

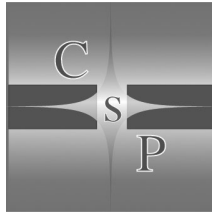
# From Hip-hop to Hyperlinks



From Hip-hop to Hyperlinks:  
Teaching about Culture  
in the Composition Classroom

Edited by

Joanna N. Paull



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

From Hip-hop to Hyperlinks: Teaching about Culture in the Composition Classroom,  
Edited by Joanna N. Paull

This book first published 2008 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2008 by Joanna N. Paull and contributors  
Cover designed by Cassandra Murphy

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-84718-475-8, ISBN (13): 9781847184757

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Joanna N. Paull	

## **PART I: MUSIC AND CULTURE**

Chapter One.....	10
“Bring [in] the Noise”: Sourcing Hip-Hop and Rap in the Composition Classroom	
Morgan Lynn	

Chapter Two.....	31
Teaching Jazz Culture and History in the Composition Classroom	
Coretta Pittman	

Chapter Three.....	52
On a Difference Note: Music in the College Writing Classroom	
Roger Sedarat	

## **PART II: FAMILIAR CULTURES**

Chapter Four.....	74
Teasing Out Everyday Culture: Why Simple Questions Are Worth Asking	
Matthew S.S. Johnson	

Chapter Five.....	96
Of Cabbages and Kings: Reading Food Culture and Other Compositions	
Gwendolyn Spring Kurtz	

Chapter Six.....	112
Crossing the Line: Using Comedy to Discuss Culture in the Classroom	
Andrea Cumbo and K. A. Wisniewski	

**PART III: GLOBAL CULTURES**

Chapter Seven.....	136
There is More to an Iceberg Than the Tip: Culture and Second Language Writing in the Classroom Andrea DeCapua & Tommy McDonell	
Chapter Eight.....	149
Culture as/and Creativity: The Story in a Foreign Language—The Example of <i>Writing Macao</i> Christopher Kelen	
Chapter Nine.....	168
Diversity and Active Citizenship in the Composition Classroom Grace Talusan	
Chapter Ten .....	186
Global Culture, Global Campus: Researching Global Issues in the Writing Classroom Justin Young and Charlie Porter	

**PART IV: DIGITAL CULTURES**

Chapter Eleven .....	210
Using Digital Storytelling to Examine Culture and Intercultural Communication Deborah Bridges	
Chapter Twelve .....	229
Focusing on Culture: Using Ethnographic Photography in the Composition Classroom Joanna N. Paull	
Chapter Thirteen.....	252
E-Writing: Expository Writing Exploring the Electronic Laura Rotunno	
Contributors.....	275

# INTRODUCTION

JOANNA N. PAULL

When I first began putting together this collection, I imagined what my ideal anthology would do for its readers. I wanted to find chapters that would be both practical and inspiring to other college composition instructors. When I was approached about this editing opportunity, my dreams became a reality. The experience of seeking out creative and innovative classroom approaches was exhilarating and challenging. In this collection, I wanted the writers to be straight-forward about what they do in their classrooms. As a result, these writers (including one chapter that I wrote myself) share some exciting classroom experiences, student responses and assignment sheets. This is quite brave. For that, I am thankful. These chapters will serve the composition instructor community so well.

We the—contributors to this volume of essay—have brought to the collection different voices, different pedagogies and different points of view on culture and how we may, as composition teachers, help our students to better understand American culture.

As a collection, these chapters can be used in a pragmatic way or more so as inspiration for developing and revising readers' current cultural curriculum. Some readers might create syllabi directly reflecting the ideas of these writers; others may decide to simply use these ideas as inspiration for their own unique classroom structures. Either way, the vast array of classroom approaches in this book will touch everyone in some way.

In general, these essays trace semester-long course structures rather than singular assignment arcs. By seeing how one assignment leads into the next, our audience will truly get a sense of how composition instructors are envisioning their students developing an understanding of American culture whether it is through humor, technology or food.

There is not another collection out there quite like this one. It is our hope that our readers will read to be inspired to return to their own composition classrooms armed with new and creative ideas and passion that the writers in this collection have in their classrooms already.

Part I addresses approaches for teaching culture through various types of music. In keeping with the beginning of the title, “Hip Hop,” Chapter 1, “Bring [in] da Noize”: Sourcing Hip-hop and Rap in the Composition Classroom” by Morgan Lynn details her experiences teaching students the historical context for rap and hip-hop, identifying parallels between such rap and hip-hop artists like Tupac with other prominent figures such as Malcom X, and addressing how these figures and their historical contexts influences race, unity, language, discourse communities and ultimately, identity throughout generations. Lynn notes that,

I try, here, to establish a conversation—a circle—of rappers, poets, gangsta warriors, prophets, politicians, and revolutionaries, teachers, and students. Inside this circle (this community), students begin articulate and challenge ideas and beliefs (14).

Through innovative writing assignments and discussion arcs, Lynn’s course is certainly fascinating to consider.

In Chapter 2, “Teaching Jazz Culture and History in the Composition Classroom,” Coretta Pittman also emphasizes the need for students to understand the historical development of musical trends to help to develop their insight into political and social movements of those generations. Pittman shares her experiences teaching advanced writing students about the marginalization of the musical genre of jazz; specifically, she focuses her instruction on the lives and work of “Dizzy” Gillespie and Charlie “YardBird” Parker. Pittman explains it best when she writes,

In essence, I wanted them to know that their words could have applicable meaning in the lives of everyday citizens. Thus, when I teach writing courses, particularly to advanced writing students, it is important to help them interpret various traditional and non-traditional texts to enhance their global perspectives but also to find motivation to continue to learn their craft (35).

Pittman’s unique inclusion of bebop and jazz in the composition classroom opens up the doors to all kinds of potential music-based curriculum for the composition classroom.

Chapter 3 wraps up the Music and Culture part of this text with Roger Sedarat’s chapter “On a Difference Note: Music in the College Writing Classroom.” In Sedarat’s chapter, the author takes us through his use of music from around the world in his classroom. Specifically, he offers a wide array of exercises from ice breakers to fully developed analyses which pair up music with texts he has chosen with similar themes or ideas.

Specifically, he notes that,

Instead of serving an ancillary function to the understanding of writing, music can provide more immediate access to the text, enabling students to connect with the words they read through a familiar medium (53).

By sharing his activities with readers, it becomes quite evident how music can enhance many types of compositional assignments.

Part II, Familiar Cultures, consists of three chapters that explore the local, familiar culture of America in very unique ways. It begins with Matthew S.S. Johnson's "Teasing Out Everyday Culture: Why Simple Questions Are Worth Asking." In this chapter, Johnson states that composition instructors

can help students begin to generate sophisticated, argumentative, inquisitive prose by examining the epistemology and complexity of seemingly simple, seemingly benign, and seemingly natural cultural behaviors and symbols that we encounter every day (75).

He begins the class by analyzing the writing classroom and writing instruction, examining the cultural expectations of writing "rules" and hand-raising then looks at the "everyday" like tables. This chapter is provocative and well worth investigating. I see potential for using this chapter as is and building in so many innovative directions to fit any school's and classroom's needs and interests.

Chapter 4, "Of Cabbages and Kings: Reading Food Culture and Other Compositions" by Gwendolyn Spring Kurtz investigates the ways we eat and how what we eat can and does define our culture or at least part of it. Her unique compositional take on this element of American culture, certainly prevalent with the proliferation of fast food and other eating establishments is definitely a chapter worth reading. In it, Kurtz notes that,

Reading food as culture, a culinary mythology cognizant of place, value, and power is what I want to do here and in a composition classroom. Examining how and what we eat introduces students to the nuances of culture, invites their active participation in the learning process, and encourages student writing that is engaging, insightful, and evidences a sense of inquiry (92).

Clearly, there is a lot to learn about who we are from the foods we eat. The composition classroom is a great place to offer students an opportunity to investigate the cultural issues within themselves, quite physically.

The final chapter of Part II Andrea Cumbo and K. A. Wisniewski's "Crossing the Line: Using Comedy to Discuss Culture in the Classroom," which discusses how to use various contemporary comedians' sketches such as Dave Chappelle, Carlos Mencia and Jerry Seinfeld, to address issues of diversity and culture. They note in their chapter that,

By examining comedy in the composition classroom, students are better able to find parallels between abstract ideas of diversity and their personal interactions outside the classroom as well as learn analytical and writing skills that will serve them in their academic and professional vocations (112).

Comedians are inherently raw with their approaches toward ethnicity and culture, so this chapter's authors challenge us to embrace those awkward yet honest statements in the classrooms as a means for opening the doors of communication with our composition students in regards to cultural issues. Not only is this chapter entertaining for its honesty and smooth prose, but also for its innovativeness with integrating humor in the classroom.

Part III of this text addresses "Global Cultures," i.e. how we connect the composition classroom students with issues on a global level. The first of these three essays, Chapter 7, is "There is More to an Iceberg Than the Tip: Culture and Second Language Writing in the Classroom" by Andrea DeCapua and Tommy McDonell. In their second language composition classrooms, both undergraduate and graduate-level, these authors and professors discuss with readers how they address the elements of culture that most of us consider unseen, i.e. "below the tip of the iceberg." The authors of this chapter

believe our students should not only learn to understand the differences in culture, but that they should also become aware of the reasons *why* these differences exist, and *how* these differences impact on communication and social interactions (139).

Contextualizing differences between and within cultures is certainly something we all hope to do in our classrooms.

Chapter 8, "Culture as/and Creativity: The Story in a Foreign Language—The Example of *Writing Macao*" comes from Christopher "Kit" Kelen who teaches in Macao, China. His work with native speakers of Chinese writing about their experiences in Macao but using the English language to do so. This is so innovative and engaging to read, because its use of second language creative writing. Certainly, it brings about different

kinds of challenges, having students write in a second language, but Kelen addresses those issues in this chapter and with his students when he writes

This kind of reflection is helpful and has a place, but making stories about the place is even better. It is engagement with possibility – through the form of the story—that makes the meta-discourse (for instance this one) possible (149).

Whether you teach second language learners in an American classroom or teach an ESL class yourself, you will find this chapter engaging and unique.

In Chapter Nine, “Diversity and Active Citizenship in the Composition Classroom” by Grace Talusan, readers will get a chance to step into Talusan’s composition classroom that explores issues of diversity in exciting ways, using both primary and secondary researching techniques. After her students expressed to her some disturbing and conflicting understandings of diversity and, specifically, diversity on her college’s campus, this author wanted to

do something as a teacher to provide alternative ways of thinking about diversity. Moments such as this was the inspiration to develop a curriculum that explored issues of campus diversity while at the same time practicing the critical thinking skills, research tools, and writing goals central to the composition classroom (170-71).

After reading this chapter, you will see that she did just this and did it successfully. This is an inspiring story that will be applicable to any college or university composition classroom.

Chapter 10, “Global Culture, Global Campus: Researching Global Issues in the Writing Classroom” by Justin Young and Charlie Porter addresses their experiences teaching about the correlations between the students campus communities and the more global picture. This approach toward teaching composition offers us insights into helping students see how the activities on their campus play into the bigger picture. Specifically, Young and Porter articulate that,

In many ways, the American university is a microcosm of the larger economy and is therefore ripe for cultural and economic analysis. Writing about the ways that the university is integrated, for better or for worse, into the lives and cultures of the global community exposes students to the structures underlying the college experience while also giving them consumer tools to use in their lives outside of the academy (185-86).

Their work with students' compositions about issues such as campus contracts with Nike and Coke and presentations of that information to the campus-wide community are progressive and will inspire you to start a similar project at your own school.

The fourth and final section of this anthology, Part IV, addresses digital culture, leading to the "hyperlinks" part of the title. It begins with Deborah Bridges "Using Digital Storytelling to Examine Culture and Intercultural Communication." In this chapter, Bridges examines how she has her students understand how to write digitally, integrating text with audio and video productions. Supporting the notion that students learn better by using different types of learning (reading, hearing and seeing), this author offers some wonderful assignment ideas for getting students to embrace their digital knowledge to explore ways to communicate. Bridges describes her digital storytelling assignment this way:

Using digital storytelling as a tool to examine culture and intercultural communication concretely and consequentially translates into action receptiveness to new communication experiences, empathy toward different cultures, development of a universalistic, realistic worldview, and tolerance of views that differ from the storyteller's (212).

If you are interested in technological assignments and are excited to learn how to use the tools, Bridges explanations of the assignments and inclusion of the explanatory assignment sheets should prove quite helpful in your development of a similar assignment in your own classroom.

Chapter Twelve, "Putting Culture into Focus: Using Ethnographic Photography in the Composition Classroom" by Joanna Paull offers readers insight into a semester-long project where students use ethnographic photography to study a local subculture from their campus or local community. Paull emphasizes the value of visual literacy in our culture that is ever-increasingly reliant on visual elements. By students being able to not only take photographs of the cultures they student but perhaps more importantly to analyze what they reveal about the culture they are studying, students are able to better become critical thinkers, readers and writers. In the chapter she notes,

Research became real, something tangible (people they could see and hear; places in which they could participate and with people they could converse), and my students seemed to grow far more invested in their research projects. Students become more personally invested and connected to their research subjects (242).

If you have any interest in visual ethnography, visual literacy or photography, this kind of project is right up your alley. Ending with a hypertext final research paper, this semester-long project is certainly worth reviewing.

The final chapter of this anthology is Laura Rotunno's Chapter Thirteen, "E-Writing: Expository Writing Exploring the Electronic." This chapter explores Rotunno's semester-long series of writing assignments that address various ways to communicate, beginning with what we now term "snail mail" letters through current texts like emails. More specifically, Rotunno notes that

the students and I discussed how electronic communication and computers in general influence our relationships and shape our sense of ourselves and our positions in the world. The students asked whether love and friendship can be born and thrive totally online; they debated how far science should go when exploring links between computers and human brains. In other words, they examined the advantages and disadvantages of living in a cyberculture, while simultaneously practicing ways of putting cyberculture to work in their writing (252).

This chapter is the perfect ending to a wonderful anthology. Her engaging topics and assignment sheets make the readers of this text think just as much as I am sure they will make your students think about the importance and influence of technology on our writing.

Overall, this text offers a surprising range of topics and approaches toward teaching culture in the composition classroom. I can't possibly thank this group of writers enough for all of their hard work in producing it through this past year. I am confident that you the readers will find it inspiring and useful in many practical ways. Whether you are a new teacher looking for help in designing successful assignment sheets or you are a seasoned veteran looking for new assignment ideas to spice up your usual curriculum, *From Hip Hop to Hyperlinks* will do the trick. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed editing it.



# **PART I**

## **MUSIC AND CULTURE**

## CHAPTER ONE

# “BRING [IN] THE NOISE”<sup>1</sup>: SOURCING HIP-HOP AND RAP IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

MORGAN LYNN

A nation which neglects the perceptions of its artists declines.  
After a while it ceases to act, and merely survives.  
—Ezra Pound<sup>2</sup>

So, being an African-American male, it’s hard sometimes to make a life in  
this diverse culture and even harder to get your point across being a black  
male.  
—Greg Calvin<sup>3</sup>

AmeriKKKa.  
—Ice Cube<sup>4</sup>

In the following chapter I suggest approaches for using hip-hop culture and rap music<sup>5</sup> as seminal texts in college writing and critical literacy courses. I hope to show how hip-hop and rap music can serve three key purposes. First, the political messages in rap music can link students to the history and tradition of African-American political resistance, thereby permitting a more complex analysis of black identity, race relations and black power. Second, using hip-hop and rap music within academia is a

---

<sup>1</sup> Public Enemy, “Bring the Noise.”

<sup>2</sup> *ABC of Reading*.

<sup>3</sup> “Ways of Oppression.”

<sup>4</sup> “The Nigga You Love to Hate.”

<sup>5</sup> As I will explain in more detail below, hip-hop is the term most often used to the culture (or political and aesthetic movement) that was born in the South Bronx in the late 70s. Hip-hop has numerous mediums—DJing (spinning records), MCing, (speaking or rapping over records) Breakdancing, graffiti art, etc. Rap music is therefore one form of expression within the culture of hip-hop, but it has emerged as the most salient and commercialized medium.

political movement; it privileges forms of knowledge and expression that are often dismissed as mere entertainment, but which often connect directly to students' lives and experiences. Consequently, we authorize "street" language as a powerful source, while also permitting a rigorous critique of the positions on race that rappers promote in their music. Last, rap music exemplifies—and can inspire—the *critical stance* and *literate strategies* that are the tools of discursive power. Rappers are powerful wielders of words and discourses. They synthesize multiple texts and textual idioms, they negotiate competing hypotheses and points of view, they critique generally-accepted and media-promoted values, and they embody sheer delight in verbal dexterity. Hip-hop and rap music taps into the spirit of making meaning. It models the *act* of expression and critical inquiry, which I define as follows: the search for understanding through the mastery and re-invention of language/s to serve individual and social purposes. This is the fundamental *act* of any literate or literary prACTice.

However, mainstream rap music perpetuates highly controversial images of gender, materialism, and power. In addition, rappers frequently adopt an adversarial rhetorical stance and ideology that can be alienating and divisive, indeed downright misogynistic, materialistic, and prejudiced. My fundamental concern in using hip-hop and rap music has always been twofold: first, I want to exploit its inspirational and intellectual potential while also problematizing its negative messages and ideological rhetoric.

Yet, because the music offers such currency and influence in terms of positions on race, identity, and power, the critical analysis of the music and its messages is all the more urgent. Rappers expose ghetto life, yes, but they are just as capable of mis-representin' history as is the standard history textbook or any politician. As Eric Michael Dyson writes in *Reflecting Black*, the systems of racism and oppression at work today are more subtle and more complex than ever. He describes

[a] subterranean network of slippery attitudes, ambiguous actions, and unfixed, equivocal meanings, which can accommodate racist intent and concomitantly permit the semblance of racial fairness (248).

If we posit Dyson's definition of the American post-civil rights landscape as one that is much more subtle in its expressions of racism, we can better understand how troubling the task of discussing racism is for our students (and ourselves.) The hip-hop generation, in particular, is one that must negotiate often contradictory messages about race. They are forced to celebrate Martin Luther King Day, for instance, while living in neighborhoods and going to schools still defined by racial and economic segregation. However, by situating rap within its larger socio-historical

context, students can better understand how rappers respond to this post-civil rights discrimination by representing one end of the spectrum of expression, in which they radically, righteously, and dogmatically REFUSE the idea that America has achieved any kind of racial equality. Students can then analyze these rhetorical strategies and discuss how it is and is not effective in building arguments.

As I develop this chapter, I describe a unit on race, identity, and power that I use in my English 90: Integrated Reading, Writing, and Critical Thinking course at Los Medanos Community College in Pittsburg, California (right outside Oakland). I loosely design this unit as a *rap battle* around how rappers, authors, academics and others construct identity and conceptualize racism. To establish a theoretical position on hip-hop pedagogy, I build on Linda Flower's work on Intercultural Rhetoric and Rivaling, in which she articulates a rhetorical stance that depends on multiple textual forms and authorial and historical positions to construct knowledge and sustain critical inquiry.

In order accurately analyze the aesthetics and politics of rap, I re-situate the music within the tradition of Black artistic and political expression (or "black expressive cultures" as David Samuels calls them) by reading poet Langston Hughes, and listening to and watching blues and jazz artists such as Nina Simone, and Cab Calloway. I also expose students to the origins of hip-hop, as it was born in the streets of the South Bronx in the 70s. To establish a critique of rap's rhetoric and style, I *rival* hip-hop and rap texts, in particular those by rappers Tupac Shakur, Chuck D, and Mos' Def with the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., especially his writing concerning the Black Power movement in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Other texts for writing and discussion include work by cultural critic and academic John McWhorter, poems by Langston Hughes, the novel *The Color of Water* by James McBride, and contemporary race-oriented films such as Paul Haggis' *Crash* (2004).

Finally, I include a substantial amount of student writing, in the belief that their opinions, positions, and approaches to the music and its messages, in addition to their argument strategies and writing styles, are the best tools teachers have in designing future writing courses.

**“It’s just the energy, yo.”<sup>6</sup>**

Before entering more scientific turf, I want to drop something a little spiritual.

---

<sup>6</sup> Un-named young rapper in the film, *Freestyle: The Art of Rhyme*.

It is my sincerest belief that the gesture toward writing is a direct result of an *impulse* to make meaning. Writing, therefore, does not originate with words, but with desire—a *stirring of the spirit toward action*—that compels us towards lives of critical engagement with texts that permeate our worldview. It is within and against these texts that we define our self-concept and shape the decisions about our futures. Hip-hop music *moves* us, thereby providing this motivation toward inquiry. As one student wrote in a paper entitled “The Hip-hop Identity”: “Hip-hop is about speaking to society in a deliberate meaningful way from the heart [...] Hip-hop is freedom of speech” (Balinton). Or, as Jerrica Soto writes,

Teens can be saved by the hope that hip-hop brings into their lives. Hip-hop is often stereotyped, but don't be fooled. Hip-hop is *optimism in disguise* (emphasis mine).

For Marcus and Jerrica, how hip-hop is the energetic, magical combination of intellect and passion. In hip-hop, not only is there a commitment to “freedom of speech,” as Marcus puts it, but also a sincere to desire to inspire and uplift people—to “open their eyes,” to use a phrase repeated over and over again in hip-hop lyrics. Hip-hop, therefore, is about taking a certain stance toward the world and making a stand based on one's beliefs and experiences. For this reason alone, the music is inspirational. However, it is particularly appropriate for composition courses, because rappers gain reputation and respect for three main qualities: originality, verbal dexterity, and insight. Writers—and those who succeed in academia (or in any profession for that matter)—depend on the same strategies.

As such, I believe that hip-hop culture and hip-hop pedagogies<sup>7</sup> are a necessary intervention in the academic experiences of our students (and ourselves). Rap music IS—in both form and content—about negotiating difference, keeping spirit alive, and using words to survive. I can't think of a more apt definition for literacy (or humanity) than that.

---

<sup>7</sup> See Jeff Rice, who really started the movement toward identifying a hip-hop pedagogy. Rice explores, in particular, the notion of sampling.

## Toward a Hip-hop Logik?<sup>8</sup>

Linda Flower's exploration of Intercultural Rhetoric the Rival Hypothesis stance has helped me conceptualize the ways I use hip-hop—or what I like to think of as “hip-hop logik”—as a pedagogical tool. Flower describes the act of literacy as “talking across difference,” as she calls it, bridging gaps and exploring spaces *between* communities and their discourses. Flower argues that intercultural rhetoric might transcend simple cross-cultural dialogue to function *between* cultures, agendas, and political positions. This also acknowledges conflict as one of the central features—and indeed most positive and fruitful features—of our world. As Flower writes,

Intercultural rhetoric operates in a force field of contradictory agendas and conflicting voices. The intercultural inquiry described here is a literate practice that tries to elicit real differences without polarizing people and to negotiate conflict without silencing it (“Talking” 64).

In addition, Flower, along with Elenore Long and Lorraine Higgins describe how intercultural rhetoric depends on a strategy called the “rival hypothesis stance” (*Learning to Rival* 2000). Rivaling seeks out “rival readings of the world” to enhance understanding using “multiple styles of evidence” (“Talking” 50). It is a position that assumes difference and complexity and privileges communication rather than the defense of a position. As the authors point out, the Rival Hypothesis stance has always defined critical pedagogies. Like the approaches of both Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, it redefines the curriculum as the “study of ideology rather than simply the examination of different perspectives.” Critical pedagogy and rivaling suggest that texts be used to “reveal how control and domination in the larger society affect the production, distribution, and evaluation of knowledge” (*Learning to Rival* 45). That is, authors and artists are read for the purpose of exposing a larger social context.

In an attempt to access these broader social discourses, particularly the deeply polarized one about race, I strive to create a “palette” of ideological positions for students to negotiate. So, I situate institutionally familiar

---

<sup>8</sup> I deeply appreciate Linda Flower's willingness to explore, practice, and theorize concepts of literacy, rather than directly asserting them as explanations. Similarly, I am still working with the concept of a Hip-Hop Logik, which embraces both a critical stance and a spirit of inquiry. I hope through (many) more years of practice, and many conversations with other teachers, it's possibilities as a pedagogy and rhetoric will become more clear.

figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Langston Hughes alongside institutionally alien figures like rapper Tupac Shakur and other hip-hop artists.<sup>9</sup> Both Tupac and Dr. King felt a *moral imperative* to speak out against racial and economic oppression. However, the polarizing rhetoric of race in America has contributed to what I believe are misleading, “sound-bite” discussions of their positions on race and black power. Tupac’s political agenda can be drowned out by his gangsta image, and the profound radicalism of Dr. King’s message of nonviolent resistance can be diluted to a “turn the other cheek” understanding of his beliefs (a position that Tupac himself took.) My main thesis in utilizing hip-hop and its messages is that *students can’t understand how and why rappers like Tupac make their arguments unless they also more fully comprehend the polarized discourse of race relations that has preceded them.*

## The Roots of Rap

It’s important to historicize contemporary popular hip-hop, since the mainstream rap music that dominates radio and MTV today is very different from its hip-hop roots. Hip-hop culture is an aesthetic and political movement that was born in the South Bronx in the late 70s. In the context of violent, impoverished neighborhoods, poor young people from all over New York would gather wherever space was free for what came to be known as hip-hop parties. Someone, usually a DJ, would hook up turntables and speakers to an electric pole or set them up in an apartment window, and start spinning beats. An MC rapped over the beats to keep the party going, breakdancers spun and popped, and graffiti artists tagged walls with their particular brand of lyrical, identity-affirming art. All of these mediums, from music to spray paint, became part of what has come to be known as hip-hop culture. And the original DJs—including Africa Bambaata, DJ Cool Herc, KRS-One, and others—brought Jamaican and other world beats into the mix.

Then hip-hop went commercial. The improvisational “live” or “street” sound began to be produced in studios. This became what is today considered rap music, or Rhythmic American Poetry, as some call it:

---

<sup>9</sup> Within the field cultural studies especially, hip-hop has become a favored object of study. In addition, its pedagogical potential in writing and other course of all levels is also being explored. See Jeff Rice, David Stovall, and Geoffrey Sirc, for example, on more ways to source hip-hop in the classroom. Both Eric Michael Dyson and bell hooks offer perspectives on hip-hop and culture. Stanford’s Hip-hop Archive also offers resources in both these areas, as well as links to hip-hop organizations.

written rhymes laid over mixed beats and sound samples. And, backed by the record industry, rap began to take over the popular music scene. Thus, in order to properly analyze rap, students need to see its roots.

I use two films: *Freestyle: The Art of Rhyme* (2004), and *Hip-hop Legends* (2007), which show interviews with the MCs and DJs who started the hip-hop movement. These films include terrific archival footage of '60s street poets like The Last Poets and early cross-over rap groups like Run DMC. *Freestyle*, in particular, shows the original vocal aesthetics of rap performance. Freestyle is unwritten, spontaneous rap that is still performed on the streets, typically in situations where rappers gather for “battles,” to out-rhyme and out-wit each other. I’ve found that watching freestylin’ rappers is very inspiring for students. Their verbal dexterity is awe-inspiring. Yet, these are kids on the streets. They are not highly educated in the traditional sense, or anywhere close to looking like who we expect to be “well-spoken.” Freestyle represents the impulse: the spontaneity, commitment to artistic expression, the relentlessly critical stance, and the desire to always better oneself that is at the heart of hip-hop. I also use exploit the term “freestyle” to refer to the freewriting and journaling that we do in and out of class, since it remains liberated from the overused “freewriting” term that many students have heard in high school.

Last, I connect hip-hop music to the jazz and blues music tradition. Artists in the jive/ scat/ swing genre like Cab Calloway, for example, provide historical precedent to contemporary rap lyrical style and breakdancing. Students can watch Calloway’s 1934 performance of “Hi-De-Ho,” for example, and discuss what aspects of his performance might be a source for hip-hop’s breakdancing moves and improvisational vocals.<sup>10</sup> Photos of zoot suits from the 1940s<sup>11</sup> foreshadow the exaggerated postures and fashion of the 80s and early 90s hiphoppaz. Such Blues songs as Nina Simone’s “Backlash Blues” and “I Loves You Porgy” also explore themes of racism, black masculinity, and power. Finally, I ask students to read several Langston Hughes poems, since he wrote many jazz lyrics—such as “Backlash Blues” for Nina Simone—and his poems are jazz-influenced. One great comparison is Hughes’ poem “Mother to Son” and Tupac’s songs “Dear Mama,” or “Keep Ya Head Up.” Both Hughes and

---

<sup>10</sup> As of this writing, videos of Cab Calloway (and others, including famous tap dancers the Nicolas brothers) are available on *YouTube*.

<sup>11</sup> A very interesting corollary here are the Zoot Suit Riots, in which Latinos in Los Angeles were arrested for (simply) wearing zoot suits. This pertains how ethnic groups are made “visible” and “policed,” simply by the way they dress—and have been for decades.

Tupac explore how young black men are affected by their inability to alleviate the suffering of their mothers.

### **“With a spirit straining...”<sup>12</sup>/ Un-Chaining Black Male Identity/ Analyzing Rap Rhetoric**

Armed with an historically contextualized understanding of the relationship between hip-hop and rap, we then analyze the arguments and rhetorical strategies of contemporary rappers, and how their music and messages fit in to the broader social discourse on race in America. Essay assignments for this unit—assignments that I sample from below—are as follows:

1. Explore John McWhorter’s thesis that “the attitude and style expressed in the hip-hop ‘identity’ keeps blacks down.” Do you agree that rap promotes debilitating and racist images? If so, is it these images that are responsible for the economic and racial injustice that black people (and/ or other people of color) suffer? Or, do you believe hip-hop and rap music is an “authentic cry against oppression,” as some rappers, fans, and critics claim it to be? (For this topic, you can also use another musical genre that deals with political themes, such as Punk, Ska, Reggae, Heavy Metal, etcetera. Many of McWhorter’s criticisms still apply.)
2. Discuss and describe a particular rapper’s images and messages about women and male/ female relationships. Are they misogynist or degrading to women? What effects do these messages have on women in society?
3. Apply Dr. King’s three ways of meeting oppression—acquiescence, violence, and nonviolent resistance—to three authors or characters that we’ve encountered in our class discussions. So, you can write on Tupac, Chuck D, or Mos’ Def, a character from the movie *Crash* (2005), and/or either James or Ruth McBride from McBride’s memoir *The Color of Water* (1997). Describe which method each character or author uses to respond to racist situations. Finally, explain who you respect most for their behavior and choices.

In order to begin analyzing rhetoric and politics in hip-hop, I start with identity, the place where rappers re-define the black man, who, in (most)

---

<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “Black Power” 44.

rap idiom, is the *Nigga*.<sup>13</sup> In many ways, this is very uncomfortable and ironic for me, since, as a white woman, (or for some reason I still can't quite articulate fully), I can't even speak the word out loud. It gets stuck in my throat. (This makes for quite amusing classroom discussions). However, it is *exactly because* I and many others can't speak the word that it's powerful, and if it's that powerful, we had better start understanding why. In what contexts do rappers use the word? Why do they use it? Is the "reclaiming" of the word effective? How and why is it used in communities today, or who can speak it and who can't?

The documentary films *Tupac Resurrection* (2003) and *Tupac Shakur/Thug Angel: The Life of an Outlaw* (2002) introduce students to the complexities of Tupac's political rhetoric and his commercialization. Tupac extended gangsta rap's tradition of militancy, which began in 1988 with Public Enemy's *It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* and N.W.A.'s (Niggaz with Attitude) album *Straight Outta Compton*. This "new" sound combined a verbal documentary of life in the ghetto with a radical Black Power ideology that evoked the Black Panther Party and Nation of Islam. The black man became as a symbol of all oppressed peoples became both hero and victim in a lawless, oppressed urban ghetto landscape, who did anything necessary to survive.

Rapping some ten years later, however, Tupac, (whose mother was a member of the Black Panther Party) wanted to reinvent the *Nigga* and *Thug* as a new political position and source of revolutionary power. In Tupac's song "Words of Wisdom," he describes the *Nigga* as "Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished" (*2pacalypse Now* 1998). The *Thug*, similarly, is the warrior against racism and poverty, the one who has to overcome a world stacked against him. *Thug Life* is the product of social inequality and racial hatred: "The Hate You Gave Little Infants Fucks Everyone" he argues, a position he embodied so thoroughly that he had "Thug Life" tattooed across his stomach. Thug Nation would be the new Black Power movement, emboldening young black men to reclaim their *Self-hood* and their neighbor-*hoods* from an abusive police force and a neglectful government. Tupac's political and revolutionary intentions affected all those around him—not just his fans. As Quincy Jones III puts it in his dedication to Tupac, he "intended to use his success as a stepping

---

<sup>13</sup> The particular texts and assignments I describe in this chapter deal primarily with the problem of masculinity in rap music. However, similar assignments could include female and feminist rappers portrayals of gender. Joan Morgan's work is a good resource for rap and feminism (see Works Cited).

stone for his true purpose, which was to inspire true progress for all.”<sup>14</sup> For many, Tupac was a visionary—one who saw the truth of ghetto life and felt the suffering of the “masses.” In mythic status, he is a figure on the level of Martin Luther King, Jr. A hero of his time, who, like King, fell victim to violence. (Tupac was shot at the age of 25).

Many students believe in Tupac and his political message so strongly that they have not stopped to carefully analyze how he makes his arguments. Students *believe in* the *Nigga/ intellectual* who never stops asking questions and refuses to accept racist definitions or explanations of reality. As Tia writes,

Who would think that the “vulgar” words he often spoke about were really acronyms to inspire? For example, when he referenced the word “nigga,” few would think that this word meant more than what they read in their history books. How would they react knowing that this “thugged out” rapper was not just shouting this word for street credibility, but in fact was letting everyone in the streets know that they were “Never Ignorant,” that in fact they were “Getting Goals Accomplished?” despite the popular beliefs society has about them (Witherspoon).

According to Tia, Tupac is not simply articulating a new definition of *Nigga*, but “*he is letting everyone on the streets know*” that they are part of this new definition, this political movement. In Tia’s analysis, therefore, Tupac’s desire to reach everyone, to inspire and uplift oppressed people, is just as significant as the content of his the message. Tia echoes many fans who see Tupac’s relationship to the people and his desire for change as eclipsing his more sinister and problematic gangsta message of retaliation and violence.

In addition, students quickly rise to the challenge of untangling this linguistic knot, (the *Nigga*), again since it translates directly to their lives. The word is used pervasively by the black community (at least in the Bay Area). One student, Alexis, for example, clearly articulates the most prominent critique of this rhetorical and political strategy:

I can’t begin to understand how it can be acceptable to use that racist and derogatory term so casually and not be considered racist themselves [...] The word is racist no matter who says it (Garcia).

Here, Alexis grapples with whether oppressed communities can re-define themselves using old terms. Another student, Francisca Alvarez, more

---

<sup>14</sup> “Dedication to Tupac,” *Tupac Shakur: Thug/ Angel: Life of an Outlaw Soundtrack*.

pointedly critiques Tupac for how he used the word. During a discussion of Tupac's song "Words of Wisdom," she pointed out that Tupac uses *Nigga* positively to refer to himself and his homeboys, but he also uses it in a derogatory sense, as an epithet he hurls at an "imaginary" Abraham Lincoln. Tupac writes:

Break the chains in our brains that made us fear yah  
 Pledge allegiance to a flag that neglects us  
 Honor a man that refuses to respect us  
 Emancipation Proclamation, please!  
 Nigga just said that to save the nation  
 These are all lies that we've accepted [...]

As Francisca challenges, can Tupac really have it both ways? Because the language of hip-hop has such cultural currency, students can really begin to see how words like this are so embedded within speech communities, and so wedded to complex identities and relationships of power, that it can be a complicated task to untangle what they mean. In addition, they begin to understand that a word's meaning is not really separate from its use. Francisca continued her critique of Tupac by arguing that Tupac's anti-government rhetoric is too strong; he doesn't acknowledge that the same justice system he criticizes at times treated him very fairly when he argued against the unjust charges brought against him.

In other writing, students explore the relationship between hip-hop and he media. Marcus Balinton puts one position on this most eloquently: "I believe the media brings the black community down more than the black community could ever do" ("The Hip-Hop Identity" 2007). This is such an important rhetorical move in terms of taking the analysis away from the individual actor to the cultural forces at work. As Marcus points out, the media doesn't spend much air time on the charity work rappers do, only the jail time that they do.<sup>15</sup> However, as Peter Smith rivals, rappers participate equally in the media glamour, by promoting false images of themselves as wealthy success stories. Peter writes,

The truth rarely sells when it comes to rap music. Rappers [are] just speaking all these lies about how good their lives are, when in truth most of their jewelry is rented and so are the cars and the houses they live in (Smith).

---

<sup>15</sup> For teachers interested in having students examine hip-hop political organizations, see Angela Ards' "Organizing the Hip-hop Generation" (2004), and also the online Stanford Hip-hop Archive.

For Peter, successful, mainstream rappers are just sell-outs, participating in yet another kind of psychological slavery. Peter goes on to argue that these images have a powerful, deleterious effect on the minds of young people, creating a “false hope” that actually

hinders your chances of having a good future for yourself, because you either believe you deserve too much or you see that that will never be you and you become bitter (Smith).

Rap’s powerfully articulated and contradictory messages are all being negotiated in these viewpoints on who is responsible for the lack of opportunity and cycle of poverty and violence that continues to define oppressed communities. However difficult, I encourage students to go beyond adversarial positions, and support a more hip-hop (not gangsta rap) kind of inquiry, in which the truth is always being negotiated. For, in all actuality, racial oppression and inequality is so deeply embedded in American culture, or, as Ice Cube literally embeds it in his “AmeriKKKa,” that no one explanation for its relentless persistence can possibly suffice.

Another problematic aspect of rap music is its degrading treatment of women.<sup>16</sup> Dasia Pickett, in her essay on rapper Nelly’s (pornographic) video “Tip Drill,” agrees with academic John McWhorter that rap promotes misogynistic images. Dasia writes: “McWhorter argues that rap has produced some of the most icily misogynistic music human history has ever known” (318). Nelly’s video “Tip Drill” is a perfect example of this because it manages to debase black women in every way [Here Dasia includes descriptions of what the women are doing]. “Tip Drill” makes women appear shallow and stupid. They are depicted as sex objects and sex toys (Pickett). But again, to explore the various positions within her argument, Dasia doesn’t merely fault the rappers, but also the women who form part of their fan base:

Women cannot receive respect when we embrace a music and culture that disrespects us and does not even care that they are disrespecting us (Pickett).

Dasia’s criticism shows how members of the hip-hop generation are able to see the complexities of rap’s negative influences and its success.

---

<sup>16</sup> Other issues for examination and writing are homophobia and anti-semitism in rap music, which corrolate precisely, as they do cross-culturally, with constructions of white male, heterosexual identity.

Yet, students also are quick to go beyond rap, as I pointed out above, to critique media and culture more broadly for impacting young people, pointing to television, magazines, and movies for negative images. As Tia argues, there are many other degrading and irresponsible images of women in the media:

Ask any young teenage girl who she looks up to the most and a large percentage will say “Paris Hilton” among other women in the entertainment industry who are seen every week on the cover of tabloid magazines doing wrong (Witherspoon).

But the media is only one of the social factors at work in economic and racial oppression, and one that for many people receives too much blame. As Karima Dunlap argues, family structure plays a much larger role in “keeping blacks back”:

Listening to hip-hop can not possibly have as much of an effect as not having a mother or father figure there to reinforce the importance of having long-term goals and being a positive motivation (Dunlap).

In addition, young people navigate a world populated with negative influences every day, so how can rap music possibly be to blame? Jessica Ross writes, “Drug dealers, thugs, pimps, hustlers and dope fiends are what most ghetto kids have to fight through daily even to go to school.”

Again, student writing on their own racialized experiences can be a part of trying to understand the language of rap. As Justin, another student, writes, the adversarial rhetoric employed by rappers is, ultimately, divisive:

Rap and hip-hop music keep the division among races alive. It certainly feels that way. When one says that they’re talking black that is automatically a barrier. And the sad part is, is that it’s pretty much universal. Everyone understands what is meant by you’re talking black, or you’re acting black. It’s pretty unfortunate and rap and hip-hop music keeps that alive. It is also universally understood that acting black means acting ghetto; acting like a thug. That alone hinders the black culture because the phrase acting black conjures up an image of a gangsta or thug. Similarly, you can also act “white.” That is usually associated with negative connotations, like having no rhythm, or not being able to dance. Unfortunately, it is becoming more associated with being uncool. And this is all perpetuated by rap and hip-hop and the rap and hip-hop mentality (Esposito).

In his essay, Justin points out that hip-hop and rap can't be about "unity" when its language and the rhetorical stance are exclusionary. But, it is important to discuss with students how "acting black" and "being cool" carries power in some situations and not in others. How "cool" is it to be, as Greg is below, stereotyped as a criminal? Greg writes:

People sometimes look at you and basically judge you on first impressions. Like when I was living in Richmond when I got kicked out I had braids and baggy clothes and the whole nine yards. The judge told my lawyer that he looks like a troubled kid, but once the judge heard me speak and checked out my record and seen that I had no convictions and this was my first time being in trouble with the law his whole outlook was different upon me (Calvin).

Greg (who is African-American) rivals Justin's (who is white) position, since for Greg, rap reflects the discrimination and segregation that he experiences; it doesn't cause it. In both cases, language powerfully affects reality. And, as race relations become more complicated and communities more diverse, it is even harder to discuss new relationships with old terms.

Justin acknowledges at the end of his piece, "Maybe, as Tupac suggested, it's time for a change" (this is in reference to Tupac's song "Changes.") Yet, where Tupac is advocating for America to change the way it stereotypes people of color, Justin is hoping that rap will change the way it talks about race so that society can too. The two positions that Justin and Greg are getting at here is that rappers like Tupac are BOTH contributing to the problem AND expressing the need to change it.

To rival gangsta rap ideology and conservative cultural criticism we read Martin Luther King, Jr.'s essay "Black Power" in *Where Do We Go From Here? From Chaos to Community* and his essay "Three Ways of Meeting Oppression." In both pieces, Dr. King examines the problem of power and how to achieve justice and equality.

Dr. King, like many rappers, believed that broader social change begins with the individual liberating him/herself from an oppressive mentality. Dr. King argues that "the Negro has been confined to a life of voicelessness and powerlessness" ("Black Power" 36). As a result, the reclamation of identity and self-esteem is the most "most powerful weapon" in the fight for social justice. Dr. King writes:

Psychological freedom, a firm sense of self-esteem, is the most powerful weapon against the long night of physical slavery [...] The Negro will only be truly free when he reaches down to the inner depths of his own being and signs with the pen and ink of assertive selfhood his own emancipation proclamation. With a spirit straining toward true self-esteem, the Negro

must boldly throw off the manacles of self-abnegation and say to himself and the world: ‘I am somebody. I am a person. I am a man with dignity and honor. I have a rich and noble history, however painful and exploited that history has been’ [...] This is positive and necessary power for black people (44).

Like Tupac, Dr. King uses the Emancipation Proclamation as a rhetorical tool for oppressed people to re-examine their social condition. But there is a significant difference between the two uses of the concept. So, I ask students to carefully examine the difference between Dr. King’s “manacles” and Tupac’s “the chains in our brains” (from “Words of Wisdom”). For Dr. King, the psychological slavery he describes is at least partially caused by oppressed peoples’ internalization of racism. However, for Tupac, and in most gangsta rap rhetoric, the “chains” that limit them come from government and other social institutions that keep people of color trapped in the ghetto, uneducated, and poor.

As I described above, I have students apply Dr. King’s three ways of meeting oppression—acquiescence, violence, and nonviolent resistance—to the actions and words of rappers, authors, characters. Particularly illuminating have been writing assignments on whether Tupac followed the path of violent or nonviolent resistance. Many see him as violent—a gun-toting gangsta. Yet other students see him as a nonviolent poet/prophet, who fell victim to the lifestyle he was trying to reform. However, the third position is to see him as alternately both: actor and victim, a violent Black-Panther-infused revolutionary and a man, suffering on his own “cross,” looking for peace but fighting a system so marinated in complex racial attitudes that he couldn’t accomplish his goals. In an essay called “Contradiction and Struggle: Hand in Hand,” Saul Lechuga argues for the two sides to Tupac:

Because of his songs he was a nonviolent resistor. He used his lyrics to get his words and ideas out to people, which really helped and touched the people with similar situations and problems. On the other hand, there is the street thug Tupac Shakur, who used violence. He thought that was the only way to solve his problems. Therefore, he contradicted himself.

Saul’s analysis demonstrates how Tupac’s life and words can be at odds, but also how admired and loved he was for his struggles.

In addition, by setting the stage for how current race relations are complicated, I hope that students can more comprehensively understand why rappers would want to be as uncomplicated as possible—or as adversarial and LOUD as possible. I try to show how rap represents one