

# Writing and Unwriting Race: Using Hip-Hop in Writing and Literature Classrooms

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While I was a voracious reader as a child, I had no exposure to African American literature until I was late into my teens and read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. This was a book I felt was life changing; however, I did not consider becoming a scholar of African American literature until I was embarking on my doctoral studies. Like many of my own students now, as an undergraduate student, I believed that to be an "authentic" scholar of the African American tradition I needed to have been raised in it; I needed to be African American myself. Despite my relatively late exposure to canonical African American texts, I was quite familiar with hip-hop. Hip-hop CDs were a normal part of the rotation on my Walkman, but as a teen and young adult, I didn't see hip-hop as a part of the literary tradition. This also mimics the way many of my own students now feel. They often have more exposure to hip-hop than to other types of African American texts, but they tend to see it as "only" pop culture and not as a topic for academic exploration. When I made the decision to focus my doctoral studies and my dissertation in the African American literary tradition, specifically hip-hop, I was forced to strongly consider my own position in the culture and in the academy as a white person and white scholar. The time I have spent contemplating that position has led me to recognize the necessity of asking students, both white students and students of color, to reflect on and acknowledge their own identities and how these identities inform their readings of and writing about African American texts in an African American literature class or a composition course. Hip-hop is my frame for these reflections in both writing and literature classrooms.

As a white scholar of African American literature, I try to remain highly conscious of how my own position of authority and privilege in the classroom—based both in white privilege and in academic credentials—influences how my students regard the texts, cultural issues, and historical information that are discussed in the various classes in which I teach African American texts. At the institutions where I

have taught classes focused on the African American tradition, the majority of the students on the campus, and in the classes, have been white. This makes the recognition of the potential for othering of African Americans and of the texts a practical as well as an ethical concern. The classroom must be a safe and comfortable environment for all students, and the courses and discussions must be structured and facilitated to avoid African American students being made to feel that they are expected by the rest of the students (or by me) to represent African Americans as a whole, to have an intrinsic understanding of the texts, or to feel marginalized or dismissed in the discussions. Students need guidance in addressing the form and content of African American texts and in understanding how the texts work inside the broader American context and literary traditions, including the contexts of institutional racism and of the stereotypes and negative assumptions about African American English (AAE) and Black discourse. In the process of textual analysis of hip-hop lyrics and analysis of the aesthetics of the form, my students and I are traveling through and writing about the uncomfortable issues of race and class and the current inequities and issues implicated in these topics. This chapter gives a snapshot of what those journeys have been like for me and for my students, from the foundational ideas of the approach to a typical first-day discussion to an example assignment.

Discussing and writing about racial issues and characterizations are a necessary part of any examination of the African American literary tradition. However, due to the somewhat taboo and certainly difficult nature of discussions about race in American culture, I have found it vital to begin the class (or the discussion of hip-hop within a composition course) with an examination of our positions, both conscious and unconscious, about race. This has been particularly true since the idea of a “post-racial” society has gained currency. Most of my students have not given much thought to how racial privilege or lack thereof (actually privilege in general) affects the ways they read and interpret texts and the ways they approach writing, academic writing in particular. My students have made decisions to take the African American literature or writing course with a hip-hop theme based on interest; the institutions where I have taught courses focused in the African American literary tradition have not required these courses for a degree or major. That they have an interest in the material is often the only thought that students have given to signing up for the course. In fact, many students have come into the classes without the vocabulary to discuss their own positions. Many students are unfamiliar with or only partly understand terms like white privilege, benevolent racism, and essentialism. This lack of conscious reflection or the vocabulary to discuss the issues has often meant that students have to resort to other strategies to ask questions or to read and write about the texts. One of the ways to provide students with the strategies to effectively understand their own positionality and to engage with the texts and with the difficult issues about race, race relations, and our country’s racial

and racialized history is to ground the courses in something many of the students are already familiar, and often comfortable, with: hip-hop.

There are hip-hop classrooms across the country, and many scholars such as Elaine Richardson and Kermit E. Campbell have made explicit hip-hop's value in the college classroom. The National Council of Teachers of English has recognized this value as well and so have done "what any responsible educator should—that is, tapping into the cultural interests of students instead of, as is usually the case, putting school culture at complete odds with the popular culture" (Campbell, 2005, p. 78). Other scholars, notably Geneva Smitherman in books like *Word from the Mother* (2006), and Arnetta Ball and Ted Lardner, in *African American Literacies Unleashed: Vernacular English and the Composition Classroom* (2005), have made the necessity for the recognition and study of AAVE and Black discourse in composition and literature classrooms clear. These scholars have laid the groundwork for teachers such as myself—and point out the ways in which teachers and students can explore the hip-hop nation together to enrich their reading and writing practices. As Smitherman puts it in *Word from the Mother*, "Language makes the impossible possible" (2006, p. 78); the seemingly impossible unpacking of race and class in the classroom is made possible through the power of the words and works of hip-hop and through the work of these scholars who blazed the trails.

In "Diaspora" (1999), the Speaking Seeds' hip-hop ode to their roots and the roots of hip-hop as a genre, they repeatedly tell us "It was the traveling that mattered." This describes hip-hop in the writing or literature classroom—the reading/writing is a journey through the genre, across avenues of appropriation and appreciation, through the 'hoods of race and class, in search of authentic voices. We truly live in a hip-hop nation. Hip-hop consistently is one of the best-selling genres. It is the soundtrack of films, dance clubs, and advertisements. For many of the young people in America, it is the soundtrack to their lives; it is their music. For many college students, it is a familiar gateway into the unfamiliar territory of a critical assessment of the roles of race and class in our society.

Hip-hop is an important addition to the curriculum of writing or African American literature classes. It provides another type of text to use as the basis of writing exercises, a type of text many students are interested in and feel that they have more access to and understanding of than more traditional or historical texts dealing with issues of race, like Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Students also often feel that the hip-hop texts are more relevant to their lives and experiences. It is very effective when hip-hop is the framework for the writing classroom's curriculum or is a framework for entering into a survey of canonical African American literature. When I have taught classes using hip-hop in these ways, my students have been willing to engage deeply with difficult issues that they often are reluctant to discuss in the context of more traditional texts or of simply "real life." They might admit as one student did that he was "an ignorant

white boy” or point out the rhetorical differences in how students approach other students in their own racial groups and those in other racial groups—employing “Black speech—of the ‘yo, what up variety’” as one African American student characterized how her white peers spoke to her. Hip-hop opens new dialogues, new roads that student readers and writers can travel.

The road map of Hip-hop makes explicit the issues of race and class that traditional models of the “American dream” and our own discomfort with race, our history, and our social practices have worked so hard to make invisible. Yet this is also a hip-hop nation where one of the top-selling and most recognized hip-hopppers is Eminem—a white rapper. The issues of race and class that confront the larger society can be approached through the microcosm of the hip-hop nation. Although hip-hop is the cultural creation of socioeconomically underprivileged, urban African Americans and Latinos, its audience is now comprised not only of other African Americans and Latinos but also of white youth, many of whom are suburban and middle-class. The dichotomy between many of the artists and large parts of the audience allows for discussions about how we try to both write and unwrite race and class: what is the line between appreciation and appropriation? Can artists and audiences “keep it real” yet bridge boundaries of class and race? Can race and class be unmarked without changing the art form? These are the questions that center the hip-hop classroom. Students often feel uncomfortable discussing or writing about these issues in a general sense or based in canonical texts. They may feel they lack the authority to address issues as large as race and class because they believe they are too inexperienced or uneducated about the issues. Hip-hop provides a familiar foundation from which to explore these issues, in the hip-hop nation and in the wider culture.

Students’ initial reactions to the issues of race and class in the classroom framed in discussions of hip-hop are much the same as in many classrooms and in many other forums: “things are better than they used to be”; “racism doesn’t really exist anymore”; “we’re post-racial now, so that stuff doesn’t matter”; “hip-hop has moved beyond all that—all that matters are your skills.” The students exhibit the signs of having succumbed to what Julia Kristeva describes, in *The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt*, as “the failure of rebellious ideologies on the one hand, and the surge of consumer culture on the other” (2000, p. 7). Everything must be okay because people of all cultures can make and sell records and books and we can all buy and consume them. Many students seem most comfortable when they are submerged in what Kristeva calls our “culture of entertainment, the culture of performance, the culture of the show” (2000, p. 7) in which nothing carries more significance than its price tag or brand name. They often start from the premise that as long as people of all cultures can dance to the same music, watch the same movies and TV shows, read the same books, or even just be in the same classroom, all must be right with the world. As Richardson points out in *Hip-hop Literacies*, students work

from “their structural positions which offer them certain views of reality, deny or offer them access to adequate social goods, deny or offer them certain discourses” (2006, p. 43). My job as a teacher is not to tell them that their ideas are reductive, that they should engage more deeply rather than simply accepting the “show.” My job is to journey with them below the surface spectacle—to take more than a one-hour tour of the hip-hop nation.

Hip-hop refuses to be simply the spectacle, the culture of the show. It is not a comfortable, quiet, non-revolutionary entertainment. It keeps up the insistent beating and bass thumping of its revolutionary heart and roots. Hip-hop is not spectacle, not merely consumable product; it is, in the words of KRS-One (2002), “what we live.” It is the art of the street demanding appreciation and actively rejecting appropriation. Geneva Smitherman describes African American Language (AAL) as a “resistance discourse” (2006, p. 3), and hip-hop functions as this same type of discourse in the classroom. It provides the context in which students can resist the unwriting of race and class issues that pervades the broader culture (and too often happens in the classroom as well). While many students—Black, white, and brown; rich, middle class, and poor—feel they lack the lived experience or educational background or simply the comfort or confidence level to actually write about socioeconomic class and race outside of the fairly fixed and specific framework of historical events (e.g., the Civil War or the Civil Rights movement), hip-hop authorizes the examination of race and racism, class and classism. It creates a contemporary framework and unearths contemporary and historical issues—bringing them defiantly and loudly (think of Public Enemy’s soundscape of police sirens and street noise) to the forefront of any discussion of the genre. Furthermore, many students feel that it is a framework that they already have access to. While it takes them down unfamiliar streets and into new ‘hoods, it is a vehicle they feel they know how to drive.

This familiarity with hip-hop provides one of the first street signs for students seeking direction in their reading and writing to explore the nature of race and class relations in America. If their initial reactions to the importance, or even existence, of race and racism are indeed based in fact, if race and class issues have become irrelevant, why does so much of hip-hop explicitly reference the fact that the genre is the creation of “ghetto” dwelling Black and Latino youth? It is hard to find a respected emcee who doesn’t celebrate his or her roots—whether it’s De La Soul (1993) celebrating the area codes of their members’ neighborhoods in “Area” and telling the “fake ass frauds” to “clear my area” or KRS-One and BDP (2002) celebrating the birth of hip-hop in their native South Bronx or NWA (1988) announcing that they are straight outta Compton. Even white emcees like Eminem reference their roots (in *Eight Mile*, for instance). Hip-hop insistently locates itself in the economically deprived areas that have populations that are largely African American or Latino. Hip-hop is the vehicle that takes students to the issues of race

and class, even when the students are aiming at a location where these issues have been unwritten by the leveling power of the green—if people have the money they can consume the culture.

Before they can effectively engage with the question of whether their first reactions that we are “post-racial” or that race has become irrelevant in their generation if not in the society more broadly are well-founded, they must examine their own assumptions about African American texts. This can be achieved through a relatively simple, but often illuminating, exercise. On the first day of class (or at the beginning of a hip-hop unit), before we have examined any texts, hip-hop or otherwise, I ask students to tell me what first comes to mind when they think about texts by African American writers. I do this either as a free writing exercise or as a discussion where I will list what they say on the board. A typical list generated by this activity looks like this: race, racism, oppression, slavery, Civil Rights, violence, abolition, history, religion, culture, family, names of famous African American figures (usually Martin Luther King, Jr., or Rosa Parks), and music. Less frequently, matriarchy or mothers and family make the list. We then have a class discussion about what this list suggests about the assumptions we are bringing to the texts, to our own reading of and writing about the African American tradition and/or racial issues, and how these assumptions affect how we see connections between the textual tradition (both oral and written) and racial issues. Elaine Richardson points out that the “social location of performer and audience determine how meaning is interpreted” (2006, p. 6). The exercise helps students see their social positions (and mine) and see how the nature of their assumptions and their own positionality might affect the way they read and write.

This discussion tends to center on three things that are common to the lists:

1. the list is more historical or sociological than literary or rhetorical;
2. the list focuses a great deal on the negative; and
3. many of the elements of the list imply but do not explicitly state that African American texts (and by extension African Americans themselves) exist and have meaning most in their relation to white people and white culture.

We then try to unpack each of these areas. I am careful to frame the discussion as non-evaluative; students are not graded on their contributions and they are not judged for the cultural capital they bring to the table, whatever that capital or knowledge may be. I do not want to “dislocate” my students from their positions and relocate them to mine; I want to help them “intervene in [their] own context” in a way analogous to the way that Richardson describes African American students’ literacy education (2003, p. 116). The hip-hop classroom is a way of intervening in our own context in understanding race and racism, privilege and

position. The discussion of our unconscious assumptions about African American texts helps us formulate central questions for our journey: Why, in approaching African American texts, do we focus so heavily on the content and not on the literary or rhetorical devices, techniques, and innovations? Why haven't things like love or overcoming adversity, incredibly common themes in literature generally, made the list? Do we expect that the texts will always have white characters or address white concerns, even if those concerns are addressed only in opposition to racism?

While this discussion is often somewhat, or very, uncomfortable (one student admitted in a later writing assignment that she had been embarrassed by her own subconscious assumptions that the exercise brought forth), it helps students begin to understand their own unacknowledged approaches as readers and to be more proactive in how they position themselves as writers taking on explorations, interpretations, and analyses of texts by African Americans and issues of race. The exercise also helps students understand my position as a white scholar whose work focuses on the African American tradition. While my approach includes historical aspects, it also focuses on the literary techniques and rhetorical devices that weave throughout and connect various elements of the tradition. What also becomes clear through this discussion (and through my syllabi) is the importance I place on challenging my own and my students' culturally inherited ideas and biases and the need for us to recognize difference without dismissing or othering texts, authors, or each other based on these differences. These "cultural politics" must be made explicit early on in the course because of the responsibility I have as a teacher to "make certain that all the positions as represented by different members of the class are articulated and critiqued" (Richardson, 2003, p. 26). By making my own position clear, and recognizing I am on the journey with the students, I help students allow themselves to question and challenge and recognize the factors in their own rhetorical positions and in the texts and the cultural issues they raise.

The recognition of difference and of our own ethos as students of the African American tradition is first addressed through a statement about language on my syllabi for any course in African American literature or any writing course centered on hip-hop. The final statement on these syllabi is:

**A Note on Language:** Because many of the texts deal with race and racism, there is some use of offensive terms. There is also use of terms that were acceptable at the time some texts were written but that we may now find offensive (Negro for instance). The presence of derogatory terms in the texts does not mean that general use of derogatory terms is acceptable in the class. Certainly in quoting from or referring to the texts (offensive terms are in some titles), the use of the terms is allowable, but please think carefully about your use of these terms. Also,



some of the texts use African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which at some points was referred to simply as “dialect.” AAVE is a recognized variant of English, as is Standard American English (SAE), and we will discuss it as such. It is important to understand that AAVE is not improper SAE; it is a variant with its own rules.

This note, the final thing we look at before embarking on the exercise discussed above, explicitly introduces the importance of language in not only conveying our ideas but also in shaping them. I deeply believe in the power of words to not only express ideas but also to shape them. Because words shape our worlds, we must pay special attention to language and its ability to be oppressive or liberatory in the hip-hop classroom. The note on language is one of the few parts of the syllabus that I devote significant class time and discussion to. This helps us to understand from the first day of class the importance of our own rhetorical choices and positions as we discuss the texts, language uses, and issues of race. Our language is our power, and it is vital in any class that aims to address racial myths and stereotypes and to engage in serious discussions and analyses of texts in the African American tradition to frame those texts, and the language we use to discuss them, in a way that acknowledges the power of racial slurs and the ease with which the quality of a text can be dismissed by the simple application of descriptions of “improper” or “uneducated” language use rather than recognition of linguistic variation. This discussion of language use also lays the foundations for discussions of appropriation and discussions of discourse communities and their function in academic writing. It allows us as a classroom community to have the tools to think about, discuss, and challenge ideas of linguistic hierarchies, who “owns” particular discourses and who may (or should) participate in them, and how understanding points of connection and disjunction between various discourse communities impacts our thinking and our own rhetorical choices and impact on our audiences. It opens the door to ideas about how our language shapes our ideas and worldviews.

These issues of language use are embedded in hip-hop itself and in many of the mainstream discussions about hip-hop that often center around the use of “the N word” or of terms like bitches and hos, for instance. In particular, the question of language “ownership” and the related right to identity creation and self-representation can be unpacked through analysis of hip-hop texts. The issue of whose voice is native, of what tongue is the mother tongue of hip-hop or of Americans is illustrated by the prevalence of the idiom of “keepin’ it real” in the hip-hop culture. Audiences (the students for instance) and artists (both rappers and the students as writers in the context of these classes) passionately engage in this discussion across the hip-hop culture. De La Soul’s “I Am I Be” (1993), explicitly addresses the idea of whose voice is authentic:



Or some tongues who lied  
 and said “we’ll be natives to the end”  
 nowadays we don’t even speak . . .  
 This is not a bunch of Bradys  
 but a bunch of black man’s pride.

This is not the sanitized television world of the Brady Bunch—it is a world where speech is most privileged when it is that of a “native son, speaking in the native tongue” as Mos Def (1999) does in his rap simply titled “Hip-hop.” These texts and discussions of language use “flip the script” that most students enter the classroom with—the expectation that SAE, because it is a Language of Wider Communication, is superior to other variants and the expectation that the most privileged speaker is the “native” speaker of SAE—most often implicitly seen as white, male, formally educated, and older (relative to the students).

These language issues start the traveling—the part that matters—for students and teachers, like myself, seeking to understand and write about African American texts or race and racial issues more generally. When using hip-hop as a vehicle to explore race and class and whose voice gets to represent, students are forced to confront whether or not they are in their own ‘hoods; race and class can no longer be glossed over. Many of my students, white, African American, Asian American, or Latina/o, enter my classes with little knowledge about AAVE as a language system (although students who have taken linguistics courses on our campus have do often have this exposure). Many of them hold the idea, consciously or unconsciously, that SAE is “better” or “more proper” than other variants. Because the majority of them are white, it is easy for them, as Campbell compellingly describes, to “be color blind when you don’t see yourself as having any color to be blind to, when you don’t see yourself as anything but an authentic American existing perpetually in a state of natural entitlement, when you own the American language or voice that is, of course, naturally good, naturally right” (2005, p. 12). But to take the journey, to understand, we have to remove the blinders we may not even know we have. In the hip-hop nation, your area code, neighborhood, your geography (and the connotations these have of race and class) are central to an understanding of the genre, and as Christopher Holmes Smith points out, the use of these identifying markers of place has been an “agent of unprecedented transformation for the visual intelligibility of race and class throughout America” (1997, p. 346). Hip-hop, through helping address negative attitudes about language variants, helps remove the blinders of our (teachers’ and students’) own “insecurities and prejudices” and helps us move toward “self-efficacy and reflective optimism” (Ball & Lardner, 2005, p. 149) Hence Mos Def (1999) can establish his right to speak because he is “blacker than midnight on Broadway and Myrtle/hip-hop past all your tall social hurdles” while a rapper like Vanilla Ice

lost all credibility not only because he was white but because he came from an upper-middle-class area.

In this context, students come face-to-face with the idea that in the hip-hop nation the typically privileged speakers and audiences (whites, often males, of high socioeconomic status) are an afterthought, as in Mos Def's "Mathematics" (1999) in which he says he has "beats by Su-Primo for all of my peoples, Negroes and Latinos" and only after a pause and offhandedly does he acknowledge that it is for "even the gringos." Whiteness also may be a marker of frontin' or being inauthentic—as in some of the reception of white rappers such as Vanilla Ice, House of Pain, Whitey Ford, the Beastie Boys, and even Eminem to some extent—although he is deemed acceptable by his class (he lacked economic privilege) and because he is supported by important Black members of the hip-hop community. At best, it is cause for some skepticism about whether the person in question can participate with understanding in the discourse, and if they can, whether they should. White audiences have a vested interest in the elision of the importance of race in this question of authenticity because blindness to the issue allows them to maintain that they are authentic rather than sucker emcees who should "clear the area" (De La Soul, 1993).

But that elision is not sustainable for students or teachers if they are going to read African American texts closely and effectively and write about them productively.

Students must consider whether they can "keep it real" or "drop science" in their own writing. They must confront the issue of their own positionality, what privilege they possess or lack, whether they are appropriating techniques or themes, and how they are allying themselves with or distancing themselves from the tradition and writers and people of color. Part of the journey is learning how we have negotiated and how we will negotiate our reality. Will we take the highway of appropriation and privilege, or will we take a road of resistance to privilege and acknowledge the value of multiple discourses and languages? Mos Def (1999) deals explicitly with the idea of appropriation in his rap "Rock N Roll" in one of the variations of the chorus:

Elvis Presley aint got no sooull (hell naw)  
 Little Richard is Rock and Roll (damn right)  
 You may dig on the rolling stones  
 But they aint come up with that shit on they own (nah-ah)

Students have to decipher their own voices and their rhetorical positions: Are they Elvis or Chuck Berry? Can they rock like Nina Simone, or are they only the Rolling Stones and hence cultural thieves who are trying to take over yet another space carved out by those historically marginalized by the mainstream culture? Part of a responsible pedagogy is helping students in this navigation. Awareness of the

history of appropriation (e.g., in rock and roll) is a starting point in helping students in this navigation and negotiation of their context. Smitherman quotes a young African American, Jamal, who said, “White folk kill me tryin to talk and be like us. They just want the good part. But it don’t go like that. You got to take the bitter with the sweet” (2006, p. 118). In classrooms that uncover and make explicit the “bitter,” students learn to navigate their privilege and to question their entitlement. Their ethos in their interpretations of African American texts or essays about hip-hop and culture depends on it. Faced with the complex and nuanced verbal agility and arguments of emcees, they cannot help but confront the dominant idea that posits “literacy and literacy education [I would add literature itself] as a white thang” (Campbell, 2005, p. 133).<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, hip-hop makes students (through its insistence on the role of the audience—in the shout out, call and response, etc.) confront the realities of the social inequities and stereotypes predicated on race and class. De La Soul’s “I Am I Be” (1993) declares that Posdnuos (the rapper), and by implication other young African Americans, “be the new generation of slaves” and that despite hard work they don’t get ahead: “I am an early bird but the feathers are black/so the apples that I catch are usually all worms.” The Coup’s Boots Riley (2001) raps that “the world ain’t no fairy tale/it’s run by some rich white scary males . . . and we still get paid barely enough to eat” (“Wear Clean Draws”) and “this ghetto is a cage/they only give you two choices be a rebel or a slave” (“Get Up”). KRS-One, Nas, Public Enemy, Mos Def, and many, many other emcees and hip-hop acts consistently reference the deprivations of life at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. The Coup (2001) explicitly raps about those who try to move up legitimately but face resistance from the social or legal institutions:

I’m a young black heterosexual male  
 Don’t drink drank  
 Don’t smoke  
 Don’t sell  
 That’s the real reason that they want me up in jail  
 They want me to fail (“Pork and Beef”)

Faced with lyrics like these, students have to consider their own role in the system. Can middle class students authentically speak/act/dress in the guise of the hip-hopper (a guise often associated with the “gangsta” pose by the suburban middle class audience)? How can they address the intertwined issue of race and class and stereotypes of criminality when they don’t (and sometimes feel that they can’t) understand the economic desperation that pushes the poor to be “thug[s] selling drugs” (De La Soul, 1993) to “keep they belly filled” (Mos Def, 1999)? How can they authentically write about these texts and issues at all if they are white? How can their white teacher? While these are incredibly challenging questions to address in a

culture that desperately wants to be “post-racial,” that wants to believe that racial issues, racial inequalities, and racism are things of the past, they are also fruitful areas for examination. In this context, even the “bling bling” rappers are calling attention to stark inequities in the socioeconomic system. They have achieved socioeconomic success despite all odds. They have achieved despite the fact that most mainstream institutions and traditions send messages that young men (and women) from the inner city, from impoverished backgrounds, from non-European and non-white heritages, are not supposed to achieve material success. They have achieved where those who do achieve that success are often perceived as criminals who can achieve only through breaking the law. The constant references to money and the lack of it make it impossible for the student of hip-hop to ignore the socioeconomic system that we all participate in or to ignore how race is tangled up in that system.

Hip-hop also makes it impossible to ignore that we still live in a society plagued by racial and ethnic divisions. Hip-hop is deeply concerned with its roots, with “the old school” and what happened “back in the day.” Can those who are the oppressors in the history of African Americans and Latinos in this country authentically speak about these issues when their “great-granmomma was[n’t] raised on a plantation” (Mos Def, 1999)? The history of hip-hop goes back to the African American and Latino experience where the songs were for “inspiration . . . relaxation . . . to take their minds off that fucked up situation” (Mos Def, 1999). Those who want to participate in the discussion must at least begin to understand that history—and their relation to and position in it—especially when they cannot claim that history as their own. The rhetorical and literary analysis of hip-hop lyrics and analysis of hip-hop aesthetics starts students on the journey through reading and writing about the American taboos of race and class in history and in our current life. Ball and Lardner point out how this type of explicit examination of race is an opportunity as it allows teachers and students “to construe ‘difference’ as a strategic category of meaning that may be foregrounded or relegated to the background for purposes that are determined by the agents involved” (2005, p. 150). This is key in not only reading the wide variety of texts by African Americans as not all “foreground” difference, but also in our writing because understanding that resistance to owning our own social positions is what allows the unwriting and erasures of race and class that are so culturally and historically pervasive.

Hip-hop allows us to see how strong the impulse to unwrite race and class is (an impulse made explicit in a sample on De La Soul’s *Buhloone Mind State* (1993)—“why we always crossing over; they can accept our music as long as they can’t see our faces?”) Students see how strongly we attempt to erase race and class or at least their significance even from a genre that is predicated on the experience of, a genre that is the creation of, African Americans and Latinos from the lower socioeconomic classes. Hip-hop also allows students to actively engage in writing race and class in reactions to texts (particularly those by Afrocentric hip-hop acts),

in the connections between hip-hop texts and more canonical African American texts, and in critical analyses of the media and social reactions to these texts (for instance the hysteria around gangsta rap despite the fact that it existed side by side with “conscious” rap and rap that was mostly party music), and of critical analysis of their own assumptions and reactions as well. An example of a classroom exercise that connects hip-hop texts and more canonical works follows:

### Hip-hop Aesthetics

#### Propaganda Exercise

Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be . . . I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for the right of black folk to love and enjoy.

—W. E. B. DuBois, *Criteria for Negro Art*, 1926

More than mere weakness, it [beat] implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bed-rock of consciousness.

—John Clellon Holmes, “This Is the Beat Generation,” 1952

The Black Artist’s role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it.

—Amiri Baraka, “State/ment,” p. 169, 1965

The dicta we arrived at 1. To create a true Afro-American Art

2. To create a mass art 3. To create a revolutionary art

—Amiri Baraka, “The Black Arts Movement,” p. 503, 1994

Focusing on Hughes’ and Baraka’s work and on one hip-hop piece, answer the following questions. Use specific details in answering.

1. Do you think Baraka’s early work fits Holmes’ definition of beat? Why? Does Hughes? Why? Does the hip-hop piece? Why?
2. How does Baraka’s work, Hughes’ work, and/or the hip-hop piece either support or reject DuBois’s position that art is propaganda? If the pieces are propaganda, what are they propaganda for? Why is it propaganda and not just entertainment?
3. Does Baraka’s poetry meet his own dicta? How? Does the hip-hop piece? How? How do Baraka, Hughes, the hip-hop piece, or all three “aid in the destruction of America”?

4. How does form (how the poetry/music is put together, language use, etc.) contribute to the poem's/song's use as propaganda/destructive agent/revolution? Or is this a question of lyrical content only? Why?
5. What effect do the words propaganda, destruction, and revolutionary have on the audience (us)? How do they affect our perception of the author's ethos?

This type of exercise gives students an opportunity to reflect not only on how their assumptions might affect their readings of texts, but also on how those reactions are based in perceptions of the rhetorical positioning of authors and potentially in racialized ideas. Further, these types of exercises provide a gateway into discussing junctions and disjunctions in the African American and broader American traditions, literary and cultural. They allow students to prepare themselves to write about race, to understand the importance of rhetorical positioning (the authors' and their own as writers and students), and to challenge culturally inherited ideas about race in America. Richardson's examination of how "hip-hoppers continue to flip the public script on undervalued Black life by making their aesthetics the overwhelming standard" (2003, p. 71) undergirds this type of exercise—the aesthetics of hip-hop and the African American tradition become the center of the discussion on their own terms. It is a re-visioning of hip-hop, African American literature, our writing, and ourselves.

In the *Sense and Nonsense of Revolt*, Kristeva points out that art can be revolutionary, that it can allow us to work out and work through displacements (like the unwritten race and class issues in our society) and that art can allow us to transgress prohibitions (like fully addressing and writing about these issues) (2000, Ch. 1). Hip-hop is this kind of revolutionary art. Christopher Holmes Smith's "Method in the Madness" claims rap "promotes symbolic forms of travel that are often denied to the physical bodies" (1997, p. 350). This traveling opens new vistas for students in literature and writing classrooms. And while hip-hop is not the solution to our social ills and inequalities, it does allow for important academic and personal explorations of these ills and inequities. Mos Def's 1999 rap "Hip-hop" summarizes hip-hop's powers and limitations:

Hip-hop will simply amaze you  
 craze you, pay you  
 do whatever you say do  
 but black, it can't save you.

We should be aware that hip-hop can't change the social structures based on race and class. But as Elaine Richardson calls for in *Hip-hop Literacies*, "our critical pedagogies must guide students beyond challenging to changing of systems that

tolerate inequality, sexism, and racism” (2006, p. 55). The hip-hop classroom is one road on this journey of change. In the class that utilizes hip-hop, it can take us, students and teachers, into new territory, away from our comfortable ‘hoods, down new streets and avenues. My journey, and my students’, continues. And in writing, as in much else, it is often the traveling that matters.

## Note

1. Campbell discusses this from the perspective of African American and Latina/o students. However, I believe this idea is also quite current among white students (particularly middle or upper class) who see high school graduation and attending college as the natural path.

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