, hip-hop developed into a community-building social activity, one organized around urban street culture. Most recollections of Hip-hop’s beginnings cite neighborhood block parties as the origin of hip-hop culture, nostalgically referencing how DJs would power their stereos and equipment with energy from streetlights. However, hip-hop grew, rather quickly, from a type of music performed at block parties into a set of cultural practices that included rapping, street dancing, and graffiti art. Nevertheless, rap music remains the culture’s most visible and commercially appealing persuasive force. It continues to most dramatically spur hip-hop’s growth from a set of local practices in New York City into a national and international culture. Hip-hop now represents not merely a type of music but a social perspective that continues to shape identities, customs, and beliefs. As a dominant influence on worldwide youth culture, hip-hop’s growth has extended into academe, leading to the formation of hip-hop studies as an academic field.
Since Tricia Rose’s 1994 publication of *Black Noise*—an ethnographic study of hip-hop culture—a steady stream of hip-hop scholarship has developed. Most of this scholarship has been somewhat interdisciplinary in method, drawing heavily from literary and cultural studies. However, the area of hip-hop research this project seeks to contribute to is Hip-Hop Based Education (HHBE). HHBE represents an area of study that rethinks educational policies by examining the relationship among hip-hop culture, formal education, and youth identities. In particular, this project aspires to link the cultural study of hip-hop to critical pedagogy and theories of teaching. Some recent works affiliated with this area of study are Kermit Campbell’s *Getting Our Groove On*, H. Samy Alim’s *Roc the Mic*, and Marc Lamont Hill’s *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life*. These texts represent three full-length studies that derive from a desire to more fully articulate hip-hop’s connection to the ways students currently engage and perform hip-hop identities as they negotiate formal schooling. It is from this perspective that I propose a formal study of hip-hop rhetoric and composition pedagogy to articulate some theoretical and practical values that hip-hop can afford teachers and students.

For some time now, I have grappled with hip-hop’s complex relationship to my own literate and rhetorical practices. I’ve worked to understand how and why hip-hop has and continues to inform my teaching and reading habits. In this search, I have found that I am not alone in this concern, but I have also found that beyond some literary and linguistic analyses of rap texts there have been very few articulations of hip-hop’s relationship to rhetorical education. But as Cornel West notes, hip-hop represents something much broader than popular urban music; it
represents a critical practice connected to a tradition of black rhetoric and music that is deeply concerned with the circulation of inequity and injustice throughout the social world (“On Afro-American Music” 483). In this way, it represents a contemporary rhetorical practice that moves far beyond the consumption of commercial rap music. In particular, a rhetorical study of hip-hop should engage concepts such as voice, style, delivery, identity, community, literacy, and memory in ways that broaden discussions about composition and rhetorical theory. Thus, I engage each of these concepts. More specifically, I trace the concepts’ functions within hip-hop and link them to composition and teaching concerns. For example, I consider the metaphors of flow and work within hip-hop culture as a way of rethinking ongoing discussions in composition studies about language, voice, and identity.

I discuss hip-hop and composition as equal and related types of rhetoric, that is, the effective use of language to persuade, inform, or identify with a person or persons. I differentiate the term composition instruction from composition; composition for this study represents a critical, identity-forming, democratic practice. Thus, at times I use the terms composition and rhetoric interchangeably. While composition is a term often used to refer to the study and teaching of formal writing practices, it has also come to mean the articulation and performance of language as a process for shaping one’s life. In particular, such a conception of composition directs our attention to the social and political significance of composing language. In Amid the Fall, Dreaming of Eden: Du Bois, King, Malcolm X and Emancipatory Composition, Bradford Stull explains that composition is an
act of representation central to negotiating and restructuring unequal power relations (3-5). He views language use as a socio-political practice for performing, maintaining, and developing one’s citizenship. Thus, I use the term *composition* both to indicate an inquiry into teaching practice and as a rhetorical practice deeply connected to the way people use language to deliberate about common concerns.

Throughout this work, I use the term *hip-hop rhetoric* to refer to the ways hip-hop composers or *hip-hop heads* use hip-hop language and other hip-hop practices to persuade, inform, deliberate, or sharpen one’s understanding of language and composing. In this way, I attempt to identify a group of people by their collective social and language practices. Unlike some previous studies, I do not use hip-hop to refer to a subculture particular to an ethnic group or region. Instead, I use it to refer to students and persons who locate themselves within a collective or a public that consumes, produces, and deliberates about a common set of texts. As previously mentioned, hip-hop has become a worldwide cultural phenomenon, one that is taken up and performed in unique ways across the globe. Therefore, while I do not deny hip-hop’s origins within black culture or rap’s origins as an African American rhetorical phenomenon, I also do not want to uncritically discuss it as simply something “urban Black kids do.” Although it is something they “do” or perform, it is not exclusive to them. Nor should it be treated, uncritically, as a synonym for urban black youth.

My interest in studying hip-hop as a form of rhetoric central to composition instruction and composition theory represents, in part, an attempt to understand hip-
hop’s connection to youth identity formation. As Dexter Gordon points out, identity is, at least in part, a rhetorical construction. In other words, identity and ideology are not so much the results of committed philosophical beliefs, but contingent rhetorical responses to lived experiences (6). Gordon’s work proceeds from two assumptions, a) that rhetoric functions as a tool for creating and recreating one’s reality and b) that rhetoric produces audiences and political stances by compelling individuals to participate in the circulation (listening, reading and writing) of texts—speeches, written texts, music—throughout a discourse (33). Similar to Gordon’s work, I try to understand how student identities form, at least in part, through a set of collective responses to issues and concerns related to hip-hop culture. A deeper understanding of hip-hop and hip-hop rhetorical practices can suggest ways of rethinking certain assumptions about education and writing in relation to an increasingly diverse and hip-hop-oriented generation of students.

A primary goal of this study is to challenge and complicate certain thinking about the teaching of composition for the current generation of students and those on the educational horizon. I draw on hip-hop to achieve this because the spirit of hip-hop derives from an understanding that things are never perfect and could always be changed for the better. By looking at the ways hip-hop functions in the lives of students, I am attempting to extend and complicate hip-hop’s relationship to formal schooling culture. As some scholars have noted, there is a dearth of scholarship about hip-hop that moves beyond the use of rap music to support traditional schooling practices (Kirkland 2008; Hill 2008). Most HHBE research seems to focus primarily on hip-hop’s value for motivating students to engage in
traditional literate practices. However, given hip-hop’s function as a critical and performance practice among today’s youth, it is perhaps more beneficial to discuss its own direct connection to rhetorical education and the development of critical interpretive communities. How does a Hip-hop perspective compel teachers to educate students not only to perform specific tasks or develop particular knowledge, but to also use their education to address public problems?

Accordingly, another goal of the study is to suggest how hip-hop writing pedagogies can be useful to critical pedagogical scholarship. Critical pedagogy represents an area of study that is concerned with raising the consciousness of students to enable them to address the unequal power relations of their wider cultures. I suggest that hip-hop should be understood, to a certain degree, as an “unquiet pedagogy” because it contributes to discussions about the rhetorical nature of teaching and critical pedagogy in general. Unquiet pedagogy represents an intellectual approach for engaging the location and context of student and teacher experiences with troublesome topics that have social and political implications.

Education activist Paulo Freire explains,

> Because an unquiet pedagogy is preoccupied with the uncertainties, of the culture of the classroom, language and thought, home and school language, cultural literacy and multicultural education, reading and meaning, writing and composing, it is, by its nature, a pedagogy that requires investigation. (Freire “Foreword” X)
In the introduction to an *Unquiet Pedagogy*, the book in which Freire’s above-referenced foreword appears, Eleanor Kutz and Hephzibah Roskelly ask readers and teachers to begin to investigate the ways that teaching is shaped by culture, society, and tradition. My study will contribute to recent studies and discussions of rhetorical education and critical pedagogy because, as Freire, Kutz, and Roskelly would have it, it focuses attention on what it might mean to engage student experiences and public problems that can at times be uncomfortable but important to the construction of knowledge and social relationships.

Given hip-hop’s and composition’s relationships to marginalized identities, this study will also contribute to composition-rhetoric studies by linking hip-hop with contemporary discussions about *basic writers* and this term’s continual relationship to non-standard-English-speaking students. David Bartholomae notes that standard written English represents a language and discourse students cannot afford to pass on (115). However, as previous studies have shown, in many cases students’ home languages cannot simply be erased and replaced by standard written English without resistance and/or damage to students’ personal and social development. Thus, a hip-hop writing pedagogy can provide a new perspective on assumptions and attitudes toward language difference.

Throughout this text, I consult theories of performance, publics, counterpublics, and democracy. I draw on performance studies and speech act theory to suggest that although language and discursive systems shape individual and collective identities, they are also shaped by the unpredictable actions of
people. As Judith Butler suggests, every linguistic performance reinforces a pre-existing system of practices, but it also represents the means for disrupting that system. Thus, in composing language one always has the potential to change social circumstance and shift power relations, and toward this effort rhetoric as both a constitutive and political practice represents the means by which language produces knowledge through its performance. The singing of gospel songs by Civil Rights protesters, for example, represents the way certain utterances when deployed in new contexts can cause one to reconsider previous beliefs about a topic. Hip-hop’s language practices and social performances can be better understood and linked to composition-rhetoric by using a performance perspective to read critically and articulate their production. Furthermore, I believe performance studies and speech act theory to be largely untapped resources in the field of composition-rhetoric as a critical mode of inquiry.

To discuss the idea of a hip-hop *nation, generation*, or simply a collective of people engaged in hip-hop, I rely on public-sphere theory. The term *publics* has functioned in recent composition-rhetoric work mostly as way of acknowledging the social implications of student writings. Joseph Harris, for example, argues for composition teachers to eschew the term community in favor of public because for Harris public implies the possibility of an unseen and deliberative audience for writers that community does not (104). Public in this sense suggests an audience concerned with negotiating and deliberating about differences, whereas community denotes geographical specificity and social compromise. While I would not and do not eschew the term community because it also serves as a valuable metaphor at
times, I think it is important to enable students to conceive of their work as ways of locating and marking them within the wider culture. I, however, do not wholly agree with Harris that classrooms represent public spaces. Because most formal classrooms exist literally and figuratively within institutions of education, they are organized and restricted in ways that true public spaces are not. Thus, I think Rosa Eberly’s term proto-public is a more appropriate way of thinking about student collectives (166). But, more important than thinking about how one terms actual physical spaces students occupy, teachers need to think about the actual communities these students may belong to and the ways they connect themselves to those spaces.

In Publics and Counterpublics, Michael Warner notes that publics are textual, that is, they are produced through the circulation and reception of particular texts such as public address speeches and written documents that can be debated and contested by engaged participants across vast distances (73). For Warner, these publics exist only through the reception of a common set of texts. Considering hip-hop as a public that can be located in particular communities throughout the world allows me to theorize the ways hip-hop rhetoric influences different youth identities.

Moreover, I draw on political theory, specifically theories of democracy, not to reference a type of government or political system, but rather to reference a type of social practice, what I see as the most important social practice for U.S. students. Through hip-hop we engage the struggles and values central to human experience in
ways that acknowledges students’ validity and, more important, the individual
sacrifices made by many of these students, who, after all, are part of a population
least represented or served by our government and institutions. As political theorist
Danielle Allen articulates, sacrifice is a “central feature of democratic citizenship”
because democracy does not represent the articulation and management of national
consensus, but rather the sacrifice of different citizens at different times (16-19).
The need for and limits of sacrifice is a learned practice, one that requires a deep
understanding of past sacrifices made by exemplary citizens. Therefore, I argue that
a deeper understanding of sacrifice as a form of democratic engagement is
important to the practice of education because it suggests that learning need not
represent an individual endeavor. Rather, learning, as a practice of democracy,
should come to mean a process of discussion, disagreement, and compromise that
can lead to a more profound understanding of difference, community, and
citizenship. I connect hip-hop and composition instruction to democracy through a
concern with how teachers and students discuss, think, and write about public
problems. At the heart of this appropriation of political theory is an attempt to
discuss the material consequences of the ways language is used to persuade, inform,
and describe people and social relations.

As method, I favor close textual analysis and classroom observation. Similar
to the pedagogical works of bell hooks (Teaching to Transgress, 2004) and Keith
Gilyard (Let’s Flip the Script, 1996; Composition and Cornel West, 2008), this
project is an attempt to weave together critical theory with practical experiences
regarding the teaching of writing. As Freire suggests, theory becomes problematic
when it is not clearly informed by practice. Thus, I use my own teaching experiences to enhance my close readings of traditional scholarly texts and hip-hop musical texts.

In reading the works of various composition-rhetoric scholars such as Pat Bizzell (*Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*, 1992) and Joseph Harris (*A Teaching Subject*, 1996) I have been particularly fascinated by how they have been able to connect their close textual readings of theoretical work to their own classroom experiences. Such an approach has seemed to demonstrate a certain rigor expected of academic work, but it also has acknowledged the local and personal nature of teaching composition. Their work has seemed particularly democratic, by which I mean it has made the conversation seem open to students and a general readership. In particular, it is not simply that these scholars have performed close readings of texts, but that they have been interested in how these texts are taken up by ordinary people. As previously mentioned, I draw on performance theory to shape my reading of texts. In particular, I read hip-hop texts as performances, trying to discern how these texts require their audiences to re-imagine social relationships. In what ways do the texts construct agents and audiences? How do participants or readers of these texts understand integrity? In what ways are they willing or unwilling to compromise? What are the effects of each performance?

Additionally, my approach for assessing the language and performance of hip-hop and student compositions is based on the work of Geneva Smitherman (*Word from the Mother*, 2006) and H. Samy Alim (*Roc the Mic*, 2006). Drawing on
their sociolinguistic investigations, I represent the social context of hip-hop’s linguistic practices. I provide some in-depth or “thick” descriptions of hip-hop social practices and textual reception. I also try to provide thick descriptions of my experiences in attempting to teach students of a hip-hop generation by appropriating “pedagogies of hip-hop” and developing “pedagogies with hip-hop” (Hill 121-125). Through close reading of hip-hop texts, I try to understand the “particular values, truth claims, and subject positions” of a hip-hop world view and use them to shape my own teaching practice, but I also try to connect particular strategies of hip-hop to the design of specific assignments and to the design of a usable hip-hop-based curriculum. Through these descriptions or narratives, I hope to provide an understanding of these texts and experiences as well as their usefulness for teaching composition.

Chapter two explores the concept of voice. Student voices represent a consistent interest of and challenge for composition teachers. Teachers must decide how to silence, strengthen, or otherwise modify these voices as they appear in student writing. In this chapter, I connect two hip-hop metaphors—flow and putting in work—to a discussion of voice and linguistic pluralism in order to extend certain assumptions about style and student writing while at the same time challenging aspects of those assumptions. In particular, I forward the argument that flow complements the metaphor of voice and suggest that learning to author skillful compositions requires that writers learn both to conform to and to manipulate the conventions of a particular discourse community to their advantage. I then shift to a
discussion of putting in work as a metaphor useful for extending some recent discussions about code-switching, code-meshing, and classroom language policy.

In chapter three, I examine techniques and practices central to building a critical interpretive community. In particular, I investigate the hip-hop cipha not only as a social practice but also as a way of teaching students to think about audiences, communities, and publics when forming their compositions. Along with considering the cipha, I will look at hip-hop mix-tapes and live performances as cultural practices that suggest new ways of teaching writing as a social practice with political implications. I draw on classroom reflections in order to better illumine how students’ writings locate them within a collective identity. Part of the goal of this chapter is to articulate a method of positioning students to better engage writing as a way of entering the public sphere and furthering their understanding of academic writing as a legitimating and de-legitimating process.

The next chapter contains my discussion of a classic hip-hop text, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, as an exemplary approach for developing an engaging pedagogy. To this end, I demonstrate that Hill’s work is a critical pedagogical text that questions traditional and, in some respects, even critical pedagogies by suggesting new ways of using hip-hop perspectives to engage real student identities. This chapter includes a close textual analysis of Hill’s classic CD, consideration of its relationship to composition scholarship and critical pedagogy, and ethnographic reflection on a classroom experience during which I tried to incorporate Hill’s pedagogical insights into my own teaching. Through this
reflection, I try to acknowledge the multiple ways both hip-hop and I empowered some student narratives and silenced others whether consciously or unconsciously.

Chapter five broadens the project’s critical lens socially and politically to discuss the importance of memory to composition. As Victor Villaneuva opines, memory is largely a linguistic and textual practice, and, in this way, it is central to the formation of ideas, beliefs, and assumptions that inform individual and collective identities. Memory serves as a vital way of connecting students to the history and traditions of the broader American public sphere and helping them to form their own relationship to that sphere. I attempt to do so in this chapter by reflecting on the kinds of collective memory work hip-hop is well suited to position listeners and readers to perform. I enter hip-hop into the discussion of memory and composition by revisiting the public memory of the Civil Rights era from a hip-hop perspective. Although controversial and at times misguided, I believe hip-hop music positions readers and listeners to question, complicate, and extend popular knowledge about the Civil Rights era in ways that speak to present-day concerns about violence, equity, and social action. Specifically, I will contemplate Claudette Colvin, Mary Louis Smith, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The first two figures are important for the two lesser-known narratives of the Montgomery bus boycott that they represent. These narratives are useful for critical inquiry into the gender relations and the politics of the boycott and the Civil Rights movement in general. I consider King to address his strategic use of language and ritual marches to negotiate the ambivalent relationship of blacks to non-violent protest strategies at that time. This moment is particularly intriguing because in popular memory non-
violence is usually constructed as an uncontested and largely successful practice of most Civil Rights protesters.

Chapter six, the concluding one, is a reflective summary and suggests some implications for future research in hip-hop rhetoric and composition studies. I will reinforce my notion of hip-hop studies as a crucial field of research for rhetoric-composition and further indicate the potential that ethnographic, performance-based, and rhetorical modes of inquiry provide for those interested in the intersections of hip-hop studies and rhetoric-composition.
2. Flow and Work as Metaphors for Composition Practice

My interest in hip-hop rhetoric includes a specific attraction to a metaphor known as flow because I believe flow perhaps best describes the complex ways compositions are developed, presented, and positioned. In hip-hop, one’s flow performs the creative expressions that constitute one’s voice (Rose 38-41; Ibrahim 135-136). In rap music, to flow demonstrates linguistic and symbol-making competence that allows one to address productively various social contexts and discourse communities. Because linguistic diversity remains an important concern for composition studies, especially so given changing demographics in the U. S. (see Lovejoy, Fox, and Willis), and because code-switching or code-meshing pedagogy has emerged, not unreasonably, as a proffered solution (Canagarajah 598), I argue that flow is a construct that helps to clarify and usefully extend discussions about language diversity, invention, and voice.

Similarly, I embrace another hip-hop metaphor known as work or putting in work as an important concept for composition studies. As Robin D. G. Kelley argues, many of the artistic expressions within hip-hop culture derive from a literal mixing of commonly perceived work and activity normally understood as play, from a combination of material and symbolic work to signify one’s creativity for an audience (75). Geneva Smitherman and Karla Holloway use the term “word-work” to suggest a similar perspective (95; 75). Work, in a sense, speaks self-consciously to context, the rhetorical situation inside which one flows.
In this article, I will elaborate on the notions of flow and work in order to suggest another way of addressing voice, language diversity, and code-meshing in composition studies. As such, I will continue to aid a larger pedagogical project that forwards previous discussions of hip-hop and composition rhetoric.

**Specifics of Flow and Voice**

For my purposes, flow is about the way hip-hop composers layer meaning into their compositions in ways that contribute to a distinctive voice. Such a concept stems from a belief that the ability to smoothly make sophisticated connections among disparate concepts both attracts wanted attention and contributes efficiently to a deep understanding of any subject matter at hand. Through scrutiny of hip-hop texts as illustrative examples of the more prominent features of flow—linguistic virtuosity, redefinition or appropriation of terms and concepts, the use of allusions to shape interpretations, and the use of incorrect spellings or pronunciations to extend certain conventions, for starters—composition teachers and students can gain a sense of how flow can likewise direct student writing.

Obviously, my interest in flow as a concept to motivate composition students derives from my appreciation of the way hip-hop artists compose language through deliberate choices for specific effect. Moreover, I am responding to Keith Gilyard’s intriguing question: “How is a lyricist’s attempt to negotiate various discourses instructive for student writers today?” (98). Part of the answer involves thinking about the strategies these artists use to present fluid and authoritative
compositions.

The popular song “The World Is Yours,” by hip-hop artist Nas, demonstrates some of the aforementioned features of flow. In the song he presents a collage of experiences to make connections among hip-hop music, street culture, and social activism, rhyming:

I sip the Dom P/ watchin Gandhi til I'm charged/Then writin in my book of rhymes/ all the words past the margin/To hold the mic I'm throbbin/mechanical movement/Understandable smooth shit/ that murderers move wit/

Nas also exemplifies the appropriation that is characteristic of flow. He uses Ghandi in his text as a dominant symbol for social activism and as an inspiration for his own compositions (watchin Ghandi til I’m charged/then writin in my book of rhymes). As most know, Gandhi was able to make possible a better life for South Africans and Indians through his own compositions, and thus can be seen as the embodiment of the song’s motto, “the world is yours.”

I will almost take for granted that most people will concede Nas’s linguistic virtuosity, the creativity, for example, of rhyming Dom P with Ghandi. One should also note the internal rhyming, charged and margin, along with the end rhyme, margin and throbbin. Then Nas takes it up a notch in the subsequent rapid sequence, mechanical movement/Understandable smooth shit/that murderers move wit. On display are alliteration—mechanical movement—along with internal rhyming—mechanical and understandable—in addition to more alliteration—stand, smooth, shit—all connected within a rhyme scheme containing two direct rhymes—
shit and with (pronounced wit in the vernacular)—and slant rhymes—movement. shit, with. Nas’s attention to language, as is the case with the precise and engaging language of any practitioner, can be marvelously instructive for developing writers.

Later in the song Nas raps,

Dwellin in the Rotten Apple/ you get tackled
Or caught by the devil’s lasso/ shit is a hassle
There's no days for broke days/ where selling smoke pays/
While all the old folks pray/ to Je-sus' soakin they sins in trays/
of holy water

The idea that living in the city “is a hassle” builds on his audience’s awareness of the oppressive conditions of some the country’s poorer sections. Nas again juxtaposes seemingly incompatible images—older generations that take solace in prayer with an implied younger generation that sometimes chooses criminal activities (“where selling smoke pays”) to manage. For Nas, both can be seen as coping mechanisms because “there’s no days for broke days,” even though that is the reality for much of his audience. Through the juxtapositions of Ghandi, inner-city struggles, and hip-hop, and by identifying that “the world is yours” if one chooses not to give in to despair, Nas offers a compelling text.

I understand that Nas’s composition was written for hip-hop consumers and does not assume the kind of academic structure that students can easily borrow from for their compositions. Yet I believe that the fluidity of his words and insights create a useful pedagogical tool because they attract a type of close reading that reveals a dexterous and well-informed voice, a voice capable of rendering
“understandable smooth shit” as a laudable goal for all compositions, formal and informal alike. Hip-hop music provides an important perspective on what it means to develop a relationship with language that allows one to assume a certain unapologetic authority and fluency. The concept of flow, therefore, contributes to recent discussions of language diversity and voice by pushing students to first and foremost try to understand writing as a meaning-making activity that does not necessarily require them simply to imitate academic language. Writing with a certain flow is not the performance of one stylized type of prose. It is a wielding of all of the languages one possesses skillfully enough to persuade. Peter Elbow notes in “What Is Voice” that readers tend to experience certain voices, certain expressions as more natural, as more of a fit with whom they picture a writer or speaker to be (200-202). Thus they assume a type of agency in one’s “natural” voice. However, as I have suggested, flow is far from a natural performance and should be thought of more as strategic moves writers make using all of the languages and knowledge they have acquired. Below I will elaborate on this view by explaining in more detail some of the specific practices that contribute to one’s flow.

In Writing in Rhythm, Maisha Fisher writes about the value and potential in teaching writing as a rhythmic, continuous, and performative process. In her view, we should understand that “rhythm and fluidity with words and language” are not a “luxury.” Students need to work within and beyond academic standards if they are
expected to “own language” and to produce knowledge (14). I think this idea of owning language is an important but an under examined description of what good writers do. To simply tell students they should own language like one of the many authors they are asked to read does not convey the process or the impossibility of this process. Good composers *wield* language effectively and competently in ways that shift thinking about a topic or an idea. However, no one really ever owns language, or if they do, it is only for a moment. As most writers know, it is rather easy to lose hold of the language, to become inarticulate or to lose one’s train of thought at any given moment. Peter Elbow describes this process in detail in his essay “Closing My Eyes as I Speak.”

Part of the perceived fluidity of one’s words derives from the ability to turn, flip, or redefine concepts, words, and ideas in ways that demonstrate an authority over them and language in general. Good rappers, or rather emcees as they are often referred to, exhibit this ability regularly, just as good writers do. I find that in reading hip-hop texts with students, pointing to these moves disrupts some fundamental assumptions about their language as natural expressions and highlights the rhetorical nature of composing for an audience. There is always Nas, of course. But another song that has aided this task is “Beef” by rapper Mos Def. While preparing to discuss the song in class, I noticed there were a variety of student responses, some of which were reflected in one-page journal entries. Students seemed to struggle with the language and purpose of the song because they saw them as incongruous. *Beef* in hip-hop culture can be understood as an intense dislike between two individuals or groups of people that elicits either physically or
verbally violent responses. One of the more popular articulations of beef is the song “What’s Beef” from the Notorious B.I.G.’s double album *Life After Death*. However, the students’ journals responses, which were primarily exploratory (as most students were trying to become comfortable with the idea of reading hip-hop lyrics in a formal class setting), reflected ambivalence as students tried to understand Mos Def’s authority to describe beef as a national rather than hip-hop problem. I cite a portion of the song here to illustrate what the students were reading as well as the kind of moves in the song that contribute to flow and authority.

Beef is when a Gangster ain’t doing it right/
And another gangster then decides what to do with his life/
Beef is not what famous niggas do on the mic/
Beef is what George Bush would do in a fight/
Yeah, beef is not what Ja said to 50/
Beef is more than Irv not bein here with me/
When a soldier ends his life with his own gun/
Beef is tryin' to figure out what to tell his son/
Beef is oil prices and geopolitics/
Beef is Iraq, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip/
Some beef is big and some beef is small/
But what y'all call beef is not beef at all/
Beef is real life happenin' everyday/
The last five lines of Mos Def’s song I believe presented the most conflict for students as he easily moved from everyday local concerns to broader social concerns such as war, poverty, and geopolitics in a manner that made clear his definition of beef in a way that most students had not anticipated given the harsh language used throughout the piece.

While some students were admittedly put off by the song’s language, a dispute ensued about whether his language was justified because it was his natural way of speaking or if it clouded the intelligence of the piece. Mos surprised several students with his ability to turn such a term as beef into a conversation about economic struggles and national politics. Most students had not thought of rap music as having an interest in broader social concerns and respected him for his commentary. As one student wrote, “he defines [beef] as something much larger; that beef is actually about hardships going on in the world. Ideally he has a good point—to focus on bigger issues rather than things that do not matter as much.”

Others also took my advice to view this text as a they would a piece of critical writing and to think not about the appropriateness of the language for an imagined ideal academic audience, but its appropriateness for the audience it addresses and the subject matter it discusses. I quote one student’s journal at length here because her response represents a strand of our in–class conversation that proved fruitful in future discussions of flow and voice.

This rap actually has a logical and inventive stream of thought. It starts with the little and petty issues of a community. It then proceeds to a state-wide level. This is shown by the judge. It then
goes to a nationwide dispute when it mentions George Bush. Finally, the global community is reached due to the wars. This logical progression surprised me because it was coming from a rap. Usually, I do not listen to rap at all even if it is supposed to be funny. This type of music just does not appeal to me, so it surprised me that this actually had a literary stream.

As we moved away from the authenticity debate—is his language natural or strategically chosen?—the conversation, with some direction from me, focused on Mos Def’s ability to shift the audience’s perspective on beef from a concept about “little and petty issues” to a much more sophisticated argument. Most students agreed it was Mos’s assumed authority to redefine the term that they most respected. To recall Fisher, Mos Def demonstrates an agency that gives off the effect of owning language.

In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler also observes that linguistic agency derives from an ability to redefine the dynamics of a situation through the turn of phrase (37-38). Such ability conveys a type of ownership of language, a type of agency that conveys the authority of its speaker (15-16). As an example, Butler uses a parable by Toni Morrison. In the parable young children decide to play a joke on an old blind woman and ask her to identify whether the bird one child is holding is dead or alive (6). The woman turns this question askance, and out of the children’s control, by stating that she does not know the answer to their question but that she does know “that it is in your hands.” The old woman redirects the children’s challenge through the turn of a phrase. The idea that the bird’s physical
body, but, more important, its life or lack of life is in their hands shifts our concern from the little and petty issue of “can you guess what I’m holding” to a question of the moral character of the children. In doing so, she performs a type of authority, a type of quick wit and linguistic maneuverability that contributes to how readers construe her voice. Likewise, agency can be found in academic writing through the fluid and confident manner with which one defines and links an idea, phrase, or expression to a larger issue. Throughout the discussion of beef, I tried to convey this to the students.

Geneva Smitherman’s writing provides an exemplary model of academic writing that flows. This is not due solely to her use of African American vernacular in her writing, but rather her deft ability to employ multiple registers to redefine cultural concepts in ways that explain their complexity. Her discussion of the concepts “play” and “game” in African American language illustrates this point. Smitherman writes,

> Taken together, “play” and “game” constitute a powerful linguistic icon. Every game in the social universe has its clearly defined rules of play. Conceptualizing reality and life as a game is a framework that fixes things, puts structure and system in place, gives one the comfort of order in a random, disorderly world. When a rival is a person’s competitive equal, they accept the checkmate with the well-known Black expression: “Game recognize Game.” And if you are outdone by a competitor, you may have to hear, “Don’t hate the playa, hate the Game”(68)
I sense in Smitherman’s writing an academic and a cultural voice overlapping. When she explains “conceptualizing reality and life as a game is a framework that fixes things, puts structure and system in place, gives one the comfort of order in a random, disorderly world,” I hear an academic tone that shapes the commentary. On the other hand, “game recognize game” provides readers with added cultural flavor. She seamlessly redefines game in a way that is both intelligible and elegant in its movement. In other words, her flow is tight.

Recent interest in linguistic diversity and composition instruction rightly places language difference on the table as a central concern of teaching writing. However, I think at times such discussions can cause teachers and students to miss the forest for the trees. Yes, English dialects and vernacular language can allow students to think and express themselves in ways important to their intellectual growth; however, issues of voice and agency even in the most skillful code-switchers, code-meshers, or culturally sensitive writers are not merely a matter of figuring out the right places to interject vernacular prose. Sensitivity to linguistic differences does not alone invest students with agency. A key ability is to exert control over these differences in the manner of Smitherman. She includes written expressions, images, and ideas outside of an academic context into her texts, and, as I have been arguing, there is great value in helping students to do the same.

In hip-hop, one juggles different allusions and references in order to shape and layer the meaning of each composition while maintaining continuity that contributes to the “tightness” of his or her flow. As Tricia Rose notes, such an ability “creates and sustains rhythmic motion, continuity, and circularity” out of the
ruptures and breaks of one’s narrative, dance, or graphic drawing (39). Such allusion often references figures, words, or cultural texts outside the immediate context of one’s discussion, thereby clarifying a position on the subject at hand. As we have seen, Nas’s appropriation of Gandhi and Mos Def’s appropriation of George Bush are examples of this.

The ability to perform these types of references is central to more formal composition primarily because they allow writers to use elements of their cultural and social backgrounds in ways that do not disrupt the cohesiveness of their work and also suggest linguistic sophistication. For example, in *Let’s Flip the Script* Keith Gilyard makes a statement about the importance of self-motivation as a prominent feature among other mitigating factors that contributes to the literacy development of young Black children (93). However, it is the way he does this that best illustrates the sense of rhythm that contributes to his flow as a writer. Gilyard notes,

> anyone who reads the 1988 article knows [Delpit] understood that any form of language use is a manifestation of personal motivation and social dynamics. Nonetheless, the literacy success she cited is attributed solely to skills instruction. To gain a fuller, more accurate sense of that development, we need a more elaborate account of motivation. Her eyes and her classmates’ were on the prize, the sparrow, or something similar. (93-94)

In his assertion that Delpit has mistakenly overlooked a central feature to all literacy development, he alludes to two popular African American texts “Eyes on
the Prize” and “His Eye is on the Sparrow”—a popular African American
documentary series on the Civil Rights movement and a popular Gospel song,
respectively. Gilyard is not really turning the phrase as his reference serves as a
rather straightforward assertion about a central feature of Delpit’s own education.
And while the phrase is a form of signifying, it doesn’t really serve as the type of
critique traditionally associated with signifying. Rather, it makes a specific point
that also adds another layer of meaning to his text for those familiar with these
African American texts and the traditions they evoke. It adds credibility for an
audience different from yet as equally important to him as the academic audience
he is addressing. Like the example from Geneva Smitherman’s text, this citation is
also a moment where one can see an academic voice overlap with an alternate
cultural voice so seamlessly they appear to flow into each other. The rupture is not
very pronounced, but there is a sizeable audience who will notice the point where
the text breaks into a non-traditional reference. The fact that continuity was not
disrupted suggests that the rhythm of his prose and thinking demonstrates another
model for students seeking to incorporate their non-academic voices into their
writing.

To return to Mos Def, his references to “oil prices and geopolitics” and
“Iraq, the West Bank, and the Gaza strip” perform a similar task for a different
purpose. In his attempt to redefine beef, Mos alludes to these resources, concepts,
and sites for the way they imply serious public conflict and contestation. The ease
with which he includes these references maintains a continuity that compels readers
to simultaneously think of these larger social concerns and the concept of hip-hop
beef. These references also suggest a different type of voice than the hip-hop one that begins the text. It is a politically engaged voice. The rupture is much more pronounced here than in Gilyard’s text in that deep interest in geopolitics is not associated with the dominant image of hip-hop (which is often urban, Black, male, and criminal). However, their relevance to the purpose of the text and his ability to maintain rhythmic continuity with the previous lines helped define for students a sense of flow that previous discussions about transitions and cohesion could not.

As many have noted, hip-hop artists tend to spell terms in unconventional ways. In fact, hip-hop artists are expected to reform language and to create new words (Morgan 115-127; Smitherman, 95-103). Such a practice provides an interesting critique of mainstream spelling conventions and linguistic standards, keeping in line with much of hip-hop’s non-conventional heritage and disposition. However, hip-hop orthography, as a visual practice that influences and adds to the overall purpose of a text, contributes to the discussion of flow. The spelling or misspelling of a word can push readers to think about the historical context, social context, or audible performances of a word. Words such as Amerikkka, sumthin, nigga, and sucka produce a visual effect for astute readers that suggest an additional meaning than the terms’ more traditional spellings can provide. The deliberate misspelling of Amerikkka with three Ks, for example, alludes to U.S. cultures racist histories and ambivalent relationship with the Ku Klux Klan. As Smitherman notes, these types of misspellings that appear in hip-hop orthography sometimes represent an attempt to capture oral performances in written form, but
more important, when performed skillfully, they push the reader toward a deeper understanding of the overall text (103).

I am reminded here of an excerpt from Frank McCourt’s *Tis: A Memoir*, which I often use in my first-year composition course. In the excerpt, McCourt reflects on teaching a service course for teacher’s aides. All of the aides were women, most of them older working class mothers, and for many of them it was their first time in a college classroom. McCourt vividly describes the language and personality of the women in the class, going so far as to mimic their dialect. In one specific scene, he describes a class discussion about juvenile delinquency. During the discussion, a spirited student responds, “No Kid o’ mine gonna be no yoot” (450). McCourt uses the spelling of “Yoot” to capture the woman’s pronunciation of the term *youth*, juxtaposing that spelling with the correct spelling as it appears in a newspaper headline “Youth Slays Mom”(450). I am often amazed at the consistent and widespread assumption (every semester I’ve taught it so far) that the woman could not spell *youth* and that McCourt was simply depicting her ineptitude. I usually end up explaining to the class that the women never actually wrote the word *yoot*, and that this spelling was McCourt’s decision or his editor’s, and that perhaps McCourt was seeking to convey the audible sound of her speech visually, rather than to offer evidence of her incompetence. For many, such a possibility seems highly unlikely, and that is not a major problem. By juxtaposing the correct and vernacular spellings, McCourt makes their reading possible. However, the source of their reading and the way it blocks them from other readings are major problems. The misreading, I believe, derives from a generational and geographical
gap between McCourt and my students (McCourt’s scene represents a Civil Rights era New York City difficult for many of them to imagine). But I also believe the misreading signals something else, namely, that a type of hypercorrective assumption about grammar, spelling, and standards stifles a more imaginative view of language. The Yoot spelling contributes to the humorous tone of the piece, alludes to the culture and rhythm of the students in McCourt’s class, and signals the cultural divide he worked to navigate that semester. Yet the students focused on the misspelling as an error, as a sign of unintelligence.

I’ve come to enjoy discussing this scene with them because it is an explicit example of the connection between flow and reading. Romy Clark and Roz Ivanic suggest that writing teachers should “hold the standardisation of written English up for critical scrutiny” as a way of broadening students’ understanding of the descriptive rather than prescriptive quality of standards and conventions (191). I agree with this sentiment given that such a view tends to push students toward the type of flexible reading practices that contribute to the flow and authority of their own voices. However, let me be clear: grammar is an important component of writing instruction, but only to the extent that it aids students in understanding how the structure of their sentences and paragraphs locate them in a tradition of writing that is more complex than merely producing “correct English” in their writing. Otherwise such knowledge becomes useless and detrimental to a fluency or linguistic mastery that allows them to bend these very grammatical structures and conventions toward their advantage.
I shift the conversation now to the concept of work, a concept used by Smitherman to describe the critical linguistic awareness of hip-hop writers (95). I draw on the term as a metaphor for explaining the material constraints and the mental and physical effort necessary for assembling careful and culturally sensitive words into a composition. While flow demonstrates the need to develop the imaginative capacities of students to wield language and symbols in a complex manner, work reminds them of the institutional and multi-cultural contexts that shape the reception of their flow and voices.

**Specifics of Work and Context**

The metaphor of work in hip-hop culture directs composition teachers and students to the institutional and multicultural contexts that shape the flow and reception of student writing. The concept stems from an understanding of labor and leisure as intricately connected practices historically shaped by African American bodies whose very lives depended on how they negotiated material spaces occupied by white, authoritative bodies. In terms of formal composition instruction, the concept of putting in work references a type of literacy and material effort necessary for addressing various rhetorical occasions. To discuss the concept of work with students is to place added emphasis on reading. In other words, work fuses a hermeneutic concept with a rhetorical one. It is common in African American culture to hear one report that she or he has read somebody up and down. This actually means that she or he told someone off. The telling off is the same as the reading, and the reading is the same as the telling off. Similarly, the hip-hop
concept of work suggests that successful composing is a writing and reading, or reading and writing, process. When done skillfully such a process becomes a valued achievement that often rewards the careful reader. Similarly, the hip-hop concept of work suggests that successful composing requires one to acknowledge that reading and writing often take place within specific contexts, and the skillful writer negotiates these contexts in a way that is both pleasurable and helpful toward their goals.

In Yo Mama’s Disfunktional!, Robin D.G. Kelley explains that in Black culture work and play share a conceptual space, a space that understands creative and pleasurable performances as a form of work central to an individual’s survival (57-58). As Kelley elaborates, the work of most hip-hop artists involves a response to, a reading of, the sociohistorical context of inner-city unemployment. In this case, hip-hop functions as an employment opportunity for working-class and poor citizens (64-67). However, as Kelley also notes, this analysis should not elide the psychic pleasure that goes into the products that are produced by these artists. For them, it is not simply money or pleasure at stake. In a figurative and sometimes literal sense, the reception of their work or lack thereof is a way of measuring their success or failure in the overall game of life. The barometer is not always the same, thus the conflicting views about whether hip-hop success is determined by critical acclaim or monetary rewards. Commercial success does not always produce the communities’ respect, nor does critical acclaim always produce monetary gains. Nonetheless, the key point here is the shared belief, not unlike Nas’s views in “The World Is Yours,” that one’s success and even survival depend on the ability to put
in work—read and write back productively to—within the terrain of post-industrial America.

Consider a tragic example of rhetorical failure: the death of “Radio” Raheem, a character in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*. Radio exemplifies what’s at stake for hip-hop heads who fail to put in work given that his lack of work in cross-cultural communication leads to his death and the destruction of Sal’s shop. While Radio is not the only one culpable in the chain of events that lead to his death, he is not an exemplary example of a hip-hop head—if indeed that is what Lee intended to represent—because his critical response to dissatisfaction severely underplayed verbal skill and social awareness and overplayed physical reaction.

With music from the famous rap group Public Enemy blaring loudly on his radio, Radio’s death is preceded by a conflict with Italian pizza restaurant owner Sal, who denies him service for playing his loud and intrusive (and not coincidentally Black) music within the boundaries of his restaurant. Sal attempts to maintain his business space as an Italian-American space, despite the multicultural make-up of the neighborhood, often going so far as to regulate who can and cannot eat within his establishment and which pictures (only those of Italian-Americans) can adorn the walls. Radio’s death occurs in large part as a knee-jerk reaction to what Sal views as a challenge to his authority, ownership, and whiteness. Sal destroys Radio’s boom box in an attempt to regain authority over Radio’s voice, and Radio attacks Sal for destroying his boom box, an extension of his voice. Radio is consequently killed when police arrive to break up the fight between Radio and Sal.
Yes, hip-hop music is transgressive and aggressive, but it is also very self-aware and very conscious of institutional authority. Put another way, such reactive behavior by Radio does not exhibit the type of work essential to negotiating cross-culturally with a reticent or hostile audience. Had Radio’s response, indeed his voice, been more variegated and cognizant of the subtexts informing the situation he found himself in, he could have anticipated the police response and, perhaps, avoided the brutality that ended his life. Karla Holloway reminds us that, “our codes of conduct call upon us to anticipate the impact of our behaviors on the institutions we hope will assure us a stable democracy” (110). In other words, work—as a strategy for understanding the politics, pleasure, and self-conscious adaptation required for one’s verbal and written performances—can be a generative model when applied to formal composition instruction. Taken seriously, the concept of work pushes students to appreciate nuance.

The sense of work---multiple skills, serious side, fanciful side, politics, pleasure, self-conscious adaptation---is a generative model when applied to formal composition instruction. Taken seriously, the concept of work pushes students to appreciate nuance.

The use of the work metaphor in hip-hop music is instructive here. In the song “Work to Do (Obama 08)” by Kidz in the Hall, the group appropriates the Isley Brothers’s song of the same name, adding an inspirational and socially aware connotation to the song. Inspired by Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign successes, the song captures a “keep on pushing” sensibility central to Black soul music, while also using the hip-hop belief that words perform and encourage action to make a
statement about the political work required of youth culture. The original Isley
Brothers song is sung to a demanding female lover in response to an implied plea
for the man to spend more time at home. In the Isley Brothers’s version, the line “I
got work to do” is shaped by a cultural understanding of the struggles for
employment by Black men. In the song one can hear the tension in the singer’s
voice; there is conflict brought on perhaps by the pressures and strains of a
working-class lifestyle. However, there is also a cultural context that shapes the
song. Performed by black male artists (who are also working and playing in a
studio and struggling for commercial success) for a mostly black audience and
against the backdrop of America’s racial struggle, there is tension in the song that is
reflected in the assertion, “I’m taking care of business, baby can't you see. I gotta
make it for you, and I gotta make it for me.” The song, however, perhaps given
commercial concerns, does not overtly point to the source of its tension. Kidz in the
Hall’s song responds to a different set of contexts. The artists are less concerned
with commercial success and more concerned with inspiring youth culture, the
group chose to release the song independently via the Internet, web pages, and a
mixtape during President Obama’s campaign. Thus, they subvert but not
maliciously the music industry’s influence over their song. This version of the song
advocates for a change in social attitudes. The phrase “I got work to do” echoes
President Obama’s spirit of hope, serving as a response to his call and suggesting
that everyone has a part to play by working to improve their own conditions: “I
dropped forty g’s a year for the best degree/ now I’m back to spread love to the
streets/ but I know ‘I got to work.”
The response to the context of the original song and the more immediate social climate are subtle yet important to the positive reception of that text. In my class I use the work metaphor to describe the similar type of flexible work seasoned writers perform through their writings. After reading Amy Tan’s essay “Mother Tongue,” a narrative that describes the author’s pluralistic understanding of English, derived from her own use of both a standardized and a Chinese-dialect form of English, I explored with students the context that makes her essay particularly interesting. Although Tan claims her impetus for the essay stems from thinking about her mother being in the audience of one of her talks, the subtle moves she makes in the essay undermine this claim. Instead, I would argue, the essay derives from a desire to combat the effects of negative attitudes toward linguistic difference that require cultural difference to be removed from public conversations.

In the essay, Tan uses examples of her mother’s Chinese-English dialect, heavily creolized, to illustrate examples of the dialect and its poor public reception. She does this to highlight the broader cultural discrimination her mother and speakers like her mother endure (“people in department stores, at banks, and at restaurants did not take her seriously”) (61). However, later in the essay she turns the discussion to herself, suggesting that the problem with such attacks are that they shape or undermine the confidence and development of second generation Chinese-English speakers to become more skillful language composers (“lately, I’ve been asked as a writer, why there are not more Asian Americans represented in American literature”). Thus, I gather the sense that her mother is little more than an opening
pawn in this conversation on language and cultural difference (63). Although I discuss with my classes a variety of issues that appear in the story, I think the way Tan negotiates the institutional and cultural subtexts that shape her narrative is amazing. Her argument is subtle and fluid, but she also appears cognizant of the material constraints of her rhetorical occasion. She is writing to an audience invested in the institution of U.S. education and, certainly in some cases, monolingualism.

As most students note, the essay itself is rather clear and easy to read, yet many of them initially suggest that she should exclude the examples of her mother’s speech because they are not written in Standard English. The Chinese-English dialect in written form does take effort to comprehend for those unfamiliar with it, but her mother’s voice contributes toward the cohesiveness of the text and its ability to evoke discomfort. Over the course of a semester, usually some students demonstrate a kind of recognition about the offensiveness of silencing someone’s voice simply because it makes one uncomfortable. I believe Tan’s composition anticipates such readers, and thus her concluding commentary about the way standardized tests and linguistic biases in U.S. education almost silenced her work resonates among readers as a different way of thinking about language diversity. Her work here is subtle and timely in what it suggests about language and difference in U.S. culture, namely, that despite assertions about the hybrid nature of all languages, code-meshing as a concept is useless without a nuanced understanding of one’s audience and social constraints, socially constructed or otherwise.
Curiously, a student essay titled “The Race Begins” presented a particular difficulty for me and demonstrates the way putting in work can be central to teacher assessment. The essay is an analysis of black athlete stereotypes and their effect on white athlete performance. When the student first brought the paper in as a rough draft, it read somewhat as an implicit indictment of black athletes, who by their mere presence intimidated white athletes into failure. In her writing, a type of quiet anger was present; a resentment of the way stereotypes of black athletes may have affected her own performances on the track. “Due to the negative stereotype that Blacks are faster than whites, I told myself it would be ok if they beat me because that is what would be expected…Having a defeated attitude before and during the race caused me to finish with a slower time.” While the writing itself was fairly clear, the essay quickly devolved into a pity piece about the insecurities that plague white athletes in black-dominated sports.

The insecurity the essay expressed was not very different from the types of fears and insecurities Blacks and Latinos experience in most academic, professional, and social settings that are dominated by whites. Yet, the composition read clumsily in the way it ignored how such stereotypes also affected minority athletes and assumed a kind of injustice was being done to white athletes. During a conference with the student, we agreed there was a long history of bias and assumptions about black athletes that contributed to the popular stereotype and that providing this context in her narrative would create a complexity in her discussion that was not quite there yet. We spoke of the dominance of black athletes in track and field in the recent Olympics and the type of pressures this placed on all athletes
of different races. Then we also spoke of the danger of letting such myths and stereotypes prevail unaddressed. However, I think the real work came in our discussion about how the paper could be perceived as offensive by some black readers. I think to have this conversation I had to ignore my initial reaction to the essay and to think deeply about the intentions and goals of the essay. How are the insecurities of white athletes a problem for anyone but themselves? I think much like the notion of work in hip-hop there is a belief that black athletes need success to survive, while white athletes possess other options. This conversation never really came back to inequality or a history of oppression, yet these are subtexts still present in the essay. Her response to our discussion was positive, and I believe there were signs of that she put in work. Her essay read more as an analysis of black athlete stereotypes than the narrative of insecurity it read as earlier. Her conclusion read,

Stereotypes inhibit people of all races from reaching their fullest potential. The stereotypes of Whites being slower than Blacks is evident throughout many sports, especially track and field at the high school, college and Olympic level. White runners are psychologically inhibited during the races by the dominant appearance of Black competitors, which decreases their performance and contribution to the sport. On the other hand, Black runners are under enormous amounts of pressure and stress, as they are expected to carry their team to victory and be successful in all of their races. Academics are deemphasized in the life of a strong Black athlete, which can lead to
far reaching negative effects. In the end, what is perceived as a negative stereotype for Whites also has detrimental consequences for Blacks.

While it did not perform the same agility and cultural perspective as Amy Tan’s work, there is a recognition and anticipation of a non-ideal reader. Likewise, in reading her essay I was required to anticipate and respond somewhat sympathetically to a type of non-ideal piece of writing. Now I am not suggesting that teachers sympathetically read “The Holocaust was a Myth” or “Blacks are Genetically Inferior,” essays I have received. I am only arguing that when students are trying to find their voices and discussing complex subject matters and opinions that resonate differently in various contexts, teachers should model putting in work, that nimbleness of mind and spirit possessed by the most successful rhetors. In this way, they further help students to develop the kind of astute and culturally sensitive compositions important for cross-cultural understanding and multicultural audiences.

**Conclusion**

I have discussed the use of two hip-hop metaphors, *flow* and *work*, as a perspective on developing student voices and respecting linguistic and cultural diversity within formal composition instruction. The metaphor of flow allows composition teachers a way to direct students to practices that contribute to their authority as writers without denying or uncritically allowing them to assume a
certain agency encoded in their vernacular languages and cultural backgrounds. Linguistic pluralism is a laudable goal for composition instruction, one that I believe will become increasingly important for the future of composition studies, yet it is also only a portion of what sophisticated writers do in their compositions. In Jacqueline Royster’s “When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own,” written ostensibly in Standardized English, I can hear the cultural inflections. I have had similar experiences reading Gilyard, Smitherman, Holloway, Carmen Kynard, and Adam Banks. However, aside from Smitherman there was very little vernacular in these texts, a phrase here, a concept there. The voices these writers composed seemed to have more to do with their fluid control of the language than the use of vernacular or Standard English. This is an aspect recent conversations on code-meshing seem to gloss over. Yes, there is value in teachers of composition understanding that arguably all discourse is mixed, meshed, intermingled. However, also important is how teachers use this information to explore with students the available means for exploiting this knowledge in ways that are sensitive to their personal aspirations and social context in which they are working.
3. Ciphas, Mix-tapes, and Emcees as Techniques for Teaching Composition

In this chapter, I continue my discussion of hip-hop composing practices by discussing three hip-hop models—the cipha, the mixtape, and the emcee. These models represent strategies for guiding students in their interactions with pop-culture texts, teachers, and each other. A discussion of these constructs builds on bell hook’s assertion that teachers “examine critically the way we as teachers conceptualize what the space for learning should be like” (39).

Given that in hip-hop the cipha—usually a rap workshop—serves as a way of preparing artists and hip-hop heads to compose for a general audience, through a communal and competitive training activity, I use the concept of the cipha to organize and manage student writing activities such as writing workshops, peer-review sessions, and in-class discussions in ways that test the substance and skillfulness of student arguments. The “cipha” can guide and strengthen the student conversations that inform their written performances.

Mixtapes are an alternative form of hip-hop music produced and distributed independent of corporate sponsorship that allow artists to be more eclectic, critical, and freethinking about their songs, beats, and topics. Given recent compelling arguments for encouraging students to use popular-culture texts as resources for their writing (Mahiri 76-78), I use mixtapes as a way of broadening student conceptions of writing, specifically by helping them to more effectively use popular-culture texts to build stronger, more original arguments in their writing.
Viewing mixtapes as literate practice, students can learn to build their arguments through a variety of examples that contribute to a broader conversation rather than relying on academic sources and language that simply regurgitate dated arguments.

Highly visible, dynamic, and trendsetting, emcees represent the voice of hip-hop. Emcees provide a generative paradigm for teaching because good teaching is a performance involving skillful negotiations with audiences. Unsuccessful teaching, it follows, derives in large measure from unsuccessful negotiations. The emcee model provides an approach for thinking about the various teacher performances that directly influence student identities. An emcee approach requires that teachers construct a curriculum and persona that value the organic call-and-response practices of emcees to influence students to view writing as central to their identities.

**The Cipha as Process**

As a hip-hop ritual, ciphas place productive pressure on ideas and performances that can be applied to the composition classroom to prepare students to hear and respond to real people and real ideas. Most ciphas are comprised of a group of individuals seeking to evaluate, motivate, or build on the ideas and compositions of those within the collective. If, as Joseph Harris notes, writing engages writers in conversations not only with other academic texts but also with real people and real concerns, then the quality of one’s writing is in part related to the quality or rigor of
one’s public conversations (110). Therefore, when situated as ciphas, practices such as workshops, peer-review sessions, and in-class discussions tend to highlight for students the agreements, disagreements, or, at the very least, different perspectives that readers bring to a text or topic. More important, these practices facilitate the conversations, inquiry, and deliberation important to developing a stronger understanding of writing and rhetoric.

Actually, several types of ciphas exist in hip-hop culture, and it is useful to review the collective features that are pertinent to writing instruction. The rap cipha, as I have suggested, is the most popular, or at least most popularly recognized, form. It serves as a way of sharpening and evaluating a rapper’s skill level through semi-public performances that display for other rappers and hip-hop heads developing compositions that may soon be performed before a public audience. In formal rap ciphas, artists and observers evaluate the rhymes of participants, and, much like the call-and-response practices of the Black church, one’s performance is judged through head nods, verbal affirmations, or verbal scoffs and ridicule. As Marcyliena Morgan explains, “MCs practice regularly in front of others in ciphers, where participants listen as they also evaluate the skill

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1 I am borrowing and extending Rosa Eberly’s notion of the Proto-Public sphere. In “Audiences, Communities, and Publics” she defines the classroom as a proto-public sphere, given that although classroom discussions often emulate the deliberative and critical practices of most public spheres it is also shaped by institutional restrictions that non-academic public spheres are not. Although hip-hop ciphas are not informed by institutional restrictions, most ciphas can be exclusive and restricted in ways that real public forums are not. For example, should an outsider over-hear a conversation or rap and choose to interject his or her voice, the participants of the cipha will most likely stop and wait for the intruder to leave before continuing. Thus, ciphas can take place in very public spaces, but require a type of assent that traditional publics do not. See also Warner’s, *Publics and Counterpublics* and Morgan’s *The Real Hip-Hop*. 
level of the MC. When outside [of a stage performance] an MC’s crew severely evaluates his or her freestyle skills” (102). This practice functions similar to the way workshops, conference panels, and writing groups do for academics. Morgan argues that such a practice is tied to the social and community values of hip-hop and derives from an understanding that no one can develop a skillful flow through private practice alone; instead, dope rhymes develop out of call-and-response activities such as the cipha that critique and comment on these rhymes before they are formally presented to a general audience (82).

Another variation of the cipha is the type evident on rap albums. Artists push one another to excel by trying to out perform each participant on the recording. Ideally, each verse exhibits a linguistic virtuosity that attempts to exceed the preceding verse on the song. Songs such as “All About the Benjamins” from P. Diddy’s *Puff Daddy and the Family*, “Guerrilla Monsoon Rap” from Talib Kweli’s *Quality*, and “The Cypher” from Wale’s *Back to the Feature* represent this type of cipha. On these songs a collective of artists perform their respective rhyme, taking turns as they attempt to top the previous rhyme delivered. Such ciphas are usually reserved for more advanced artists and tend to evoke friendly competition. These songs do not always follow a particular theme, nor do the artists’ verses necessarily build on each other. Rather, the main point is the testing of one’s lyrical abilities.

Ironically, the least-explored cipha that occurs within hip-hop culture (most likely because it occurs among hip-hop heads rather than rap artists) are the ciphas that occur on street corners, stoops of buildings, or within private living spaces among a small collective of speakers. These ciphas represent conversations that
engage specific topics and are intended, sometimes indirectly, to build, challenge, or discard received knowledge. Such a practice is common among hip-hop heads, but is also a common practice within African American culture. An example of this can be found in Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*. In a scene that takes place among a young Wright and his friends, the group dialogues about various topics. The author Wright decodes the implicit meaning of the boys’ statements to demonstrate the purpose of the dialogue and its function as an African American discursive practice. Here is an excerpt,

“Man, you reckon these white folks is ever gonna change?”

Timid, questioning hope.

“Hell, No! They just born that way.” Rejecting hope for fear that it could never come true.

“Shucks, man. I’m going north when I get grown.” Rebelling against futile hope and embracing flight.

“A colored man’s all right up north.” Justifying flight.

“They say a white man hit a colored man up north and that colored man hit that white man, knocked him cold, and nobody did a damn thing!” Urgent wish to believe in flight.

“Man for man up there.” Begging to believe in justice.

Silence. (80-81)

By allowing others to put pressure on their ideas, by accepting, rejecting, or discarding some statements, the boys build knowledge and solidify their own personal stances. Notice that with regard to the topic of flight, each boy builds upon
the previous statement hoping to construct a rationale for his own flight to northern cities away from a racist and harsh southern environment. The boys’ silence at the end of the exchange serves as a critique that ultimately leads to the boys discarding this idea out of fear of its impossibility (81). Ironically, by working through this idea and discarding it, the boys literally circle back to the original topic of white racism. Through collaboration, they are able further to define their positions on Whites,

“Man, what makes white folks so mean?” Returning to grapple with the old problem.

“Whenever I see one I spit.” Emotional rejection of whites.

“Man ain’t they ugly?” Increased emotional rejection.

“Man, you ever get right close to a white man, close enough to smell ‘im?” Anticipation of statement.

“They say we stink. But my ma says white folks smell like dead folks.” Wishing the enemy was dead.

“Niggers smell from sweat. But white folks smell all the time.” The enemy is an animal to be killed on sight (81).

The boys’ cipha represents a reasoning process, a way of transmitting, rehearsing, and discussing ideas that develop one’s stance on a particular topic. Wright describes the value of the activity as thus,

The culture of one black household was thus transmitted to another black household, and folk tradition was handed from group to group.
Our attitudes were made, defined, set, or corrected; our ideas were discovered, discarded, enlarged, torn apart, and accepted. (82)

Such a cipha can be productive, as it requires individuals—much like its Standard English equivalent to cipher—literally to puzzle through an issue together with hopes of creating knowledge and solidifying stances toward that issue. I organize workshops, peer-review sessions, and in-class discussions with elements of these ciphas in mind.

Optimally, student interactions in writing ciphas should push them to discuss, defend, discard, or accept particular ideas by focusing conversations on the value of multiple perspectives. Conceptually, ciphas extend Rosa Eberly’s view of the classroom as a “protopublic” sphere by providing teachers a way to connect these writing activities to the deliberative practices all writers and rhetors engage in (172). The goal is to guide students to take seriously the ideas of others and to work through the language and concepts of their classmates as they would the voices that they encounter in other aspects of their lives.

As Donald Murray explains in A Writer Teaches Writing, writing workshops, despite some of the best intentions by teachers, can easily turn into a gauntlet of criticism from peers that contributes very little to the development of one’s writing or confidence (194). While I would not say that workshop ciphas should emulate the “trial by fire” tradition of workshops that troubles Murray, one of the central features of a rap cipha is critical feedback, and thus students are encouraged to be honest about how they’re reading their classmates’ work (194). The job of teachers in workshop ciphas is not to shield students from conflict, but...
rather to provide a frame for critical feedback that pushes one’s writing and every participant’s thinking forward. Participants in a workshop cipha should help each other build and develop the skill of a particular performer.

In my first-year composition courses, students are regularly asked to submit copies of rough drafts to the class to be discussed as part of our writing workshops. Everyone is expected to read the drafts submitted and respond to them in a few ways: through a brief, typed response; through comments and questions written directly on copies of the drafts; and through discussion of the drafts in class. Although I encourage students to mark some of the mechanical and grammar errors they notice in student papers, I also let them know that a large portion of their comments and class discussions should focus on the ideas within the essays. I encourage students to discuss what they understand a draft to be arguing or explaining and to be honest about whether they accept or reject the positions taken in the draft. I also ask them to justify their reactions.

For example, one student’s paper on sexism in the workplace created considerable conversation about similar experiences of sexism in classes and majors in which students were the gender minority. Although some students suggested that perhaps some other students were overly sensitive, I assured them that these were not isolated experiences and that previous students in my courses expressed the same concern about the same majors. Through some strategic questioning by me, students began to explore the idea of gender discrimination and how their respective majors and fields of interest reflected such discrimination.
explicitly or implicitly. After deliberation, students began to suggest ways that the paper being workshopped could be focused and strategically incorporate clearly articulated personal testimony. Again, following the suggestion of Arnetha Ball and Ted Lardner expressed in African American Literacies Unleashed, my goal was to shift student focus from exclusive attention to written products to the interaction and discursive performances that contribute to one’s thinking about a topic (73).

Throughout my first-year courses, students are also asked to discuss their papers in small groups. In this setting, students are expected to engage in more personal and extensive dialogue about their writing. Because students are expected to have read the papers of their classmates ahead of time, I only allow a small portion of class time for student feedback. I liken these peer-review ciphas to the ciphas advanced artists engage in because the expectation is that students will scrutinize their peers’ work and will step up their own writing in an effort not to be outdone. Although writing is not a competition, students benefit from putting pressure on each other’s writing. I ask students to highlight some of the stronger sentences or ideas in their classmates’ papers and to read them aloud. Then I ask them to discuss troubling sentences in the essays. Together we attempt to revise the sentences and then engage in a discussion about the writers’ rhythm, voice, and flow. Although I am not pushing an unproblematic success story---obviously, not all goes as planned---I do believe that this process energizes many students to work on their writing and to improve before the next round of ciphas.
However, I think the most spirited ciphas come in the form of in-class discussions about assigned readings. Although these discussions are not directly related to students’ formal writings, there is a kind of informal composing that occurs in these instances. Furthermore, I find that these dialogues draw out the type of productive energy generally found in all hip-hop ciphas; this energy becomes especially useful for maintaining student interest in writing successive drafts. Students compete and complement each other’s ideas, seeking to articulate more fully their positions on a particular subject. I often try to connect particularly astute points back to student rough drafts so that these points can be used to inform their compositions.

One particular discussion that demonstrates the value of this type of ciph involved Lani Guinier’s essay “Tyranny of Majority.” In the essay, Guinier argues that democracy as it is currently practiced tends to support a “winner take all” mentality that at times excludes minority voices and ignores the participatory principles of egalitarian democracy (608-609). To illustrate this point, she uses the example of a high school that had two proms because the black students felt their collective cultural interests, particularly with respect to music, had not been included in the planning of the traditional prom (608). As Guinier points out, because the black seniors were always outnumbered by White seniors, they would never, by mere voting, have their preferences honored. They felt that their votes did not count (609).
The essay sparked a lively conversation primarily because many students participated in a similar voting process for their proms and identified with that specific example. And, as Gilyard notes, Guinier’s essay disrupts “a dominant and largely invisible discourse, that is, the nexus of ideology, language, and historical consciousness inside which majority rule in the nation is regarded as an unquestioned and unquestionable assumption” (46). The class quickly divided on the notion of prom voting as a democratic process. Some students felt that such a process was fair and that the students in the example were merely sore losers. However, as other students were quick to point out, such an approach ignores the realities of diversity.

That students shared their different views with one another, competing to compose the most persuasive arguments for their individual stances was the most important outcome. Similar to the cipha in Black Boy, they evaluated each other’s arguments without directly labeling them as successes or failures. After class, several students came to me looking for a definitive answer on the validity of Guinier’s proposal for turn taking. Although I had a few responses I could have provided them, I felt it more important that they absorb the discussions from that day and use them to reflect on Guinier’s ideas, cultivating, I hoped, a more nuanced understanding of U.S. democracy in the process. Like traditional hip-hop ciphas, such conversations are not about a final verdict. Although judgment is important, informed judgment is a process of reflection, assertion, and interpretive leaps with others that is central to any desire to publicly display one’s ideas through writing or speaking.
The point of situating these activities as ciphas is to demonstrate that writing is a form of communal interaction that can be improved profoundly when students invest in the writings and ideas of their classmates. This requires teachers to create spaces that challenge students to speak to, against, and for each other. To this end, the cipha circumvents traditional forms of assessment to engage students in a broader understanding of writing and audience.

**Mixtapes as Heuristic**

Jabari Mahiri reports in *Shooting for Excellence* that popular culture and hip-hop culture in particular represent integral parts of student identities, experiences, and literacies (112-116). Given this understanding, a central concern of many writing pedagogies that emphasize hip-hop has been to change classroom discourse by encouraging students to use their popular literacies as resources for their writing (Kirkland 71-72). Mahiri advocates “blending,” or teaching students to use their popular literacies as scaffolds for developing academic writing performances (109-111). However, I find that simply allowing students to incorporate popular cultural texts into their writing does not in and of itself facilitate better writing. Quite to the contrary, most students simply subordinate such resources to more traditional academic sources or hurriedly reference them as examples without any clear indication of how they further their arguments.
In “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae explains that students are placed in difficult positions as writers, essentially being asked to write as authorities on topics they do not have expertise in (75). To do this many students look to academic texts or sources to authorize their arguments. It is not a simple matter of supporting or developing ideas. Mickey Hess describes my experiences when he says,

I too often see my students opting for overused topics (like abortion, gun control, or the death penalty) where they believe they can find the most sources. These papers tend to be far less interesting and complex than the papers that develop unique topics that require more digging for sources and combining and applying sources that may not be on their topic at all. (291)

Proposals to incorporate students’ popular or hip-hop literacies should prod students to use these texts to reason through particular subjects without returning to or relying on traditional academic texts. Teachers can facilitate this process by outlining for students moments when they should avoid using texts that serve a strictly informational purpose. Toward this end, I advocate using a hip-hop mixtape approach to writing because mix-tapes represent an alternate form of hip-hop music that can instruct students to purposefully and strategically ignore institutional expectations or formal academic sources in favor of sources that enable students to formulate more original arguments. I find that a mixtape approach toward rhetoric
and writing helps me to direct students to think deeply about the various ways they can discuss a topic outside of traditional academic arguments.

As a genre of hip-hop music, the term *mixtape* references a variety of hip-hop music albums, including independent albums sold in the hip-hop underground², compilation albums composed of exclusive music by mainstream artists and arranged by a DJ, compilation albums composed of popular hip-hop songs reinterpreted by different artists, and concept albums that build on controversial themes (Shonberger 10-13). Hip-hop mixtapes tend to ignore and avoid institutional consent, strategically organizing and developing from a mixture of non-traditional songs. Although mix-tapes tend to flood the internet today, they were originally sold directly from the trunks of cars and other personal spaces directly to local consumers, representing an alternate form of distribution and authorization (Watkins 13). Mixtapes were and still are to a large degree directed to local publics; thus, the only validation or respect that artists who produce mixtapes care about is that expressed by these local publics.

My particular interest is in concept mixtapes, because they are a strategic use of different topics and music to build on a specific theme or purpose, gradually developing a coherent argument through the juxtaposition of these different songs. Such a practice can be instructive for teaching students about selecting powerful

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² As both Marcyliena Morgan and Kwame Harrison note, the hip-hop underground spaces within the public sphere—coffee shops, community centers, trunks of cars etc—that are used to circulate and perform hip-hop music and culture. While all hip-hop mixtapes circulate in this space, independent artists usually engage in a type of hands on circulation of their music within the hip-hop underground that other artists do not.
sources of popular knowledge. Examples of these concept mix-tapes are Wale’s *Mixtape About Nothing* and *Back to the Feature*, Lil Wayne’s *The Dedication* and *The Dedication 2*, and AZ’s *N4L (Nigga for Life)*.

On N4L, rapper AZ takes as his subject matter the controversial term *nigger*. Although used on the majority of rap albums, this term remains controversial both within and outside of the hip-hop and black communities. However, the purpose of AZ’s album is to provide a complex meditation on the various meanings, historical roots, and continued usage of the term by hip-hop and non-hip-hop consumers. AZ deliberately elides institutional norms to speak directly to a hardcore hip-hop audience. Likewise, I believe student papers can be improved in some instances by deliberately avoiding academic sources and institutional norms, such as citing the work of an authority on a particular subject, and instead building one’s own argument and ethos through the explication of particular sources such as films, music, plays, and comic books.

One album that has been most influential in my decision to advise students this way is Little Brother’s mixtape *Separate But Equal*. As a mixtape it demonstrates the type of sustained development of a particular argument and theme that is often absent from student writing. The title of the album is an allusion to segregationist slogan “separate but equal,” suggesting that similar to Jim Crow-era politics there is a program of inequality that is deliberately enacted within the music industry to undermine and control the circulation of certain types of hip-hop music. Because only a few multi-million dollar corporations have almost total
control over the selection and distribution of hip-hop music, as Tricia Rose notes in *Hip-hop Wars*, mainstream outlets such as the popular radio or networks like MTV determine rather than simply broadcast the popularity of most hip-hop music\(^3\) (86).

Little Brother (LB), a fairly conscious and humorous hip-hop group out of North Carolina, responds to this exclusion through an elaborate performance of hip-hop songs that are entertaining but would not receive major radio play. This mixtape demonstrates the complexity and value of having alternative voices representing hip-hop and is a concerted attempt to broaden the minds of hip-hop fans, a point rapper Phonte makes clear on the introduction to the album. He explains that major outlets such as MTV, BET, and popular hip-hop radio shows tend to present a narrow view of southern hip-hop music, promoting only music representative of the booty-shaking songs reminiscent of 2 Live Crew and other popular southern hip-hop artists. LB’s point is not to discourage or reject such forms of hip-hop but to suggest that hip-hop, especially southern hip-hop music, is much broader than this. Thus, through a collection of playful and serious songs, LB illustrates this point by producing songs that extend common conceptions of southern hip-hop music and challenge directly the practice of exclusion within the music industry. Songs such as “Macaroni” are playful and light-hearted songs that demonstrate some of the self-deprecating humor that makes LB such a unique rap group. “Macaroni” is a hilarious take on the term “Mac” that within African American culture references a ladies’ man. One usually employs the term macaroni

\(^3\) However, songs such as Soldier Boys’ “Crank Dat (Superman)” represent the power of digital technologies and media outlets such as youtube to circumvent this control.
to poke fun at one’s self-proclaimed status with the ladies, such as “he thinks he’s Mac, macaroni’s more like it.” Rapper Big Pooh employs this understanding to poke fun at his teenage awkwardness and inability to woo a prospective love interest. He raps,

I was stunting tryna be the one
I went to work but I ain't get the job done
Light skin, long hair, spoke a different tongue
My Portuguese princess was playing hard[to get] young (Little Brother).

His admission to such failure is something that is counterintuitive to most hip-hop music, as artists traditionally spin tall tales about their prowess with the ladies. However, as any true hip-hop fan understands, there is always room for revision of hip-hop practices as long as it’s done with wit and flair. The song’s inclusion on the album serves as one of several examples of the range of southern hip-hop music. Moreover, it delivers on multiple levels, as the title of the song also makes allusion to a popular southern dish. The song suggests that not just Big Pooh had such struggles with the ladies but that many brothers had similar experiences. As Pooh notes, “I ain’t the only one.” Thus, he forces a kind of community through the identification of shared experience. However, the most important point is that such a song builds on the thesis of the album not by relying on a formula for success but by taking a creative risk and poking fun at one’s failure.

However, other songs such as “Boondock Saints” are explicitly critical of the music industry’s exclusionary practices. The song’s title is a play on the cult
classic film *Boondock Saints*, a film about a pair of Irish brothers who take the law into their hands in order to punish high-profile criminals who continually elude the penal system through underhanded political connections. Similarly, rapper Phonte sees himself taking matters into his own hands and addressing the underhanded dealings that contribute to the narrow displays of hip-hop music. He rhymes,

I'ma put it on wax and give you the raw facts  
And truth about life and the things I'm dealing with  
Black folks saying that I'm too intelligent  
And white folks saying that I'm a little too niggerish  
It got me in a strange predicament  
I wish Black Embarrassment TV would judge more wisely  
But I don't know what's worse  
The fact that they ain't playing our shit,  
or the fact that it don't even surprise me  
Because I ain’t shucking and cause I ain't jiving

Phonte refers to B.E.T, the popular black entertainment channel that serves as a primary outlet for hip-hop music videos, as black Embarrassment TV, indicating a frustration caused by the unbalanced representations of hip-hop music. This is significant as it bolsters Rose’s point that hip-hop music itself is in a strange predicament as it is largely marketed to an audience outside of the core producers of the culture; therefore, it is always subject to extreme forms of commodification and stereotyping that distort its complexity into simplified images and messages that can be easily consumed by broader audiences (88). However, it is Little
Brother’s use of a variety sounds, gestures, and topics to make this point that remains important to writing instruction.

Through a mixtape approach, teachers can help students to see moments when their own writing can be improved by breaking from traditional perspectives and approaches. Not unlike mixtapes, students should be encouraged to organize and engage topics through a variety of mediums and sources. In my own classes, I often ask students to think about how some of their popular cultural texts shift the purpose of and audience for their writing. One student informed me that she never really thought of her popular-culture sources as the central element of her essay. Teaching students to view these sources as different perspectives on a common topic pushes them to think deeply about the topic and purpose of their writing. Two student essays come to mind, primarily because both students initially emphasized less interesting and more traditional texts and topics in their essays, only briefly referencing some popular texts that informed their discussions. However, both essays begged for more attention to these popular texts because these texts eventually allowed these students to think through the implications and possibilities in their arguments, stretching rather basic arguments into a more nuanced treatment of their topics.

One essay discussed the way “women stereotypes” were circulated through fairy tales such as Cinderella. In the essay, this student reviewed the way Cinderella influenced young girls at early age into buying into the stereotype that women are somehow incomplete without a husband to care for them. She borrows this argument from social psychologist Vera Maass’ work The Cinderella Test.
However, as I noted, as did some of her classmates, her use of television shows and movies such as *Sponge Bob Square Pants*, *7th Heaven*, and *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* to illustrate her claims that women stereotypes are deeply embedded in American popular culture provided a unique perspective on the conversation, one that did not need the statistics or heavy citation of academic sources. If highly successful television shows and movies regularly circulate sexist stereotypes of women, then these stereotypes become a type of literacy, a lens for understanding gender roles. As she writes:

> As one can assume the imagery that is displayed in fairy tales, movies, and television shows has an affect on men and their outlook on women. This can be one explanation of why it is harder for women to advance in the business world, resulting in the male dominance of this field.

I thought that this claim was too large to give a fair treatment in a five-page essay. However, I saw something different in her treatment of popular culture. Here is an extended portion from another section of the same essay.

> Shows like SpongeBob, *7th Heaven*, and the movie *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, all in one way or another, reinforce the stereotype that a woman is always in need of a man, keeping the Cinderella story alive. For example, *The Diary of a Mad Black Woman* shows a woman who gives up her life to help her husband fulfill his dreams. Once the marriage is broken, we see her life crumble; she is miserable, and feels worthless. She, like Cinderella, must give up her
life and independence to advance her husband’s empire. Ironically, she finds the road to independence by getting a job, her own house, and primarily providing for herself, only to immediately remarry and claim she is happy.

In both examples, she is trying to extend Maass’s work by suggesting that much of youth culture is inundated by subliminal messages that reinforce stereotypes that female happiness is best achieved by subordination to men.

However, as I stressed to the student in conferences about her paper, her pop-culture examples, not Maass’ or Cinderella, represented a common set of texts that provided her access to a broader discussion of misogyny, feminism, and stereotypes in a way that strengthened her argument. In our writing ciphas, students read the essay and, I believe, because of their familiarity with the referenced texts, began a spirited discussion about what those texts meant for young people.

The second essay was a compare-and-contrast essay that focused on Barack Obama’s and John McCain’s campaigns. For the most part, the essay provided an adequate review of their main personal and political differences. But a paragraph toward the end of the essay that seemed out of place identified an important point. As the student noted, hip-hop had been more visible in this national election than any previous one. She articulated an interesting rationale for this occurrence,

Part of Obama’s appeal is aesthetic: he is young and African American and an overwhelming amount of the hip-hop community can relate to that. Another popular song that referenced Obama was
“The People” by Common. One of the lines is: “My raps ignite the people like Obama”. There were numerous mix-tapes out with lines like Common’s, because many hip-hop artists endorsed Obama’s campaign and became committed to the electoral process. Other than getting shout-outs in songs, I think that the publicity Obama got in the hip-hop community, like being on the cover of Vibe magazine, strategically helped him. There was not a similar euphoria for McCain.

The paragraph seemed out of place because a large part of the essay focused on the candidates’ specific positions on topics such as same-sex marriage and abortion. Furthermore, the student’s thesis stated, “In this paper I will compare and contrast them and their positions and how it may have affected the election.” After some discussion, we agreed that the hip-hop portion of the essay seemed out of place. But more important, we both saw that it represented a fascinating discussion in and of itself. This paragraph spawned a new paper that drew mostly on mixtapes and news articles to make the point that for some reason hip-hop as a cultural movement had finally invested in a presidential candidate and visibly participated in the voting process. She made the astute point that previous attempts to interest hip-hop heads in national politics devolved into attempts to literally “sell” the idea of voting through clothing and other products—such as P. Diddy selling “Vote or Die” t-shirts to encourage youths to vote. Her argument was built on an understanding

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4 The voter registration drive, held during the 2000 election, ironically lacked the type of critical, popular-cultural literacy that many students possess.
that Obama gathered such a strong following from hip-hop culture not necessarily due to his skin color, but his ability to avoid “bullshit” appeals to youth culture.

The central ideas behind mixtape pedagogy are to provide students with a broader view of writing and suggest new pathways for entering public conversations. The goal is to help students figure out how and when to break from institutionally sanctioned public opinions and exhibit their own understanding of public opinion based on their engagement with actual publics. For Gerard Hauser, a closer examination of public discourse requires that one examine a variety of texts that are representative of the conflicted and multiple opinions that circulate in public discourse (6-7). Given that popular cultural is a type of public discourse that continues to infiltrate classrooms through student interests and reading habits, teachers need to help students engage these discourses as a way of accessing public discourses, problems, and issues on their own terms rather than using institutional voices to authorize their writing and writing projects. A mixtape approach likewise should build upon Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade’s contention that teachers develop a “curriculum, as well as pedagogy, that empowers students to critically engage the electronic media and other forms of youth popular culture” that serve as sources of knowledge that allow them to reason through complex topics and ideas (331). Thus, a mixtape approach reaffirms the explorative nature of writing, which often has been diminished in student writers.

Teaching to Move Crowds
If teachers take seriously bell hooks’s point that, “Teaching is a performative act. And it is that aspect of our work that offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements in each classroom,” then an emcee approach directs teachers to construct a teaching persona that is informed by intense listening and responses that are able to persuade students of a teacher’s efficacy and knowledge (11). Teaching is a high-stakes act, requiring the spontaneity, risk, and adaptation that is inherent to the emcee’s role. It involves fostering a sense of identification between teacher and student because the teacher, like an emcee, is the primary facilitator for developing a more participatory audience.

The emcee is often understood as the master of ceremonies within hip-hop culture. Originally, emcees primarily worked for DJs, guiding and manipulating parties, adding spontaneity and originality to the DJ’s musical mixes and cuts. Rakim, one of the most prominent emcees, best expresses this function when he states on the classic hip-hop album Paid in Full, “No tricks in '86, it's time to build/ Eric B easy on the cut, no mistakes allowed/Cuz to me, MC means move the crowd.”

The idea of “moving the crowd” is not a reference to one’s ability to dictate the actions of others. Instead, one should think of it as a process, as a rhetorical performance that understands that one’s persona and the beliefs that circulate among an audience are just as important as the quality of one’s music or oral compositions. Kenneth Burke frames rhetoric as an act that negotiates actions and
identifications between human agents (22-23). Because the goal of live performances is to interact with and discover new ways to engage a crowd, emcees must take into account the dynamics of each situation as they encounter it.

Similarly, teachers face a variety of identities within the classroom that must be engaged effectively if they wish to motivate students to learn. Therefore, teachers should be as mindful as emcees of the various ways their bodies and persona contribute to their rhetorical performances. Arnetha Ball and Ted Lardner reason,

> When teachers lack experience and knowledge of students’ diverse cultural backgrounds, they may unconsciously withhold, draw back from, or simply fail to recognize opportunities to fully engage and motivate, to communicate the high expectations of these students that is the hallmark of teacher efficacy and reflective optimism. (66)

Failure to “move the crowd” can be detrimental to all participants. Emcees can inform teaching performance in a few distinct ways.

> Emceeing at a live performance requires a kind of social competence necessary for creating and maintaining a give-and-take relationship with one’s audience. One particular practice is through call-and-response. However, in this case, emcees are not merely looking for affirmation or validation. Instead, it is an attempt to foster participation and dialogue. I think here of when an emcee begins a line from a song and then holds the mic out to audience members for them to finish the verse. Such a practice is not laziness; it is a way of making sure the audience “hears” them, is with them, is in agreement with their performance. And it allows
the audience itself to be heard. At the root of this practice is a democratic understanding of participation as central to both composing and community. As Freire argues, teachers do not own the truth. Students develop the capacity to write their own realities when they are at least allowed to speak in the presence of careful listeners (104). In the classroom, teachers can apply such a practice by taking seriously the concerns or voices of students in ciphas or through their writing.

One practice that facilitates this type of listening is leaving space in the curriculum for students to bring in texts that interest them for the whole class to study. In these instances, teachers are not merely asking students to respond or comment on a preselected text but to participate in the practice of knowledge building by sharing what it is that interests them. Teachers who do this are following in the footsteps of emcees who allow amateur artists on stage to freestyle or battle. As Kwame Harrison explains, it is a known practice at hip-hop shows for artists to invite novice emcees onto the stage to battle or simply to freestyle during portions of the show (139). However, emcees understand that such a practice is a huge risk. Performances by aspiring emcees can be flat or uninspiring and elicit “boos” from the crowd. Likewise, students can select texts that do not necessarily inspire. But that’s okay. Just as the master emcee will save the show from a flat guest appearance, the accomplished teacher can still move the crowd.

I often invite students to bring in music videos, songs, or short films that add to a particular unit of study or ongoing conversation in class. I briefly review these texts beforehand to make sure they are appropriate for class, and, if suitable, I allow
students to lead class discussions telling us how they discovered the text and why they thought it was relevant to our course. However, I am always mindful that like a true emcee I should always control the microphone and reserve the right to take it back at any time. The important thing is that students begin to invest in both their teachers and themselves. Like an emcee, teachers serve as guides.

Hip-hop, despite some of its “get money” mantras and popular views on achieving economic success, can be a very democratic enterprise. With such recent interest in hip-hop and educational practice, I think it’s important for teachers to reflect on those organic moments in hip-hop, those live performances, mixtapes sold on the street corner, and those ciphas that take place on one’s stoop as performances that speak directly to the type of engagement that democratically minded teacher-emcees can use to further the learning, writing, and conversations that contribute to the rhetorical education of students.

**Conclusion**

I close this chapter by reaffirming the value of ciphas, mixtapes, and emcees. These models of instruction represent an attempt to engage the invisible traditions that silence students and interrupt their writing processes. In searching for a more equitable, more democratic, more productive means of reaching an ethnically and economically diverse group of students, hip-hop represents a viable method and not simply a set of texts for analysis. Within hip-hop, each technique fuels and is fueled by a desire to generate more writing. Hip-hop artists live to
compose language, to put in word work as a way of constructing new meaning and shaping their own realities. Nevertheless, this desire to continually compose is not innate. Like most people, including poets and professional writers, their abilities are facilitated by experiences and practices with writing that maintain their interest in writing. Similarly, I believe that one way to help students to continue to improve as lifelong writers is to introduce them to techniques and perspectives on writing that highlight for them the power of their own voices within a community of other voices.

Too often teachers and students come to view small group work, peer revision, and classroom workshops as ways of policing the work of others. It is not surprising that, as many of my colleagues complain, students are so bad at correcting one another. However, like hip-hop heads, I have always seen collaboration not as a way of policing the work of others, or as away of producing consensus about the value of a particular work, but as way of challenging and acknowledging the work one has “put in” in order to improve collectively and individually as performers.

In order to encourage students to engage and build on the responses of peers, scholars, and intellectuals, teachers must be prepared to grant them, at times, the authority usually reserved for professionals and published authors. Emcees recognize the reciprocal relationship between avid listeners and amateurs; they draw on the energy and potential embedded within their audiences and use them as sources for their own compositions. What this practice highlights is the recognition that the strength of one’s expressions is directly related to the strength of their
audience’s responses. If learning and growth occur best within a community of engaged teachers and learners, as scholars like Paulo Freire and bell hooks suggest, then perhaps teachers should begin to think about how their own performances direct, reflect, silence, or embolden the performances of their students.
4. Lauryn Hill and the Pedagogy of Critical Hip-Hop

In this chapter, I focus on hip-hop artist Lauryn Hill’s *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, her 1998 multi-platinum hip-hop album that combines rap music with hip-hop neo-soul, as an important text for writing teachers. The compilation is one of the most extensive thematic links between prophetic or socio-political hip-hop and education; Hill reveals herself to be an exemplary composer who deftly uses language and imaginative thinking to respond to several personal and social dilemmas. Moreover, a major aim of her music is to inspire and motivate youth to sharpen their thinking. As such, her project is aligned with that of composition scholars such as James Berlin, who argues that rhetoric and composition instructors must assist students to become astute producers and interpreters of texts as part of a process that prepares them to become critical citizens and agents of social change (109-110). Moreover, Hill’s work, with its keen analyses of youth cultural politics, represents public pedagogy of the sort recognized by Cornel West. As he indicates, we build bridges between the older and younger generations by speaking directly to them and performing with them in their idioms and styles. These CDs are danceable education for artistic and political ends. In this way, democracy matters are woven into hip-hop culture in a respectful yet critical manner. (Democracy 185).

Or as Hill explained in a 2006 interview, she has always seen herself as a teacher, someone who—through personal example, dialogue, and exhortation—teaches

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5 Hip hop soul and neo-soul have been used to describe relatively recent R&B music that uses hip hop production practices, verbal rhythmic patterns, and/or popular tropes of hip-hop rap artists.
others to look beyond easy answers and to practice “uncommon sense” thinking. Specifically, Hill is a promising example for composition teachers because of the way she engages issues of politics, gender, race, and language while providing a unique hip-hop perspective.

Hill’s album also suggests the need for more discussions about the ethical development of hip-hop youth and emphasizes the personal and political nature of writing compositions. Stated simply, the personal often becomes political as individuals deliberate and write. Hill understands this and advocates for a socially conscious engagement with public discourse and hip-hop music to highlight this for students. My goal in this chapter is to focus on the composer Hill—composer in the broad sense of giving ideas significant form---the reader and writer of texts who connects learning, life, and social injustice in compelling compositions in order to illustrate the importance of language and learning in effecting social change.

**The Miseducation as an Educational Text**

Despite Hill’s critical agenda and thematic emphasis on educating hip-hop youth, most hip-hop scholars have ignored the educational theme in *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. This is ironic given that “miseducation” is a prominent word in the title. For example, although African American scholar and serious hip-hop head Jelani Cobb argues that Hill’s album “was intent upon moving urban music out of the kiddie pools and into deeper waters” and praises Hill for
stretching the genre of hip-hop by noting that, like African American writer Walter Mosley’s *Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned*, Hill’s album “provide[s] a vision of black city people that is textured, complex, human,” he avoids any explicit discussion of the volume’s educational theme (146). Similarly, Imani Perry recognizes the theo-political and subversive nature of Hill’s compositions but avoids the educational theme as well. Instead, she chooses to focus on the transformation of Hill’s image into a mainstream and acceptable figure despite the controversial nature of her lyrics (199). But it is not by chance that Hill’s album title is a thinly-veiled allusion to a celebrated text in African American studies and critical pedagogy, *The Miseducation of the Negro* by Carter G. Woodson. Published in 1933, *The Miseducation of the Negro* represented a notable challenge to the technocratic education received by many blacks in U.S. schools. As Woodson stated, “too many Negroes go to school to memorize certain facts to pass examinations for jobs. After they obtain these positions they pay little attention to humanity” (21). He understood that education should encompass more than simply the acquisition of skills; in his view, it should prepare individuals to adapt—through experience, reflection, and effort—to their immediate social situations and to improve their communities. Influenced by Woodson, Hill extends his project through an overt concern with the creative development of hip-hop youth. Like Woodson, her interest is in the values and not just the skills that students derive from their education, and her aim is to inspire people to take an active role in transforming society.
Hill’s title is also an allusion to the 1974 film *The Education of Sonny Carson*, based on the autobiography of Robert “Sonny” Carson, a reformed criminal turned Afrocentric activist. The movie is a cult classic among the hip-hop generation. Directed by Michael Campus, the film traces the journey of a young Carson as he joins a gang and begins a life of violence and crime. Carson subsequently witnesses the death and imprisonment of several friends and becomes incarcerated himself. His situation reflects a reality Lauryn Hill would later express: “It seems we lose, before we even had a chance to play [the game of life]” (“Everything Is Everything”). Hill is perhaps referring to the high incarceration rates of hip-hop youth, who, years after Carson’s era, succumb to the same cycle of violence, arrest, and imprisonment that Carson eventually overcame.

Through his prison experiences, Carson becomes (in the film) more politically aware and reflects on the cycle of oppression in which African Americans are caught. As the movie builds toward climax and conclusion, Carson is released from prison into a drug-ravaged community; even his girlfriend is addicted. After she overdoses, Carson rushes her to the hospital. The closing scene is of a solemn and reflective Carson exiting the building and walking off into the sunset to presumably change his ways and perhaps his community.

The film highlights the reciprocal relationship between individuals and their respective communities. Although the decline of Carson’s neighborhood stems from large-scale political and economic neglect, the film also indicates, through the close scrutiny of Carson and his gang’s behavior, that one’s ethical, social, and
economic decisions play an important role. The notion of reciprocity—the belief that individuals share various positive and negative bonds with others in their community—is a central theme of Hill’s album. As she suggests throughout, one’s ethical behavior has consequences that reach far beyond an individual’s own experience. Songs such as “Lost Ones,” “To Zion,” “Final Hour,” and “Forgive Them Father” argue for a heightened awareness about one’s ethical obligations not only to “do for self” but also to build community by treating others with respect and care. Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson argue convincingly that reciprocity is a concept central to negotiating difference and disagreement because both are realities individuals cannot avoid and therefore require strategies, not for winning and losing, but for finding mutually justifiable solutions in order to maintain the tenets of a democratic society (5). They also assert that successfully to employ these strategies within a democracy, individual actions cannot be interpreted separate from their social context. For Hill, as for Gutman and Thompson, it is important that individuals learn to see their compositions (expressions of one’s personal experiences) and the compositions of others as interrelated. Some of the warped social relations about which Hill muses can be read as symbolic of the institutions and technocratic practices that undermine student development. Therefore, through her songs, she is suggesting that it is the job of educators, both teachers and conscious citizens in general, to work for overall social improvement.

Like The Education of Sonny Carson, Hill values the informal experiences that also constitute one’s education, acknowledging their importance to critical thinking while also signifying on their systematic exclusion from formal education.
However, she does not discard the possibilities of formal education; instead, she suggests that the two go hand in hand. Education, for her, is both a formalistic and organic process of engaging one’s community through carefully reasoned words and choices. Hill stresses this point through the interludes on the album, which provide snippets of a formal classroom discussion addressing the topic of love. She enlists Ras Baraka, son of Black Arts poet Amiri Baraka, to play the role of teacher. Currently a school principal in Newark, New Jersey, the younger Baraka engages the students, using Socratic questions to challenge some of the student’s responses while helping to elaborate on the value of other responses. Hill perhaps chooses the topic of love for discussion because it resembles the organic nature of education; loving relationships ebb and flow in a manner that leads to moments of recognition and growth important to all participants. Hill’s inclusions of such interludes indicate a commitment to pluralism---not a sprawling everyone-has-his-or-her-own-truth type of pluralism, but a commitment to understanding and negotiating difference as the preferred response to diversity and individuality. But not only are Hill, and Baraka, educating hip-hop influenced youth about personal relationships, they are, in their roles as the “teachas” and “professas” remarked upon by rhetorical scholar Celnisha Dangerfield, teaching them citizenship.

**Reading the Miseducation of Ms. Hill**

_The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill_ opens with the ringing of a school bell and a nameless teacher reading student names from a roll sheet. As he reads through
several names, students respond with the statement “here” to demonstrate their presence. When Hill’s name is called, she is noticeably absent. We leave traditional school for Hill’s school. Her name is called a few more times before the teacher moves on to the next name and the introduction fades out.

The following track, “Lost Ones,” has been commonly read as a “diss” song directed toward Wyclef Jean, former fellow group member of the Fugees. But considered in light of the education theme of the album, it reads more as a caution against exploiting others for personal gain. The song is also symbolic of the relationship that many urban youth have with mainstream educators. Tricia Rose explains, for instance, that hip-hop youth are disproportionately a target of conservative outrage and disdain by educators who see hip-hop as a superficial, anti-education culture. Because of such attitudes, which resonate beyond the teaching profession as well, teachers often seek to control youth identities rather than engage them. They ostracize as opposed to guiding (75). Hill conveys this frustration when she rhymes,

    Miscommunication leads to complication
    My emancipation don't fit your equation.

A central argument of the song is that one should not discourage independent thinking and individuality. Hill ends the verse with the rhymed couplet,

    Who you gon' scrimmage, like you tha champion?
    You might win some but you just lost one
These lines press her concern with mutual respect, the rhetorical question in the first line signifying a challenge to her unnamed and disrespectful opponent. As noted in my discussion of ciphas, hip-hop artists value peer evaluation that both challenges and improves their compositions. Emcees often produce their best work when the stakes are at their highest, when every emcee in a cipsa is performing at his or her best. Thus, when Hill asks “who you gon’ scrimmage, like you tha champion?” her tone suggests she is obviously upset at the attitude of her adversary.

The song encapsulates another major theme of Hill’s album---hope. As she announces, “I was hopeless, now I’m on Hope road.” Although the line is often strictly interpreted as “now I’m more hopeful,” it references 56 Hope Road, the location of the Bob Marley Museum, where the song was recorded. The line, therefore, is more than an expression of desire, though hope as desire is characteristic of Hill’s oeuvre; the line signals an actual transition from a negative space to a positive one. The Marley Museum, given Marley’s progressive impulses, stands in ideological and physical opposition to the school structure from which the student Hill is missing.

“Ex-Factor,” a painful and heartfelt meditation, speaks to the question of healthy interdependence. The narrator reveals that she must again dissolve a damaging relationship because her partner does not respond to her needs; the relationship constantly creates angst for both. Thus, “Ex-Factor” focuses on the reciprocity that is essential to the physical and psychic well being of self and
others, and on the detrimental effects a lack of communication can have on relationships. In the first verse she sings,

Loving you is like a battle
And we both end up with scars
Tell me, who I have to be
To get some reciprocity

Because reciprocity requires that one think through complex ideas and moral dilemmas without simply dismissing opposing viewpoints, it produces both intimacy and vulnerability. This is true in love and in learning and composing. One must be able to listen in order to convince, to be willing to be persuaded in order to persuade, to engage in meaningful dialogue in order to deliberate about collective concerns.

In Teaching to Transgress, bell hooks argues that painful experiences provide a strong basis for developing and enriching critical inquiry (71-72). She acknowledges that it is not always easy to reflect upon painful experiences, but she still feels that to remember suffering is to renew the challenge, to renew the struggle needed to change one’s current conditions (74). Personal experience, for Hill and for hooks, is valued as a form of self-awareness. Hill’s album, much like hooks’ scholarship, urges a transition from self-reflection to communal action.

On “To Zion,” an ode to her first-born son, Hill continues her discussion of relationships, advocating this time for creative thinking by hip-hop youth. Hill, an unwed mother and burgeoning music superstar, was advised to abort her pregnancy (Checkoway “Inside”). Despite attempts to dissuade her, she chose to give birth:
I knew his life deserved a chance/but everybody told me to be smart

“Look at your career,” they said,

Lauryn baby use your head.

But instead I chose to use my heart.

This is not necessarily an argument for single parenting; her responsibility and commitment to raising her son productively is clear. But she is imaginatively testifying to the difficulty of decision making and the need to sometimes buck social norms. She invokes the Virgin Mary’s pregnancy,

But then an angel came one day

Told me to kneel down and pray

For unto me a man-child would be born.

Imani Perry argues that hip-hop artists mix sacred and profane metaphors not out of self-deprecation, insensitivity, or nihilism but as a commitment to complexity and to shirking the forms of expression authorized by institutions of power (6).

Hill demonstrates such imaginative thinking again on the song “Everything is Everything.” She mixes references to Abyssinian Baptist church, a prominent African American activist church in Harlem, with images of littered ghetto streets, spray painting the tomb of Nefertiti, and Cherubims at Nassau Coliseum---again mixing the sacred and the profane. Celnisha Richardson associates this song with Hill’s myth-making abilities, her ability to reimagine a different world and new possibilities. In this regard, Hill shares a pedagogical view with yet another progressive educator, Paulo Freire.
In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire suggests that hope represents one’s ability to recognize error and revisit past decisions in an effort to view them in a different light (24). Hill, on songs such as “Doo-Wop,” “Superstar,” and the eponymous title track, continues in the Freirean grain. “Doo Wop” is an analysis of the influence on youth culture of a commercial hip-hop music that, as Hill witnesses, provides an excessive number of tasteless videos featuring scantily clad women seeking financially wealthy men. Hill begins the song by recounting the promiscuous and manipulative behavior of an unnamed Hip-hop female antagonist and proceeds to question, “How you gonna win if you ain’t right within?” Thus, Hill’s first verse is directed to young women who perform in hip-hop music videos, continually degrading themselves in her estimation. As she is aware, such images contribute to the general dismissal of youth culture, especially hip-hop identities.

In the second verse, Hill switches her criticism to the frivolousness and materialism of men portrayed in hip-hop videos. Challenging the embrace of thug and bad-boy images, she notes that the men portrayed tend to embody a variety of unsavory characteristics associated with masculine hip-hop identities, such as a sexist attitude, financial instability, poor parental instincts, and low moral character. She responds by advocating that women and men should choose to do better for themselves by making wiser life decisions, again proffering reciprocity as strategy to temper uneven relationships, in this case exploitative relationships encouraged by rampant consumerism. Hill emphasizes that the bling-bling life style of hip-hop and street culture is an illusion used to maintain a cycle of oppression that undermines spiritual, mental, and social well-being. But perhaps the key
pedagogical move Hill makes here is to push identification over chastisement as she proclaims,

Lauryn is only human
Don't think I haven't been through the same predicament
Let it sit inside your head like a million women in Philly Pen
It's silly when girls sell their souls because it's in.

She speaks from a position of love and concern, and her advice comes from a place of familiarity. She has “been there and done that” and therefore knows the potential that listeners possess to change and to effect change, as well as the danger of ignoring opportunities to do so. Philly Pen refers to the million-woman march held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and to the high incarceration rate of minority women.6

On “Superstar” Hill continues her criticism of hip-hop music, this time focusing on the lack of meaningful and socially aware lyrics. She sees nothing wrong with desiring fame and riches; she confesses her own wish to be a “ghetto superstar.” Hill understands hip-hop’s relevance to how younger generations make sense of moral and social dilemmas, and she knows that the excessive consumerism or “profits over people” attitude prevalent in some aspects of hip-hop culture is connected to a desire for social success, an ability to shape one’s life according to their terms.

Yet she worries about how such pursuit can erode ethics. In order to mediate between the lure of neo-liberal capitalism and social/critical development, she

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6 In hip-hop language, pen is an abbreviation for penitentiary.
suggests that there is a need to reconnect to one’s community, to “not forget what you got.” For Hill, wealth and status are viewed as transitory and not as the most important aspects of agency. She sees education as an ethical enterprise. Tricia Rose suggests that the moral and social contradictions in hip-hop, which surely reflect contradictions in larger American culture, should engender areas of learning and revision and not simply biting criticism (89). Hill’s commentary represents a nuanced outlook, one that invites the input of youth.

On the “Final Hour,” Hill explains through the chorus that “You can get the money!/You can get the power!/But keep your eyes on the Final Hour!” thus reinforcing her message that listeners who embrace consumerism need not be shameful of this, though she would have them temper that embrace with a sense of social responsibility. She provides an interesting mix of religious, political, and consumerist metaphors:

I make silat like a Sunni
Get diplomatic immunity in every ghetto community
Had opportunity went from Hoodshock to Hood-chic
But it ain't what you cop, it's about what you keep

Her reference to silat, an Islamic prayer practice, reveals openness to different ways of knowing. However, she does not forget her roots—urban, Christian—and maintains that she receives a diplomatic “pass” in these communities. Thus, “it

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7 On the song “Every Ghetto, Every City,” Hill takes a reflective look at her own past in order to trace her own critical and literate development. The song implies that all youth should practice a similar type of critical reflection as a way of asserting the value of their unique experiences to their education.
ain’t what you cop, it’s about what you keep” references not only fiscal thrift, but the need to build outward from one’s subject position toward the influences and subject positions of others; in essence, it is about understanding reciprocity as way of engaging the world.

Hill personifies Chris Gallagher’s criticism that critical pedagogy often idealizes critical theory at the expense of real teaching situations and the contexts that shape’s one’s work. He goes on to suggest that critical pedagogy—at least the kind offered by Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren—does not always offer many tangible examples or practices for teachers use in their own classroom. Gallagher’s point is that ultimately critical pedagogy too often remains alienating for the very audience it seeks to empower. Rather than prescribing a static theory for teaching students to emancipate themselves from dominant discourses, it is more appropriate, in Gallagher’s view, for teachers to discover for themselves and with students ways to reform education practices relative to the contexts in which they teach and learn. Gallagher explains,

In the unpredictable and messy terrain of pedagogy, we are not likely to find many grand moments of social transformation, but we are likely to find important moments in which teachers and learners work together to assert their agency in the face of institutional and cultural scripts that do not assign them active or crucial roles. (87)

Gallagher calls for critical pedagogies that focus on institutional literacy—the ability to read institutional discourse (79). He describes institutional literacy as the “bylaws, handbooks, codes of conduct, contracts” as well as the “institutional
habits and beliefs that guide its everyday work” (80). He urges for more focus on assessment as a form of critical practice, again questioning the lack of practical examples in critical pedagogies such as Giroux’s.

Hill’s push for more attention to organic interactions between teachers and students and more creative thinking by everyone sharpens Gallagher’s call for institutional literacy by encouraging teachers to rethink not only the relationships between teachers and academic institutions, but also between teachers, students, and various communities. As Hill’s work intimates, to think of social and political arrangements inside and outside of academe as always affecting our performances and analyses of discourse is to enact a holistic form of critical pedagogy.

**Lauryn Hill’s Influence in Classrooms**

In *A Reason to Believe*, Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly argue for composition scholars to pay more attention to romantic pragmatism to build on the moments of possibility that surface in every classroom (125). They note that systems are useful but not foolproof; therefore, any regiment implemented without regard to human experiences ignores the changing nature of human discourse, culture, and educational situations (133-134). Similar to how Roskelly and Ronald look to the productive tensions expressed by romantic writers and pragmatist educators to proffer alternate ways to think about teaching, I draw on what I see as Lauryn Hill’s hip-hop romantic pragmatism to direct how I engage students relative to politics, beliefs, and social concerns that inform their reading and writing. As does Hill, I assume that central to critical writing in the academy is the ability to
display the type of “both/and” creative thinking that is conscious of the way personal experience intersects with the institutional and social demands of education. Thus, I use reading and writing assignments, as well as Hill’s recordings, to connect examinations of personal experience to analyses of broader social concerns. Similar to Hill, I try to situate writing and other forms of personal expression as both personal and political.

In *Personally Speaking: Experience as Evidence in Academic Discourse*, Candace Spigelman argues that personal narratives, especially when writers are challenged to consider the perspectives of others, can provide a substantive base for developing academic writing (92-93). For Spigelman, all writing is personal and political, personal in that it often represents a combination of social and individual values, and political in that effective writing requires students to analyze, advocate, and defend specific positions in relation to a dominant discourse. She argues, using Burke’s idea of perspective by incongruity, that by troubling student’s personal narratives, forcing them to test their arguments against the arguments of others they are building a surplus of alternate perspectives that will contribute to more nuanced writing (92-93). Hill’s pedagogy, in turn, requires that teachers in this endeavor apply pressure to points of contradiction in student’s articulations without becoming dismissive of the values and goals many students share.

A course in which I have applied Hill’s pedagogy---and by extension that of Ronald, Roskelly, and Spigelman---is a U.S. cultures option of the first-year composition course at my university. The U.S. cultures option uses the writing course to teach students to analyze aspects of U.S. culture. Because the concept of
culture is nebulous, a major aim of my teaching is to help students define it for themselves through readings that touch on the sociopolitical implications of ethnicity, race, class, gender, and geography. For example, in Toni Cade Bambara’s “The Lesson,” language and economics dominate the tale, and the text provides an interesting and layered commentary on these topics. The story follows Sylvia, a young African American girl, and her Harlem friends on a trip to F.A.O Schwarz, a popular high-end toy store in midtown Manhattan. Ms. Moore, a local teacher, takes the children to the store to, among other things, teach them about economic disparities between social classes. Shocked at the costs of the items, specifically a thousand-dollar toy sailboat, the children question the practicality of purchasing such items, as well as the social circumstances that would allow some individuals to spend so much money on an item while others go hungry. At the end of the trip a student states, “I don’t think all of us here put together eat in a year what that sailboat costs” (244). Often, student discussion in my class focuses on the vernacular language used to narrate the text. While this exchange is important because it allows the class to talk about the design and stylistic choices used to compose the text, I am much more interested in how students link this to the social critique of class values within the story, particularly because a prominent form of expression in youth culture is consumption, perhaps inspired by the bling-bling lifestyle of hip-hop artists but also by the rampant consumerism circulated by popular discourse. Although most would agree that it is absurd to purchase a thousand-dollar toy boat (and this story was written in the 1970s) when that money could be spent on worthier causes, a major reason most students attend college is to
obtain a job that can allow them to accumulate status, wealth, and possessions. I admit to them that my initial reasoning for attending college ran along the same lines. However, as Hill reminds us, we can consume critically. It is not a sin to accumulate wealth, but it is unethical to ignore one’s social responsibilities once you begin to accumulate wealth. Thus, I talk with students, as Hill would, about class politics, which is sometimes a difficult topic to broach in school, as Anne Green suggests, given that academic institutions are widely perceived as gateways to professional, middle-class lifestyles (77). But I prod nonetheless. As Berlin explains, “It is at the moment of denial that the role of the teacher as problem poser is crucial, providing methods for questioning that locate the points of conflict and contradiction. These methods most often require a focus on the language students invoke in responding to their experience” (111).

The goal is not to browbeat students about changing their spending habits or to dwell endlessly on consumerism. Rather, the aim is for them to interrogate how the ideology of consumption influences their own experiences and choices. A few students explained that they had felt pressure from their family members to switch majors to pursue more lucrative professions. A female student once explained that she received the opposite criticism; her family felt that pursuing a medical degree would keep her unmarried and unable to have a family. These conversations would become topics for their written assignments. Moreover, Sylvia’s ambivalence about consumption at the end of the story proves interesting to students. She expresses no qualms about pocketing Ms. Moore’s four dollars in change from the taxi ride but is disturbed by the idea that there may be individuals more knowledgeable and
wealthy than her who could afford to spend exorbitant amounts of money at F.A.O Schwarz. However, the text never suggests that she is angry at their ability to spend that much money on toys and clowns; her anger has to do with her sense that she is losing in a competition that she did not even realize was taking place (244). Thus, Bambara highlights such disparities in spending practices to comment on the invisible discourse of classism. Geographic, racial, and class divisions are literally maintained by pricing. Furthermore, Bambara uses Sylvia to play on the ambivalence of youth culture toward materialism even before the rise of hip-hop.

Another text, R.A. Hudson’s “Language Worlds,” an excerpt from his book *Sociolinguistics*, invites discussion of language and diversity. Hudson identifies a group of related tribes that are exogamous, that is, males of a particular tribe must marry women that speak a different language. However, the wife is required to live in the husband’s “old stomping grounds” and only speak to their children in the father’s language (437). Needless to say, there is quite a bit of language difference that needs to be negotiated. Most students find Hudson’s description of the language practices of these indigenous Indian groups intriguing but initially reject its applicability to U.S. culture, stating that such diversity would undermine the unity important to a democracy. The piece also serves as a transition to discussion of language politics, especially the English-only movement. I ask students to think about how the U.S. has responded to large populations of ESL speakers or non-English speaking immigrants. We explore arguments for and against the English-only movement and for racially profiling legal and illegal immigrants. Keeping in mind Hill’s notion of reciprocity, I take seriously students’ questions and
challenges about protecting borders and securing jobs. But in turn, as the problem poser Hill and Berlin would envision, I then challenge them to take seriously the reality of diversity and its implications for ideals such as democracy. In a few classes, ESL students have contributed to my problem posing approach by providing opinions that differed from the dominant monolingual perspective. I make sure that we as a group pay attention to the fact that the harshest arguments for English-only policies are directed against Hispanic and Asian populations. Little attention is paid to Canadian immigrants who sometimes struggle with the complex grammar rules of U.S. English.

Two assignments require students to reflect on and analyze their speech patterns and language development and then to do the same with others in their communities. The first assignment is primarily autoethnographic and asks students to trace the origins of their speech patterns and literacy development. While this is a difficult task, the purpose for this assignment is to encourage students to think about the various strands that have contributed to their linguistic, intellectual, and social development. The second assignment is a mini-ethnography as it requires students to observe a class or social organization, or to interview friends and family about an aspect of their identity—this includes race, ethnicity, speech patterns, personal politics, and experiences with discrimination. Through these assignments many of the students became increasingly aware of numerous speech varieties. One student—a working-class white female from Philadelphia—discussed the ways she had been mocked by classmates and even a professor for her pronunciation of certain words, using a hard “D” in words that required a soft “Th” sound. Some
individuals even went so far as to openly challenge her intelligence. From my own observation, the student was very bright and often contributed valuable insights with respect to her classmates’ questions and assertions.

Barbara Kamler, in *Relocating the Personal: A Critical Writing Pedagogy*, argues that writing represents an individual’s understanding of his or her positions within social power relations (94-95). She further posits that students who use language and writing uncritically tend to bind themselves within a white, conservative, masculinist view of the world, a view that does not often benefit their own autonomy or cultivate confident cultural/social identities (94). By encouraging students to explore issues such as language from both a personal and social perspective, I am encouraging a form of reciprocity, a negotiation between their individual experiences and their social worlds. In addition, the concept of reciprocity requires that I do not just push students to interrogate common forms of oppression such as linguistic discrimination but that I also acknowledge and aid them in acquiring standard written English literacy. To be clear, my point is not that reciprocity is an original “Hill rhetorical concept,” only that I have been directly inspired by her expression of the idea.

**Conclusion**

*The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* album bargains in a theory that individual worth is measured through the development of sophisticated responses to one’s social conditions. Learning is seen as a process of change that occurs in fits and
starts and is amplified through one’s ability to authorize particular situations. Eve Sedgewick’s in *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, and Performativity* elaborates on this point. She notes, for example, that both Buddhism and pedagogy are less about adaption and flexibility, concepts often appropriated and integrated into Western theoretical viewpoints, and more about the ability simply to indicate something that requires further investigation. From Sedgewick’s perspective, Buddhism and pedagogy should teach one to experience the process of investigation and to derive meaning from that experience. What is crucial is “being exposed to an idea or proposition, catching on to it, taking it seriously, having it sink in, and wrapping your mind around it” (167). In this process, recognition is the end; one is expected to recognize the possibilities in what is being said or taught no matter the source of the recognition. Sedgewick describes the image of a finger pointing at the moon and remarks that at different points in the educational process a student’s attention is characteristically either on the finger or the moon. But real recognition occurs when the finger and the moon become inseparable, that is, when teachers and students acknowledge that at best education is a process of indicating something that may be grasped, revisited, and repurposed at different times. This conception is extremely important for understanding critical hip-hop music as a tool for teaching students because at its best it is always indicating a social concern or generational ideology that deserves more attention. As I have been indicating, Lauryn Hill’s work, her composition, is exemplary in this regard—analytic, prophetic, loving, and obviously motivating to me. Stanley Fish, skeptical about critical pedagogy, asserts, “being told that you are in a situation will help you
neither dwell in it more perfectly nor to write within it more successfully” (351). However, such a position is reductive and ignores the fact that to dwell less comfortably intellectually or to be able to write *through* the situation might be the point. Critical educators—and Hill, operating at the peak of her artistic powers is one—can teach students also to use their accumulated knowledge to comment on and influence the various discourses that shape how we experience our realities.
5. Connecting Civil Rights Narratives to Hip-Hop Writers

In this chapter, I broaden my discussion of hip-hop and composition socially and politically to discuss the importance of memory to hip-hop rhetorical performances and composition instruction. As Victor Villaneuva notes, memory is largely a linguistic and textual practice that is central to the formation of ideas, beliefs, and assumptions that inform individual and collective identities (16). Memory serves as a vital way of connecting students to the history and traditions of the broader American public sphere and helping them to form their own relationships to that sphere. This chapter reflects the kind of memory work that hip-hop is well suited to enable.

I will begin by discussing the practice of critical memory in hip-hop music. Critical memory is the strategic use of recollection to guide and shape one’s responses to present-day concerns. As literary and cultural critic Houston Baker, Jr. describes, “the essence of critical memory’s work is the cumulative, collective maintenance of a record that draws into relationship significant instants of time past and the always uprooted homelessness of now” (7). Or as the philosopher John Dewey queries, “How shall the young become acquainted with the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present?” (23) As some composition scholars argue, memory is more than memorization; it is a way to teach invention to student writers, and hip-hop music provides a powerful
example of how hip-hop writers can engage the past in ways that are central to their present concerns.

Far too often, as scholar Eddie Glaude, Jr. remarks, youth are disconnected from history because of heavily edited and reductive versions of the past that deny them access to its narratives and experiences. Hip-hop music, as a collection of references to past music compositions, is perhaps the only organic connection to that past that hip-hop youth experience. Although controversial and at times misguided, I believe hip-hop music positions readers and listeners to question, complicate, and extend popular knowledge about the Civil Rights era in ways that speak to present-day concerns about violence, equity, and social action. Thus, I argue that hip-hop music can be used as a model for connecting hip-hop composers to texts from the past by providing hip-hop writers close textual analyses of popular remembrance that perform critical memory. Moreover, through a hip-hop frame, I consider three narratives important for understanding Civil Rights history. Specifically, I contemplate stories pertaining to Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith regarding their roles in the local protest movement that culminated in the Montgomery bus boycott, and I will review the saga of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s involvement in the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery and his subsequent appearance in Watts after the riots that summer. The first two narratives are useful for critical inquiry into the class and age politics of the boycott and the Civil Rights movement in general. I consider King to address his strategic use of language and ritual marches to negotiate the ambivalent relationship of Blacks to nonviolent protest strategies at that time. This moment is particularly intriguing because in
popular memory nonviolence is usually constructed as an uncontested and largely successful practice of most Civil Rights protesters.

The approach I take can be very useful in helping students to write compositions that encapsulate mature intellectual responses to important legacies and discourses. In particular, it provides a rationale and method for a unit on myth and memory in first-year-composition courses as a way of developing the interpretive and productive capacities of student writers, encouraging and teaching them to use the past as a viable source of invention.

**Rethinking Hip-Hop Memory and the Generation Gap**

Despite hip-hop music’s connections to earlier black music forms such as the blues and jazz, the rise of hip-hop as a cultural phenomenon is often viewed as demarcating a divide, a shift in the cultural, social, and political worldviews of youth that has created a chasm between previous generations and the hip-hop generation. Todd Boyd argues this position vehemently in his introduction to *The New H.N.I.C: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip-hop*. Using a popular 1990s Coca-Cola commercial that compared Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell’s “You’re All I Need to Get By” and its subsequent hip-hop reinterpretation “I’ll Be There for You” performed by Method Man and Mary J. Blige as an example, Boyd emphasizes the generational differences between the Civil Rights era and the new hip-hop era, highlighting the need to understand both eras on their own terms (6-11). Boyd goes on to make the point that
To the extent that the graphic, even cinematic nature of civil rights is specific to that era, we cannot expect everything to follow suit. Times have changed. We cannot hold the civil rights generation in contempt because its members were not slaves, nor can we hold the post–civil rights generation hostage because its members did not have to eat at segregated lunch counters. We can, however, attempt to understand the generational differences that distinguish the two groups without allowing civil rights to function as the only way to be Black. (9)

Although Boyd’s point is apt, I believe that he and others tend to overstate the distance and difference between the hip-hop generation and preceding generations. There are stark generational differences in perspective, expression, and social interactions. However, these differences still exist on a cultural and social continuum. Similar to the conclusion of Ishmael Reed’s novel *Mumbo Jumbo* when Papas Legba suggests that time is a pendulum, a changing same, I would argue that hip-hop represents a revision of black cultural practices and beliefs, but not a complete break (218). The practice of critical and cultural memory in hip-hop music situates the importance of this changing same to hip-hop youth. However, because the performance of memory in hip-hop music is sometimes subtle, many hip-hop youth and older consumers of hip-hop music, like Boyd, overlook artists’ attempts to locate themselves within that continuum through their music. Teachers of rhetoric and composition, as careful consumers of language, are in a position to heighten awareness of the memory work taking place in these musical performances.
Within the African American discursive tradition, music has served as a primary means of remembering, forgetting, and reimagining, practices that hip-hop music continues. One popular and controversial example of this is the song “Rosa Parks” by OutKast. In Boyd’s introduction he references this song to suggest that the group’s use of Parks’s name in the song’s title is an attempt at irony; he implies that they exploit her name and legacy to draw attention to themselves. He asserts, “other than the clever metaphor of going to the back of the bus and the obvious title, the song has nothing to do with the real Rosa Parks” (7). In Parodies of Ownership: Hip-Hop Aesthetics and Intellectual Property Law, Richard Schur extends Boyd’s viewpoint, arguing that parody, irony, and ambivalence are central features of all hip-hop music. For Schur, parody and irony reflect a world in which music artists criticize systems and institutions that circulate oppression through capitalist practices and also participate willingly, to varying degrees, in those systems and institutions (58-61). It is irony that allows them to negotiate this ambivalence, to pay homage to the texts of others, provide critical commentary, and to get paid for it (65-67). And it is irony that provides, for Schur, an interpretive frame for understanding their music. For him, artists are always engaging in irony and parody and this is the only way to make sense of the aesthetic decisions made by them. However, I argue that sampling expresses more than ambivalence and does more than pay homage to previous texts and situations through ironic commentary. In many instances, sampling aids in strategic remembering, the desire to connect with the past in order to better understand those moments and how others also negotiated similar struggles with contradictory desires. By paying more
attention to the way rap artists engage hip-hop music samples, teachers of rhetoric can provide for students a better understanding of critical memory in hip-hop.

Returning to Boyd, his reading (or misreading) of the text derives primarily from the chorus of the song, which expresses, “Aha hush that fuss/ everyone move to the back of the bus/ Do you wanna bump and slump with us?/ we the type of people to make the club get crunk.” However, I believe that interpretation reduces the rhetorical complexity of what the group is trying to do in this song. Although I would agree that Parks becomes a metaphor appropriated by OutKast, her relevance to the song extends beyond the title and the chorus. Rather than view her invocation as a haphazard appropriation of an icon, given OutKast’s insightful and creative body of work, as well as their even-handed approach to delivering compelling compositions, it is reasonable to believe that Parks is invoked to bridge a generational divide between hip-hop identities and Civil Rights identities.

Mark Anthony Neal echoes my point when he explains that OutKast’s song is an attempt to remember and reconnect to a movement that many hip-hop heads have been figuratively and literally disconnected from. As he expands, Rosa Parks’s name is invoked because she “metaphorically represents [Outkast’s] own struggles as marginalized black men within the recording industry and the larger society” (22). Through OutKast’s song, contends Neal, Rosa Parks literally becomes a way of measuring the quality of one’s legacy. Yet, I would not go so far as Neal, who, also focusing too heavily on the chorus, asserts that the song is a tribute. Instead, I would argue that Parks’s memory becomes a place of invention for the group. If listeners understand that the song itself is largely about legacies,
and that Parks provides a model for the type of commemoration the group seeks for itself, then the song should be seen as engaging in “the twin rhetorics of nostalgia and critical memory” (Baker 7). As Baker indicates, nostalgia and critical memory allow one to purposefully evaluate and reimagine the past, to not simply appropriate but to use a fuller, more organic understanding of the past (8). With regard to the song, this can be easily missed given the group’s heavy use of southern hip-hop vernacular, which can seem, at times, esoteric and vulgar in its delivery. When Big Boi raps, “Many a day has passed, the night has gone by/But still I find the time to put that bump off in your eye/Total chaos, for these playas, thought we was absent/We takin another route to represent the Dungeon Family,” he is explaining that despite OutKast’s hiatus from the music industry, they are still top dogs in the rap game. The bump refers to the lyrical black eyes that OutKast is doling out to challengers. This is reinforced by the reference of “chaos, for these playas,” which can be interpreted as trouble for those individuals who challenge their reign on top. As noted in chapter two, in hip-hop, and more broadly in black culture, one’s work is viewed as a game that requires individuals to use their creative talents to compete in order to achieve success. The “playas” are those who participate in this system of work and play. For Big Boi, OutKast’s savvy has enabled them to take an alternate route that places them ahead of their competition. Thus, chaos and frenzy will ensue from competitors who believe OutKast’s hiatus to be permanent. He supports this idea later in the verse by invoking the image of his rap partner, Andre 3000, driving circles around his competition, reinforcing their dominance over figurative opponents (“thank [think] my Broham [brother]
aint sittin pretty/ Doing doughnuts round you suckas like them circles around titties?”). Aside from its display of linguistic virtuosity, the verse also expresses a deep concern for OutKast’s legacy and in maintaining a certain stature among music listeners. In one sense, Boyd is correct; it is the memory of Rosa Parks’s agency expressed by her refusal to give up her seat that encourages Big Boi to affirm OutKast’s position within hip-hop. In another sense, Boyd and others ignore the seriousness of the piece, the serious work put in to develop the song using Rosa Parks as a topoi, a means for contemplating their own struggles.

In the second verse of the song, Andre 3000 continues this discussion of legacies. He reflects on a previous conversation with a woman on a bus—“I met a gypsy and she hipped me to some life game.” The woman suggested the need to maintain one’s legacy through consistent and quality performances, as the woman asserts that an artist is only as good as his or her last work—“focus on the past your ass’ll be a has butt”—a comment that causes Andre to consider the short-lived careers of musicians. As he notes later in the verse, even his “favorite group ain’t coming wit it,” implying that their music has begun to falter. As Dre continues, his only hope is that “when the record gets to skipping and slowing down all anyone in hip-hop will say is them niggas earned that crown,” meaning that he hopes their legacy, much like the legacy of Rosa Parks, will stand the test of time.

Obviously, if one understands OutKast’s song as the practice of critical memory, then it is easy to see that Parks’s memory is invoked as a hip-hop sample, a selected reference to the past that can be used to orientate listeners to the message of the song, similar to the break-beats used to compose hip-hop music. Take for
example, the southern harmonic break beat and synthesized bass samples used in the song. These samples, sounds of the blues and southern hip-hop being played simultaneously, combine to create southern experiences of both the past and the present. The harmonica is not ironic but symbolic; it adds to the meaning of the song, illustrating a continuum of black music traditions. The song is not a tribute to Rosa Parks, at least not in the traditional sense, but neither is it an ironic play on her name. The greatness of Parks’s legacy is an always already for OutKast, a group wishes to emulate her success, who wishes to become an icon itself. Keeping in mind that OutKast performs within a music industry that often discards its artists after one or two albums, and that the life cycle of most artists is very short, there is a valid reason for concern about whether one’s legacy will stand the test of time. Through critical memory, OutKast avoids the superficial commemoration of the Civil Rights hero that television sound bites and commercial tributes often provide youth culture. Instead, the group uses the memory of Parks as invention, as a way to connect to its past.

Another example of how samples can inform the memory work of rap artists is the popular song “Mo’ Money, Mo’ Problems.” Most associated with the Notorious B.I.G., the flashy party number, written in the mid 1990s by the Notorious B.I.G, his executive producer Sean Combs, and the former rapper Ma$e, expresses the joys, troubles, and pressures that come with fame. The song samples the popular Diana Ross entry “I’m Coming Out,” which is in itself a commentary on success and exposure. While both songs were wildly popular, B.I.G’s track is interesting for the way it uses the Ross sample to work through his ambivalence. As
the song title “Mo’ Money, Mo’ Problems” suggests, B.I.G or Biggie smalls, as he also called himself, had become increasingly aware of the scrutiny, vulnerability, monetary profits, and commercialization that came with a high-profile pop music career. Because his first album, featuring tunes such as “Juicy,” “Big Poppa,” and the remix of “One More Chance,” had become a commercial and financial blockbuster, he became one of the first gangster rappers to cross over into popular music and gain access to a broad range of audiences. As Imani Perry explains, crossover success is particularly troublesome for artists who derive from a culture that is particularly concerned with authenticity and one’s allegiance, first and foremost, to a hip-hop community (89). Given this pressure and Biggie’s rather public feud with rap superstar Tupac Shakur, which exposed numerous details about his personal life, one can assume the act of “coming out,” of embracing one’s fame and relinquishing control of one’s personal affairs was a troubling decision for someone who was highly invested in maintaining a certain level of street credibility.

The choice to sample Ross’s song suggests that perhaps Biggie was trying to convey this understanding to his fans. Despite his bad boy gangster image, he was often considered to be an incredibly sophisticated thinker, someone who consumed various types of music in abundance. He surely would have been aware of Ross’s own history as a crossover artist, recording for a Motown label that championed the integration of soul music with mainstream culture. Ross can be seen as a source of black popular music’s current circulation and prominence among predominately white-owned music labels and on white-owned radio stations. According to Neal,
Ross “served as the commercial icon who would deliver Motown into the next phase of development;” she was the face of both Motown and its black middle class aspirations to integrate into a predominantly white music market and strike it rich (Neal 89-91). Thus, for Biggie, Diana Ross’s voice provides a backdrop to the anxiety and ambivalence he faced as he composed his second album, which, not surprisingly, included more crossover hits.

The memory work of OutKast and Biggie Smalls models a way of teaching the concept of critical memory to students. I find that in many of my composition courses, students often invoke or write about the past in ways that are often reductive or inaccurate. While they mean well and often wish to use the past to aid in compositions about their own experiences, they simply have not done enough research and are not familiar enough with the type of memory work involved in writing articulate compositions about the past. What OutKast and Biggie perform, in part, is a type of crate-digging, what Joseph Schloss describes as a messy process performed by hip-hop DJs who research and familiarize themselves with music from the past by digging through vast numbers of crates to find their samples (79). DJs who undergo this process gain status within hip-hop because, through their research, they develop a cultural music memory that allows them to more authoritatively compose music. As Schloss notes, one of the primary functions of crate-digging is an education in the process of music making and the music tradition (94-95). OutKast and Biggie perform such practice with respect to the contributions of Rosa Parks and Dianna Ross. They dig into the past to produce compelling compositions and to educate themselves and others about the
experiences of those that preceded them. Thus, I believe that one can illustrate for students the concept of memory through hip-hop compositions such as OutKast’s and Biggie’s by helping them to crate-dig into their own national/cultural history and find their own moments to sample.

As several scholars have observed, within popular memory the Civil Rights Movement is recalled as a mostly middle-class, unified, and nonviolent movement. Brian Ward refers to these memories as “master narratives,” common beliefs about the past that control how the movement is interpreted and invoked (8). In many instances, figures like Parks and King are separated from their complex historical contexts and reconfigured into national symbols devoid of radical characteristics. My interest is in ways that critical remembrances of the movement can be used to teach students to eschew such master narratives and develop their own stances on the past. As Kirt Wilson suggests in his article “Interpreting the Discursive Field of the Montgomery Bus Boycott,” the importance of Parks and King to the Montgomery bus boycott can only be understood through a detailed examination of the discursive performances, social circumstances, and relationships that also informed this protest (307-308). Wilson argues, as do OutKast and Biggie implicitly, that a large part of enacting critical memory is digging up and making relevant the narratives omitted from popular memory in hopes that they will inspire a renewed interest not just in commemorating the past but rethinking it.

Situating Civil Rights Protests for a Post-Civil Rights Generation
On March 2, 1955, at the tender age of fifteen, Claudette Colvin was arrested, nine months prior to the famous incident involving Rosa Parks. However, Colvin would be a mostly forgotten figure with regard to Civil Rights activism. Arrested in a scene suggestive of the defiant spirit exhibited in most hip-hop music, Colvin performed the initial act of resistance against an unjust Montgomery bus system. Colvin and four other black women had been asked to give up their seats when the white section of the bus had become full (Branch 120). Initially, Colvin and another woman were the only two to refuse to move, and the bus driver quickly hailed a police officer to help with his effort to remove the two women from the bus. The police officer, seeking to avoid a segregation dispute, appealed to the black males on the bus to give up their seats so Colvin and the other woman did not have to stand (120). The other woman would eventually vacate her seat in the colored section of the bus. However, Colvin would remain seated, defiant to the end. As she later explained, she was inspired by the unjust arrest and death sentence of a former classmate, Jeremiah Reeves, who had been accused of raping a white housewife, and influenced by the social justice teachings of her English teacher, Ms. Nesbitt (Hoose 23-25). Although Colvin would struggle and scream during her arrest, she vehemently denies claims, such as those expressed in Taylor Branch’s Parting the Waters, that she used “language that brought disapproval from passengers of both races” (Branch 120). Instead, Colvin asserts that in a high-pitched and fearful voice she had recited her constitutional rights.

Colvin was eventually charged with violating segregation laws, disturbing the peace, and assaulting an officer (for resisting the policeman who pulled her
from the bus), charges to which she pleaded innocent. While awaiting her trial, Colvin attended NAACP youth meetings led by Rosa Parks, who encouraged her to tell her story (Hoose 52). For a short time, Colvin was a local hero among some adults and youth in the community; however, the overall sentiment toward her arrest was ambivalence. Colvin had stood up to an unjust system when others had not, but many who rode the bus were aware of the heightened tension between black and white riders she created. A few months after her arrest, she was convicted of all three charges. But two convictions were overturned. The assault conviction stood, and she was fined and placed on probation. It was ultimately decided by the leaders of the Civil Rights movement—primarily E.D. Nixon—not to protest her conviction (48). Rosa Parks, perhaps inspired by Colvin, soon left for a two-week workshop at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee.

I begin this section with Colvin’s story because the Montgomery bus boycott represents one of the most significant examples of social protest in U.S. culture and because within popular memory it is one of the most misrepresented periods of the Civil Rights movement. Images of the boycott and the movement are commonly shown on television during Black History Month. Students, whether asked to or not, draw on this moment in many of their compositions. However, I find that students are often relatively uninformed and rely too heavily on popular memory, primarily news sources, partially fictionalized films, and brief excerpts in history textbooks, to help in their discussion of historical events. These sources do little more than help them to regurgitate clichéd memorials and, in some cases, contribute to the reproduction of inaccurate information.
Colvin’s narrative provides a useful place to begin discussing with students the value of revisiting the past with a critical eye. Her story and other omitted stories illustrate the political and textual nature of memory. I refer to Colvin and the boycott to illustrate how writers of history excise, rewrite, and frame particular moments in time, eliding, ignoring, and reshaping certain perspectives. It is important for students to envision for themselves what a particular moment means.

Stephen Browne’s examination of Crispus Attucks is instructive as he describes how Attucks became a national hero. Browne traces the competing memorials to Attucks, a black civilian slain in the Boston Massacre, to show the multiple transformations he would undergo in the public eye—from local hoodlum, to cultural revolutionary, and finally into a national martyr—before becoming a national symbol of America’s independence. According to Browne, Attucks’s rise in stature and subsequent transformation into a national hero was tied to questions about the role of a newly emancipated black population (178). Each transformation required a new narrative, a collective forgetting, and a series of deliberations. Memorials and monuments for Attucks came to exemplify the conflicting desires to integrate a black population into a national consciousness and to accept that population as equal members of society. Browne’s argument is not that there is a correct way to remember Attucks but that public memory has always been contested, multiple, and overlapping terrain (186).

A figure such as Claudette Colvin, therefore, who should be pertinent to discussions of the Montgomery bus boycott but is often elided from its popular memory can be used to teach hip-hop writers to practice critical memory.
Moreover, the subsequent erasure of narratives like Colvin’s signals attempts, much like the national commemoration of Attucks, to smooth over racial and social strife by reducing complexity. As a countering move, teachers can explore with students the various reasons that Colvin was excluded from the formal protest against the bus company and later from history books. Colvin’s age and rumors about her personal demeanor characterized her as immature and vulgar. She was believed to be prone to bouts of profanity that would damage her credibility were her case ever to go to court and she demonstrated such behavior in those environs (Branch 120). And her pregnancy shortly after the arrest contributed greatly to her ostracism. As Colvin has acknowledged in reference to her predicament, “They didn’t want me because I didn’t represent the middle class. . . .They didn’t want me involved because of where I lived and what my parents’ background was” (Hendrickson 288). Exiled from the formal movement, Colvin found the courage, nevertheless, to testify in court against the injustice of segregation; her testimony was significant with respect to the final ruling against the bus company and contributed to the Montgomery bus company’s changes in segregation policies. That these rumors circulated and continue to circulate so easily reveals some of the gender and class politics of that era still relevant today.

Kirt Wilson provides an intriguing discussion of the class politics that are omitted from discussions of the boycott (308). As Wilson notes, there is irony in the fact that King was chosen to lead a bus boycott although having never ridden one of the Montgomery buses. Although riding the bus was surely not a prerequisite for responding to racial and social injustice, his selection and middle-class status
were indicative of the social hierarchy of the boycott that still shapes how the event is remembered. While many of the citizens who felt the effects of racism and segregation were working-class and poor black women and children subjected to various forms of verbal and physical abuse at the hands of white male bus drivers and the white public in general, these people and their experiences garner little esteem within popular memory of the boycott. Figures such as King, who would make crucial decisions about the boycott, were able to avoid many of these experiences; thus, rarely are these moments discussed in memorials to the protest. As Ward suggests, the legacy of King conceals the social diversity of the local Alabama city and the culture and contributions of these mostly working-class people to the movement.

Decisions to omit the less palatable episodes from the prevailing narrative of the boycott also undermine critical interpretations of Rosa Parks’s actions. While much is made of the order and dignity of Rosa Parks’s arrest, the vulgarity of Colvin’s arrest provides an important context for understanding Parks’s behavior. Colvin was cussed by her white male bus driver and her arresting officer, who, as she reminds us, referred to her as that “thing” and “called [her] ‘nigger bitch’ and cracked jokes about parts of [her] body” (Hoose 32). It is possible, then, to see Parks’s public display of decorum as being produced in part by a critical remembering of Colvin’s arrest. Parks’s subdued response to being arrested was most likely a strategy, perhaps developed at Highlander Folk School, in expectation of the type of treatment Colvin experienced.
Aside from class politics, Colvin’s exclusion from the dominant “Montgomery Story” is also connected to her age. Although youth contributed in numerous instances to the movement, youth perspectives, especially those of youth viewed as volatile, have been omitted from the popular memory of the movement. Colvin’s commentary about her arrest provides a youth’s perspective on the social conditions of that time. In this way, Colvin seems a particularly vital figure for hip-hop youth identities given that hip-hop culture tends to value youth willing to symbolically and literally resist social injustice. Teachers can take advantage of this to press students to engage the boycott from multiple perspectives.

Another narrative that could be generative for hip-hop youth is one concerning Mary Louise Smith, who, while an 18-year-old maid, was also arrested in Montgomery. On October 21, 1955, less than two months before Rosa Parks’s arrest, Smith, now known as Mrs. Ware, boarded a bus to return home from work. When asked by the bus driver to move so that a white woman could take her seat, she refused. As Smith later described, she felt that she had the right and privilege to remain seated because she was seated in the colored section of the bus (Hendrickson 294). Smith’s subsequent arrest proceeded quickly, and her father promptly paid a fine and secured her release from jail. Smith was not even aware that other members of the community had taken notice until a rumor that her father was a drunkard began to circulate shortly afterward. This rumor is believed to have been spread by E. D. Nixon, who justified the accusation because of Smith’s living conditions—Nixon described her house as a shack—and because he purportedly found her father in a drunken stupor on their porch when he visited the home.
(Hendrickson 294). Nixon felt these two elements alone could injure the integrity of the movement if Smith were ever placed under intense national scrutiny. Therefore, he would encourage the black community not to rally around her cause.

Eventually, Smith testified with Colvin and several other black women about their mistreatment at the hands of the Montgomery Bus Company. However, her story is also intriguing for the way it also exposes class biases and elitism in the movement. While Smith maintains that Nixon lied against her father, Nixon’s sentiments regarding class and substance abuse are troubling in general. Even if Nixon’s allegations had been true, such circumstances should have required attention and intervention, not dismissal by a social activist. Instead, yet another working-class person was sacrificed, in a sense, to the symbolic representations of King and Parks (who ironically is a working-class figure who has been transformed into a middle-class ideal). But by interrogating moments like Colvin’s or Smith’s arrest, and deliberating over the public value of such episodes, teachers and students can enter into larger discussions about democracy and informed citizenship.

Though my analysis explores the value of alternate ways of engaging the Montgomery Bus Boycott, I do not wish to imply that Rosa Parks is not vital to discussions of memory with hip-hop youth. Parks’s consistent struggles for social justice and the rhetorical education she pursued to battle injustice are important paths into that conversation as well. However, my point is that there are multiple tributaries that lead into the larger bodies of water that constitute history and
memory. By encouraging hip-hop writers to explore these other tributaries, teachers can emphasize of not-so-popular Civil Rights participants.

In addition, King himself, read in fairly novel ways, remains crucial to my project to practice critical memory by discussing popular memory with students. In this vein, I find not the bus boycott but the march from Selma to Montgomery to be particularly captivating because it and its aftermath afford insight into the limits as well as value of King’s nonviolence strategy. Moreover, this moment can be used to discuss King’s struggles with the rise of black militancy and his transformation with respect to the profound effects of poverty and police brutality. I find that among the hip-hop generation, more specifically among many of my students, the legend of King’s nonviolence campaign makes the movement appear to be in opposition to hip-hop culture itself. This development contributes greatly to the historical exceptionalism that Mark Lamont Hill identifies as a key feature of a hip-hop worldview, that is, the belief that the social experiences of today’s youth are unique and distinct and in most cases worse than previous generations (“Beats”106-107). They believe popular myths that individuals were more nonviolent and that the violence and crimes performed by today’s youth are a product of generational nihilism rather than deteriorating social conditions. Such a view tends to reduce or dismiss the influence of social conditions, instead reflecting a nostalgic view of the past as better and the present as worse. It is perhaps King’s struggles to maintain nonviolence that can be most useful in complicating this view for youths and adults.
King’s use of nonviolence was a strategic attempt to expose the contradictions that racism and segregation created within U.S. democracy. Thus, it is important for students to understand that the nonviolence of the Civil Rights Movement was rhetorically constructed in order to highlight the savagery of racism and segregation; it was never a natural or even sustainable approach in every social context. Nonviolent protest was a valuable tool in addressing explicit forms of racism such as segregated buses and schools, primarily because it showed the inequality of segregation and the absurd lengths to which some would go to maintain that inequality. However, such a strategy was more difficult in areas such as Watts, Newark, and Detroit, where blacks had access to many of the same facilities as whites but were subjected to conditions of poverty and police brutality. In these areas, serious riots would occur, and nonviolence would be exposed as an ideal unacceptable to a black audience experiencing persistent but perhaps less overt forms of racism.

On February 18, 1965, protesters assembled at a tiny church in Selma to protest the unlawful arrest of James Orange, a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) (Boyd 193). When the marchers proceeded to leave the church to protest outside of the jail where Orange was being held, they were accosted by local police officers and state troopers. In the midst of the mayhem, Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot. He laid in the streets for sometime before he was finally taken to a hospital. Jackson would die a week later on February 26. In the wake of his death, members of the SCLC decided to march in protest from Selma to Montgomery. Although the youthful and more militant Student Non-Violent
Coordinating Committee (SNCC) refused to participate, SNCC Chairman John Lewis would march, claiming he felt a kinship with his fellow Alabama natives (Boyd 195). The march began on March 7, 1965, and was led by Hosea Williams and John Lewis—not Martin Luther King. In the wake of several death threats, King had decided not to participate despite requests for his presence. In what would become known as “Bloody Sunday,” the marchers traveled only as far as the Edmund Pettus Bridge at the outskirts of Selma before meeting with state troopers and local police officers. Given two minutes to turn around and abandon the proceedings, the marchers, on the signal of Williams and Lewis, knelt to pray. However, before the prayers began, they were attacked by the deputies and troopers. Many were badly injured, including Lewis, who received a fractured skull. In the aftermath, King would be accused of cowardice. Shaken by such statements, he flew to Selma to participate in the successful second march.

Not frequently mentioned is that King’s investment stemmed from a desire to maintain nonviolence in the face of rising tension. On March 10, 1965, three days after “Bloody Sunday,” King joined a group of protesters confronting a police barricade outside of Selma. Tensions were already in a flare, and King sought to quash any fires before they erupted. After praying with the protesters, King quickly dispersed the group before anything else could take place (Carson 159). Also rarely discussed is the increased attention the second march received after the death of Reverend James Reeb, a white minister attacked by local whites for participating in the March 10 demonstrations (Carson 160). Sympathies for Reeb would aid in gaining public attention.
Nonviolent protest as a strategic approach to discrimination relied on a delicate balance of King’s charismatic leadership and some measurable progress towards a definite goal. The death of Reeb, which caused President Johnson to take notice of the event, also contributed to King’s success. Without such elements in place, it is doubtful that King could have pulled off such a protest without major disruptions.

Only a year after the march, King began to doubt the viability of sustaining nonviolence in the wake of mob violence and persistent police brutality. He stated after one such attack, “I know I’m gonna stay nonviolent no matter what happens. But a lot of people are getting hurt and bitter, and they can’t see it that way anymore” (Carson 210). Also interesting is King’s reception in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, California following a riot that left several people in the community dead or injured. Addressing a crowd that chanted “We Won! We Won!” King admonished them for taking such a cost-heavy path (Cone 222). However, he was faced with an audience that had very little respect for his philosophy of nonviolence or his reputation as a Civil Rights activist. These individuals cared less about civil rights such as voting privileges and more about human rights; theirs were being violated regularly.

The rise of black militancy, which was tied to the extreme poverty and persistent harassment individuals in Watts experienced, would also prove a troublesome concern for King, who was ambivalent about its value. In one sense, King understood the need for pride and to stand up with dignity in the face of denigrating circumstances. In another sense, King struggled with the violent and
separatist implications of black militancy and its clarion call: Black Power. King would continue to wrestle with and redefine the term in attempts to counteract its ambiguous use by other black leaders, who used the term to appeal to angry and nonviolent audiences alike (Cone 228).

The popularity of violent lyrics and tirades against police corruption in present day hip-hop music can perhaps be explained by the historically strained social relationships between poor blacks and the police force. The raps, as fictional accounts, provide a catharsis for frustrated individuals and perform a type of imagined authority for those who possess very little real authority. When viewed from this perspective, there are some interesting connections between the attitudes expressed in NWA’s “Fuck Tha Police” and the aggressive sentiments of success as expressed by the Watts crowd---We Won! We Won! Both responses stem from a frustration with law enforcement and from the experiences of poverty and community disintegration.

Perhaps the most important point missing in popular accounts of the Civil Rights Movement is the reality that without overt and blatant racist attacks, or prominent figures leading the opposition, the strategy of non-violence could not have delivered as much dramatic and social force. As Julian Bond notes in reference to the movement, lawmen such as Bull Connor and Jim Clark came to personify brutish ignorance and police corruption, providing for a vigilant media the necessary drama and suspense to enrapture an American audience (29). In other words, civil rights strategists used Connor and Clark rhetorically, and today it may be beneficial for students to understand this strategy, as well as the limits and costs
of nonviolence. For instance, King’s greatest successes using nonviolent protest occurred when tangible goals were identified and racist individuals were convinced not to work against their own interests. An integrated bus system in Montgomery was most profitable for white businessmen. The march from Selma to Montgomery was more of a symbolic protest, and, thus, it really cost nothing more than racial pride to allow the marchers to exert themselves by marching such a great distance. Widespread joblessness and police harassment are not as easily resolved. Joblessness, for instance, stems not just from racism but also broader economic conditions such as the lack of access to a quality education and the lack of development of local businesses.

Crucial for the current generation to understand is that “the movement never unanimously embraced King’s commitment to non-violence as a way of life” (Howard-Pitney 90) and that hip-hop culture often embodies the same diversity of identities and beliefs about social change as the Civil Rights Movement. Black culture and, more broadly, public culture exist on a continuum reflected by militant songs such as KRS-One’s “Sound of the Police,” Public Enemy’s “911 is a Joke,” and Dead Prez’s “Police State,” which express a frustration similar to the citizens of Watts that rejected King, to the more pacifist music of groups like The Strange Fruit Project, Andre 3000, the Black Eyed Peas, or B.O.B., which resemble the spirit of the pacifist marchers in the movement. Hip-hop’s own struggles with violence can then be used as an initial “track” that can be mixed with popular cuts from controversial sit-ins and protest marches. Moreover, students should understand that hip-hop culture is not inherently violent but rather informed by the
conditions of poverty, crime, and police harassment that make some of the more
violent fantasies of gangster rap palatable. As Imani Perry concurs, the violence
within most hip-hop lyrics derives from a “violence over victimization” philosophy,
a belief rooted in a history of police brutality that predates the Civil Rights
Movement.

Memory, Hip-Hop, and Myth in a First-Year Composition Course

In “Everywhere You Go, It’s There—Forgetting and Remembering the
University of Texas Tower Shootings,” Rosa Eberly reflects on a rhetoric course
she taught that used local public memories to develop students’ abilities to analyze
and judge the commemoration of specific events, in that case the tower shootings at
the University of Texas, Austin (71-73). For similar reasons, I have developed a
unit for my composition courses that uses hip-hop music and critical writings to aid
students in examining the complexities of memory. In this class, I extend Eberly’s
aims by encouraging students to do more than simply deliberate and judge the
memories they consume. I ask them to write compositions that respond to present-
day experiences by using the past as topoi, as invention. I try to link the textual
nature of public memory and the composing functions of critical memory through
an analysis of hip-hop music and popular memory.

I begin the unit by providing students with two options for their next written
essay. The first option requires them to research and write about the history of an
event, discussing its origins and reflecting on its current significance within popular
memory. One example that illustrates what I mean is a paper written on the history of THON, a nearly year-long, campus-wide, community-service activity that culminates in a student dance marathon to raise money for children with cancer. The student first explained the origin and purpose of THON and then the legendary status the activity has gained on campus among students. The student’s essay ended with suggestions about new community-service projects that could be launched. The student used a partly mythic past to consider future possibilities.

The second option requires students to compare two historical figures such as John Lewis and John F. Kennedy. Although this assignment needs less explanation, I remind students that this option involves more than simply a compare-and-contrast essay that memorializes their chosen figures. They should develop an argument that may be of interest to a general audience. Option two has been the dominant selection the few times I have offered a choice. When I have asked why they have chosen that option, most students have responded that they simply have more ideas for the second assignment than the first.

Next, I introduce them to the practice of critical memory in hip-hop music. We listen to DJ mixes by Eric B., a prominent DJ in the 1980s and one half of the prominent group Eric B. and Rakim, and J Dilla, a recently deceased but prominent producer in hip-hop from the late 1990s until the middle of the current decade. I discuss with the students the process of crate-digging and connect it to more formal academic research processes such as a literature review. I also point out some of the samples (as many as I can) in artists’ productions. We talk about what these songs remind them of individually, as well as the effect they have as a sample within a
larger composition. We then read and listen to OutKast’s “Rosa Parks” and then Common’s “Payback is a Grandmother,” which samples James Brown’s “The Payback.” We discuss music’s function as a form of memory. As previously described, I use OutKast’s song to engage them in discussions about Rosa Parks, Claudette Colvin, and Mary Louise Smith. Because there were more figures involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott—some 50,000—than I am able to articulate in class, I encourage them to do more research about the event.

In the past, we have read Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Richard Wright’s “The Library Card,” and Paul Berger’s “Building Plans: What the World Trade Center Meant to Us.” While these reading are a part of a textbook anthology used for the entire course, I use these specific readings for this unit because the narratives are situated within historical periods that prod students to reflect, imagine, and, in the case of Berger’s essay, remember critically. “The Library Card” for instance entices reflection on the 1920s. Students can use the text to imagine the social conditions of that time and also can pursue independent research on the era. I also provide some background for each text we read at the beginning of class. We also talk about how these eras are depicted in popular memory, examining, when time permits, some film and news snippets, and recalling textbook information received during primary and secondary schooling.

Students are pushed to become, in short, myth makers. I discuss with students the function of myth in modern culture, citing examples from hip-hop music and popular films such as The Matrix. We again discuss the different ways hip-hop artists use memory to think through contemporary concerns. Through in
class discussion and commentary on preliminary drafts, I stimulate the students to think about the implications of their research and not just the information they’ve discovered. I find that after these class discussions, student papers exhibit more nuance and agency with respect to discussing the past.

**Conclusion**

In *A Shade of Blue*, Eddie Glaude recalls a public demonstration against gang violence in Trenton, New Jersey. After marching across a bridge, the demonstrators were addressed by the mayor of the city, Douglass Palmer, who invoked the events of “Bloody Sunday,” declaring that the demonstrators were making a similar stand. But Glaude notes, “The fact that many, if not most, in the audience knew more about the death of Biggie Smalls or Tupac Shakur than they did of the Edmund Pettus Bridge escaped him” (138). The Civil Rights Movement remains a testament to the powerful potential of rhetoric to improve democratic social standings; however, as Glaude conveys, such a remembrance or invocation of the Civil Rights Movement is meaningless unless the audience it is addressed to can make sense of it for themselves and their immediate circumstance. Rap music, for better or worse, holds the uncanny ability to facilitate discussions about issues such as class divisions, racism, and gender discrimination as they occurred in the past and continue to occur in the present. Such activity can contribute mightily to the rhetorical education of hip-hop writers.
In “Memoria Is a Friend of Ours: On the Discourse of Color” Victor Villanueva reminds readers to take Plato’s admonishment that writing diminishes the ability to remember with a grain of salt (16). “His leaning on written discourse” to make this point through the remembered conversations of Socrates and Phaedrus serves as a gentle reminder that writing enables individuals to do more than simply recall an event (16). Villanueva asserts that to write is to remember; thus, writing and memory are inseparable. Because memory enables individuals to connect ideas across a complex web of tropes and associations, it is in this capacity that memory becomes more than a textual practice, but a method of identity making, a vital component of “self-authorship,” to borrow from Anthony Appiah (13-14).

Similarly, through writing and memory, hip-hop youth can transcend spectatorship and move to action, enact judgment, and express agency. To spark this activity knowledgeably is probably the most important step that instructors can take toward helping to develop a more critical citizenry and a more participatory democracy through the teaching of composition.
6. Keeping the Party Going

The phrase “keep the party going” denotes a desire to adapt in the face of changing circumstances. It extends the flexibility and social awareness associated with “putting in work” and acknowledges the tragicomic spirit of African American culture, a belief built on an enduring struggle to use the best and worst of one’s experience for continual improvement. I invoke the concept here to suggest the need for continued examinations of hip-hop music as a theory of discourse vital to contemporary scholarship on language, literacy, and composition. Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald assert that to combat the rhetoric of efficiency that ignores diversity and difference in favor of homogeneity and rigid assessment criteria, teachers must be prepared to expose the fallibility of such a rhetoric and engage students as living agents, shaped by an equally organic community with nuanced and new ways of understanding (24-25). Similarly, I have tried to frame hip-hop’s importance to composition studies as a rhetoric of organic engagement that conceives of writing as much more than placing words on a page. For the hip-hop community, composition is a means to reinvent oneself and reframe considerations of language, dialogue, and authorship on its own terms. Hip-hop’s language use, social rituals, invention techniques, and intellectual figures can broaden discussions about writing instruction by providing a unique perspective on how teachers should help position students to read and respond to the conditions, institutions, and publics that influence their lives.
Recent conversations about code-meshing and linguistic diversity celebrate writing that makes explicit the mixed nature of academic discourse. Yet, without strategies or approaches for enabling students to make confident and informed choices about their mixed linguistic constructions, such recognition does little to aid in the training of students to exert a presence in the world. Likewise, conceptions of audiences, communities, and publics can be productively informed by hip-hop rituals that cultivate a sense of knowledge as contingent and social, and situate critical writing as an act of conversation and deliberation.

The goal of hip-hop research in the area of rhetoric and composition should build on this understanding of hip-hop as a theory of discourse and writing. What does a hip-hop intelligentsia look like in age in which the culture and music continue to shape and inform not just students but the teachers of tomorrow? How should scholars frame the relationship between hip-hop and education so that teachers can draw on the best of hip-hop’s resources to forward conversations about teaching, writing, and reasoning?

In *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, Mark Anthony Neal devotes a chapter to describing the goals and motivations of a hip-hop intelligentsia, a group of young intellectuals who grew up with hip-hop and draw on many of its deconstructionist and post-modern practices to create and critique public culture. Although his conception of a hip-hop intelligentsia is somewhat narrow, it does highlight an often forgotten persona in discussions of hip-hop as pedagogy, the teacher, or the “teacha.” By teacha I mean the hip-hop intellectuals who provide interesting readings on race, resistance, culture, and
politics that eschew binary and technocratic paradigms while producing usable texts for K-16 teachers invested in developing the analytical facilities of all students. How might the next wave of teachers/scholars interested in connections across race, music, and writing draw on hip-hop to create curriculums? How might these curriculums reflect contemporary perspectives on social justice, citizenship, and literacy without eliding the best of rhetoric and composition’s traditions and theories?

In this closing meditation, I try to keep the party going by reflecting on these questions, as well as recent conversations about rap music, hip-hop culture, and writing instruction. I point to pathways for further research in hip-hop-based rhetoric and composition studies. First, I review relatively recent scholarship on hip-hop, language, and composition. Then I review hip-hop scholarship that addresses more extensively broader concerns such as race, class, gender, and social justice that have been of interest to composition scholars. I link this review to a more expansive vision of hip-hop-based pedagogies. I am interested in hip-hop-based education research that can move beyond considerations of hip-hop as solely a youth cultural phenomenon and examine hip-hop as theory of discourse vital to the shifting dynamics of language, culture, and education within a U.S. context.

**Considerations for Further Study in Hip-Hop and Composition**

Hip-hop transforms language either through newer iterations drawn from older forms of expression or through the creation of its own terminology. While scholars should not simply eschew the troubling content of most hip-hop music, the
language of hip-hop represents the extension of African American vernacular and
an attitude toward democratic creative expression that is important to voices
historically pushed to the margins. Rappers value and construct agency and
autonomy through language, which allows them to often speak truth to power.
Thus, research that seeks to trouble the still-too-pervasive legitimate/illegitimate
language dichotomy that frames too much of teacher training and writing
instruction will remain valuable. Such research necessarily requires robust
considerations of language’s connection to identity formation and to the analysis of
difference.

Relatively recent works on language and hip-hop provide relevant insights
on rap’s promise for language education. Alastair Pennycook’s Global Englishes
and Transcultural Flows forwards a noteworthy assessment of hip-hop’s global
influence and linguistic beliefs, outlining in the process newer ways of
understanding cultural exchange and implementing education reform. For him,
“hip-hop be connectin,” meaning as a cultural force hip-hop has done a great deal
to legitimate non-standard English language varieties in other countries (148-50).
According to Pennycook, code-meshing, or the transcultural flow of language, is
much more than a theory about non-standard writing, but a lived reality that can be
useful to education. He explains, “hip-hop both produces and is produced by a
cultural context that often thinks differently about questions of language, writing,
identity and ownership from the mainstream discourses of the academy” (150).
While Pennycook does not formally connect hip-hop to writing instruction, he is
heavily invested in how newer conceptions of language, as an always already mixed
practice, enable students to imagine multiple conceptions of themselves through each new verbal performance. He extends previous calls for linguistic and cultural pluralism by showing how hip-hop functions as a paradigm for engaging, celebrating, and directing this pluralism without forcing the type of educational schizophrenia that Gilyard notes is the un-reconciled byproduct of school culture (Gilyard 163).

However, one must remain conscious that any theory of hip-hop language must also acknowledge its connection to African American Vernacular English because without such considerations scholars are liable to misconstrue the hip-hop metaphors that create a hip-hop worldview. H. Samy Alim understands this and forwards an understanding of hip-hop language that acknowledges its African American vernacular roots as a way of drawing on the rhetoric and poetics of hip-hop to strengthen the critical language awareness of students and to teach them about the pluralistic and evolving nature of language use. Borrowing the term “nation language” from Kamau Braithwaite, Alim suggests that studies of hip-hop language investigate more than the lexical features of the hip-hop speech community, but also its rhythm, timbre, orality, and conversational style (Roc the Mic 70). He follows John Edgar Wideman’s argument that African American English is not simply words and intonations, but rather an attitude toward speech that values spontaneity and improvisation (70).

As a member of the hip-hop community, I am well aware of the educational value of hip-hop’s oral tradition. As Kermit Campbell argues in Getting Our Groove On, orality is far too often excised from conversations about teaching
writing because many still believe it to be detrimental to the acquisition of standard English and a fuller understanding of academic discourse. However, writing assignments designed around the study of hip-hop rhetoric provide a way of framing conversations about tone, style, arrangement, and delivery in ways that provide that expressive pop that is a valued feature of all sophisticated writing. Furthermore, they highlight the instructional value of language varieties for teachers of writing whose job it is to frame for students the possibilities available in composing language for a variety of audiences and purposes.

Work such as Jeff Rice’s “The 1963 Machine: Hip-Hop Pedagogy as Composition” engages hip-hop metaphors such as sampling and uses them to instruct students about rhetorical concepts such as invention. Rice teaches students to cut away particular images and sounds and paste them together into a collage. He demonstrates his approach by utilizing a series of sampled 1963 moments; his particular aim in this instance is to show how composition students can research and form arguments through sampling” (459). Sampling, thus, is seen as a conceptual model for discovering patterns across written and visual texts through juxtaposition.

In “Was Foucault a plagiarist? Hip-hop sampling and Academic Citation,” Mickey Hess extends Rice’s work by delving deeper into the implications of sampling as a social practice. He does this by connecting it to a Foucauldian stance on authorship, that is, the ability to use texts creatively without subordinating one’s ethos to their authority. Although Hess, along with Rice, highlights the possibilities
of reading sampling as composition pedagogy, both elide the cultural implications of the construction and its roots in the African American signifyin tradition. As indicated in my discussions of flow, work, mixtapes, and critical memory, consideration of hip-hop constructs should articulate an understanding of language, community, and composing that troubles a purely mechanistic appropriation of the culture or its rhetoric.

As illustrated in chapter five, sampling, at times, functions as a form of signifyin that utilizes parody, pastiche, and revision to subvert or convert meaning for one’s specific purpose. In other cases, it represents a form of critical memory, oscillating between nostalgia and reinvention in order to build on previous ideas and texts. In the case of musically mixing hip-hop, producers may sample to change a listeners particular conception of song or a story (and to keep the people dancing) as with Kanye West’s sampling of Ray Charles’ “I Got A Woman” for his song “Gold Digger,” in which West problematizes material excess. Charles’ status and function as an icon in African American culture lends considerable power, beyond the inspiring quality of his voice and music, to the circulation of West’s ideas within the context of black youth culture. This social and historical aspect should not be ignored. To theorize sampling merely as a collage technique represents a form of appropriation that reduces its effectiveness as pedagogy and reinforces Joseph Schloss’ observation that academics sometimes miss the forest for the trees in their attempts to link hip-hop to academic theories.

My point is that concepts such as sampling, ciphas, mixtapes, swagger, freestyles, busting-a-move, require serious intellectual parsing before they can be
presented effectively to students. However, the reward is a broader knowledge base and avenues of inquiry useful for articulating the nuances of writing instruction without relying exclusively on technical jargon. One of the reasons I chose mixtapes as a metaphor for cultivating resistance in student writing is because it avoided the kind of social mystification that makes sampling such an elusive and exclusive social practice within hip-hop. Like sampling, mixtapes highlight concepts such as arrangement and authority that are central to discussions about attribution and argumentative writing. However, because of its use of original lyrics and some original music, using mixtapes avoids some of the murky intellectual property conversations that sometimes complicate the use of sampling. Moreover, as a general concept, mixtapes are popular among most of the public. I remember my mother’s own mixtapes, which included popular songs from Luther Vandross, Mariah Carey, Jody Whately, Whitney Houston, and many other 1980s African American pop stars.

But my goal is not to be provincial. Indeed, for my purposes, the richest area of hip-hop and composition research is audience—and hip-hop enjoys a huge, multivari ed one. Texts such as Elaine Richardson’s *Hip-Hop Literacies* trace hip-hop literacies as they manifest in Germany, indicating the international popularity and broad audience of hip-hop consumers. Geneva Smitherman also acknowledges the heterogeneity and international flavor of hip-hop’s audience in a chapter from *Word from the Mother* entitled “All Around the World Same Song.” However, for her, and for Richardson as well, hip-hop is an African American vernacular practice, a contemporary extension of black American culture. The title of her 1997
article on hip-hop language practices explains it this way: The Chain Remains the Same. Given these facts, how do various audiences appropriate and recontextualize the various forms of language circulated by U.S. and international hip-hop?

Ibrahim Awad-El Karim suggests one way of thinking about this reality with regard to immigrant students. In particular, he focuses on African immigrant students navigating Canadian school experiences. For these students, hip-hop is a vehicle toward stronger facility with the English language, as well as self-authorship through a stronger understanding of voice as it is modeled in hip-hop music. Such phenomena suggest how teachers can better understand audience as a constructed and evoked element of a writer’s identity and voice that is not subject merely to institutional discourses but multiple discourses.

More work is needed on the performative nature of hip-hop relative to formal education. Documentaries such as The Art of 16 Bars highlight the process of naming as a central contribution to rap personas. However, of equal importance is how the use of cadences, images, and local references allow listeners to construct empowered identities. These decisions are more than just simple expressions of one’s political identity; they are influenced by regional experiences, racial markers, and even cultural/critical memories. More sophisticated investigation into the relationships among composer, performer, and audience in hip-hop could yield new insights about classroom relationships: writer/composer, writer/performer, and reader/performer. I am constantly amazed by how students choose to negotiate their own immigrant, working class, bilingual, or ancestral experiences in relation to institutions that for the most part encourage them to deny their own hard-won
reading and writing practices in favor of more traditional and prescriptive strategies for reading and writing.

Another way of framing this is to ask the question of how hip-hop artists and students construct social face. In her research on African American language practices, Marcyliena Morgan, knowing that individuals are always communicating within and across various discourse communities, proposes the concept of social face as a way of acknowledging the performance nature of language, listening, and composing. (38-39). She notes that language diversity does not present the type of boundaries individuals often assume it does; people often find a way to communicate and interact with those different from them when necessary to function socially. The call for linguistic homogeneity is often a result of political and ideological agendas and not necessarily communicative impasses. Also interesting in Morgan’s scholarship is her awareness of the degree to which language systems of many marginalized cultures rely on an elaborate understanding of audience that is cognizant of multiple and overlapping social markers—gender, class, age, race, and location (38). Obviously, I am also interested in the teacher as an embodied performer and the way different social faces of teachers are ostracized, ignored, or celebrated.

The studies I reference and the questions I raise provide a template for further research into hip-hop pedagogy. As I have tried to show, hip-hop is one way to continue the dialectic between theory and practice that is central to critical, liberatory, and socially-engaged teaching. My main concern in all of this is the way students form selves in relation to the institutions and communities that exert
influence over them. Learning to use language, symbols, and compositions effectively is one of the most important ways students can exercise a presence in this world and consequently contribute to the development of our collective critical minds and democracy.

More on Diversity and Social Justice

Race remains an important area of research for composition studies, and hip-hop a fertile site for such research. All students and teachers must contend with the discourses surrounding race implicitly, if not explicitly, through their responses to the subtle and not-so-subtle politics of academic culture, and the racial politics that shape hip-hop consumption and production beyond commercial distribution speak directly to the changing perception of race and the changing circulation of racism among the current generation of youth. Terms and phrases such as “nigga” and “stop snitchin” provide important insight into hip-hop perspectives on race and social justice. These terms offer fertile ways to explore race in an age of systematic, but not colorblind, racism. The texts that rappers produce reflect widespread attitudes about race among hip-hop youth, while recent hip-hop scholarship provides newer ways to grapple critically with race.

Albums such as Nas’s critically acclaimed yet commercially anemic album *Untitled* (previously *NIGGER*) serve as straw men for arguments against rap music and as catalyst for cursory criticisms of hip-hop culture in general. The album, similar to AZ’s *N4L*, was an attempt to comment on the rising racial tensions stirred by several public controversies, including the use of racial epithets by comedian
Michael Richards and radio host Don Imus. Although meant to draw attention to unresolved issues regarding race, many considered the album an inept attempt by Nas to shock listeners into buying his album. However, from a critical standpoint, the album highlights the contradictory and conflicted attitudes towards race that shape the language and culture of hip-hop as it struggles to come to grips with its newly-minted multicultural core constituency.

Not an intellectual gem on the level of, say, James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son*, Nas’ album does, nonetheless, capture discord over meaning and circulation of *nigger/nigga* within popular culture. The title song “N.I.G.G.E.R (Slave and Master)” performs this discord through creative and uneven allusions to black American culture. In these references, listeners can fully grasp Nas’s intention for the album, which are not to defend hip-hop’s use of the term but to engage its symbolic function for youth culture. Nas’ effort reflects a pragmatic belief that the term remains present and prevalent not simply because of hip-hop but because of the general silence surrounding the history and continued influence of race on the experiences of many black working class people. He begins with a barrage of images associated with poor black households—photographs and calendar depictions of Martin Luther King, Jr., JFK, and Jesus; he alludes to powdered eggs and government cheese. He then notes the troublesome desire of the signified children to attend schools with “fly sneakers on” despite the fact that most of the schools they attend are underfunded and unequipped to provide quality education for them (“schools with outdated books, we are the forgotten”). Although Nas argues that struggle and poverty have produced resilient and successful African
Americans, he also notes the ambivalent nature of success achieved through largely white institutions and at the hands of predominantly white males. As Hill articulates, at times Nas embraces a reductive version of Afrocentrism (“Critical Pedagogy” 111-112). Yet, it is the underlining theme of hope in his music that is instructive for many hip-hop youth, particularly African Americans.

Jeffrey Ogbar provides a telling analysis of the ambivalent concern with the term *nigga* and race in hip-hop culture. In *Hip-Hop Revolutions*, Ogbar explores how “realness is negotiated, interrogated, and articulated in a world where gendered and racialized stereotypes are pervasive.” Understanding the socially-constructed nature of race, he explains that hip-hop’s conflation of ethnicity and class—which *nigga* symbolizes—derives from an understanding of racial exclusion and poverty as primary markers of insider/outsider status in the culture. Moreover, *nigga* “blackens” certain people beyond African Americans and Latinos (Ogbar 48). Eminem, Paul Wall, and other white rappers have been referred to as “niggas.” In each case, the usage has framed a distinct understanding of their allegiance to hip-hop culture and working-class status that locates them as marginalized figures, sympathetic to and familiar with some of the discrimination experienced by working-class African Americans. But at the same time, *nigga* also marks an attempt to invert the historically racialized term *nigger* by taking ownership of the term and denying whites the right to employ it. While this rationale is questionable, the importance of recognizing these artists’ critical awareness of racial stereotypes shifts conversations about hip-hop’s view of language and race from simplistic
condemnation to greater awareness of the way hip-hop youth navigate the racial and class-based stereotypes that circulate in American popular culture.

Anthony Kwame Harrison’s *Hip-Hop Underground* expands the implications of Ogbar’s argument. As he suggests, hip-hop generally constructs three broad categories of legitimacy that are often used to gauge one’s credibility: Black, People of Color, and White. But Harrison sees the situation as more complex, and, understanding that race is a socially and linguistically constructed concept, one that still influences the social performances, reception, and success of many individuals, he unravels the nuanced way race shapes hip-hop culture. In hip-hop, black participants tend to enjoy certain authority due to their race. However, this authority is not absolute and can be lost by poor performance, inadequate display of cultural knowledge, or perceived lack of authentic experience. Thus, the racial hierarchy is fluid. Eminem’s acceptance and success within the hip-hop community is also based on his substantial ability to rap and his participation in the hip-hop underground, particularly in non-mainstream cultural practices such as ciphas and battles. While Eminem is the most mainstream example, the function of race in hip-hop is also evident in the increased presence of whites and Asians in positions of leadership within the hip-hop community as dancers, underground rappers, and graffiti artists. As Harrison comprehends, hip-hop outside of mainstream representations has become a surprisingly middle-class and multiracial culture.
While race has remained a central topic of interest in recent hip-hop studies, researchers should not ignore the parallel possibilities for further research into gender and feminism in hip-hop. Much of the scholarly discussion about sexism in hip-hop culture tends to mimic popular discussions about hip-hop’s hypermasculine ethic and the extreme forms of sexism that are embedded in much of the music. Even Elaine Richardson’s’ analysis of Lil Kim, also known as Kimberly Jones, although admittedly only a snapshot, focuses on how women make sense of video vixens and sexually-aggressive pop stars. Very little discussion explores the way hip-hop femcees and other female artists construct agency within a male-dominated discourse by using language to claim positions of power and challenge the sexist logic of many emcees. While the most dominant female voices in hip-hop music have come from hip-hop soul singers such as Mary J. Blige, Alicia Keys, and Erykah Badu, femcees such as Jean Grae, Tiye Phoenix, and Eternia construct narratives of about personal struggle, womanhood, and politics. These women express agency by challenging the dominant beliefs regarding women in hip-hop and American culture they use metaphors and narratives to present empowering, painful, and compelling compositions of themselves that can be instructive in understanding some of the linguistic, stylistic, and political choices female hip-hop writers make as they examine particular topics. They can also be instructive for how we understand the positions female students take in class discussions, class presentations, and in small-group collaborations.

In Morgan’s latest book, *The Real HipHop: Battling for Knowledge, Power, and Respect in the LA Underground*, she analyzes the way women are empowered
through programs, conversations, and raps. She disputes the belief that hip-hop is only a masculine discourse and a decidedly misogynist rhetoric. While she does not refute that much of mainstream and even some underground hip-hop expresses sexist lyrics and views about women, there are women within hip-hop that draw on its creativity and community ethics to build towards a newer conception of feminism and female empowerment. Morgan explains, “the females of the underground who practice their skills at Project Blowed do so with determination, skill, and a great sense of self-worth. Their discourse represents their knowledge as women who desire to thrive in a society that is sexist, racist, and biased against the working class” (158). So much of the public discourse about hip-hop dismisses its most-publicized rhetoric but fails to embrace the underground and non-mainstream artists who also contribute to hip-hop’s rhetorical production, which includes modern-day, feminist responses to paternalism and patriarchy. As I have noticed among my own students, male and female, much like with the concept of race, their views of sexism are somewhat different (somewhat more enlightened) from those of previous generations, yet they are not blind to the ways that women and men are oppressed by the sexist discourses that influence social acceptability and popular belief.

Given that social equity is a major topic of interest in composition studies, attention should be directed toward a recent and provocative study of hip-hop as social justice theory. In Let’s Get Free, Paul Butler links hip-hop slogans such as “stop snitching” and “fuck da police” to contemporary failings of the law enforcement and the legal system in protecting the rights and dignity of poor and
minority citizens. (79-81). As with much of hip-hop culture, mainstream audiences are only privy to the sensationalized voices of select members of the hip-hop community. Thus, much of what the public knows about hip-hop’s theories of social justice are reflected in the sensationalized responses of gangster rappers who only represent a section of that community. However, as Butler notes, some of hip-hop’s views on justice point to reasonable and complex perspectives on law and order.

For Butler, snitching is a dangerous practice that feeds racial profiling and leads to many violent and unjust actions against poor and minority citizens. Although rappers at times appear morally ambivalent, most share a belief that criminals, if caught, should pay for the crime they commit. However, according to their perspective, this should not occur in an overly authoritarian and capricious manner. Butler suggests that a hip-hop theory of justice seeks fair and equal treatment under the law and requires judges, officers, and law makers to consider the long history of discriminatory police practices and egregious sentencing practices linked to racial and class-based prejudices in their applications of justice. In relation to composition studies, researchers might consider how a hip-hop approach to social justice allows students to rethink and challenge some of the existing logic that shapes the policies to which they are expected to adhere. At best, such an analysis makes for great *topoi*, directing attention back to the prescriptive and disciplining nature of institutional discourses. Ideally, teachers can use concepts such as “stop snitching” to complicate an analysis of local and communal attempts to respond to oppressive and unjust practices maintained through
particular responses to crime. Often, slogans such as “stop snitching” are dismissed without serious investigation of their historical meaning or metaphorical value. Butler’s study is important as an initial foray into a serious analysis of injustice, racism, and hip-hop. Moreover, it suggests avenues for further inquiry into the value of hip-hop to teachers and researchers invested in social justice as a framing topic for courses and lessons on writing and rhetoric.

The Outro

To understand that black youth remain the arbiters and core consumers of hip-hop culture is inadequate for accounting for the way a multitude of individuals produce, circulate, and are influenced by hip-hop. Hip-Hop exists in the lived experiences of the hip-hop nation. The goal of this project has been two-fold, to illustrate various ways to think and teach with hip-hop beyond merely lyrical analyses of its poetic verses, and to construct a pedagogy that takes seriously pluralism, multiculturalism, and difference as a lived reality that requires much more than a pedagogy of tolerance.

In Writing in an Alien World, Mutnick reminds us that teaching and writing occur in particular institutions that have their own social legacies and conditions, and that in these social contexts are bodies that also bring their own legacies and cultures into these institutions. Thus, any real consideration of writers working within institutions must account for the complex set of social and textual relationships that contribute to student subject positions. Thus, my interest is in projects that forward our understanding of the pedagogy, the conversations, and
questions that arise from the way hip-hop composers negotiate spaces, identities, and legacies.

Not every artist seeks to compose a skillfully developed composition infused with wit, complexity, and substance. Nor does every artist that composes skillful rhymes care about the ethical and critical development of the hip-hop youth that consume their music. As Adam Bradley declares, “not all rap is not created equal” (205). Nevertheless, there are artists, who through their music seek to comment on social problems, point out and undermine troublesome stereotypes, and to teach listeners—through stylish metaphors, rhythms, and stories—how to think critically about what they consume.

Rebellious, spirited, and fearless, hip-hop can be a tool for progress and nourishment when used strategically. Used unwisely it can be dangerous and full of uneventful explosions and emptiness. Students listen to it, unabashedly support it, represent it, and some live within it. Hip-hop is possibility. The mixes and collaborations of artists, the personal and public critiques of mixtapes and battle rhymes, the energy projected toward a larger audience at live performances are all efforts to explore the possibilities of hip-hop. Understanding the processes—not just the concrete cultural products of hip-hop—is a step toward charting a more constructive use of hip-hop in the classroom.
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