

CHAPTER 9

THE POWER OF THEIR TEXTS

Using Hip Hop to Help Urban Students Meet NCTE/IRA National Standards for the English Language Arts

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ABSTRACT

While goals for English language arts are expanding, curriculum and instruction within English language arts classrooms remain exclusionary. As such, marginalized urban youth struggle to meet national standards for reading comprehension and writing. To address this dilemma, I discuss ways in which Hip Hop might be used to include marginalized students and help promote proficiency in writing.

According to the NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts:

- Students will read a wide range of print and non-print texts to *build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world*; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and *contemporary* works.
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- Students will apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
- Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. (1996, p. 1; emphasis added)

Since NCTE/IRA produced their national standards in 1996, curriculum and instruction in secondary English settings have shifted. Many English language arts classrooms began to offer students a broad range of textual choices, somewhat reflecting the diversity of American society. In spite of this shift, texts authored by White males still dominate English language arts classrooms. As such, urban students—many of whom are not White—rarely study or write about texts in their English language arts classrooms that reflect their interests and cultural heritage. As a result, many urban students feel alienated within schools (Mahini, 1998) and, worse, struggle to meet national reading and writing standards.

This paper deals, specifically, with this disconnection between urban students and the NCTE/IRA English language arts writing standards. In order to reach these students and help them attain the writing standards set for them, I argue that Hip Hop, which Smitherman (1999, p. 269) calls the “voice of urban America,” is ideal for the production of a culturally relevant English pedagogy capable of engaging urban students in sustained and critical English study.

HIP HOP AS TEXTS

There are ongoing debates in English education concerning what constitutes a text. The perspective on text that guides this paper is drawn from poststructural theories. Derrida (1976, 1982) counts text as anything that is articulated, thus suggesting that text can be much more than print on a page. In this way, Wade and Moje (2000) contend,

Texts, then, are organized networks that people generate or use to make meaning either for themselves or for others. Texts can be formalized and

permanent, reproduced as books or speeches and sold as commodities. Or, they can be informal and fleeting—written lists or notes that are scribbled out and quickly thrown away, or conversations and performances that are made permanent only as they are written or recorded by sound or video devices or passed on orally to other people. . . . Different views of what counts as text—whether they are formal and informal, oral, written, enacted; permanent or fleeting—lead to different views of what counts as learning, and consequently expand or limit the opportunities students have to learn in classrooms. (p. 610)

Student learning in the secondary English classrooms (as the NCTE/IRA standards suggest) consists of student engagement with texts. However, as Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) point out, many urban students fail to engage (read or write about) traditional classroom texts, either because such texts lack relevance to them (Ladson-Billings, 1996) or because such texts promote perspectives and interests that are threatening to them. By limiting our understanding of texts to traditional, canonical literature, we limit the opportunities urban students have to write in our English classrooms.

By saying this, I am not saying that urban students do not engage with texts. They are, in fact, engrossed in textual practices. As one student told me, “I am a Hip Hop head,” which spoke not only of his interest in Hip Hop as music, but in his knowledge of Hip Hop as texts. To him, Hip Hop was something to know. In addition to being able to read it, he was in constant dialogue with it—writing it, writing about it, and writing through it. Hence, I use Hip Hop to refer to something more than music. In this way, I refer to Hip Hop as the post-revolutionary, urban movement which responded to the passing of civil rights and Black power and the failure of industrialism. Urban youth in the Bronx, New York, fermented the Hip Hop movement as a way to voice their criticism of racism, neglect, and economic oppression in urban Black America. Powell (1991) describes Hip Hop this way:

[Hip Hop/Rap] emerged from the streets of inner-city neighborhoods as a genuine reflection of the hopes, concerns, and aspirations of urban Black youth in this, the last quarter of the 20th century. Rap is essentially a home-made, street-level musical genre. . . . Rap lyrics concentrate primarily on the contemporary African American experience. . . . Every issue within the Black community is subject to exposition in the rap arena. Hit rap tunes have broached touchy subjects such as sex, sexism, racism, and crime. (p. 25)

In addition to being a “musical genre,” Hip Hop represents an artistic shift in American society reminiscent of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. As both culture and art, “Hip Hop is manifested in such cultural

productions as graffiti art, break dancing, styles of dress (e.g., baggy pants, sneakers, Malcolm X caps, appropriately worn backward), love of b-ball (basketball), and so forth" (Smithernan, 1999, p. 268). Urban youth, through Hip Hop, developed radical new cultural dance practices like crip walkin (exported from the West Coast), new ways of resistance writing like taggin and tattooing, and innovative linguistic expressions such as "phat" (spelled with *ph* to indicate high quality or excellence).

Most important, Hip Hop is text. According to Smithernan (1999), "[Hip Hop] is not only a Black expressive cultural phenomenon; it is, at the same time, a resisting discourse, a set of communicative practices that constitute a *text* of resistance . . ." (p. 270; emphasis added). Adding to Smithernan's idea, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) "argue that Hip-hop texts are literary texts and can be used to scaffold literary terms and concepts and ultimately foster literary interpretations" (p. 89). As such, Hip Hop texts can be used to promote writing and critical classroom dialogue among urban students around serious social issues pertaining to resistance and struggle, race and gender, and cultural exploitation. In the English classroom, this dialogue, while transactive, can be transformative. Not only can it foster student engagement, but it can also stimulate movement among a growing number of urban students who are, by default, being left behind.

While it might be helpful in closing "the achievement gap," teaching Hip Hop in secondary English classrooms serves a greater good. It can be useful in integrating a culturally-homogeneous curriculum that has, for the decades since *Brown V. Board of Education*, been resistant to change. That is, Hip Hop presents itself as a fresh, new text that deals with the diversity and complexities of postmodern America (Kirkland, 2006). This freshness makes Hip Hop relevant to many urban students, who also deal with the complexities and diversities of urban life.

Because of what they share, Hip Hop and urban students can be brought together in pedagogical allegiance to stimulate transformative discussions, actively engaged citizenship, and a critical writing practice (Kirkland, 2005). As such, Hip Hop can be used to help students, particularly urban students, develop the critical competencies needed to legislate social change and spark empowerment in their communities. In addition to using it to stimulate action, Hip Hop can also prompt critical reflection. That is, urban students can analyze (reflect upon and write about) Hip Hop (in relation to their lives or other analytical constructs) to acquire the dispositions needed to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts.

With this in mind, we must not, however, lose site of students' existing relationships with familiar texts, especially Hip Hop. As Brown (2005) points out, not all urban students are interested in Hip Hop the same way.

In addition, teachers who are unprepared to use Hip Hop in the classroom may not be able to effectively engage students in either discussion or analysis of texts related to the genre. Hence, it is important that English teachers who use Hip Hop in the classroom understand two basic issues that could influence student writing:

- Relevance (some students do not explicitly relate to Hip Hop just as some students do not explicitly relate to Shakespeare).
- Teacher Preparation (just as teaching Shakespeare requires sustained study and planning on the part of the teacher, so does teaching Hip Hop).

While it may help engage some students, teaching Hip Hop does not guarantee an engaged classroom.

In addition to these two pedagogical issues, there is another matter that deserves some attention. Hip Hop struggles with "real," complex, provocative (2003) warris, "The music and lyrics [of Hip Hop] must be considered in relation to beliefs, values, mores, and complex ideologies that underlie the street apparel, hard body imagery, and the sometimes seeming celebration of misogyny, thuggishness, and larger than life personas narrated in the music" (p. 69). But much of what is critiqued in Hip Hop is not Hip Hop's alone.

Many Hip Hop texts are explicit about America's culture of violence, misogyny, and greed. In this way, Richardson (2003) argues, "The weight American society places on the acquisition of wealth and material possessions, patriarchy and the social construction of maleness as a means of power and prestige are also factors in the production of the music, lyrics, expressive behaviors and its focus on materiality, sex, and power by many [Hip Hop] artists" (p. 70). While they are present in Hip Hop, the "American cultural themes" of materiality, sex, and power are, as well, eminent in canonical texts that have been used to teach English for decades. Teachers who claim they cannot "teach" Hip Hop because of such issues or because of Hip Hop's so-called "inappropriateness" raise disturbing questions about the enduring remnants of institutional racism and curricular segregation in K-12 classroom settings.

A final pedagogical issue that must be addressed deals with Hip Hop as a fact. In her critique of Hip Hop's educational popularity, Brown (2005) described the misguided celebration and exploitation of Hip Hop in the classroom. She maintains that Hip Hop can be tokenized by teachers, who fail to explore critical issues that, if ignored, perpetuate ignorance and injustice. By glossing over important issues within the genre, teaching Hip Hop will be as effective as watching "the movie to the book on Friday." While simply watching the movie might entertain them, students will not gain much

from uncritical encounters with texts (Morrell, 2004). Hence, in order to prevent tokenizing it, we must have students seriously engage Hip Hop, in ways that push them to make sense of it and the world around them.

TEACHING HIP HOP IN THE SECONDARY ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Recent national achievement data illustrate a literacy gap among America's urban and non-urban youth. While we have very good evidence to conclude that urban youth are engaged in sophisticated textual practices (Appleman, 2000; Dyson, 2003; Fisher, 2003; Morrell, 2004), opportunities for this kind of textual engagement are rarely presented in English classrooms. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) note that urban youth, through Hip Hop, exhibit "the critical and analytical skills that we want them to bring to academic texts from the canon" (p. 88). In this way, Richardson (2003), in her study of African American literacies, found that [Black] students possess a variety of (critical) "literacies and consciousnesses" that come out of Hip Hop. Richardson (2003), further notes, when they have official opportunities to engage in the critical study of Hip Hop, students' performances on official literacy tasks, like academic writing, improve dramatically (Richardson, 2003, pp. 68-72).

While there is evidence that Hip Hop can be used to help students meet learning objectives, questions persist. Specifically, there is little information on (1) how to use Hip Hop to most effectively teach students to write and, thereby, deal with complexities and dilemmas of texts; (2) how to use Hip Hop to teach language, especially in light of the primacy of standard English in our schools and society; and (3) how (and if) teaching Hip Hop can be used to prepare students for standardized assessments, college admissions, and the world of work. While it is important for students to engage relevant texts in classrooms, it is equally important for students to learn academic literacies, which are the standardized uses of language and texts in American society. Given this dilemma, we have to continue to consider how teaching Hip Hop can be used to meet national English language arts standards.

The rest of this paper will address two questions related to the concerns stated above:

- How can teachers use Hip Hop to help urban students meet national standards for the English Language Arts (in particular, the NCTE/IRA writing standards)?⁴
- How can teachers use Hip Hop to help urban students exceed national (writing) standards?

THE CCW UNIT

In order to answer these questions, I designed a unit (the CCW unit) that two Michigan State University intern teachers, whom I supervised, used in their classrooms. The unit deals with various theories of Hip Hop (Kitwana, 2003; Morgan, 1999; Pough, 2004), specifically theories related to the unit's theme, "The Classroom, the Community, and the World." In this way, we approached Hip Hop as a Black cultural aesthetic, which commented on human experience from an Afro-urban perspective.

The conceptualization of the CCW unit was not confined to Hip Hop theories alone. The unit employed other critical literacy frames, which Appleman (2000) maintains "can help secondary literature classrooms become sites of constructive and transactive activity where students approach texts with curiosity, authority, and initiative" (p. 9). In particular, the unit employed three approaches to literature that Appleman outlines: Rosenblatt's (1968) reader-response, feminist literary theory (Showalter, 1989), and Marxist literary theory (Appleman, 2000). In bringing these perspectives to bear on Hip Hop text, students composed texts that dealt with multiple aspects of our humanity. Specifically, they were able to build understandings of the texts, of themselves, and of others. Not only did the critical analytical lenses make visible what our students brought to the texts, but it also gave them language to articulate this interaction, rooted in cultural and social critique.

Hip Hop texts were far more amenable than canonical texts to critical analysis, perhaps because they emanate from textual genres rooted in critique of contemporary circumstances. Along these lines, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) contend,

Teaching Hip-hop as a music and culture of resistance can facilitate the development of critical consciousness in urban youth. Analyzing the critical social commentary produced by [Hip Hop] may lead to consciousness-raising discussions, essays, and research projects attempting to locate an explanation for the current state of affairs for urban youngsters. The knowledge reflected in these lyrics could engender discussions of esteem, power, place, and purpose or encourage students to further their own knowledge of urban sociology and politics. In this way, Hip hop music should stand on its own merit in the academy and be a worthy subject of study in its own right rather than necessarily leading to something more "acceptable" like a Shakespearean [sic] text. (pp. 89-90)

M. A. K. Halliday's (1980) "three aspects of language study" also helped to shape the CCW unit. According to Halliday (1980), a child learns language, through language and about language. Hence, the process of learning is as much about learning context as it is about learning content. Then,

to teach Hip Hop content divorced from the context to which it belongs diminishes its educational value. In this way, the CCW unit required students to learn Hip Hop by reading lyrics and listening to music from several artists. Texts ranged from Run DMC's "Walk This Way" to N.W.A.'s "Expression," from "Queen Latifah's "U-N-I-T-Y" to Lil' Kim's "Heavenly Father." Students also wrote raps, some of which were thematic and others more open ended.

LEARNING HIP HOP

While they were exposed to several Hip Hop texts, students closely examined two songs ("Dear Momma" and "Changes") by posthumous rap artist Tupac Shakur. These texts were looked at closely to answer the question: what is Hip Hop? To answer the question, students looked at the Hip Hop texts to determine what was happening in the texts (e.g., What was the function of words and phrases? How was meaning and experience expressed?). For example, students identified a list of literary concepts ranging from metaphor to alliteration and from chiasmus to irony. As they analyzed the texts, students used their knowledge of such terms to assess each rap's literary merit. Building upon this activity, students developed their own "rules for writing rap" and used these "rules" to compose their own raps.

Student raps varied in style and in substance. In spite of their differences, all of the student-produced raps emanated from known Hip Hop traditions. Some of the student-produced raps were overtly political like the raps of KRS-1, Public Enemy, and Mos Def. Other student-produced raps were comical like the raps of DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince and, more recently, Kanye West. Still others were a sober reflection of city-street life, reminiscent of the raps of N.W.A., Notorious B.I.G., and the Game. The objective, here, was not to use rap to scaffold academic literacy (basic writing) skills. Rather, the objective was to have students learn Hip Hop by having them practice it. Listening to, reading, and writing raps was our way of accomplishing this goal.

Learning about Hip Hop

The CCW unit also promoted students' learning about Hip Hop—its history, its language, and its culture—by exposing students to a wide range of texts that provide information on what Hip Hop is about. To learn about Hip Hop's language, students read Smitherman's (1997) "The Chain Remain the Same: Communicative Practices in the Hip Hop Nation" (pp.

268–283). Our objective was not to dismiss the importance of learning Standard English, but rather to present material that might help students appreciate their own languages. According to Smitherman (1999), "It is critical to keep in mind that the racialized rhetoric of rap music and the Hip Hop Nation is embodied in the communicative practices of the larger Black speech community" (p. 271). Hence, the language of Hip Hop has deep roots, especially for urban students, many of whom are Black. Since Black language has been devalued and vilified in our society, it was important for us to establish the legitimacy of Black language in Hip Hop so that students would not feel that they were reading "inferior" texts.

In addition to language study, students read excerpts from Light's (1999) *Vibe Magazine's History of Hip Hop* and Kirwan's (2003) *The Hip Hop Nation*. These texts were used to help students explore Hip Hop's evolution over time and to help introduce them to the cultural study of Hip Hop. In this way, students learned that, just as it has legitimate linguistic roots, Hip Hop also has legitimate historical and cultural roots. By exploring the deeper characteristics of Hip Hop, students gained valuable contextual knowledge about the Hip Hop texts they were reading and writing about. This knowledge was crucial in helping reform students' understanding of themselves, which was vital to getting them to write about texts in more sophisticated and valued ways. As such, students began to understand how they could learn through Hip Hop about the world. Hence, as they learned about it, students began to associate Hip Hop with other valued products that they consumed, appreciated, and critiqued.

Learning Through Hip Hop

Finally, the CCW unit encouraged students to learn through Hip Hop. In the course of the unit, we explored, analyzed, and evaluated many themes related to human experience. In this way, students developed understandings and interpretations of the many dimensions of human experience and developed an awareness of how texts, including Hip Hop texts, speak to one another and to various conditions that define individuals and the world. Some students commented on the Black mother/son relationship, comparing Tupac's "Dear Momma" and Hughes's "Mother to Son." Other students explored femininity, deconstructing beauty in Walker's "Everyday Use," TLC's "Unpretty," and Aguilera's "Beautiful." In this way, Hip Hop was used to sanction ideas that relate to much more than Hip Hop. Specifically, our students were learning how to critically analyze texts, through which they could make sense of the world.

Meeting the Standards . . . and More

During the course of the CCW unit, students produced texts that demonstrated their proficiency with respect to NCTE/IRA writing standards. Not only did students read a wide-range of texts, but they were also able to demonstrate an understanding of these texts in writing. They were also able to “apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to *create, critique, and discuss* [these] print and nonprint texts” (emphasis added).

The following episode illustrates this point:

- S: I can relate to what Tupac feels in his rap ‘Dear Momma.’ It come[s] from the same place that make[s] Hughes write his poem—the heart. This is where we all share a universal love for momma. She [is] the same to all of us. She [is] momma. No matter where she is, who[se mother] she is, she got [has] the same name: Momma.
- T: But Hughes does not call the mother in his poem Momma.
- S: They [are] still alike . . . (stutters), re-related. Hughes’s poem [has] a mother talking to her son, you know, giving him some advice. [Tu]Pac is a son, saying thank you for what his mother [has given] him. Don’t Hughes got a poem called “Thank you” too?
- T: That’s a short story, “Thank you, Ma’am.” Go on.
- S: I don’t know . . . (Pauses) Whether your momma is like Langston Hughes’s mother or like Tupac’s momma, she [is] a symbol of love to us all.

What is distinctive about this episode is that the student is making observations about a perceived relationship that he believes exists between two unlike texts which share commonalities. Even when challenged by his teacher, the student maintains: “They still alike.” His insistence that his interpretation of the texts (that the mother figure in Black writing is a powerful character) is valid and telling. Much scholarly writing is about authority in making truth claims, supporting/establishing a rationale for such claims, and labeling what is perceived in the world. Hence, the episode takes on scholarly characteristics. It suggests that the student has become able to identify relationships in texts and make those relationships real, support their reality, defend them, and label them (e.g., “She got the same name: Momma”).

Further, the texts did not serve as a source of information for the student. To use the terminology of Rosenblatt: his is not an “efferent” read. Rather, the student in this particular episode uses the texts as a tool for thinking about and examining the Black mother/son relationship. According to Wade and Moje (2000), these kinds of connections and interpretations of texts constitute engagement. According to the NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts (1996), this student’s engagement represents learning. As I will demonstrate, this learning—while evident in this discussion—is also evident in students’ writings.

In the course of the CCW unit, students completed a culminating writing assignment. The assignment asked students to respond to a theme in their readings and analyze Hip Hop in some personal way. Both the structure and the language of the writing assignment were consistent with the language of the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) writing test (Michigan Department of Education, 2003). In her final essay, a student offered an interpretation of the mother/son theme (the same theme discussed above) in the texts “Mother to Son” and “Dear Momma.” Her written response demonstrates high-level writing proficiency with respect to the NCTE/IRA national standards. According to the student,

The symbol of the mother in both of the texts [“Mother to Son” and “Dear Momma”] has a lot of importance for how we think of women today. There is a hidden tension: she is a savior and a survivor . . . but a sinner and a saint. Women in our society have usually been boxed up between paradoxical extremes, which never allow us to see who she really might be—always more than what we think she is—more than a friend, more than just a mother; but, like Lil’ Kim said—a woman, a phenomenal woman.

In her analysis of the “woman character” in the two texts, the student feels put off by the male (or “mother to son”) depiction of the mother. For her, this description, while celebratory, is restricting. Her assessment is similar to the feminist literary criticism of hooks (1992) and others, who find it limiting to describe women in extreme terms, “as sinner or saint,” as Manny or Jezebel. As such, there is sophisticated analysis taking place in the brief excerpt, which indicates learning and proficiency.

According to the NCTE/IRA writing standards, “students [will] employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.” Indeed, this student has employed a feminist strategy to write about the mother character in “Mother to Son” and “Dear Momma” in a very sophisticated way. The standards also indicate that “students [will] apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.” While written in standard

English, there is certainly an awareness of language (i.e., what it means to be a mother) that pervades the text. As such, her writing employs a variety of complex language structures.

In the example given, the student blends a poetic voice ("always more than what we think she is—more than a friend, more than just a mother") with a salient argument ("women in our society have usually been boxed up between paradoxical extremes"). While I have only established that this student's writing meets national standards, it also suggests that the serious study of Hip Hop can be an avenue to encourage student writing.

What I have done thus far is illustrate that Hip Hop in collaboration with other textual material can, in fact, be used for serious study in English language arts. That is, students can write compellingly about Hip Hop and Hip Hop texts. Not only can it stimulate complex and sophisticated discussion and analysis, but it can also invite prolific written responses that live up to, and in many cases exceed, national writing standards. But what else can Hip Hop in secondary English education offer? In short, it can offer a lot.

With the achievement gap in literacy looming large, it is urgent that English educators revise instruction in ways that engage disengaged and marginalized urban students. This means shifting our focus away from a narrow curriculum designed around the English canon and substituting texts with which disengaged urban students are most familiar (i.e., Hip Hop texts). While the examples above illustrate ways that students can discuss and write about Hip Hop in a serious and thoughtful manner, they also hint at what Hip Hop means to urban students. Indeed, it is very much a source of contention, conversation, celebration, and critique.

Another student, described by my interns as "disengaged," "failing," "not-working," in fact, successfully engaged with the CCW unit. The student described the unit as "real," commenting on "the things we listen to" outside of the classroom as relevant for the classroom. While it may be a moot point, during the CCW unit, the student did not miss a day of class. During that time, I asked him how he felt about the unit:

Student: It's a good unit. I like it [praise] 'cause the stuff we talking about is real. I'm saying, it's not like the other stuff we was doing. I'm talking about reading stuff that don't make sense, listening to the teachers talk in big words about stuff we read that don't make no sense, and then, we got to write about it. I can't do that.

Me: Can't do what.

S: Write about stuff that don't make no sense. All I can say is it don't make no sense, or it's boring.

Me: What about now?

S: I like what we doing now 'cause I like rap and Hip Hop. Sometimes that way they talk about [Hip Hop] and teach it is boring, but it is usually real interesting, like the conversation we had the other day about drugs killing Black people. I can get wit that [snickers] I can relate. I see drugs killing Black people every day. I can't relate to Shakespeare. I don't see brothas climbing into sistas windows saying wack stuff like 'wherefore art thou' boo. That's just not real to me.

The same student in his writing assignment analyzed Hip Hop, constructing a well-thought out argument. In his final paper, this student compared the origins of Hip Hop to its current state. According to the student,

You can think [about] hip hop in two ways: the hip hop of yesterday and the hip hop of today. Both hip hops have significance but unfortunately they do not mean the same. The hip hop of yesterday was originally based on cultural relationships, resistance to dominant cultural and social forms, creative expression, and stories from people's everyday lives. Its popularity was based on its relationship to the poor and disadvantage black community, which was a rejection of other forms of black music commodified by white corporate America. Hip hop today is, in fact, a major part of the white American corporate machine. Today's hip hop is based on the exotic: the minstrel show of modern America where black people's lives are put on stage and exploited for the benefit of the corporate enterprise.

Not only does this student's written response deal with change over time, but it also deals with the politics of economic power and influence. Indeed, reading other texts in conjunction with Hip Hop texts (and with the help of teachers and multiple revisions), this student was able to produce/compose a complex analytic piece of writing. In this way, the student demonstrates knowledge of a range of ideas (e.g., a Hip Hop of today and a Hip Hop of yesterday) and textual approaches (i.e., Appelman's [2000] Marxist approach). While this student's critique of Hip Hop employs elements of Marxist literary interpretation, I argue that Marx did not make Hip Hop visible to the student, but the other way around—Hip Hop has made Marx (and other complex approaches to literature) visible to the student.

After his final paper was written, I spoke with the student again:

Me: Do you like to write?

S: I think that question is unfair. I write sometime, but I don't like to write in here. I write at home sometimes. But in school, we usually don't get to write about stuff like this [Hip Hop]

Me: I'm sorry. Maybe I should ask, how was this experience for you?

S: Good... I guess. You mean my paper?

Me: Yeah, let's talk about your paper.

S: I like my paper. My teachers say they like it. It's the only paper I finished this year. I guess it show that I can do it [write proficiently] when I want to. I mean, I ain't no dummy.

Me: No... we know that. But why aren't you showing us all the time what you are capable of?

S: That's a hard question. [Pause] I don't be thinking that school is, like, the place for me, not because I can't do the work. I be doing it, and all I can think about is what the... what does this have to do with me. I don't be seeing my moms reading stuff like the stuff we read in here or nobody else outside school. It's, like, school is so detached from my reality. I know I don't fit in here, and they don't do much to help.

Me: But, as you admitted, you wrote a great paper.

S: That's 'cause it was about Hip Hop. We talk about that stuff on the street. Me and friends always argue about Hip Hop and stuff like that. There is even movies like *Brown Sugar* talking Hip Hop today versus Hip Hop yesterday. I can write about Hip Hop because I talk about it all the time.

This brief transcript of conversation suggests that the student felt enabled by the presence of and opportunity to write about Hip Hop in his classroom. Hence, by inviting Hip Hop into the classroom, we also invited this student (his world and his experiences) into the classroom as well. So what Hip hop has to offer, especially to historically left-out groups like many of our urban youth, is an invitation. In some ways and for some students, it promises to make the study of English more real and the practice of writing more authentic. Students who feel ostracized in English classrooms might feel more accepted when we embrace Hip Hop in pedagogy. Furthermore, students who are not currently meeting standards might become encouraged to learn once they feel accepted and connected to their learning.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the writing examples and conversational episodes mentioned above describe the meanings that students are capable of making

when given an opportunity to seriously engage their texts. In *The Reader, the Text, and the Poem*, Rosenblatt (1978) argues for a transactional view of literary response. This view holds that literature demands a particular kind of attention in which the reader's experience is as important as the text being read. The transaction between text and reader's experience (as text) becomes a third text, or the poem. The poem represents the potential of responses (written and otherwise) that can be articulated when a reader makes a connection with a text. Yet, as suggested above, it is difficult for students to connect with texts in which they find little relevance.

As I alluded to earlier, the issue of engaging disengaged students really is not about literary approach. Texts become meaningful for various reasons and, indeed, we derive meaning from texts based upon the connections that we share with them. The issue here, then, is about the relationship, the explicit connection, between the reader and the text. Divorced of this connection a text can render little meaning to a reader/writer. Hence, the interpretations that the students produced (students' writings) are as much about their relationships with texts—in this case, Hip Hop—as they are about the ability to read and write about (Hip Hop) texts. Because it was relevant and because they were able to connect to Hip Hop, our students were able to write meaningful reflections and engage in critical conversations about Hip Hop, which represent, in many ways, their words and their worlds.

The messy issues of language and intolerance in English language arts persist. We live in a linguistically intolerant society where everyone is pressured to bend to the supremacy of standard English. I am not against students gaining proficiency in standard English. Both of the writing examples I have chosen to share illustrate, to a degree, students' proficiency in standard English. Rather, the issue of linguistic intolerance in English education speaks to the narrow frame in which we present English language arts. Therefore, in addition to excluding a variety of language resources, we often exclude a variety of cultural resources, too. In doing so, we marginalize students who would benefit greatly from inclusive English language arts by default.

To avoid "explicitly" teaching students "edited" English (Delpit, 1988) and to help marginalized students gain the linguistic tools needed to succeed in American society, I have argued that the primacy of standard English/canonical text over other American languages/literatures creates linguistic/cultural divisions in English language arts which privilege the status quo. Our current approaches to English language arts and writing help to perpetuate exclusionary educational practices.

Furthermore, this work suggests that Hip Hop is effective in helping students meet national writing standards. As Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) point out, "once learned, these analytic and interpretive tools devel-

oped through engagement with popular cultural texts can be applied to canonical texts as well." As illustrated here, students write about Hip Hop in ways that we desire for them to write about other texts. Since they are able to respond to Hip Hop in sophisticated ways, teachers should seriously consider using Hip Hop texts to help guide students on their journeys to become more successful writers.

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