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Hip-Hop Literature: The Politics, Poetics, and Power of Hip-Hop in the English Classroom

A high school teacher describes why hip-hop is a genre worthy of independent study, not just a bridge to traditional literature.

There's an educational disconnect between students' individual backgrounds and the instruction that they traditionally receive in school (Darling-Hammond 3). This division is even more severe for black, Latino/Latina, and economically underprivileged students, who often lack the support, experience, or resources to fully engage in traditional classroom instruction. While the idea of culturally relevant teaching, "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings 20), has been widely accepted since its 1994 introduction into educational discourse, it is put into practice much less frequently than it is discussed, and it is also often distorted in its implementation.

Hip-hop pedagogy has grown in the past ten years, as scholars and educators have researched and experimented with the use of hip-hop music and culture to improve students' empowerment, cultural responsiveness, and skills of literary analysis and critical literacy (Petchauer 952). As Greg Dimitriadis studied the ways in which youth engaged in and made meaning of hip-hop culture in their individual lives, Ernest Morrell and Jeff Duncan-Andrade ("Toward") explored the use of hip-hop texts in the English classroom for the promotion of academic literacy and engagement. While Morrell and Duncan-Andrade ("Toward") recognized the space that a study of hip-hop texts provides for critical discussion, their work focused on the use of hip-hop for accessing traditional literary texts. In so doing, they privileged the literary canon in a manner that continued to marginalize hip-hop literature, a practice that both Dimitriadis and Sam Seidel warn against, since it limits the agency and possibilities of students in critical engagement with hip-hop culture (Seidel 121). David Stovall recognized the use of rap and hip-hop culture as a means to develop critical thinking and introduced hip-hop texts into a secondary social studies curriculum that engaged students in "transformative" conversations about history and culture (585). Marc Lamont Hill took the idea of transformative hip-hop curriculum further by thematically analyzing hip-hop texts as literature and spaces for identity development within a secondary class focused on hip-hop literature.

Hip-hop literature is now frequently introduced into English language arts curricula as a bridge to discussion of literary works and devices. Hip-hop texts can serve as a useful supplement or entryway into the traditional English curriculum; however, simply juxtaposing such texts with canonical texts in the classroom does little to rectify the cultural inequality that already exists in education. While arguments have been made on the literary merit of hip-hop lyrics—that it is a "worthy subject of study in its own right" (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, "Toward" 89)—hip-hop literature still most often falls into the trap of being taught with and compared to canonical texts. Rap can be a powerful tool for helping students to develop skills in critical analysis, but that power is diluted when the goal of its use is solely for reading

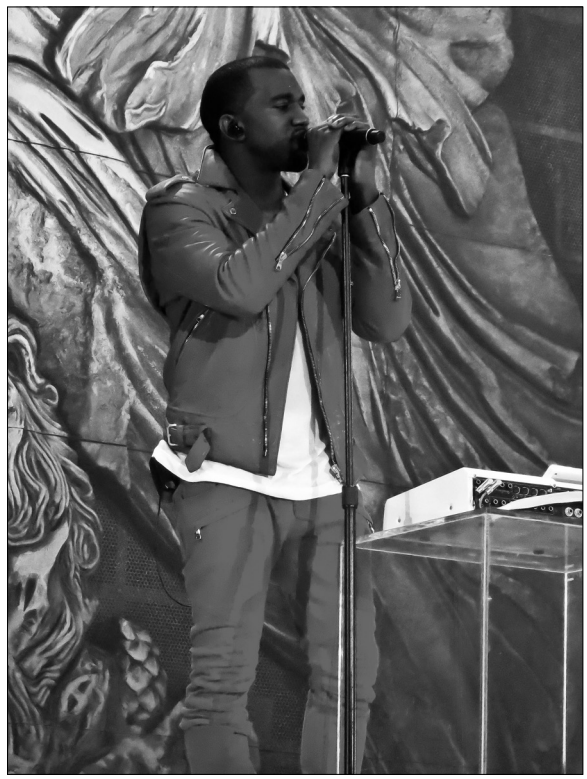
and discussing canonical texts. For this reason, I believe it is necessary to establish a separate course that focuses on hip-hop texts as the central literary genre, and recognizes their power as creative, poetic, valuable, instructional, and cultural texts, worthy of academic study. By providing students with ways in which to engage their cultural interests in an academic setting, we are giving them the opportunity to embrace their individuality while also pursuing academic success (Emdin xii).

Connecting Students' Lives with Students' Learning

I grew up with hip-hop music as a backdrop to my life. It was on the radio or on cassette at home, in the car, and even on the street blaring through my headphones. And yet, there was no recognition of hip-hop in the classroom. I found myself taking on a dual identity: I was hip-hop outside the classroom and student inside it. There was no space for both at once. As well-versed as I could be in the language of hip-hop, that knowledge did not provide me with any source of power or access inside academic spaces. While I saw myself in hip-hop, I did not see myself in classroom texts. Ultimately, I was only marginally involved in my own education.

As a teacher, I see this same conflict occurring with the students in my high school English classroom. Many students feel that they must shed their true selves to be successful academically; those who refuse to shift personas resist education, since they find that it conflicts with their own identities (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, "Turn Up" 293). For students to truly engage in learning, they must be able to see a space for themselves within it.

In the first high school English class that I taught, a student said to me, "Last night I was listening to a Dead Prez[1] song about schools, and I thought of you." After I expressed my appreciation for the song, the student looked at me, bewildered. "But you're a teacher," he said. "Doesn't it go against everything you stand for?" For this student, the spaces of hip-hop and schooling were innately at odds with one another, and I could not possibly inhabit both. In that moment, it was clear to me that the cultural gap between students and formal education continued to persist (Emdin xi). In the years following that conversation, I began to infuse



Kanye West performing at Revel Ovation Hall in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on July 7, 2012. Photo by Kenny Sun; licensed under Creative Commons.

hip-hop in my English classroom and curriculum as a tool for analysis and dialogue. One of the most successful of these lessons occurred when we studied Kanye West's "Homecoming" and Common's "I Used to Love H.E.R." to exemplify the utilization of extended metaphor in literature. Both songs seem to describe a tumultuous relationship with a female, but in the end the women are revealed to be metaphoric.[2] The former is one that most of my students already knew quite well but had not explored on a literary level.

While Common's "I Used to Love H.E.R." is an unfamiliar song to most of my students, they were eager to read it as a text because it is a hip-hop text and I connected it to the Kanye West song that they already knew. In fact, the students were able to take the lesson even further by asking critical questions of the text and song titles. After reading "Homecoming," one student asked, "If this isn't about a girl he was in a relationship with, then who are the kids he left behind?" This question led to a discussion of family structure, abandonment,

role models, and expectations. Another student asked after reading "I Used to Love H.E.R.," "Why is *H.E.R.* written as an acronym[3]?" These are the same critical questions that many English teachers find their students unlikely or unwilling to ask of traditional texts. It may be that students are quite capable of engaging in such discussions but have not been encouraged to do so using effective, culturally responsive texts.

One year, weeks after I had taught the extended metaphor lesson using hip-hop, a student approached me at the end of class one day and asked if I thought that rapper Immortal Technique's song "Dance with the Devil"[4] was an extended metaphor meant to teach a lesson, or if it was a true story. The fact that the lesson had caused a student to independently reexamine his music through a critical lens makes clear how powerful and necessary it is to introduce hip-hop literature and popular texts in the English classroom.

Hip-Hop Literature

We are asking a great deal from our students when we ask them to invest in material that does not reflect, respond to, or engage with their cultural identities. According to Carol D. Lee, minority students tend to disengage from school practices because "they feel that they are not respected in classrooms, that the content of instruction does not serve the goals that are most immediate to them, or because they do not understand the subject matter as they experience it in classrooms" (26). Minority students in suburban school districts spend most of their time in English literature classes reading texts both by and about people who are unlike them. The psychological effects of this monocultural education are damaging for students both academically and emotionally (Ladson-Billings 10).

The purposes of a class on hip-hop literature are manifold. Hip-hop currently plays a central role in popular culture (Pough 5) and has become the language, fashion, and music of the majority of our students, regardless of ethnicity (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, "Toward" 88). While it would be myopic to state that all students of color respond to hip-hop based instruction, it is true that students in general, and especially minority students, tend to engage more with lessons that include hip-hop texts and tend to feel more included in a classroom that uses such texts (Stovall 589). Acknowledging that hip-hop music has merit as literature, and therefore has a place in the classroom, also conveys to the students that their background and culture are just as relevant and worthy of study as those of the students whose cultural identities are traditionally represented in classroom literature.

In the same way that the introduction of rap[5] "gave voice to a group hardly heard before by America at large" (Bradley xiv), the study of rap in the English classroom can give voice to those students who are rarely heard, and often silenced. While this silence can often appear to be self-imposed in the secondary classroom, it is a direct result of the marginalization of the culture and language of these students (Alim 122). The presence of hip-hop literature in the classroom offers a counternarrative (Delgado and Stefancic 60) that can aid students in working through their identity development as both students and individuals (McKeown 86). The creation of this space through hip-hop literature is especially helpful for teachers in urban areas who come from cultures or communities that are different from those of their students, and who struggle with finding spaces for honest conversation surrounding identity development (Petchauer 947).

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The absence of hip-hop literacy in education does not only harm minority students. It also deprives white students of the opportunity to learn about others. Students of color spend a great deal of time learning about the language, history, and culture of white America, but white students are rarely introduced to the language, history, or culture of the minority populations that also reside in the United States. As a result, students have a myopic view of cultures other than their own or the ones represented in the classroom. This reduces their ability to connect globally with others on a personal and academic level. It also reinforces ethnic and racial inequalities that have existed and been promulgated for decades (Gurin et al. 3). The teaching of hip-hop literature in the classroom not only allows the students to connect with the

material, it also provides students with the opportunity to take ownership over the materials and their own education.

Hip-Hop Curriculum

Hip-hop texts offer many valuable pathways to English language arts content and skills. Below I describe just a few of them.

Literary Devices

Hip-hop literature provides a powerful way to teach skills and concepts in literature that students struggle with when studying canonical texts that are distant from most students generationally, and distant from minority students culturally. Adam Bradley describes the literary and historical content of rap music as "public art, and rappers are perhaps our greatest public poets, extending a tradition of lyricism that spans continents and stretches back thousands of years. . . . They expand our understanding of human experience by telling stories we might not otherwise hear" (xiii). Bradley speaks to the power of hip-hop as poetry, that it is poetry as it is written on the page, and public art as it is broadcast through music. The study of hip-hop as poetry in the classroom recognizes traditional poetry as an inspiration for rap, while also evaluating the ways in which rap music innovates the written and spoken word.

Language

In studying language in the context of hip-hop, students can improve their vocabulary knowledge and decoding skills (McKeown 87); they are able to engage in discussions about the context and connotations of the words themselves. The language of hip-hop has spread well beyond the confines of music and has enhanced mainstream culture. In a hip-hop literature class, students can explore concepts such as the commodification of slang, which has the ability to "fashion new expressive possibilities" at the same time that it has "left hip-hop culture to become part of the general American lexicon" (Bradley and DuBois xxxvi). In analyzing language through the study of hip-hop, students are able to draw connections between the cultures in which they engage and the global impact of these cultures (Alim 126). Additionally, they will become familiar with the development of language as well as the individual nuances of words.

Storytelling

The way in which stories are developed, documented, and structured stems from the tradition of spoken word and sharing (Pough 6). In this respect, rap is closely tied to literary tradition (Pihel 252). An important aspect of hip-hop is the ability of rap music to document life and tell personal stories that inform or connect to the reader (Hill 69). It is through this form of storytelling that individuals are able to express themselves honestly and openly, while providing support for those who have endured similar experiences. It is also a way in which people can learn through others about cultures, communities, conflicts, and history (Stovall 597). In some ways, the stories told through rap lyrics that follow the essential elements of storytelling can be more powerful for students than the traditional stories that they read in class, since these stories are more culturally relevant (Hill 96). For many students, the stories conveyed through rap are their own stories. In recognizing the experiences of the protagonists in hip-hop, we are also acknowledging the fact that students have their own stories to tell, and that those stories are no less valuable than the ones we ask them to read.

Social Critique

A critique that is often made of rap is that it is violent, misogynistic, and laden with immorality (Petchauer 954). When viewed in this negative light, it seems irresponsible to introduce such content in an educational setting. In response to this argument, Lee writes, "Great literature is not defined by the presence of violence or sexuality or the lack thereof, but by how great writers have the ability to make us think deeply about the dilemmas of the human experience" (70). While it is hopeful to imagine that students will not be exposed to negative language or messages as long as we ban such material from the classroom, the truth is that students will continue to engage in popular culture, regardless of what is presented in the academic environment.

The best way that we can prepare students to make informed decisions about their individual actions and choices in media consumption is to recognize what influences are surrounding them, and to begin a critical discussion of these influences (Stovall 589). Brent McKeown "can think of no greater disservice to our students than failing to afford them both the physical space and the critical apparatus to enter into a thoughtful discussion about the merits and the problems with the music they listen to on a daily basis" (89). The English classroom provides an ideal space for critical analysis of social and cultural forces in students' lives (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, "Toward" 91). While a large portion of rap music contains positive examples, words, and messages, it is also valuable to examine the less positive material and give our students the space to analyze the media that surround them and engage in meaningful conversations about this material. Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois maintain that "rap is a reflection of a broader culture that too often sanctions the same sexism, homophobia, and violence found in the music. By including lyrics with such content, we present occasions to challenge pernicious influences by confronting them directly rather than simply pretending they aren't there" (xxxviii). By inviting students to critique troubling lyrics in hip-hop, we challenge them to critique these same offenses in their community and society.

Acknowledging Cultural Identities of Students

It is well-documented that including hip-hop is effective in motivating and engaging students. However, this is not enough if our goals are to support students in critical thinking and analysis and to open up new possibilities for them as independent agents of change and transformation. Teachers must go beyond the juxtaposition of hip-hop and traditional literature by including hip-hop as an independent genre worthy of study within the literary tradition. By acknowledging and privileging the cultural identities of students, educators can simultaneously engage students in critical literary and social dialogues while also sending a clear message that students' lives and communities are present and relevant to classroom learning and culture.

Notes

1. A New York City–based hip-hop duo formed in 1996, known for making politically or socially conscious hip-hop music. Their song "They Schools," released in 2000 on the album *Let's Get Free,* critiques the school system as oppressive and instrumental in furthering the marginalization of people of color.

2. In "Homecoming," the female that West leaves behind is actually the city of Chicago, and in "I Used to Love H.E.R.," the young woman with whom Common is in love is actually hip-hop.

3. Stands for "Hearing Every Rhyme."

4. Self-released in 2001 on his album *Revolutionary Volume 1,* this song tells the story of a young man who becomes so corrupted by his desire for power that he commits sexual assault in order to gain acceptance, and subsequently takes his own life. In the last stanza of the song, Immortal Technique authenticates the story by stating that he bore witness to the events described.

5. The term *rap* is used here in reference to the music only, while *hip-hop* refers to the music as well as its surrounding culture.

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