One Time 4 Your Mind:

Literate Practice, Critical Analysis, and Construction of Self

in Hip-Hop Pedagogy

BY

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THESIS

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Dedicated to all of my students who shined brighter than expected

and illuminated my life in the process.

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Your tallies and peaks and valleys can't describe who I am.
This music is therapeutic. I define who I am

- Talib Kweli, "Self Savior," 2011

In this dissertation, I use autoethnographic methods grounded in a critical race analysis of schools and schooling to situate the use of hip hop in my own classroom as a tool for critical literacy development for students who are underserved in schools because of instructional practices and curriculum orientations that fail to recognize or build upon their out-of-school discourses. I reflect on how I use hip hop to help students utilize these out-of-school discourses to not only appropriate the skills and competencies embedded in literary interpretation of canonical texts, but also to extend these interpretations to critically examine the institutional contexts in which they are situated and to contest marginalized identities within the school. This dissertation examines the literature on hip hop in education, critical pedagogy, and Critical Race Theory in education and calls for a hip-hop pedagogy that does not solely serve as a bridge to school sanctioned knowledge, but recognizes the intellectual wealth of hip hop in its own right while actively challenging structural inequalities and seeking to resituate the identities of youth of color with respect to disempowering school spaces and social contexts.

Chapter 1

Introduction

In the autumn of 2003, two days before the start of the new school year, I was told that I would be teaching Junior English, which in the state of Illinois is synonymous with British Literature. I had spent the previous two years, my first two years in the classroom, teaching reading at the alternative school located inside Cook County Juvenile Detention, a context and content area that had afforded an almost limitless choice of texts (from hip hop and spoken word to Malcolm X and Luis Rodriguez) and topics (the prison-industrial complex, for example, was a frequent focus of discussion). Despite my status as a new hire, I meekly protested my assignment, but apparently my Ivy League education and my certificate in English[1] rendered me uniquely qualified to teach what my principal clearly considered to be the most important and intellectually demanding of all literary traditions. So intellectually demanding, in fact, that I was nonetheless forewarned that the kids would never "get it", even if their disabilities were not cognitive. Colleagues nostalgically recounted the good old days when we issued certificates of attendance and didn't have to bother with academics while my principal earnestly admonished me to find "translations" of the required texts, as if the true value of Shakespeare resided in the by-now clichéd stories rather than the language itself.

When I was a high-school student in Chicago less than a decade earlier, I'm not sure that I even noted the incongruity, much less the cultural arrogance, of dedicating an entire year of instruction to British Literature. When I first saw the state-mandated

[1] All of the other English teachers at the school, as is common in Special Education, had no subject-area training or certification.

sequence of courses as an adult, however, I balked a bit. Even if eurocentricity (in this case anglocentricity) in schools wasn't all that surprising, it was disconcerting to see it so unselfconsciously displayed, not just sanctioned but required. My cognitive dissonance deepened when I reviewed the recommended texts for my class; British literature, of course, did not refer to the literary traditions of any of the vast swathes of land and people colonized by the British Empire, but rather the white folks (colonized or not) residing in the immediate vicinity of England. South African literature, for example, was apparently not British, and while Orwell writing about the Raj may be worthy of inclusion, no actual Indian writer qualified for the glorious moniker. The Irish (Joyce and his compadres), while colonized and not technically British, nonetheless seemed to meet a standard apparently based as much upon melanin production as literary merit.[2] As a young teacher, an onslaught of objections immediately overwhelmed my sense of duty to inculcate my students in the immense beauty of Chaucer and Milton. Why did a tiny island five thousand miles away receive as much attention (and significantly more reverence) than all the other nations of the world combined? What sense did it make for a school district that was ninety percent black and Latino to explicitly and necessarily relegate the literary traditions of students' cultural communities to the margins of the curriculum?

I shared these questions with my students on the first day of school and although asking them may have helped to establish the classroom a critical space in which school-sanctioned norms could be challenged, it did little to clarify how I was going to teach British Literature in a way that would be truly meaningful to either my students or myself. It did, however, offer a point from which to develop a site of symbiosis between

[2] The reccomended reading list for British Literature in CPS did not include a single author of color or, in fact, any author residing outside of the British Isles (England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales), except those whose residence was that of a white colonizer (ala George Orwell writing about India).

the critical imperative, "Why would we study this?" and the possibly more generative demand, "Why should we study this?" How could it serve us? How could it engage our intellect and creativity and critical understanding in ways that could be generalized to contexts that were more inherently meaningful to us? How could the themes of human experience embedded in these texts shed new light on our own worlds? How could reading British Literature elaborate our intellectual vistas without sanctioning the supremacy of whiteness implied by the task?

Ironically, it was *Beowulf* that first brought hip hop to my British lit class. I had used hip-hop texts a great deal when I taught reading in jail, but there it had always been studied in their own right. Literary analysis and figurative understanding were a means of unpacking the complexity of the messages communicated through hip hop and of constructing rich representations and interpretations of our own lives, but hip hop itself was the point; it wasn't a means to an end. *Beowulf* became a vehicle for rethinking the possibilities presented by hip hop in the classroom because I had absolutely no idea how to teach it. I quite literally, almost viscerally, hated the text. Despite the dire warnings of my fellow teachers, my concern about teaching *Beowulf* had very little to do with my students' ability to access the literal meaning of the text, but rather about my ability to render our reading truly meaningful, either to them or to myself.

While the simplistic binary of good and evil that is so doggedly reiterated in the epic poem had alienated me from the text when I was first forced to read it in high school, it wasn't until I reread *Beowulf* as a novice teacher that I began to envision that binary as pedantic, political, and racialized. In the wake of September 11th and the start of an unjust war fueled almost entirely by the rhetoric of good and evil, the dichotomous

polemic of *Beowulf* assumed an altered salience in my imagination: the curse of Cain, the chronological consonance with Moorish invasions, the ease and utility of depicting the other as monster and fiend all collided to create a space in which our reading could be both critical and contemporary. Hip hop played into this reading in two separate, though intersecting, discourses. Canonical representation of the badman or trickster in African American literary traditions and its reflection in the hyperbolic gangsta that both challenged and fed the ghetto fantasies of white America allowed us to critically interrogate both the simplicity with which the essentialized identity of the young black male ("monster", "predator") was offered up for popular consumption and the complexity with which that identity interacted with and signified against social and political contexts, in this case the tragic and revolutionary lives of Tupac and Biggie. The early lead of hip-hop artists in critiquing the jingoistic patriotic zealotry that funneled our (young, black and Latino) troops into Iraq, and particularly the auspicious release of Immortal Technique's "Revolutionary Volume II"[3], allowed our critical interrogation of good and evil to assume global significance, creating connections between domination at home and domination abroad. All of this from *Beowulf*…and hip hop.

Research Questions

It was this wildly generative space that evolved from the intersection of hip hop and the British canon, specifically a text that had never even had meaning for me before, that led to those questions that shaped both my curriculum and my project:

[3] Released in the autumn of 2003, this album (specifically the tracks "The Cause of Death" and "Homeland and Hip Hop") provide a more nuanced and contextualized critique of Bush's post-9/11 foreign policy than anything available through mainstream news outlets at the time.

- How do I draw on hip hop as a tool to engage critical and literate practice in ways that can inform and elaborate student interpretation of the official curriculum?
- How can I draw relationships between the skills and competencies valued and rewarded by schools and those embedded in the rich, figurative language of hip hop and how can I leverage those skills to empower youth who have systematically been denied recognition and opportunity?
- How can I use hip hop as a tool to mobilize student identity and how can that mobilization be used to challenge and resist social and institutional contexts that reproduce school failure and disparate life outcomes?

This project examines both how hip hop in my classroom invited the literary problem solving embedded in students' out-of-school discourses in ways that allowed rich interpretations of canonical texts, but also how, through hip hop, those interpretations acquired new salience in the lives of students. Hip hop served not solely as a bridge to accessing school-sanctioned knowledge, but as a means with which to locate generative spaces in the canon while simultaneously compressing hierarchies of knowledge and contesting discourses that denied both the wisdom and humanity of students of color. Hip hop provided the textual terrain across which developed critical literacy. Critical literacy in our classroom implied not only the ability to recognize and challenge specific power relations and privileging of perspective embedded in the messages communicated by text (canonical and otherwise), but also to understand those relations as historically situated, socially constructed, and fully actionable; it implied the ability to both read the world and act upon it. As a critical race literacy, our reading of

word and world forefronted socially constructed notions of race and structurally and institutionally iterated racism in both text and context. It provided a critical lens through which to interrogate macro-level injustice and at the same time provided a platform through which students repositioned their idenities (racialized, disabled) with respect to school spaces and disempowering discourses on a proximal level. Through examination of student writing, interviews, and classroom artifacts, this project attempts to reconstruct both the shared experience of a specific hip-hop curriculum and track the outcomes of that curriculum in the lives of individual students. Despite the possibility that hip-hop pedagogy suggests with respect to the vast intellectual promise of students routinely deemed deficient, this project also hems up against the margins of that possibility within the context of broader social inequalities manifest both within schools and the world into which students must enter when they leave the classroom.

Researcher Positionality

I met this girl when I was ten years old
And what I loved most she had so much soul
She was old school, when I was just a shorty
Never knew throughout my life she would be there for me

-Common Sense, "I Used to Love H.E.R," (1994)

On the balmy summer evenings of my youth, my friends and I would converge, as if by implicit agreement, on a decaying Chicago Park District building separated by six lanes of traffic from the lakefront. More of an open cloister than a field house, reeking of urine from bathrooms so filthy that most people opted for nearby shrubbery, unlit except for the passing headlights on Lakeshore Drive, the spot recommended itself more for its location than its beauty. Nestled as we were between two arms of the expressway,

cloaked in relative darkness by the streetlamps behind us, at least twenty yards of park separated us and the nearest city street; we could see anyone coming long before our own figures emerged as anything more than shadows in the distance. Night after night we would meet there to smoke and drink and talk until, more often than not, the police would show up. The "toy pigs" of the nearby university, though certainly more likely to visit, didn't pose much of a threat: they had no guns, they could detain but not arrest, and they were almost always too ambivalent to give chase. Chicago cops, on the other hand, would occasionally roll up three or four cars deep, jumping the curb and crossing the grass, shining floodlights and blocking escape routes. My friends, mostly black, would placidly watch this unfold. They would sigh, look at each other knowingly, and express no fear at what had become a mundane experience. They knew how it would play out because they had to deal with on a daily basis. Although the suddenness of the sirens and lights cutting through the humid air always drove my heart into my throat a little, I was never really scared, either. Experience had taught me that being white provided me with unspoken immunity. My black male friends were inevitably searched, usually detained, and sometimes arrested for drinking in public or trespassing on park property. Black girls occasionally, though not always, escaped with a warning, perhaps protected from assumption of criminality simply by being female. I, on the other hand, was never subject to anything more than paternalistic admonition: "Do your parents know where you are?" I would receive a stern look and be sent on my merry way.

Hyde Park

The Obama basking birthplace of colorblind conceit
Complacence is sweet

Our consciences pure
Carefully calculating contours
Of a monochromatic metropolis
Meticulously excluding
Malevolently exuding
The sour scent of stasis
Of days that are not past
A condition too old
Too thoroughly controlled
To wax of gentrification
Of ivy-coated plantations
Nobel laureates steady clocking me
And, yes, the tower really is ivory
Casting shadows on manufactured fantasies
Of mythologized harmony
That never was
As the Southside swelters, we sweetly slumber
Lulled to placid tranquility
By the presumed promise
Of liberal identity
Soundly sleep on a cushion of our intellectual generosity
Because clearly there is no world beyond 47th Street
Where we bury more shorties than elders
Where Obama is a promise undelivered
An echo of hope that has already withered
Not the evolution of a revolution
But a reiteration of the past
And so we rep the 312
And litter our limbs with Chi-flag tattoos
Bold in our blindness to the nature of the beast
Our neighbors' complexion
Effectively eclipsing
A vast
And seemingly unseen
Apartheid sea

-K. Daphne Whitington (me), 2010

I lived in Memphis, Tennessee until I was nine years old and traveled back throughout my youth to visit a vast network of extended family that resides there to this day. One side of this family was solidly working class, the majority of the men, including my grandfather, working as truck drivers. Among the offspring of my nine aunts and

uncles were several biracial cousins. A white woman marrying a black man in Memphis in the 1960s was certainly an uncommon occurrence, yet my family treated it as largely unremarkable. In fact, I don't recall it ever being remarked upon at all, save distant adult discussion about the harassment to which my cousins were frequently subject. The other side of my family could not have been more different. Despite a humble, hillbilly heritage, my grandfather had amassed a small fortune and proudly positioned himself as part of the new southern gentry. Bolstered by his grand success despite his meager beginnings and limited education, my grandfather developed an extreme individualism and haughty self-importance that only served to elaborate a classic southern racist upbringing. This side of the family casually used the N-word in everyday parlance, even more so as I grew older, apparently (I'm apologetically assured by my mother) invoked in excess to irk the young northerner and her Yankee, liberal ways. Nestled away in "exclusive" communities, assuming a thoroughly British (despite actual ethnicity…my grandmother likely being the only black-haired English Kennedy in the empire and my mother's geneology research uncovering both Jewish and Cherokee ancestors) and an Episcopalian purity, my grandfather's disdain was not reserved for black folks; Jews, Mexicans, Catholics, everyone not suitably Aryan was fair game. Living in a largely black city, that particular bigotry was simply the most conspicuous. In short, I was exposed to overt racism from birth, both from the perspective of the perpetrator and that of their victims. There was some assurance, some sense that Chicago would be different, that the north was a mythical land of equality and open-mindedness. Of course, it was only a myth. Chicago was different, no doubt. Racism absconded, went underground. Its presence was never acknowledged, its name never uttered, even as it permeated every

experience, every corner of the city. It was a tacit fixture, so deeply rooted and widespread that it was allowed disappear in a cloak of ubiquity.

Living in the only "truly integrated" neighborhood in a deeply segregated city, a tiny multicultural island in a Southside sea of urban decay, Hyde Park itself had a glaringly evident racial fault line. Though the neighborhood as a whole was technically 70-some percent black, the one-way streets (designed, I am told, to thwart passer-bys from neighboring communities) couched up against the ivy-covered walls of the university were conspicuously monochromatic. "Multicultural," of course, meaning Asians and Italians, Argentineans and Indians, in smallish doses, but not the dregs of the Southside. Often I had the surprising occasion to meet University folks who had never meandered north of 55th street (a mere two blocks from lecture halls and Nobel laureates), much less 47th, the crumbling, abandoned-building riddled mote that quietly cosseted the intelligentsia from the recipients of their high-minded politics.

As a youth, I frequented this no-man's land, propelled perhaps by my own dissonance, born of abuse, or else a geographic divide from the prestigious part of the neighborhood (growing up, as I did, on the "bad side" of 55th). I attended the private school associated with the university, my father's affiliation fueling an unspoken scholarship. Although looking back at my 4th-grade class picture now, I note that aside from an ancient and tobacco-scented teacher, I am the only white person in the room (if Israeli, half-Japanese, and Columbian aristocracy qualify as color), it was nonetheless a place of privilege, admittance permitted the multicultural hordes as long as they were upper middle-class and supremely educated (I may have been the only white person in the room, but I may also have been the only one whose father did not possess a

doctorate). While this supreme education and haughty liberality may have permitted lofty intellectual discussions of systemic racism, the sort of sociological discourses embodied by *Slim's Table* (Duneier, 1994), they always held ourselves unaccountable for participation, they glossed over the racial fault line and patted ourselves on the back for our supercilious condescension. After all, we lived on the Southside.

I left my prim, pedigreed education, and my home, at sixteen to wait tables and struggle to make rent in a spare basement apartment before eventually finding my way into the Ivy League (again, a strained relationship with my father and the beneficence of the university providing a scholarship). In the interim, I chilled with my folks from the neighborhood public school (startlingly segregated for such a "multicultural" neighborhood), and hurtled full-force into a world that was both soothingly familial and strangely exotic, if only due to the disconnect from the intellectualized discourses to which I had previously been privy. The same nascent sense of justice that had propelled me to leave home also triggered an evolving understanding of the hypocrisy of those discourses while foisting me into the world itself. My own lived experience, intellectualized in its own right (understanding of rape and abuse largely comprised of distal discourses involving subjects rather than agents), provided an avenue for a more sentient reponse to the gross inequalities that I would come to witness; it became a blessing rather than a burden.

As a white girl growing up on the Southside of Chicago, the privilege visited upon me by virtue of my complexion was often obvious, if only because I was frequently the only one who enjoyed it. My initial anger and frustration, the cognitive dissonance common to white folks when they first recognize the unearned fruits of whiteness, was

assuaged by the protective ambivalence of my friends who were older and wiser than I or, at the very least, more versed in those experiences. This seeming ambivalence, though, was belied by an emergent politics taking shape around both this everyday racial injustice and the gross social and structural inequalities evidenced by our position on the wrong side of the metaphorical tracks in a city like Chicago; it was a politics expressed, and understood by me, largely through hip hop. Most of these friends were DJs, emcees, b-boys and graffiti writers back before hip hop was a commonplace affinity, back when our neighborhood radio station (the "HPK" nostalgically noted by Common back when he was still Common Sense and living on 87th Street) was the only place you could find hip hop on the air. The first concert I ever attended was Public Enemy and I was thirteen years old, followed by KRS-One, Brand Nubian, De La Soul, and Poor Righteous Teachers, all before I entered high school. The triad of neighborhoods (Hyde Park, Kenwood, and Woodlawn) that produced Common, R. Kelly, and da Brat also produced All Natural, Mass Hysteria, Stony Island, and the Primeridian, many of whom could be counted among my circle of friends. It was this hotbed of conscious hip hop that gave voice to protest against the pervasive racism that I witnessed in my youth and laid the foundation for a politics of dissent that would grow throughout my life in tandem with my personal involvement in hip-hop culture. It was hip hop, in fact, that brought me to teaching. As I grew older, my hip-hop-bred politics became globalized and I became an activist, trekking across the country during my college years to march in the streets and get arrested for causes that I only vaguely understood. When college was over and I was compelled to choose a career path, it was the roots of my politics, that nascent understanding of inequality expressed through hip hop, that drove me to direct my

activism at my own community, to contest the conditions that had shaped my perception of the world.

While immersion and acceptance in the black community afforded me some level of cultural competence and insider knowledge, I nonetheless always remained an outsider to the racialized micro and macro aggressions to which those around me were daily subjected. I was always a witness and never a victim. This dual identity of outsider and insider, of perpetrator and participant, shaped my politics and eventually my praxis. As a white teacher in an all-black classroom, race was accompanied by other axes of difference. Gendered and generational dissimilarities were coupled with the inevitable tensions of authority and access that define classroom interactions, all of which were amplified by the tacit racial assumptions and responses that saturated the cultural and institutional context of the school. While being a legitimate hip-hop insider, not just a consumer but active participant and occasional producer, certainly helped to traverse these axes of difference, it nonetheless left a vast chasm of access and lived experience .

The first time that one of my students asked if I was redbone, I was both a little thrilled and thoroughly confused. “No? Then what are you? You mixed? Or Puerto Rican?” The question was posed to me innumerable times over the years and no matter how mundane it became as an occurrence, it nonetheless always jolted me into a strange space of reflection. As a blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman of primarily Dutch heritage, the demand would strike me as almost rhetorical; it wasn’t so much a question as an offering of trust and acceptance, of honorary insider status. Despite the aesthetic implications of being identified as redbone, the presumed desirability of light skinned or mixed girls, it was never presented so much as a compliment as an earnest attempt to

explain my existence: my hint of ghetto drawl, my overt racial politics, my deep involvement in hip hop. It also struck me as something of an indictment of the culture of the school, a uniformity of whiteness so profound that any contrast could catalyze this metaphorical metamorphosis. If being down for my students meant I must be black, then what the hell did it mean to be white? For what it's worth, my students also accused me of being far younger than I was; as the years slid by and the signs of age began to take their toll, in the eyes of my students I was nonetheless positioned in a state of perennial post-pubescence. My deep knowledge of and commitment to hip hop allowed a legitimate insider status that opened other doors of access to me that might otherwise have remained shut. My students' willingness to erase or at least overlook our differences, to accept me as a full member of their world, allowed me admission to a community to which I did not inherently belong, even within the confines of the classroom. However, it was membership in some respects that illuminated the dynamics of difference for me as a teacher; it was the crossing of boundaries that rendered those boundaries visible.

Writing about my students and my classroom, and even about hip-hop culture, carries with it its own set of tensions, as well. The fear of objectifying my students, essentializing the complexity of their identities or reifying my role in their lives, is ever present. My emergent understanding of the exoticness, the perceived sexiness, of hip hop as an area of research also contends with my desire to communicate our experiences without demeaning those experiences under the gaze of ghetto fantasies that largely shape white America's (and presumably white academia's) fascination with hip hop.

Overview of the Study

This dissertation employs critical autoethnographic methods in order to reconstruct my experiences with students during the seven years that I developed and implemented a hip-hop curriculum and digital audio production program in an urban high-school English classroom. My study focuses on three specific groups of students: a group of 28 eleventh-grade English students from the 2005-2006 school year, a group of 45 students who participated in the audio production program during the 2007-2008 school year, and three specific students who participated in both. All of the students involved were African American, low-income, and labeled severely or profoundly emotionally disturbed. Data collected include: classroom artifacts such as lesson plans, assignments, and texts; student and personal writing samples; and formal interviews with former students and visiting artists/co-teachers. Data have been catalogued and analyzed thematically with respect to their consonance with my three research questions and their relationship to three distinct classroom projects: the reading and interpretation of texts from the British canon, critical readings of school-sanctioned and hip-hop texts paired with a youth-driven participatory action project, and a digital audio production program. The content of interviews has been interpreted using critical discourse analysis. Findings are communicated through evocative autoethnographic narrative describing my experiences and the stories of my students using hip-hop pedagogy in the classroom.

Chapter 2

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

As a white teacher working in a black school and attempting to construct a curriculum and praxis that challenged the normative frames of whiteness that marginalized my students and reiterated inequality, Critical Race Theory provided not only a framework for critiquing the dominant racial narrative in education, but also for creating a response based primarily in the construction of counter-narrative. My story and the stories of my students are bound to theory and methodology that sustain the primacy of our own lived experiences in contesting institutional and instructional spaces that justify and recreate disparate access and opportunity. My primary methodological considerations, then, are not validity and generalizability, but social justice and a vision for change.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory

It would seem that in a school like mine, an all-black low-income school in a fiscally abandoned and chronically neglected urban enclave of concentrated poverty and despair, an analysis of the racial politics of hyper-segregation and under-education would be obviated by the blatant and inescapable markings of social and academic apartheid. Yet within schools, and certainly within my school, the discourse of race is muted, made invisible by mythologies that protect our faith in justice and fairness while defending against any personal implication in the reiteration and elaboration of the very conditions

that we claim to mitigate through our work as educators. Instead, the onus for our inability to provide youth of color with avenues of access that might disrupt the racial hierarchies that consume their lives is too often shifted onto the shoulders of students themselves. Embedded in tacit theories of deficiency and depravity, our stock narrative depicts "those kids" as either unwilling or unable to learn. (Duncan, 2002b; Leonardo, 2009b; Love, 2004; Villenas, et al., 1999)

Critical Race Theory (CRT), on the other hand, contends that schools, and education systems more broadly, maintain and reinforce social stratification while naturalizing racial hierarchies through narratives of equal opportunity, color-blindness, and meritocracy. (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Gillborn, 2009a; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Leonardo, 2009a) By attending to the ideologies and discourses that sustain racial inequality, CRT interrogates the way that schools serve as race-making institutions, both the manner in which schools construct students as racial subjects through classroom culture and interactions and also the role that schools play in the reproduction of racial disparities in life outcomes. (Giroux, 1997; Lewis, 2003; Nasir & Hand, 2006) As Maddox and Solorzano (2002) explain, "CRT consists of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogies that seek to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain, subordinate, and dominate racial positions in and out of the classroom." (p.68) Hip hop in my classroom contested schools as race-making institutions both implicitly through the privileging of the knowledge of students of color and explicitly through a direct examination of structural racism.

Critical Race Theory has its roots in legal studies, where it was developed as an analytical tool to understand the persistence of systemic inequalities and the

ineffectiveness of civil rights legal reforms to substantively alter the social and economic condition of people of color in the US. (Bell, 1992, 1996a, 1996b; Crenshaw, 1995; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006, Matsuda, et al., 1993) Central to this scholarship was the supposition that racism is not the aberrant act of rogue individuals, but rather saturates every aspect of American life; it is ubiquitous, routine, and normal. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) Further, critical race theorists argued that the class- and gender-based critiques of the legal system that had begun to proliferate in the 60's and 70's did not and could not adequately address the profound impact of race and racial inequality independent of class and gender. Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993) identify six themes that have evolved out of critical race scholarship in legal studies:

1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. Critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy.
3. Critical race theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on contextual/historical analysis of the law…Critical race theorists adopt a stance that presumes that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage.
4. Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society.
5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary.
6. Critical race theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (p.6)

Critical race theory has also focused attention on the function of whiteness as property and its attendant material significance and legal protections within the historical context of the American tradition of privileging property rights over human rights (see, for example, the protection of the property rights of slaveholders or the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*). Whiteness carries with it "a host of public, private, and psychological benefits" (Harris, 1995, p. 286) afforded legal protection against which any real reform (desegregation, affirmative action) is an affront and serves to undermine the value of whiteness as property. In this way, all whites have a real material stake in the perpetuation of racism. (Crenshaw, 1995; Harris, 1995)

Although some attention was given to the role of education in sustaining racial inequality by critical race legal theorists, particularly with respect to the profound limitations of school desegregation and affirmative action (Bell, 1995a, 1995b; Crenshaw, 1995; Dudziak, 1995), it was the seminal work of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) that introduced CRT as a theoretical frame for interpreting and responding to the vast and persistent racial inequalities in education, as well as the disparate life outcomes produced by a fundamentally racist school system. Ladson-Billings and Tate argued the relevance of the six themes of CRT scholarship to the discourse of education and CRT's ability to bridge the "theoretical gap" that existed with respect to the function of schools in sustaining and elaborating racial disparities. Building on the work of Ladson-Billings and Tate, critical race scholars in education have developed a number of tenets specific to the context and study of schools. CRT in education: foregrounds the role of race and racism in education; recognizes the intersectionality of racial oppression and other forms of oppression; challenges traditional methods, paradigms, and narratives by illuminating

their maintenance of white supremacy and their impact on students of color; focuses on the experiential knowledge and voices of youth of color; expresses a commitment to the development of liberatory praxis; and draws upon other disciplines (ethnic studies, gender studies, legal studies) to create a transdisciplinary approach to theory, research, and pedagogy. (Jennings & Lynn, 2005; Hughes, 2010; Yosso, 2002)

With respect to curriculum and classroom practices, CRT interrupts dominant discourses of colorblindness and meritocracy and challenges claims of neutrality by asking the critical question: whose knowledge is deemed valuable in schools and who is granted access to that knowledge? Ladson-Billings (1998) explains, "CRT sees the official school curriculum as a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a white supremacist master script." (p.18) CRT suggests that curriculum content is designed and deployed to privilege white norms and epistemologies, that methodologies and classroom interactions presume deficiency while ensuring academic disparities, and that assessments serve as a means to rationalize and legitimize those disparities. (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Love, 2004; Tate, 1997) By recognizing the racialized context of instruction and the power dynamics that shape school culture, CRT challenges stock explanations that position failure within students of color while providing a lens through which teachers can interrogate race and its relationship with praxis. (Jennings & Lynn, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Parker & Stovall, 2004; Yosso, 2002) It eschews the prevailing ethos of colorblindness and renders race, including the perennially veiled presence of whiteness, fully visible in the classroom. (Parker & Lynn, 2002; Yosso, 2002) Moreover, CRT's explicit commitment to liberatory praxis and social justice represents a call to action for educators, not only to investigate the racial dynamics of

their own instruction, but also to help students to develop the tools to interrogate and challenge those dynamics themselves, to create spaces in which they can construct their own counter-narratives. David Stovall (2006b) explains educators:

> "Must engage and struggle in a process that identifies the dysfunctional nature of current policies while creating critical and productive spaces for young people to process these structures with respect to own lives. Coupled with a historical context, the social project of education becomes one that calls upon all parties, including students, to challenge shared assumptions about how things should be." (p.233)

In my classroom, Critical Race Pedagogy and the intentional treatment of both race and the institutional contexts of students' lives, elevated hip hop beyond a benign instructional strategy and allowed it to become a discursive space in which students could contest those contexts.

While CRT investigates the ways in which racial politics play out in classrooms and schools, it also provides an incisive critique of macro-level educational reforms that ostensibly address the "problem" of urban (read: African American and Latino) youth. Critical race theorists argue that liberal reform movements from desegregation to NCLB have primarily served the interests of whites. (Bell, 1995a, 1995b; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) The current climate of universalized standards and high-stakes testing masks structural inequalities while legitimizing the very processes that produce the disparate student outcomes that they were supposedly designed to alleviate. (Knaus, 2007; Leonardo, 2009a; Lipman, 2003; Love, 2004) Policy strategies claiming to help black students "perform" like white ones are premised on the supposition of a level playing field, even while simultaneously presupposing deficit among students of color;

they question neither whether the standards really are universal nor whether they are universally accessible. (Grant, 2006; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997) In effect, rather than serving to dismantle academic apartheid, standards have become gatekeepers that make sure people of color stay in their place. Cloaked in a language of colorblindness and neutrality, cluttered with de-racialized euphemism ("urban", "at risk", "disadvantaged"), fifty years after *Brown* reforms have only served to make schools more segregated and racially stratified than ever. (Ladson-Billings, 2006a; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lewis, et al, 2008; Spencer, 2008)

When I began teaching in 2000, I had never even heard of CRT. My own teacher training at a primarily white, prestigious private university had embraced multiculturalism as a de-racialized, assimilationist ideal. Substantive discussion of race and racism was entirely absent, even as "culture" was coded as racial difference. The pre-existence of a relatively radical racial politic rendered the silence surrounding the issue of race almost deafening, a dissonance that was deepened by the dismay of my fellow students every time I dared to utter the word the word "race" (or, God forbid, "racism"). Although my decision to fill the cultural vacuum of my decidedly, if dysconsciously, white education by independently introducing myself to the work of scholars of color had a profound impact on my burgeoning praxis, it wasn't until I was actually working in the hyper-segregated, dismally dysfunctional schools of Chicago's south side that my instructional choices were transformed into a critical space of resistance and opposition. I initially brought hip hop into my own classroom as a pointed response to a growing awareness of the fact that the existent competencies and out-of-school literate practices of my students were not recognized or valued within the school.

As a hip-hop head from adolescence, I knew that my students engaged, on a daily basis, precisely those skills and abilities that they were deemed incapable of acquiring by many of their teachers. Moreover, hip hop's role in my own political and intellectual development made me acutely aware of its ability to foster critical understanding of larger social and institutional contexts. Hip hop could not exist in my classroom without a critical framework, because its whole purpose was to critique and contest spaces that were disempowering to my students on both a micro (school) and a macro (society) level. Making race central to this critical framework may have been obviated by the fact that I've always worked in all-black schools, but I think the issue of language and culture was even more salient. The overt hostility towards blackness, and black masculinity in particular, that I witnessed in school, the ascription of disability to any resistance on the part of students, the uncritical adoption of white epistemologies and discursive norms and the blithe devaluing of black language and literate practices, all necessitated the centrality of race. While my colleagues may have wholeheartedly embraced cultural explanations for our failure to educate our students of color, it always seemed clear to me that risk and poverty were invoked as a metaphorical scapegoat; they served as a means of circumscribing otherness, while otherness in urban schools was clearly, if implicitly, racialized.

Research Methodology

Critical Autoethnography

Although there are no specific set of methodologies prescribed by CRT, critical race method and critical autoethnography share the common purpose of providing space

for the creation of counter-narrative, one that disrupts the dominant (racialized) discourse of privilege and challenges claims to objectivity and textual authority. Hip-hop pedagogy *is* a counter-narrative; it disputes prevailing notions of fairness and colorblindness while challenging deficit views of school inequality by recognizing, valuing, and utilizing the community-based knowledge of students of color and investigating the structural inequalities that disempower them. As a white teacher in an all-black, hip-hop classroom, critical race and autoethnographic methodologies allow me to investigate the normative role of whiteness in my own classroom and the institutional context of schools while inviting the words of my students and our shared intersubjectivity to construct my own counter-narrative.

Autoethnography as Method

Autoethnography initially arose as a methodological response to the crisis of authority in social-science research and traditional rationalistic claims to objective and unitary knowledge (Denzin, 2003; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Influenced by postmodern thinkers, particularly Derrida and Foucault, who challenged this decontextualized view of knowledge and rather suggested that meaning is socially constructed and mediated by language, culture, and ideology, social scientists began to rethink the value of the master narrative posited by traditional ethnographic epistemologies. This crisis of authority was further elaborated by feminist and postcolonialist scholars who questioned traditional ethnographic methodologies that either presented a generalized other or adopted a “native” point of view, thus co-opting and silencing the voices of the people who were being studied. (Alsop, 2005) While

dismissing positivist claims to objectivity and textual authority, postcolonialist and feminist researchers fostered a resurgence of narrative as a more accurate representation of the inherent intersubjectivity of ethnographic study. Reed-Danahay (1997) explains, "The postmodern/postcolonial conception of self is one of a multiplicity of identities, of cultural displacement, and of shifting axes of power. These are all reflected in the move toward new forms of theory and writing." (p.2) Membership of the researcher in the community being studied was essential to de-colonizing methodologies; "anthropology at home" was a move to avoid racialized and colonized ideologies in ethnographic research. (Young, 2005; Smith, 1999) In tandem with the critique of objectivity, postmodern researchers also began to locate ethnographic "truths" within the specific political, cultural, and ideological context of the researcher, challenging the notion that any text is independent of the identity and values of its author. (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000)

Originally introduced by David Hayano in 1979, autoethnography explicitly identifies and investigates the intersubjectivity of the researcher and the dialectic that exists between the personal and the cultural/political. Though subjective, autoethnography is essentially relational; it seeks to elucidate broader phenomena (interpersonal, cultural, and institutional) through the experiences of an individual community member. (Chang, 2008) Although participant observation has always existed in anthropological research, the researcher had never before played a central role in the text, nor was her involvement in the (co)construction of meanings fully examined. (Anderson, 2006) Eschewing the idea of a master narrative, autoethnography adopts a "standpoint epistemology," suggesting that much of the truth of social science research is located within the identity of the researcher, and therefore making that identity visible

within the text is, in fact, more honest. (Lincoln, 1995) Full community membership posits the researcher as a boundary walker; adopting DuBois' concept of double consciousness, the autoethnographer must negotiate two distinct yet concurrent identities, she must study the world while she simultaneously lives within it. (Alsop, 2005; Reed-Danahay, 1997)

Autoethnography attempts to approximate the emotional stance of research participants by telling about a culture through the telling of a life, describing one's own experience within a cultural/political/historical context rather than generalizing or essentializing the experience of others. Its generalizability, rather, lies in the discrete experience as a representation of the concrete continuum of possibility on a collective level. (Roth, 2005) Autoethnography identifies and investigates the manner in which the researcher forms meaning while her own meanings are being formed through participation and representation of her community. (Anderson, 2006) Autoethnography is necessarily reflexive; it expresses "an ironic awareness of ourselves as social actors." (Young & Meneley, 2005, p. 15) The self, however, is not its central concern. The primary purpose of autoethnography is to tell a story that illuminates a larger phenomenon in a way that engages the reader on a visceral level; it aims to "activate subjectivity and emotional response." (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.744)

Anderson (2006) delineates the essential elements of autoethnography: complete member researcher (CMR), analytic reflexivity, narrative visibility of the researcher's self within the text, and a commitment the development of a theoretical understanding of broader social phenomena. Complete member researcher suggests full membership, immersion, and participation in the community being studied. This membership can be

either “opportunistic”, in which the researcher was either born or otherwise introduced to the community through circumstance, or “convert”, in which the researcher’s research interest led her to immerse herself in the community. Ellis and Bochner (2000) add to these criteria an evocative literary aesthetic; if the central function of the work is to elicit sympathy and understanding from the reader, then artful evocation is fundamental to autoethnography as method.

Using story, poetry, fictionalized composites, artifacts, metaphor, essays, and social science prose, autoethnography shifts the discourse of criteria for quality research from validity to purpose. Harsborough (2003) suggests that validity and generalizability are inappropriate measures for evaluating qualitative research, while Muncey (2010) outlines new criteria specific to autoethnography, namely: resonance, larger purpose, coherence, imaginative participation (of the reader), and contextual consonance. Sparkes (2002) also suggests that larger purpose is central to evaluating autoethnographic works, but employs literary criteria, such as verisimilitude, descriptiveness, and evocativeness to gauge the quality of the research. Like all qualitative research, the value of autoethnographic works cannot be measured by universality, but rather by specificity; in this case it is the ability of story to reconstruct experience in ways that are not only accurate, but evocative. Like a novel or rich literary work, the value of autoethnography lies in its ability to engage its audience in the experience of events with the aim of generating a more profound, sentient understanding of the research subject.

Lincoln (1995) reiterates the importance of purpose by proposing that the shift in focus embodied by autoethnography reflects a shift in commitments, from authoritative objectivity to social justice, a sentiment that is mirrored in the writings of critical race

scholars who have built upon the concept of *social justice validity*, elaborated from research on Native American tribal nations that explicitly privileged confronting white supremacy over traditional research interests. (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Parker & Lynn, 2002) My project invokes both purpose (social justice validity) and the richness of prose, its ability to emotively communicate lived experience, as measures of its worth and validity.

Critical Autoethnography

The purpose to which autoethnography aspires is generally understood as a call to action or a demand for social change, a means of subverting the dominant discourse or master narrative. (Denzin, 2003; Graeber, 2005; Kincheloe, 2005; Lincoln, 1995; Muncey, 2010; Pereira, et al., 2005) Denzin (2003) explains, "A genuine democracy requires hope, dissent and criticism. Performance autoethnography is a strategic means to these political ends." (p.259) If the self is made visible in autoethnography, so too is the political. Autoethnography allows the researcher to be unapologetic in her subjectivity and her political intent, aims that are veiled by claims of detached objectivity in traditional ethnographic research. Examining the intersection between the individual and the institutional, autoethnography provides a space in which critical hermeneutics can illuminate the ways in which power shapes meaning and context. (Kincheloe, 2005) Young and Meneley (2005) suggest that autoethnography "recognizes the structures of political economy in the ritualized and the quotidian, the deeply personal, and even the mundane." (p.7) The lived experience of the individual provides an evocative lens through which to understand the political and institutional context of her story.

Critical ontology rescues autoethnography from becoming a narcissistic enterprise by focusing on the social, cultural, and political construction of self in order to play a transformative role in the community being studied. I do not talk about my classroom as an exercise in personal reflection, but reflexive action, an attempt to interrogate and alter the power dynamics that shaped our institutional context and framed our experiences. In effect, narrative becomes a political act. Autoethnography is a performative politics with the potential to instigate radical social change. (Kincheloe, 2005; Denzin, 2003) Kincheloe (2005) suggests that critical autoethnography must: be consistent with a critical ethics of difference, resonate with emancipatory goals, be intellectually rigorous and internally consistent, and not be reductionist or rationalistic. (p.157-158) If the value of autoethnography is gauged by its purpose, then critical autoethnography must be judged by its fidelity to emancipatory aims. My own work, this project, does not suggest a simplistic concrete remedy for the ills it contests, nor certainly any static or generalizable findings that might wield the weight of truth; rather, it is a project of social justice and the description of a space that illustrates both the promise and constraint of liberatory pedagogy.

Autoethnography as Critical Race Method

Although autoethnogaphy emerged from critical and feminist theoretical traditions, critical race scholars have argued that class and gender analysis are not adequate instruments for dissecting the salience of race and racism in the lives of people of color. (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Tate, 1997) Claims of objectivity and neutrality or colorblindness embedded in traditional social science research are both false and serve to

further the interests of white privilege. (Lynn & Adams, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002a) In education specifically, the myth of the meritocracy has allowed systemic disparities to be explained by stories of racialized deficit while ignoring the normative role of whiteness within official narratives (and classrooms), as well as the social and economic apartheid in which they take place. "Objective" research in the social sciences has tended to uphold a deficit view of students of color (though relying on deracialized metaphor to disguise inherently racist assumptions) as an explanation and an escape from the implications of inequality. The master narrative of cultural deficit also pervades teacher education programs, trickling down into classrooms and the lives of youth of color. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002a) Parker and Lynn (2002) argue that traditional methodologies have systematically ignored people of color, de-emphasizing race and relying on determinist perspectives that focus on biological and/or cultural deficiencies in order to explain away structural inequalities. Critical race methodologies challenge the colorblindness of traditional epistemologies by specifically focusing on the racialized oppression and experiences of people of color while critiquing the structural and institutional forces that perpetuate inequality.

Like feminist and critical theorists, critical race scholars have stressed the importance of story as a means of disrupting the dominant discourse and creating counter-narratives. Delgado (1996) explains that "majoritarian stories" inherently privilege whiteness, positing white perspectives as normal and stories that deviate from the normative frames of whiteness as aberrant. Creating counter-stories is fundamental to challenging the hegemony of majoritarian narratives. "The counter-story," explain Solorzano and Yosso, (2002a) "is a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the

majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform." (p.32) Counter-stories interrupt prevailing notions of fairness and equity while exposing the vestiges of historical racism and giving voice to perspectives that the official colorblind narrative omits. (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Parker, 1998) In education, storytelling examines how race and racism have affected the educational experiences and lives of students of color, while disputing majoritarian stories that essentialize and disempower them. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002b) This dissertation gives primacy to the voices of students of color through reconstruction of their lived experience and the power of their own words in the construction of a narrative meant to shatter the myth of their intellectual limitations and personal culpability in school failure. At the same time, my own story as a white teacher struggling to understand and address the role of race in my classroom also forms part of a counter-narrative in the Critical Race tradition.

Whiteness and Critical Race Autoethnography

Whiteness is a race, though white folks don't always like to think so. One of the privileges of whiteness is that race is not a filter through which we are forced to see the world; whiteness is "normal" and it is normally invisible. (King, 1991; Wildman & Davis, 2000) For white researcher/practitioners interested in investigating the normative role of race and racialized experience in their classrooms and the structural racism that shapes schools and academic opportunity, the reflexivity of autoethnography provides a means of disrupting our own comfort with our racial invisibility. (Duncan, 2002a) Clearly white teachers cannot speak for students of color, or adequately understand or represent

the experiential knowledge of those whose lives are impacted by racism. Nor should we attempt to, unless our intent is to re-colonize African American and Latino epistemologies. (Grillo & Wildman, 2000) That being said, ninety percent of teachers and students training to be teachers in the US are white, while urban school systems like Chicago are comprised almost entirely of students of color. (Marx & Pennington, 2003; Lipman, 2003, 2009; Lipman & Hursh, 2007; Smith & Stovall, 2008) If white teachers wish to effectively educate students of color and not become signatories to a master narrative that depicts their students as deficient and incapable, than they too must create counter-stories that confront white privilege.

While many white teachers demonstrate what Delgado (1996) terms "false empathy", it is a sentiment that perpetuates rather than alleviates inequalities. (Duncan, 2002b) False empathy is the paternalistic view that imagines understanding the experiences of people of color by imagining oneself in their shoes. It de-racializes inherently racial experiences by depicting them from the perspective of one who has not experienced racism; it views the idealized experience of the individual without interrogating inequality or our complicity in its replication. False empathy allows white teachers to feel love and sympathy for our students while nonetheless subscribing to a deficit view of urban school failure, which repositions ourselves into the role of generous benefactors of poor urban youth while shifting the onus for academic failure onto the shoulders of the children that we are failing to serve.

Duncan (2002a) views reflexivity as a means of dismantling false empathy. While white folks tend to use abstraction and detachment as methods of avoiding the discomfort that comes from talking about race, reflexivity and critical race (auto)ethnography require

a concrete and experiential interrogation of whiteness and systemic inequality. Furthermore, unlike false empathy and determinist views of cultural and biological deficiency, critical race autoethnography does not view oppression as abstract or inevitable, rather it posits injustice as concrete, actionable, and subject to intervention.

Critical Race Autoethnography and Hip-Hop Pedagogy

In the nearly ten years that I have been a teacher in Chicago Public Schools, I have never had a white student, though I've been entrusted with the sacred task of immersing my black students in epistemologies of whiteness. I am asked to proselytize with a monochromatic canon while never questioning whether resistance to my attempts at cultural genocide (Bell, 1996a) is reasonable or, perhaps more importantly, whether my hyper-segregated classroom is maybe symptomatic of a larger problem. For the majority of my professional life, I have taught students with severe and profound EBD (Emotional/Behavioral Disorder), a diagnosis that allows the normative frames of whiteness in schools to paint difference as not just aberrant, but pathological. Every year, Ruby Payne's "culture of poverty" model (discussed at length in the next chapter) is trotted out during professional development days to reassure us that it's not our fault if "these kids" don't want to learn.

Hip-hop pedagogy is an explicit response to classroom practices and institutional environments that disempower students of color. It invites community-based knowledge and out-of-school literacies into the classroom while acknowledging, valuing , and utilizing the competencies of students whose cultural repertoires are not necessarily consonant with the implicit values of the school. In that hip-hop pedagogy provides a

critical lens through which to understand the larger social and political contexts of the lives of students of color, it is also a critical race pedagogy (Lynn, 1999; Jenning & Lynn, 2005; Stovall, 2006a)

I cannot speak for my students, nor do I want to. If I were a well educated, middle-class teacher of color, I still couldn't speak for them, but as a white teacher I cannot pretend to understand the impact of systemic inequality and endemic racism on the lives black youth. I have, however, create a methodological analogue to my pedagogical practice, inviting the words and stories of my students into my own and allowing them to inform my understanding of myself as a teacher and as a participant in a fundamentally racist institution. Even as a white teacher, my story is nonetheless a counter-story. My story challenges the mythology of merit and fairness, it confronts the master narrative of intellectual deficit because in my story "these kids" are brilliant.

Research Site and Participants

Data for my project were collected over a seven-year period in my English classroom in Chicago Public Schools. Although the hip-hop curriculum that I developed began to take shape during my first two years as a literacy teacher in the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center, my primary focus is on the five years that I taught eleventh-grade English at a small alternative school on the south side. Though it was permanently closed in June of 2010, for decades Lincoln High School was a public therapeutic high school for emotionally disturbed (ED) and behaviorally disordered (BD) youth. In the wake of its closure, the 140 students who attended Lincoln have largely been parceled out

to private facilities across the city, schools generally exempt from the instructional accountability and oversight imposed on public schools.

During my second year at Lincoln (2004-2005) a leak that had slowly been water logging the insulation of our decrepit three-story building rented by from the archdiocese of Chicago caused the roof to collapse, completely destroying the top floor of classrooms, including my own. As the insulation crashed through the plaster ceiling of the hundred-year-old building, it pulled with it enough pipe to cause a flood that would eventually develop into an outbreak of toxic mold in a basement that housed several classrooms, the cafeteria/gym, and the only student bathrooms in the building. As an ostensibly temporary measure, two days after the roof collapsed Lincoln was relocated to a vacant elementary school on the site of the infamous Robert Taylor Homes housing projects. Depopulated by the ongoing demolition of all of Chicago's high-rise public housing, the small building was slated for transition to a charter school meant to serve the anticipated inhabitants of the rows of brick townhouses being constructed in the wake of the steady departure of Robert Taylor's 27,000 low-income residents. Though we were originally told that we would be displaced for two weeks, we remained in the building for nearly two years; despite the ongoing mold problem, we were eventually sent packing to make room for the charter elementary's extensive renovation plans and eventual opening.

The primary focus of my project is a group of 28 eleventh-grade English students, 21 males and 7 females ranging in ages from 16 to 20 years old, from the 2005-2006 school year, the second year of our stay at the Robert Taylor Homes site. The digital audio production portion of my project, though originally entirely integrated into my British Literature curriculum, grew to include more than a third of the students in the

school and took far longer to come to fruition. I will focus on the last year (2007-2008) that the program was in place and the only year that my students produced an album, *Chronicles of the Street*. Though the majority of these students were eleventh graders, there were participants from every grade. In all, 45 students (39 male and 6 female, ages 15 to 21) were part of the project. Both the school and all students specifically referenced in the study have been given pseudonyms.

The student population of Lincoln, and thus the participants in my project, was almost exclusively African American and overwhelmingly male, which is typical of youth diagnosed with ED and particularly those deemed severe enough to be educated in a segregated setting. All of the students at Lincoln were designated low-income and approximately fifteen percent of them were wards of the state. Lincoln serviced students from all over Chicago, but the majority of the 140 youth came from the historically black communities of the city's south side, particularly South Shore, Englewood, Woodlawn, and Bronzeville. Unlike the average high school population in Chicago, the student body at Lincoln was comprised entirely of individuals who had been diagnosed with severe or profound emotional disturbance (SED), specifically Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Conduct Disorder (CD), Intermittent Explosive Disorder (IED), and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Most Lincoln students were also diagnosed with secondary (65%) and tertiary (30%) disabilities, including learning disabilities, cognitive delays (EMH, TMH), speech and language disabilities, and mild autism. Many of the students had been removed from their previous public schools because of behavior problems, incarceration, and/ or chronic truancy. While many of my students read at a middle-school or high-school level, the average reading score at the school fluctuated

between the third and fourth-grade level. The vast majority of students also had documented histories of abuse and/or neglect.[4]

African-American students are twice as likely as white students to be diagnosed with emotional disturbance and nearly five times as likely to be segregated under the aegis of disability. (Losen & Orfield, 2005) In Chicago, this disparity is even more pronounced: 71.4% of students diagnosed with Emotional Disturbance are black, while they represent only 13% of students labeled gifted. (Meiners, 2007) Overrepresentation of students of color exists only in "high incidence" disability categories, such as ED and EMH (Educably Mentally Handicapped); these categories have no verifiable organic cause or biological criteria for assessment and are identified, referred, and diagnosed almost exclusively on the basis of the professional judgment of teachers and clinicians. Significant overrepresentation has never existed in the low-incidence categories, such as deafness or physical disability, where diagnosis is typically determined by a medical professional outside of the school setting. (Losen & Orfield, 2005; Hehir, 2005; Ferri & Connor, 2005)

Disability diagnosis has routinely served as a means of segregating students of color or denying them access to education entirely. Prior to the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA, later IDEA) in 1975, more than half of students diagnosed with disability were denied Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) under the aegis of inadequate resources within schools to provide appropriate education to disabled students. (Losen & Orfield, 2005; Artiles & Trent, 1994) In the wake of

[4] Although much of this information comes from internal school documents (interim reading assessment results, IEP review, disability statistics aggregated in-house) collected at the time of the study, much of the demographic data was retrieved from the Illinois School Report Card (http://iirc.niu.edu/), which is no longer available due to the closing of the school in 2010.

Brown and the passage of the Civil Rights Act, large numbers of black students were diagnosed with disabilities, particularly cognitive delays, as a reliable means of pre-empting federally mandated desegregation efforts and keeping black students out of white classrooms and white schools. (Harry & Anderson, 1995) As a number of court cases, particularly *Diana et al v. the California State Board of Education* (1970) and *Larry P. et al v. Wilson Riles et al* (1971), challenged the chronic over-diagnosis of mental retardation in students of color, ED has become the favored means of labeling and segregating young black males. Between 1974 and 1998, incidence of ED increased from less than 1% to more than 5% of the student population. Meanwhile, the LD (Learning Disability) category was created to provide white students with services within general education classrooms while mitigating claims of overrepresentation. SED students are three times as likely as Special Education students generally to be put in separate schools and EMH students are twice as likely. Black students, including black students who are diagnosed with LD, are significantly more likely than their white peers to be placed in segregated settings, while African American males are the sub-group most likely to be removed from the general education classroom. (Serwatka, et al, 1995; Harry & Anderson, 1995)

The arbitrary and inappropriate segregation of special education students in CPS prompted a lawsuit in 1992 on behalf of more than 40,000 youth (*Corey H. et al. v. Chicago Board of Education and Illinois State Board of Education*) that found CPS policy to be in violation of federal mandates protecting the rights of students with disabilities. (Mayrowitz & Lapham, 2008) This chronic overrepresentation and segregation of black males in the SED category provides a lens through which the role of

structural racism in the diagnosis of disability and its relationship with urban school failure and the mis-education of black youth more generally might be understood. Not only do SED students have the most abysmal academic and life outcomes of any disability category (nationally, fewer than 30%, for example, receive a high school diploma), but they are also subject to the least objective criteria in referral, assessment, and diagnosis; SED students are classified almost entirely using the normative behavioral expectations of teachers and clinicians. (Harry & Anderson, 1995; Harry & Klinger, 2006; Serwatka, et al., 1995) As is frequently the case with black males, the most common disability diagnosis at Lincoln was Oppositional Defiant Disorder, a "disease" whose primary symptom is resistance, disobedience, and/or hostility towards school authority. (Hamilton & Armando, 2008) It is the normative interpretations of (primarily white and female) teachers that read black masculinity as oppositional and project pathology onto students like mine. (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Watts & Ereveiles, 2004)

The over-identification of black males in the SED category reflects a much broader tendency to pathologize, censure, and remediate the behaviors, attitudes, language, and discursive styles of black youth in schools, a trend that it evidenced both by the misdiagnosis and segregation of SED students and by the disparate rates of behavioral referrals, corporal punishment, school suspensions, and expulsions of young males of color. (Ferri & Connor, 2006; Meiners, 2007; Osher, et al., 2005) Schools in communities of color have also increasingly adopted the behaviorist paradigm of SED as a means of training and controlling black and Latino youth outside of the auspices of special education; the prevalence of surveillance, behavior modification, and skills-based instruction in urban school settings owes a debt of gratitude to the "scientific"

understanding of deviance and model of containment provided by SED programs. (Lipman, 2004, 2007; Ferri & Connor, 2005)

In Chicago specifically, school reform under the auspices of Renaissance 2010 (which has now been adopted as a federal initiative under ex-CPS CEO Arne Duncan's "Race to the Top"), paired with the Chicago Housing Authority's (CHA) "Plan for Transformation", has allowed historical disinvestment in communities and schools of color to transform into a rationale for the demolition and displacement of those communities and further polarization of academic access. (Lipman, 2009; Smith & Stovall, 2008) As selective-enrollment magnet schools and International Baccalaureate programs become lynchpins of gentrification in areas vacated by CHA and city policies that push low-income residents of color to the margins of the city, schools in communities of color not slated for "transformation" have been reconstituted as Direct Instruction (DI), career, and military academies, schools that explicitly adopt a "special education model" of rote, scripted instruction and physical control. (Lipman, 2007) Chicago school reforms, designed and orchestrated by Chicago's business and political elites, feign interest in providing quality instruction to the communities that they decimate, while pushing out low-income residents and pouring millions of dollars into schools that by-pass desegregation laws (enrolling 50% white students in a district that is less than 11% white, for example) in order to woo middle- and upper-income white residents back to Chicago and CPS and bolster Chicago's image as a "global city," rather than an African-American city. (Lipman, 2004; Smith & Stovall, 2008) Meanwhile, the vast majority of Chicago students, 90% of whom are students of color, remain in neighborhood schools where basic skills and test-driven curriculum are the norm. The

Chicago Commercial Club (CCC), a key architect of Renaissance 2010, described the primary purpose of these schools as being the production of "ever-more-skilled employees," which the CCC defined as graduates who could "at a minimum, read instruction manuals, do basic math, and communicate well." (quoted in Lipman, 2002, pp. 401) Such are the lofty goals of Renaissance 2010 for Chicago's low-income students of color. While the explicit goals of Renaissance 2010 may have allowed the special education model of rote curriculum, containment, and control to infiltrate general education spaces, in a segregated school like Lincoln it served to reinforce an already entrenched dogma regarding the needs, abilities, and potential of students. If general education students were increasingly subjected to special-education curriculum and policy, then the instruction of "profoundly disabled" students was both justified and elaborated: still lower expectations and less demanding instruction partnered with more and more reliance on physical and intellectual containment.

At the same time, the impoverished curriculum and policies of containment adopted generally by schools serving low-income students of color construct disability through curricula and cultures that suppress academic achievement. Almost all explanations of disproportionate representation ignore the role that past instruction plays in the identification of disability or the manner in which special education instruction elaborates academic difficulties and reproduces inequality. The limited access to rigorous, high-quality instruction afforded students of color in Chicago (and the U.S. more generally) has a profound impact on students' educational outcomes and academic performance and, subsequently, the incidence of perceived disability. Not only do schools in communities of color fail to provide instruction in the sort of higher-order skills that

might mitigate the suppression of academic performance, but impoverished curriculum is also a direct reflection of the interests of white elites acting as arbiters of institutional reform. These reforms adopt a remedial curriculum of basic skills and literacies long promoted as "best practice" in special education, as well as the surveillance, behavior modification, and punitive pedagogies that have been reified to the level of dogma in SED programs. The academic failures of students instructed using remedial and skills-based curricula often manifests as perceived deficit and/or disability. Harry and Anderson (1995) observe, "The cycle of low expectations, low self-confidence, and inappropriate curricula and teaching methods builds, [African-American boys'] learning difficulties begin to appear endemic, and educational professionals begin to ask if there is something 'wrong' with these students." (p. 611) If the sense that something is "wrong" with the student leads to referral to special education, he will find himself entering an educational vacuum from which he will likely never emerge; only 6% of students labeled disabled ever leave special education.

Like race, disability is a social construct; it is real in the sense that it really affects the access and outcomes of those to whom traits are ascribed, but its meaning is fluid and contingent on social interactions and on the ability of the construct to assign and deny power to the groups it defines. (Artiles & Aydin, 2008; Ferri & Conroy, 2005) Like race, disability is a nebulous and temporal idea whose meaning has changed over time and in relation to the socio-political context in which it exists. (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Daniels, 1998) Like race, biological bases for disability have long been sought as a means to justify and quantify the supremacy of the dominant group, and the biological bases of race and disability have frequently been sought in a similar manner; from craniology to

eugenics to the Bell Curve, a large body of quasi-research and pseudo-science exists solely to legitimize the construct of deviance and the resultant power conferred on those who fall blissfully within the parameters of "normal". (Artiles, et al., 2006; Losen & Orflield, 2005) Like race, in education disability is shaped by the discursive practices and normative techniques of the school culture and has the ability to dictate quality of instruction, the expectations of teachers, and the academic outcomes of students. Watts and Erevelles (2004) observe that, "definitions of race and disability offered by both CRT and Disability Studies foreground the rejection of biological criteria as the sole determinant of difference and, at the same time, (re)theorize difference as a historical, social, and economic construct that is (re)constituted in complex ways by contesting ideological configurations." (p.276)

Disproportionate representation of students of color, particularly black students, in special education is illustrative of the manner in which normative frames privileging white, middle-class culture serve to pathologize difference in schools and to shift responsibility for school failure onto the perceived deficiency/deviance of students, parents, and communities. (Watts & Ereveiles, 2004; Ferri & Conner, 2006) Reliance on the judgments of teachers in the interpretation of student behaviors, abilities, and academic performance creates a climate in which the cultural repertoires of school personnel become the diagnostic instruments with which disability if measured. (Skiba, et al., 2006) Whether citing poverty, environmental variables, or cultural dissonance as the root cause, special education research has generally relied on a presumption of the existence of definite, discernible disability to explain overrepresentation. (Harry & Klinger, 2006) By tacitly situating responsibility within the student, researchers fail to

recognize the role that schools play in the construction of both race and disability and the impact of the broader socio-political context in which schools exist.

My students' experiences with school were shaped by the ascription of disability not only because it disordered their identities and ignored institutional contexts, but also because it placed them in an instructional wasteland in which teacher expectations were essentially non-existent, content was rote and skills-driven, and finishing school had little practical value, either in terms of knowledge acquisition or the promise of economic mobility. While many urban schools may tacitly privilege containment over curriculum, at Lincoln it was given explicit priority. When enrolling in the school, parents had to sign a waiver allowing staff to physically restrain their children so that they had no legal recourse when arms and noses and collarbones were broken (as occasionally happened) under the aegis of restraint. Behavior modification, an elaborate system of privileges and "consequences" doled out in response to student compliance with school-sanctioned behaviors and attitudes, was the prevailing philosophy of teachers and administrators. The ubiquity of this ethos of behaviorism was made abundantly clear to me at my very first staff meeting. After a lengthy and heated discussion about the niceties of the school's behavior modification program, a genial request was made for my input. When I responded by saying that I didn't really believe in behavior modification, the entire staff, every single person in the room, gasped in dismayed unison. My assistant principal was the first to break the subsequent stunned silence. With a look of earnest confusion and a hint of admonition, she asked me, "Well then, what do you believe in?" I didn't have a response, or at least not one that I felt comfortable voicing as a very young woman amidst a staff so saturated with the dogma of deficiency that any alternative was

unthinkable. My students were often labeled ED because they were resistant or "oppositional" to a school culture that marginalized and explicitly sought to control them, yet the label only elaborated those conditions and marginalization, increasing the necessity of resistance and affirming the subjective judgments of teachers that determined their disability in the first place.

Sources of Data

My data are a reflection of my pedagogy and the underlying premise of my project; it privileges the voices of students whose stories were marginalized by majoritarian narratives of race and disability. Supplemented by classroom artifacts and interviews, most of my data analysis has focused on the writing that we did together, actual student work, and our recollections of both our shared classroom experience and the contexts in which it took place. Student stories and writing, often cited at length, are central to my narrative precisely because they shape its purpose. Hip-hop pedagogy and Critical Race Pedagogy explicitly forefront the wisdom and words of youth, in this case youth who have been quite literally been pathologized and positioned beyond systems of care or concern. Student writing is analyzed on three fronts: its expression of literary understanding and interpretive problem solving consonant with content-specific tasks; its communication of critical consciousness, or a meaningful interrogation of broader social contexts; and its negation and/or reinterpretation of disabled or pathologized identity. Student interviews, while probing at each of these three fronts, were somewhat skewed by chronological distance towards the issue of identity construction and the outcomes of instruction, both personal and practical.

Autoethnography makes no claims to objectivity or generalizability, rather the subjectivities and positionality of the researcher are on full display. (Lincoln, 1995; Young & Meneley, 2005) If the primary purpose of autoethnography is to illuminate a culture through the story of an individual, then it is the recall of the researcher/participant that is the principle source of autoethnographic data, despite its acknowledged unreliability. (Chang, 2008; Denzin, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Roth, 2005) Chang (2008) observes, "Despite its precariousness, personal memory taps into the wealth of information on self. What is extracted as memory can be written down as textual data." (p.72) The subjectivity of memory, its distortions and limitations, shapes narrative as meanings form and are formed by the representational process. (Alsop, 2005; Muncey, 2010) Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamount (2003) explain, "[Auto]ethnographers-as-authors frame their accounts with personal reflexive views of the self. Their ethnographic data are situated within their personal experience and sense making. They themselves form part of the representational processes in which they are engaging and are part of the story that they are telling." (p.62) As a teacher researcher, I am afforded the insights of an insider while simultaneously being denied the luxury of traditional ethnographic data collection. My membership in the community that I studied was opportunistic in the sense that participation gave rise to my research interest rather than the other way around; my data was not collected for the purpose of academic analysis, but is rather an amalgam of reflections and relics of a life of teaching. Both my memory and that of my students is reliable in the sense that it is a real reflection of the outcomes of instruction, of reflexivity and interrogation on both sides, but it is also inevitably intertwined with those outcomes in ways that possibly skew reflection. The fact that the result of my experience as a

teacher has been the development of a profound love and respect for my students could certainly catalyze memories that more aptly communicate the bases for that love and respect. On the flip side, my ongoing involvement in the lives of my students and their general awareness of my love for them may taint their recollections in a manner that favors the impact of my instruction. I would venture to argue that these caveats are both inherent to most meaningful teacher research and also that they do not necessarily detract from the verity of the ideas communicated. Any pedagogy founded in respect and love for students necessarily confounds the impact of curriculum and rapport. Yet rapport itself is central to the curriculum; the curriculum is constructed upon relationships that defy school spaces.

Despite the importance of memory in the production of autoethnographic research, recall is reconstructed and supplemented by external sources, artifacts and representations of the cultural communities and social phenomena that illuminated by the researcher's own experience. (Chang, 2008; Muncey, 2010) My external data sources generally fall into three broad and occasionally overlapping categories: classroom artifacts, student artifacts, and personal artifacts.

The hip-hop curriculum that I developed is well catalogued in classroom documents: five years of daily lesson plans (including reflections on the efficacy of the lessons), copies of all of the texts that we used in class, and instructional artifacts such as handouts and prompts. (Appendices A and B) Over the course of the five years that I taught at Lincoln, three different emcees worked in my classroom as co-teachers, each for at least a year. I have conducted formal interviews with all three of them, both to elaborate my own recollection and also to include their insights as community members.

(Appendix C) At least one of these artists, Simeon Viltz, wrote extensively about my classroom while he was co-teaching (including a track about my students called "Whistle While You Work" on the Primeridian's 2008 album *Da Mornin' Afta* and 2011's *The Darling Lure*) and he has agreed to share those writings for my project. (Appendix D)

My collection of student writing is voluminous, including hundreds of pages of student poetry and lyrics, prose and personal reflection, published student work, and a sixty-page anthology that we compiled ourselves. A six-track EP composed, recorded, and produced by students is accompanied by dozens of MP3s that didn't make the cut, as well as an award-winning audio documentary that students created about their lives and their neighborhood. Student reflections on our classroom experiences were featured in two hour-long interviews on the Ty Wansley show on the Chicago radio station WGCI and in several brief videos filmed by the Oprah Winfrey show (Winfrey, 2008) and Street-Level Youth Media. I have also conducted formal interviews with three former students about our shared classroom experiences and their intellectual and academic trajectories in the wake of Lincoln. (Appendix E)

In addition to the reflections included in my lesson plans, I wrote extensively both with and about my students and myself while teaching. Every time that they wrote in class, I wrote with them, primarily poetry, but also prose and personal reflection. While the prose has helped me to reconstruct my experiences in the classroom, much of the poetry has been included in this dissertation. Outside of the classroom, I wrote descriptions of my students, reflections on my teaching, as well as academic analysis and grant proposals that outlined and interpreted my project at the time that it was taking place.

Data Analysis

> *The methods of qualitative research thereby become the "invention," and the telling of the tales—the representation—becomes the art…And so we cobble. We cobble together stories that we may tell each other, some to share our profoundest links with those whom we studied; some to help us see how we can right a wrong or relieve oppression; some to help us and others to understand how and why we did what we did, and how it all went very wrong; and some simply to sing of difference.*
>
> *-Lincoln & Denzin, 2000, p.1061*

I used to wonder at the relative absence of credible classroom vistas in writings about education; it often seemed that every researcher was a visitor and every student was a piece of data to be analyzed. A ubiquitous shift from third person discussions of K-12 classrooms to first person descriptions of post-secondary settings underscored an understanding that teachers don't write about teaching; that's the job of academics. Occasionally these academics may fight to retain an authentic long-term presence in schools or risk credibility by attempting to reconstruct their own experiences as teachers before they became professors, but more often than not they remain safely cloistered by the arrogance of empiricism, far removed from the struggles and the youth that they describe. It is precisely this distance, traversed primarily through usurped authority over lived experience, which allows the identities of students to be theorized and essentialized and the voices of practitioners to be muted.

As a teacher researcher and an autoethnographer, my data are not particularly amenable to traditional methods of analysis. I must act, like Lincoln and Denzin describe, as a bricoleur; I must cobble. That does not mean that my inquiry is arbitrary, only that it does not take the same shape as data collected solely for the purpose of analysis. My

three research questions (hip hop as bridge to academic tasks, hip hop as a critical lens, and hip hop in the mobilization of identity) roughly parallel three fairly distinct, though chronologically and conceptually overlapping, classroom projects: our work around and in response to the British canon, our critical reading and participatory action research projects, and our digital audio production program. Data are catalogued and coded thematically according to their consonance with the three questions and relationship to the three separate projects.

Research on our work with the British canon focuses on our readings of three texts: *Beowulf*, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, and Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. Daily lesson plans, classroom activities, handouts, and classroom texts (both the texts of the official curriculum and hip-hop texts) document the concrete content of the curriculum. Student work completed during the course of the units as well as my own reflections on our discussions around the texts are analyzed using several different lenses. Data are first analyzed in order to identify the sorts of analytical skills (figurative understanding, literary reasoning) valued by the school; in the case of these three units, I specifically look at evidence of student understanding and utilization of narrative perspective and irony/satire with respect to both hip-hop texts and the British canon, particularly students' ability to form figurative interpretations of texts and also to create their own texts using figurative language and multiple registers of meaning. I then analyze data for evidence of critical literacy, or students' ability to problematize texts and draw connections to current social and political realities, specifically student writing and discussion around narrative perspective and popular representations of good and evil, particularly black masculinity, with respect to *Beowulf,*

misogyny in popular discourses (hip hop and otherwise) with respect to Wollstonecraft, and the class and race-based discourses embedded in contemporary domestic policies with respect to *A Modest Proposal*. Finally, I analyze data in order to identify emergent themes regarding student connections to their own lives and experiences. Supplementary artifacts, specifically current and past student interviews, video, and my personal writings, are also analyzed using these three lenses.

Our work with hip hop as a critical lens with which to understand and challenge sociopolitical realities is examined by analyzing our critical readings of mainstream hip-hop texts, particularly with respect to misogynistic and consumerist content (read in tandem with Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*), and a participatory action research project that evolved out of our readings of progressive hip-hop texts contemporaneously with *A Modest Proposal*. Analysis of critical readings looks at the texts themselves, my reflections on the discussions surrounding the texts, current interviews with former students, (Appendix E) and interviews with a visiting emcee/co-teacher who participated in the activity. (Appendix C) These data are analyzed for evidence of students' ability and willingness to both deconstruct the messages embedded in the texts and to identify and challenge those meanings within their own lives. The participatory action research project, which focused on the creation and subsequent disinvestment in the black ghettoes of the Southside and particularly the contemporary demolition of housing projects in Chicago, evolved out of our analysis of progressive, political hip hop and the role of artist, as Talib Kweli says, to serve as "documentarian." This project was project was intertwined with students' own writing in the digital audio production project and was conceptually and chronologically related to our critical

reading of *A Modest Proposal*. It also involved readings of hip-hop texts, historical research, neighborhood interviews, audio documentary, personal narratives, and photography. Student synthesis of these artifacts, which were published on the internet through Northwestern University's Collaboratory Project[5] and shared with local college students, is analyzed both with respect to the analytical skills embedded in their research and synthesis and the critical understanding expressed in their interrogation of the interplay between canonical literature, city/national policy, and the lived experience of people of color.

Research on the role of hip hop in student identity formation focuses on the digital audio production program and specifically the experiences of three individual students, including their writings and extensive formal interviews. These students were selected both because of their involvement and investment in the audio production program and because of their vastly disparate outcomes in the wake of Lincoln; they include, for example, a non-reader who is now studying audio production at the university level and an extremely gifted emcee who has spent the last several years in jail. Their stories underscore both the possibilities and the limitations of hip hop as a means of mobilizing identity and contesting oppressive contexts. In addition, three emcee/co-teachers who worked with me on the project are interviewed. Pieces of raw data (specifically student, co-teacher, and personal writing) are integrated in their entirety within the text. Student and co-teacher interviews are analyzed using critical discourse analysis in order to examine not only the content of discussions, but also the sociocultural practices embedded in discursive events and the broader social and political contexts in which they

[5] https://sites.google.com/a/collaboratory.northwestern.edu/collaboratory-home/

are situated. Particularly within the context of the "disabled" identities ascribed to these three students, analysis focuses on the role of hip hop in the construction of conceptions of self that allowed them to navigate disempowering spaces.

Limitations

The limitations of autoethnography and retrospective research are both obvious and fully acknowledged. The very nature of my work (a teacher talking about teaching) undermines claims of authority, validity, or generalizability; and I willingly disown them. I am neither neutral nor objective. I entered academia in order to advocate for my students, to communicate our experiences and to contest discourses that depict them as deficient and pathological. I intend my work to be evocative and challenging, rather than replicable. Similar to Parker and Lynn's (2002) notion of "social justice validity", autoethnography suggests a different set of criteria for credibility. Lincoln (1995) explains:

> "It is scientific inquiry that embraces a new set of commitments: first to the new and emergent relations with respondents; second, to a set of stances—professional, personal, and political—toward the uses of inquiry and toward its ability to foster action; and finally, to a vision of research that enables and promotes social justice, community, diversity, civic discourse, and caring. As a result, any discussion of research today necessarily signifies a radical shift in the vision of what research is, what it is for, and who ought to have access to it." (p. 277-278)

It is what my work produces, the disempowering narratives it contests and the voices that it includes, that give it meaning and legitimacy. Despite an abundance of data

documenting the efficacy of my pedagogy with respect to traditional or standard measures, my interpretation of these data and my recollection of classroom experience is mired in a profound and undeniable desire for change.

Chapter 3

Review of the Literature

Hip Hop in education is still an emerging field of inquiry. Although a number of scholars have recently begun to explore the pedagogical possibilities of hip hop in the classroom, when I began my project nearly a decade ago there was essentially no existing research to guide my burgeoning praxis. While attending to growing body of literature about hip hop in education, and its relationship with my own work, this review also examines the ideological and institutional contexts that catalyzed the creation of my curriculum and the pedagogical traditions that informed its evolution.

I begin by looking at the discourse of deficit and risk because it so thoroughly permeated both my own training and the ideological and instructional norms of the school in which I worked. I focus on risk and deficit because my own praxis evolved as a response to those discourses, to my emergent understanding of my students' capacities and the manner in which their abilities were being stymied under the auspices of education. Adults in the school ascribed racialiazed identities ("at risk", "disabled"), segregated and sorted on the basis of those identities, prescribed narrow and rote instruction to those deemed deficient, then confirmed the validity of their original assumptions by virtue of the disparate outcomes that instruction produced. The disconnect between how I saw my own students and how they were depicted by the school, the ways in which school practices obscured their brilliance and ensured their failure, created a space in which hip hop became a means of disrupting dominant narratives and excavating the promise buried beneath a rhetoric that excused inequality.

I then look at the pedagogical traditions that informed the development of my curriculum and my praxis in the absence of research related specifically to hip hop. Culturally relevant pedagogy and the Cultural Modeling Framework allowed me to locate and isolate the intellectual resources and problem-solving skills embedded in student engagement of hip hop as an everyday cultural practice, while critical pedagogy and critical race pedagogy helped me to elaborate my understanding of hip hip's potential as a space in which to critically interrogate social and structural inequality while contesting identities ascribed by the school.

The rapidly evolving corpus of research on hip hop in education has generally focused on three distinct, though frequently intersecting, roles that hip hop potentially plays in the classroom, each of which is broadly aligned to one of my research questions: hip hop's utility as a resource for scaffolding subject-area learning, its possibility as a space for the development of critical insight and understanding, and its role in the formation of individual and collective identity. My own project both integrates and elaborates these foci by developing a space in which hip hop serves as both a bridge for academic understanding and a critical lens through which to contest structural inequalities and essentialized identities.

I have chosen to frame my discussion of the literature with the story of one of my students in order to illustrate the very real impact of dominant discourses of risk on the identities and life outcomes of youth of color. Darnell is representative of a population of students who, as Duncan (2002b) describes, are "oppositionally other" or "beyond love." Their marginalization is so complete that it has come to be seen as a disease, one that

justifies their physical and figurative segregation while naturalizing school failure and bleak futures as normal and inevitable.

Darnell

Darnell wears a heavy dark coat with a fur-trimmed hood. The uniform is indifferent to temporal or climatic influence; winter or summer, rain or shine, he saunters into school with his eyes masked behind a veil of fur under his raised hoodie. He comes to school every day, but he rarely goes to class. Instead, he ambles slowly up and down the hallways hidden under that heavy coat, his head bent pensively to the speckled formica floor. The faint bob of his hoodie is barely discernible from a distance; as you come closer, you may notice that the movement of his head matches the rhythm of his feet, and both are merely keeping time to the slow, steady flow of his rhymes.

Darnell lives a few blocks away from school on south Federal in one of the few remaining high-rises in what was once the Robert Taylor homes. His mother passed from a drug overdose when he was nine and his father is serving a life-sentence in prison, so Darnell lives with his grandmother, his auntie, and several younger cousins in a small CHA apartment overlooking the Metra tracks and the Dan Ryan expressway on one side and barren blocks of absent buildings on the other. He won't be there for long, though; his building is slated for demolition a few months before his eighteenth birthday. He doesn't know yet where his grandmother will go, or whether he will be going with her. Several years ago, before his neighbors were gone and his friends were parsed out across the city, Darnell was involved in an altercation between the Folks (GDN) and the

Moes (BD)[6] *in which he was beaten so severely that his skull was fractured in several places. Darnell doesn't mention any of this to strangers; his history must be pieced together through repeated interactions and, even then, its impact on him must be largely inferred.*

Darnell doesn't read, or at least not in any way that is valued within school. In fact, his lack of print literacy, as determined by his performance on school-administered standardized reading assessments, pretty much defines (or predicts) his entire school experience. His first-grade reading level means that he is grouped with cognitively delayed students in classes that rely heavily on phonics and cloze exercises to remediate the perceived deficiencies of students. Darnell himself will tell you that his reading problems were largely responsible for landing him in an ED school in the first place: his teachers treat him like he's stupid; he gets frustrated by the phonemic complexity and the intellectual simplicity of classroom tasks; "school ain't shit" is a mantra that manages to salvage some dignity in a disempowering environment, but it also allows his teachers to blithely characterize him in a manner that exacerbates that disempowerment. Darnell is a bad kid.

Darnell is a highly literate person. In fact, he is a member of the most literate of all peoples; he is a poet. Not only does he compose rich, figurative rhymes in his head, he also edits them there. As he aimlessly wanders the halls of school, he'll dig up one of his half-finished masterpieces and mull it over aloud, attempting or rejecting alterations in

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[6] The Gangster Disciples (famously ruled by a jailed Larry Hoover) and the Blackstone Disciples are two of the most prominent of the many gangs that occupy the vast swathe of public housing that blanketed the miles south of Chicago's loop until a few years ago. Bordered on the north by the Ickes, to the west by Stateway Gardens and the Robert Taylor Homes, to the east by the Ida B. Wells, and cut off to the south by the University of Chicago's enduring presence despite the Southside's long-since altered complexion, the Black Belt formed the largest concentration of housing projects in the nation and compelled sociologists to create the term hyper-segregation to describe Chicago.

language and form. His skills are well known, both as an emcee and as speaker more generally. He never fights in school because he never has to; he can settle any dispute verbally.

Darnell can read, but not in any way that is valued by the school. He engages with meaningful text, particularly texts of his own making. He dictates narrative that he reads and revises in print. His lack of phonemic awareness is compensated for by his ability to infer meaning and predict content as he navigates the narratives and rhymes of others. Every week he attends a hip hop writing and performance workshop after school where neither his competency nor his artistry is questioned. Despite the functional focus of his literacy instruction, Darnell is already responsible for guiding his grandma through the mire of bureaucracy accompanying the state agencies that affect their lives (CHA, DCFS, Medicaid, etc.) He works summers at Wrigley Field, stocking food for the vendors there. He dreams of going to college, but he doesn't see it as realistic. "School ain't shit" may provide some protection from classrooms and teachers for whom Darnell ain't shit, but his aspirations and sense of self have not been entirely severed from school as an institution that metes out privilege, opportunity, and legitimacy. Darnell knows that he is meant for more than a menial job and a struggle for material survival, yet school is a boulder blocking the path to who he wants to be.

In the popular imagination, a kid like Darnell is something of a pariah: a young black male, an illiterate hustler, a menace to beneficent ideals of middle-class white America, a faceless symbol of our perennial moral panic. He might also be an indictment of our failure to fulfill the promise of our purportedly colorblind liberal ethos of equal access and opportunity, but luckily for us, the blame for Darnell's condition has been

placed squarely on his own young shoulders. If the schools haven't educated him or if society hasn't nurtured his promise, it is because Darnell is either unable or unwilling to learn. He is the dysfunctional product of a maladaptive culture that belligerently opposes a school system and a society that is ready and willing to save him from himself. Fortunately, aside from alarming portrayals on the evening news that serve to reify our lack of culpability and clarify our own status as the true victims of social injustice, most of us will never meet Darnell or anyone like him; we will never be forced to see the social and economic apartheid in which he lives nor the human potential that we have blithely and beneficently squandered. Darnell will continue to go to his hyper-segregated school in his hyper-segregated neighborhood while we continue to hurtle over it on the expressway, nervously avoiding vistas that might interrupt those stock explanations that depict inequality as a natural and inevitable byproduct of our own deracialized merit.

Institutional and Instructional Contexts

Constructing Risk and Deficit

Darnell's difference has been, quite literally, pathologized; his marginalization has morphed into a "psychological disorder," providing a soundly scientific justification for all the ills visited upon him by the school system. He is segregated, he is under-educated, he is robbed of the promised rewards of schooling because he is oppositional, and clearly his oppositionality is a mental illness. While the obscene disproportionality of disability diagnoses among students of color may provide a loophole for educators to escape the overt racism of excusing systemic inequalities as a natural byproduct of genetic inferiority, for most students the discourse has shifted from biological to cultural

deficit. Despite a brief resurgence in the 1990's (Hernstein & Murray, 1996), biological explanations for the failure of schools to effectively educate students of color have largely given way to justifications premised on the deleterious cultural practices of the communities in which they reside. In the wake of *Brown* and the construction of contemporary colorblind liberal ideologies, overt claims of biological inferiority have become less socially acceptable and, as a consequence, racialized social and institutional hierarchies have come to be explained by the cultural deficiency, deprivation, or difference of those positioned at the bottom of the ladder of access and opportunity. (Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2006; Lee, 2009; Nasir & Hand, 2006; Valencia, 1997)

In the 1960's, a growing body of research (Coleman, et al., 1966; Harrington, 1962; Lewis, 1969; Reissman, 1962) placed the onus for school failure on the ostensibly maladaptive cultural norms and practices of students and their communities. Dissonance between home culture and the middle-class, white normative practices of schools was generally attributed to distinct deficiencies among specific cultural communities: poor communities and communities of color do not adequately foster literacy skills or cognitive development among children, therefore poor students and students of color enter school less able to meet its intellectual demands. Moreover, it was argued that communities of color neither value education nor are they generally willing to work hard in order to attain it. (Gadsden, 1993; Lee, 2009) In this model, it is the pathology of families of color and not the inefficacy of schools or their neglect by society-at-large that produce persistent disparities in student outcomes and subsequent social and economic stratification. The role of the schools, then, is to mitigate the shortcomings of the community by resocializing students of color and providing them those skills and

competencies that were neglected in their homes. (Hall & Moats, 1999; Lee, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Lewis, et al., 2008)

One of the most popular and persistent instantiations of cultural deficit theorizing is the "culture of poverty" argument. (Harrington, 1962; Lewis, 1969; Payne, 2005) Although originally conceived as a byproduct of the creation and subsequent neglect of segregated enclaves of concentrated poverty and the public policies that constructed and sustained urban black ghettoes, (Harrington, 1962) the "culture of poverty" has transformed into a deracialized and depoliticized explanation of urban school failure, one that locates the blame for poverty and attendant social and structural problems within impoverished communities rather than a society that blithely condones and perpetuates pervasive inequalities based largely on race. (Foley; 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1999) If maladaptive behaviors are a means of coping with and responding to the trauma of intergenerational poverty and historical oppression, it is these characteristics, rather than contemporary structural or institutional racism, that seal the fate of the urban poor; their pathology may be rendered reasonable, but it is nonetheless to blame for their current condition. (Nasir & Hand, 2006) A host of federal and state compensatory education programs, including Head Start and Title I, were constructed on the presumption of cultural deficit as an outcome of poverty; Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" erected not only the high-rise housing projects that Darnell calls home, but also the institutional entrenchment of what Haberman (1991) calls the "pedagogy of poverty," or the pervasive belief that the primary role of urban schools is to remediate deficiency and mitigate the inherent chaos of students' lives. (Gutierrezz & Rogoff; 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2007)

Since the 1970's social scientists have challenged theories of cultural deficit and deprivation, arguing that urban school failure is the result of racist policies and practices (Apple, 1999; Aguirre & Turner, 2009; Bell, 2004; Feagin, 2006; Lewis, et al., 2008; Skrla & Scheurich; 2001), access to material and social resources, including high-quality teachers (Knaus, 2007; Kozol, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2006a, 2007), historical disinvestment in communities of color (Anyon, 1997, 2005), and normative school practices of schools that posit whiteness as the "correct" way of being and knowing while depicting deviation as pathological. (Gadsden, et al., 2009; Guthrie & Hall 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2006b; Lee, 2009; Lewis, et al., 2008; Love, 2010; Spencer, 2008) Despite, or perhaps because of, the growing body of research demonstrating not only that communities of color are not culturally deficient, but also that perceived deficiencies are really the result of gross social inequalities sanctioned by our own ambivalence and complicity, the discourse of deficit has gone underground, cloaking itself in euphemism and the seemingly race-neutral language of "achievement" and "risk".

The alarmist cacophony of voices decrying the so-called "achievement gap" articulates what is implicitly, if covertly, a deficit discourse, the assertion being simply that black students "fail" to perform like white students. (Love, 2010; Valencia, 2010) It is true that profound and persistent disparities do exist;[7] schools, while ostensibly being race-neutral institutions, consistently produce raced results in student outcomes and nearly every indicator of school success can be reliably and relentlessly predicted by race. (Love, 2010) While the "achievement gap" is clearly depicted as a racialized phenomenon, analysis of its causes and formulation of curricular and institutional

[7] In Chicago, for example, 94% of African American fourth graders score "below proficient" in math and 93% do not meet standards in reading. (Lewis, et al, 2008) The U.S. Department of Education (2005) reports a four-year "performance and knowledge gap."

responses tend to obscure issues of race and racism in the lives of students of color. (Hawley & Nieto, 2010) The focus is on academic disparity alone, rather than the social, structural, and institutional contexts in which those disparities are produced. (Ladson-Billings, 2007) There is a presumption that every student has equal access to opportunity and therefore equal opportunity to meet standards, despite ample evidence to the contrary.

While originally posited as a response to a standards movement that ignored systemic inequalities and placed the blame for school failure on students,[8] the ubiquitous term "at risk" has been co-opted to sustain the very arguments that it was originally meant to critique. Margonis (1992) explains:

> "The transformation of the concept *at risk* into a deficit notion has been accomplished as policymakers have conveniently neglected the account of institutional injustice that originally accompanied the term. What was an alternative to deficit thought—a way of blaming institutions rather than victims—has become a new and potentially more resilient version of deficit thinking." (p.344)

The language of "risk" has traveled the same well-worn path trodden by all deficit discourses, locating "risk factors" within the presumed pathology of students, their families, and their cultural communities. For example, Swanson (1991), a self-proclaimed advocate for "at-risk" youth, claims, "Many at-risk students today come from homes that do not have the same reverence for *our* institutions and desire for an education." (p.74, italics added) It is the negligence of families, and the subsequent ambivalence of

[8] The term "at-risk" entered common parlance as a critique of the "Excellence Movement," articulated by the Reagan-era report *The Nation at Risk.* The term originally suggested that it was underserved students in inadequate schools who were being placed at risk by a country that did not equally distribute academic opportunity, rather than a nation imperiled by their academic failure. (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985)

students, that create “risk”. In effect, community membership is posited as a risk in and of itself. (Lee, 2009)

The term “risk” implies a false neutrality; it locates low achievement within individual learners, even as actual risk is constructed within social, institutional, and ideological contexts that consistently produce failure among students whose practices do not align with those of the school. (Lee & Anderson, 2009) Carter and Goodwin (1994) identify risk as an imposition of schools; they claim that, while students are held responsible for the inefficacy of their education, “much of the risk, however, emanates from the schools themselves, and is not inherent in the children themselves.” (p.317) Yet the discourse of “risk” engages an inverse causality, one that isolates the origins of academic failure within the individual rather than examining the structural violence that manufactures risk. (Vasedevan & Campano, 2009)

Like most deficit discourses, “risk” has become a euphemistic technique to reference race while maintaining a colorblind stance of educational egalitarianism. Ladson-Billings (1999) argues that, “being at risk has become synonymous with being a person of color.” (p.218) While it may be true that students of color are quite clearly at risk of being underserved by schools, impacted by structural inequalities, and marginalized by discourses that reify the normative value of whiteness, the rhetoric of “risk” supersedes any attempt to understand the dynamics that render students of color vulnerable in schools and obstructs the possibility of interrupting conditions that impede their success. (Gadsden, et al., 2009) Rather, “risk” has become a means of characterizing students of color in manner that masks their true vulnerability by positioning them outside the bounds of normal/normative development and pathologizing their responses

to disempowering environments. (Lee, 2009; Valencia, 2010) While the social, economic, and institutional challenges presented by structural racism necessarily create vulnerability amongst youth of color, that vulnerability does not signal a weakness in the individual, but rather a strength. The context of the behaviors and the developmental trajectories of youth are ignored, except to locate disparity and risk as individual traits of students in specific cultural communities. Resistance is depicted as deviant and pathological rather than a rational and, in many cases, protective response to structural forces that shape both the existence of risk and the ways in which risk is ascribed to the identities of students. (Gutierrez, et al., 1995; Nasir & Hand, 2006)

Positioning the universality of white experience as a standard for human development ignores the fact that youth of color must engage in traditional developmental tasks while simultaneously addressing the challenges of an inequitable and often inhospitable environment. (Chestang, 1972; Calmore, 1992; Spencer, 2008) The resilience of students, the protective factors that they possess and the coping mechanisms that they engage, represent a space of individual and communal strength rather than limitation. Systems, including schools, that minimize (or in some cases vilify) the protective processes of students, undermine coping mechanisms that produce resilience and injure students while claiming to protect them. (Spencer, 2008) The dissonance embedded in the discourse of risk can potentially provide a generative space in which the skills that students employ while negotiating school environments can be utilized as a resource for academic tasks (Lee, 2009) The inability, or unwillingness, of schools to see students as navigating contexts that put them at risk rather than being individual embodiments of risk, negates the possibility of utilizing or nurturing student

strengths in the classroom and, ironically, elaborates the very real risk to which students of color are subjected in schools.

Schools and teachers contribute to the vulnerability that produces risk and replicates structural inequality. The macrolevel crisis of risk and achievement plays out in the microlevel experiences of students of color in the classroom. (Gadsden, et al., 2009; Spencer, 2008) The salience of "risk factors" in the minds of teachers present a self-fulfilling ascription of identity; by identifying students as being "at risk", teachers shape expectations and interpret students' actions and abilities in ways that lead to different academic trajectories, including tracking, disability labels, and limited access to rigorous curriculum, thus, in effect, constructing risk within students and ensuring its reflection in school outcomes. (Anyon, 1995; Lee & Anderson, 2009; Love, 2010; Oakes, 1985) The persistent internalized bias of teachers and the connections between teacher expectations and student performance are well documented, as is the general unwillingness of teachers to recognize the role of race in their own interactions or the institutional context of the school. (Bowie & Bond, 1994; Ferguson, 1998; Jordan-Irvine, 1990; King, 1991; Marx & Pennington, 2003) The microculture of the classroom mirrors and reproduces structural inequalities as teachers disadvantage students through their interaction, expressing a commitment not to "see" color while constricting the access of students of color to academic success. (Love, 2010; Gadsden, et al., 2009; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jackson, 1968)

Designating students of color "at risk" not only constructs risk through classroom interactions and dead-end academic trajectories, it also disorganizes the identities of students. (Grant, 1984) While discussion of the "oppositional culture" of students of color

(Ogbu, 1981) does not necessarily place the behaviors of marginalized youth in a contextual vacuum, it nonetheless places the onus for dissonance on the shoulders of students. Vesudevan and Campano (2009) explain that students "are blamed for the very conditions that oppress them and are often accorded an inflated and superstitious form of destructive power—they are 'out of control' rather than responding rationally to an inhospitable environment." (p.314) Data seen as corroborating the oppositional stance of youth of color, such as suspension, arrest, and drop-out rates, are often interpreted through an essentialist lens that eclipses structural inequalities (including disparate disciplinary practices) through a language of vilification. (Ferguson, 2000) Institutional interpretations of student resistance create a symbiosis in which student behaviors and identities are criminalized, further elaborating the contextual inequalities that produce pathologized responses. (Solorzano, et al., 2000; Wacquant, 2001) Students of color are aware of the limitations of schooling to alter their social and economic realities and they frequently have fewer structural and situational reasons to engage with institutions that fail to provide them with avenues to success. (D'Amato, 1996; Lee, 2009) Moreover, the contextual inequalities negotiated by students of color outside of the school play out in local classroom settings as students' growing sense of self outside of school is stymied by the limited expectations and constricted identities ascribed by teachers and administrators. (Gutierrez, et al., 1995; Street, 1984) As macrolevel level racial politics express themselves in localized classroom settings, resistance is not an inability to escape the maladaptive practices of an "oppositional" culture, but a rejection of stigmatized identity and a principled protest of overt instantiations of inequality. (D'Amato, 1996; Erickson, 1996)

Darnell is a case and point. Darnell would euphemistically be represented as being "at risk"; in fact, I more often than not heard him (and pretty much all of my students) described in precisely those terms. Yet the absurdity of the misnomer sometimes seems at least tacitly evident even in the minds of those who enact the term to demarcate his identity. If risk serves as anything more than a metaphor, then Darnell is clearly not "at risk"; his risk, in the school sense, has already been realized. Whether risk itself is understood as a personal trait that places him in danger of school failure or as an amalgam of structural and local factors that impede his academic success, a seventeen-year-old who does not read and attends school largely as a condition of his probation is already a product of the risk that his teachers decry as they blithely explain away the decimation of his past and future. While risk may permeate his daily existence outside of school, in the classroom risk merits a past participle: he has been risked…and lost. Whether Darnell has failed at school, as his teachers believe, or whether school has failed him, the failure itself is undeniable and, more than likely, irreversible. Darnell has shifted from being "at risk" (a young black male) to being "a risk" (an oppositional young black male with no avenues available to legitimate success), while his brilliance and potential have long-since been eclipsed by discourses that essentialize his identity through racialized, gendered lenses that myopically concentrate all blame within him and his responses to the myriad risks to which he has actually been subjected, including the self-fulfilling explanatory moniker "at risk." To some extent, the same can be said of most all of my students. Their difference quite literally pathologized, segregated from all accepted avenues to academic and life success, placed in a school where containment is explicitly positioned as the primary educative purpose, my students represent risk gone awry. In an

inversion of the liberal ideals invoked by the rhetoric of risk, it is the seemingly benevolent ascription of risk to their persons that has placed them beyond the systems of care that might mitigate their vulnerability and has afforded them a permanent position at the "bottom of the well." (Bell, 1992)

For Darnell, and for many of my students, hip hop has become a means of navigating the risk to which he has been subjected, of constructing an identity that is not disabled or disordered by the normative perceptions of school authority. Hip hop provides a generative space in which Darnell's person is not pushed to the margins, one in which he can understand himself as competent and recast his identity on his own terms. Ironically, rather than recognizing the intellectual and social resources embedded in Darnell's engagement of hip hop, adults in the school generally see hip hop as contributing those internalized risks that they blame for Darnell's academic failure. Not only do they openly deny its merit and banish hip hop from the classroom, they also allow their own misunderstandings of hip hop culture to project onto Darnell yet another essentialized and marginalized identity: that of gangsta. Even if hip hop has actually helped to get Darnell off the streets and provided a space in which he might reframe his identity in ways that challenge simplistic narratives that cast him as a criminal, teachers nonetheless see it as feeding his oppositionality; they see it as another part of his pathology.

Culture in the Classroom

Sociocultural and sociohistorical theorists recognize that learning is a culturally situated act; it is mediated by cultural tools and bound to the social, historical, and

cultural factors that shape the context in which learning takes place. (Au, 1980, 2006; Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1996; Nasir & Hand, 2006; Rogoff & Lave, 1984) Bruner (1996) explains that "learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting and always dependent upon the utilization of cultural resources." (p.4) Students are enculturated from birth into communities of practice that shape both their psychological processes and their ways of behaving and learning. Cole (1996) states, "When neonates enter the world, they are already the object of adult, culturally conditioned interpretation." (p.183) As youth are socialized into the communities into which they were born, they develop mastery of the cultural repertoires embedded in everyday practices, but not all of the cultural resources available to them are equally valued within the narrowly defined cultural context of the school. (Delpit, 1995; Foley, 1991; Gee, 2004; Lee, 2006) School success, more often then not, reflects the extent to which the cultural repertoires of studentss resemble those of teachers, administrators, policy makers, and other arbiters of institutional norms. Those differences that are the most salient predictors of performance within the classroom are often circumscribed by, or coded as, community membership outside of school. (Gay, 2000; Lewis, et al., 2008; Love, 2010)

It may seem that no amount attention within the confines of a classroom could create the same level of fluency among students who are being introduced to school culture as novices as already exists among students who have been socialized, educated, and trained for participation since birth, nor are classroom practices necessarily intended to alter the power dynamics and distribution of resources that shape the institutional culture of the school. (Giroux, 1993) In fact, the inherent advantages afforded students who enter school versed in school discourses allows the privileging of their prior

socialization to masquerade as meritocracy, in this case educational opportunity. (Beachum & McGray, 2011; Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Lewis, et al., 2008; Love, 2010) Lankshear (1997) argues that "more dominant and powerful social groups are able to define educational culture and the culture of employment in ways that advantage those with discourse histories most like their own and disadvantage those whose discourse histories are different." (p.20) The disparate academic outcomes of students of color and the so-called "achievement gap" evidence the extent to which schools consistently recreate and elaborate existent inequalities outside of schools.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) introduce the idea of cultural capital, suggesting that schools reproduce social and structural inequalities and that this reproduction is mediated by cultural ways of being and doing. Cultural capital that is embodied by culturally situated practices and knowledge are differentially valued by both schools and society therefore "failure" and "success" are socially constructed by the unequal distribution and valuation of capital, rather than by individual difference or deficit. While white, middle-class students are socialized from birth into practices that afford them cultural capital in schools and society, the practices of communities that are neither white nor middle class constrict access to the resources made available by cultural capital. Reproduction of social inequalities in schools is an intentional, if implicit, defense of privilege and access for those who already possess it prior to entering school. Although Bourdieu and Passeron, like most critical theorists, based much of their analysis on the role of social class and its reproduction in educational settings, a number of scholars of color have suggested that whiteness has been constructed as a form of cultural capital and that schools reproduce racial hierarchies while perpetuating white privilege by

marginalizing and devaluing the cultural knowledge and practices of communities of color. (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Yosso, 2006) Moreover, many of these scholars have suggested that discussions of cultural capital in the critical vein have typically ignored the existence of analogous forms of capital within communities of color and particularly the lives of youth of color, for example, the currency that allows them to navigate urban spaces or engage in hip hop culture. (Carter, 2005; Rodriguez, 2009; Yosso, 2005)

Not only are the practices and epistemologies of students of color largely marginalized in school setting, the values and beliefs that shape school culture are also frequently not shared by the communities to which students belong. Dissonance, or home-school mismatch, between the practices of students' cultural communities and those of the school are seldom regarded as an outcome of the privileging of middle-class white culture, but rather seen as an absence of valued practices within the communities from which students come. (Au, 2006; Au & Mason, 1983; Heath, 1983; Phillips, 1983) Opportunity to learn is truncated for students who are not fluent in the discursive practices of the school both because the competencies that they possess are seldom valued within the classroom and because that devaluing often results in a resistance to engage in those activities through which their deficiency is measured. (Jacob & Jordan, 1993; Schultz & Hull, 2002) Not only does the dissonance between home and school culture impact the way in which the school views students, it also impacts the ways in which students view school. (Baszile, 2009) "School ain't shit" isn't simply an utterance of frustration with the school experience mediated through print literacy and white

normative frames, it is also an understanding of Darnell's marginalized identity within the school and an unwillingness to participate in a culture that is disempowering.

Making Culture Invisible

To participants in school culture, particularly teachers and administrators, whose school and home community practices are harmonious and whose primary discourse is privileged within the school because it mirrors the norms of the school (or rather the school mirrors the norms of the community), both the cultural situatedness of those practices and the privilege they confer are typically transparent; it is only through conflict that they become visible. (Delpit, 1995; King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2000b, 2004; Maher & Tetreault, 1997) White teachers' view of themselves as acultural or "normal", compounded by a pervasive commitment to the ethos of colorblindness, allows them to adopt a stance of race transcendence and create classroom environments in which the importance of race and culture are minimized or ignored altogether. (Apple, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lewis, 2003; Obrien, 2003) King (1991) terms this posture "dysconcious racism", an uncritical habit of mind in which the norms of whiteness and the privilege they confer are taken for granted even as they tacitly shape perception of others. Given little personal contact with people of color and limited understanding of culture (theirs or others), adopting a stance of colorblindness protects teachers' ideological justifications of student underperformance as embedded in the characteristics of individual students rather than their own inability to effectively educate youth of color: it allows them not to "see" color even as students of color are failing in their classrooms. (Love, 2010; Maher & Tetreault, 1997; Sleeter, 2003) White teachers' very identity, their

self-perception as “good teachers”, is therefore frequently invested in both the invisibility of race and the maintenance of a deracialized status quo. (King, 1991, Marx & Pennington, 2003) This investment of identity is elaborated by the broader social investment of whites in liberal ideologies of equal opportunity and meritocracy that compel teachers and administrators to deny the importance of race, constructing explanations of disparity that marginalize students of color while leaving institutional practices and classroom interactions largely unexamined. (Duncan, 2002b; Parker & Stovall, 2004)

What little white teachers do know about culture is often suppressed in fidelity to the ideal of the colorblind classroom, while reliance on stereotypes and deficiency discourses preserve their understanding of self as benevolent vessels of academic opportunity. (Marx & Pennington, 2003; Sleeter, 2005) Ladson-Billings (2006b) explains that, while most teachers know little about culture and routinely minimize its importance in classroom interactions, it is nonetheless arbitrarily invoked as a justification of all manner of classroom difficulties with regard to students of color. Culture, which in its usage is almost always racially coded, is afforded broad explanatory power that locates the nexus of academic inequality within students of color rather than the practices of teachers or the institutional culture of the school. The equally racialized rhetoric of risk is also an idiomatic lynchpin in the lexicon of teachers attempting to justify the disparate achievement of students of color. (Gadsden, et al., 2009; Lee & Anderson, 2009) Ladson-Billings (2001) tells us, “So prevalent is the language of at-risk-ness that it is not unusual for urban teachers to define their entire class as at-risk.” (15) Young black males in particular are subject to the ascription of identity reliant on risk and culture as stock

explanations of institutional marginalization and academic failure. (Duncan, 2002b; Ladson-Billings, 2006b)

Deficit Policies and the Narrowing of the Curriculum

The paradoxical omission of culture in classroom practices and its omnipresence in justifications of student underperformance shape not only teacher expectations and interactions, but also instructional and policy responses to the "achievement gap." If Darnell's culture situates him outside the values and norms of the school, then it is certainly not his culture that will provide avenues to academic success, particularly if his culture is rendered invisible except to quantify his difference. Instructional interventions are not in symphony with culture because culture is the enemy; rather, the purpose of instruction is to resocialize students and remediate those characteristics implicitly attributed to culture. (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Valencia, 2010) On the macrolevel of education policy, responses have adopted a similarly deracialized and acultural stance, presenting testing and remediation of students as an appropriate intervention to address institutional inequalities. (Hawley & Nieto, 2010; Lipman, 2003; Ravitch, 2010)

The pervasive omission of issues of race and culture in response disparate achievement implies a false neutrality; it obscures the fact that neither traditional curricula nor the institutional culture of schools are free of culturally and racially contingent values and beliefs. Schools play a critical role in constructing disparate educational opportunities and life outcomes, and therefore serve to reiterate and reproduce systemic inequalities and institutional hierarchies. (Banks, 2005; Giroux, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; McCarthy, 1991) Veiled in a discursive cloak of

colorblindness and meritocracy, schools nonetheless privilege whiteness through curriculum content, classroom practices, and culturally sanctioned ideologies and beliefs. (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Delgado Bernal & Vallalpando, 2002; Gilborn, 2005; Nasir & Hand, 2006) The deceptively neutral language of schooling renders race irrelevant in the construction of educational policies and instructional practices, yet dominant groups continue to determine what knowledge is institutionalized in schools and which practices are posited as standard. (Banks, 2005; Maher & Tefrault, 1997; McCarthy, 1990) The very existence of a demand for multiculturalism and culturally inclusive school practices is evidence of the extent to which dominant school paradigms adhere to a universal and unambiguous focus on content that excludes students of color. Yosso (2002) describes, "traditional school curriculum as having an unacknowledged political agenda, which is implicitly organized to privilege white people." (p.102) This privilege, as well as the structural inequalities that sanction its perpetuation, is buried under a discourses of detachment and impartiality and is largely left unaddressed by curriculum and policy responses to the perceived underperformance of youth of color.

Rather than interrogating the manner in which traditional curricular paradigms reiterate hegemony and devalue non-dominant epistemologies, curriculum reform efforts have tended to propose a narrowing of the curriculum to reflect only the technical dimensions of learning, effectively shutting out the experiential knowledge of students and the potential for cultural responsiveness on the part of teachers. (Gay, 2000; Lipman, 2003; Morrell, 2008) Curriculum reforms designed to address the "achievement gap" are generally embedded in deficit discourses, seeking to remediate students who fail to meet standards by imposing rote and rigid curricula that only serve to ensure students' lack of

preparedness for real academic achievement. (Lipman, 2001; Popkewitz, 2006; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997) These reforms suggest a form of educational triage, attempting to suture the embarrassing implications of vast academic disparities without any fundamental alteration of structural inequalities or understanding of the unrealized potential of youth of color. (Apple, 1999)

National standards movements, and particularly No Child Left Behind (NCLB), have only served to quantify and solidify disparate access to educational opportunity. (Hoover, 1998; Lewis, et al. 2008; Morrell, 2008) Premised on the idea of a level playing field, NCLB presents an implicitly colorblind solution to an explicitly racialized problem. (Hawley & Nieto, 2010) Knaus (2007) argues that NCLB has actually functioned to re-segregate schools while failing to acknowledge or respond to research on the needs of youth of color and limiting teachers ability to act in the best interest of their students. NCLB ignores structural factors and institutional inequalities while muting the role of race in academic outcomes. (Grant, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006a; Leonardo, 2009a) Leonardo (2009a) explains that "NCLB is 'an act of whiteness' and perpetuates the innocence of whiteness as a system of privilege." (p.127) The implicit values and cultural norms embedded in the standards being tested allow students to be sorted on the basis of their compliance with purportedly universally accepted and accessible forms of knowledge. (Hoover, 1998) Moreover, NCLB and standardized testing insist on the normative value of whiteness, depicting deficiency (underperformance) among students who have mastered cultural discourses that are unlike those reflected in the test.

In the classroom, the demands placed on teachers by high-stakes testing not only hold them hostage with respect to curriculum content, but also perpetuate the supposition

that tested knowledge is the only truly valuable knowledge, even if its primacy negates the cultural competencies and knowledge of students. While it may be true that the academic and life success of students of color is largely dependent on their ability to navigate both the official curriculum and systems that privilege epistemologies to which their access has been limited, it is also true that eschewing or denigrating the community-based knowledge of students is not an effective means of acquiring those skills, as amply evidenced by the persistence of the "achievement gap."

Evolution of Praxis

My project takes place within a context, specifically a school, in which the language of risk and the presumption of deficit permeates every aspect of classroom life, particularly instruction. Students are presumed to be incapable, therefore they are treated as incapable, therefore they become incapable, at least of school success. My curriculum and praxis developed as a means of contesting an institutional culture that ambivalently ensured the failure of my students while simultaneously assigning blame to them for the very conditions that disempowered them. The use of hip hop in my classroom evolved as a means of disrupting the self-fulfilling ascription of deficiency and challenging the rote, remedial instructional responses favored by the school and the nation. A number of pedagogical traditions informed the development of my classroom practice with respect to my original research questions. While culturally relevant pedagogy and the Cultural Modeling Framework provided me with a conceptual blueprint for recognizing and utilizing the skills embedded in hip hop as an avenue to access the official curriculum, critical pedagogy and critical race pedagogy helped me to understand how hip hop could

provide a space in which we might critically interrogate inequalities and mobilize identity in ways that challenged deficit assumptions.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy is constructed around the premise that thinking, learning, and ways of knowing are inherently and necessarily culturally situated and that cultural practices represent a resource, rather than an impediment. (Au, 1980; Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1996; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Lee & Majors, 2003) Although traditional instructional paradigms profess cultural neutrality, they nonetheless clearly reflect the values, language, and practices of middle-class white culture and frame underperformance of students of color as deficiency on the part of students rather than a lack of cultural responsiveness on the part of schools. (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Lankshear, 1997) Culturally relevant pedagogy, on the other hand, recognizes the funds of knowledge embedded in the practices of families and communities and attempts to disrupt discontinuity between school and home culture for students of color and its impact on academic achievement. (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2001; Moll, 2010) All students and communities possess intellectual resources and those that are not consonant with the values and practices of the schools are rarely evoked or utilized within the classroom. (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) By identifying the culturally-based knowledge and skills of students of color and inviting diverse discursive practices and epistemologies into the classroom in order to build upon them, culturally relevant pedagogy seeks to contest discourses that depict students of color as deficient while

fostering academic success among groups who have traditionally been marginalized by school practices. (Gay, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995)

Ladson-Billings (1994) describes culturally relevant pedagogy as "an approach to teaching and learning that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes." (p.18) Geneva Gay (2000) explains that culturally responsive teachers must: develop a culturally diverse knowledge base in order to better understand their students; design culturally relevant curricula that reflect the strengths and accomplishments of students of color; demonstrate cultural caring and create a community of learners; and deliver multicultural instruction by matching praxis to the cultural repertoires of students. Ladson-Billings (2001) suggests that culturally relevant pedagogy also needs to develop a sociopolitical consciousness amongst both students and teachers; the challenge to dominant discourses and disempowering institutional contexts must be made explicit in instructional practice in order to foster self-efficacy and critical understanding of structural inequalities among students.

The skills and literate practices enacted by students in their figurative and thematic understanding of hip-hop texts are frequently analogous to those that dominant discourses would have us believe that students of color simply do not and cannot possess. Culturally relevant pedagogy provides a conceptual framework for understanding exactly how and why those skills and competencies can be utilized in the context of schools. Hip-hop in the classroom, if it is not reduced to multicultural tokenism, is inherently a culturally responsive pedagogy. It recognizes the intellectual resources embedded in culturally based epistemologies and it invokes the existent competencies, discursive

practices, and experiential knowledge of students of color as a foundation for academic learning. Critical hip-hop pedagogies also embody Ladson-Billings' (2001) conception of culturally relevant pedagogy as a transformative and liberatory praxis; it not only draws connections between hip hop and canonical knowledge, but it also views hip hop as a space for the development of critical consciousness.

Cultural Modeling Framework

The cultural modeling framework (CMF) was developed by Carol D. Lee as a specific instantiation of culturally relevant pedagogy. The purpose of CMF is to engage the cultural practices and community-based knowledge of students of color in order to address the specific demands of subject matter learning in schools. (Lee, 1992, 1993, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2006, 2007; Lee & Majors, 2003) CMF isolates specific skills utilized in academic tasks and locates analogous skills in the everyday practices of youth of color in order to create a scaffold that will allow ways of thinking and knowing already enacted by students to be generalized to the classroom setting. Lee (2006) explains, "Cultural Modeling requires a detailed analysis of routine everyday practices, examining modes of reasoning, concepts, and habits of mind entailed in everyday problem-solving. The aim is to examine what may be points of synergy and difference between problem-solving in everyday domains and problem-solving within a subject matter." (p.308) Lee particularly focuses on practices in which students engage directly and habitually rather than those with which they are involved only peripherally through contact with adults in their cultural community; she draws upon the reasoning and problem-solving involved in the discursive practices and cultural repertoires of youth in particular.

Although Lee proposes CMF as a means of scaffolding understanding in all subject matter, she focuses primarily on the English classroom and the literary reasoning and literate practice invoked by African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and the African American rhetorical practice of signifyin(g). Lee argues that the word play and double entendre characteristic of AAVE and signifyin(g) are steeped in figurative meaning (metaphor, symbolism, irony) and require precisely the sorts of problem-solving skills that are necessary for rich interpretation and literary analysis in the English classroom. By identifying and isolating those skills of literary interpretation within the cultural repertoires of students, Lee is able to transfer figurative understanding onto canonical texts.

Drawing on her own use of the Fugees song, "The Mask", to teach her students about symbolism, Lee explicitly identifies hip hop as a resource for cultural modeling and culturally relevant pedagogy. (Lee, 2004, 2006, 2007) Locating students' everyday interpretation of hip-hop texts within the broader context of African American literate and rhetorical practices, Lee illustrates the manner in which students' routine interaction with those texts enact the sort of figurative understanding and literary problem-solving required for deep comprehension of the traditional canon.

Freirean Pedagogy

The emancipatory pedagogy of Paulo Freire is consonant in many ways with the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy in that it identifies the language and lived experience of students as the departure point for all learning. "The point," Freire explains, "is to help students gain a rigorous understanding of their historical location so that they

can turn this understanding into knowledge, thus transcending and universalizing it." (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p.385) Freire believes that students will ultimately acquire dominant literacy if they are first taught using the language and experience that is most meaningful to them. (Freire, 1985)

Unlike culturally relevant pedagogy, however, Freirean pedagogy expresses aims that are not solely, or even primarily, academic. Rather, the acquisition of academic learning serves larger emancipatory purposes; students read the word in order to read the world. Freire wants students to investigate their own realities in order to critically understand the dynamics of power and oppression so that they can work to alter those dynamics. He invites dimensions of students' contextual reality into schools in order to help students develop a critical posture and become participants in the process of social change. (Freire, 2006) He believes that it is the duty of the teacher to facilitate the development of critical consciousness (or the process of "conscientization") of their students. He says, "The educator who pretends to be objective and, in doing so, denies the oppressed the political space to develop a critical posture towards the world, particularly the world that has reduced them to half-human object, exploited and dehumanized, is an educator who is complicit with the ideology of the oppressor." (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p.388-389) Freire sees education as an inherently political process that affords participants the possibility of critically interrogating and contesting an unjust social order. Schools exist either to reproduce inequalities or to challenge them.

Freire is critical of traditional pedagogical paradigms, particularly what he terms the "banking model" in which the teacher narrates a static and "objective" reality to students who act as receptacles of the teacher's authoritative knowledge. The scope of

student action is limited to receiving and storing the teacher's deposit. Freire believes that the banking model mirrors the oppressive society in which it exists and serves the purpose of furthering oppression. The teacher is a conduit of the ideology and values of the dominant social class while students are reduced to passive dependents onto whom teachers "project an absolute ignorance." In contrast to the banking model, Freire's pedagogy is based on a dialogic relationship between the student and the teacher, who becomes a facilitator rather than a depositor, as co-investigators of the world. Chief among the dialogic methodologies that Freire proposes is the problem-posing method, in which students and teacher/facilitator: identify and name a social problem, critically analyze the causes of the problem, and locate actionable solutions. (Freire, 1999)

Although culturally relevant pedagogy does provide an implicit critique of the official curriculum and traditional pedagogies' tendency to transmit hegemonic ideologies while reproducing inequalities, its critical lens does not necessarily direct its gaze beyond the walls of the classroom. Nor does it necessarily make its critique visible to students; its primary purpose is to reform inequitable school practices, rather than to help students develop a critical understanding of those practices or empower them to act as agents of change. While Ladson-Billings' (2001) model of culturally relevant pedagogy explicitly connects classroom practices with larger sociopolitical contexts, others (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Lee, 2007) challenge the cultural bigotries that shape official knowledge while largely omitting discussion of race, power dynamics, and structural inequalities from classroom talk.

Much of the transformative potential of hip hop as pedagogy is surrendered if it is not used to provide a space for the development of a critical lens with which to

understand and act upon contextual realities. If it does not assume a critical stance, hip hop pedagogy runs the risk of being reduced to an instructional strategy for marginalized groups that provides no tools with which those groups might challenge their marginalization. Worse yet, it can become what Ladson-Billings (1999) describes as "the 'right strategy or technique' to deal with (read: control) "at-risk" (read: African American) students." (p.22) Hip hop has a long history of documenting and contesting racial and economic inequalities in the U.S. Its value in the classroom is not limited to its rich figurative language or its ability to bridge community-based knowledge and the official curriculum of the school, but also lies in its potential to illuminate and interrogate the social, economic, and political structures that govern students' lives.

Critical Race Pedagogy

Freire himself admits that, despite his ongoing struggle against racial discrimination, much of his work has focused almost exclusively on class as a unifying element of oppressive constructs. Though he acknowledges that analysis of racism cannot be reduced to an interrogation of social class alone, nonetheless race is only one of many bases of oppression. (Freire & Macedo, 1995) Critical race theorists, on the other hand, believe that class analysis in the Marxist tradition, though it may intersect with race, is not an adequate tool to address the systemic and endemic nature of racism in U.S. society and schools. (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Parker & Stovall, 2004; Tate, 1997) Critical theory tends to see racism as an instantiation of class-based oppression; it does not recognize the importance of race independent of class, nor the role of race in class formation and the ways in which race exacerbates class-based inequality. Critical pedagogy does not

explicitly address racism and the operation of white supremacy in schools, nor does it contest the tacit racialized beliefs and practices of teachers. (Parker & Stovall, 2004)

Like critical pedagogy, critical race pedagogy challenges the seemingly neutral practices of schools and the authority of the official curriculum, but its gaze is focused on the role that race plays in social and educational inequality. (Lynn, 1999) Critical race theory explicitly disrupts dominant racialized narratives about merit, intelligence, and deficit in schools while contesting claims of detached objectivity and colorblindness. Critical race pedagogy makes central the stories and experiential knowledge of students of color. Jennings and Lynn (2005) explain that critical race pedagogy explicitly acknowledges the endemic nature of racism and how it influences the power dynamics inherent in schools. It recognizes the intercentricity of race and other oppressive constructs such as class and gender and it advocates for equity in school as requisite for a just society. Critical race pedagogy, like critical pedagogy, is also committed to social justice; it demands not only critical investigation of inequalities, but also action against racialized oppression. (Yosso, 2011)

The invisibility of whiteness as a normative frame, the prevalence of deficit explanations of the underperformance of students of color, and the ideology of colorblindness that pervades urban schools are not challenged by critical pedagogy alone. In my all-black classroom on the Southside of Chicago, the invitation of black cultural epistemologies into the classroom is not a race-neutral choice. Rather, it expresses an understanding that race is important and that the privileging of white discursive practices, epistemologies, and normative frames in schools is vital to the maintenance of inequalities that are largely constructed around race. Although critical pedagogy provides

a framework for challenging oppressive discourses, it does not afford a real understanding of the centrality of race independent of class, nor does it necessarily concern itself with the effective teaching of students of color specifically. In the economic and social apartheid of a hyper-segregated educational system in which the academic outcomes of students of color are routinely subordinate to those of whites, even poor whites, any attempt to address inequality that does not explicitly interrogate the independent role of race in the reproduction of inequality is, quite simply, insufficient.

Hip Hop Pedagogy as Synthesis of Culturally Relevant and Critical Race Pedagogy

Although critical pedagogies and culturally relevant pedagogies are not independently adequate to realize the potential of hip hop in the classroom as a method to both scaffold academic learning and foster critical consciousness, in symphony they provide a framework that imagines hip hop's capacity to disrupt cultural hegemony in schools while simultaneously challenging the structural inequalities that school practices reinforce. Culturally relevant pedagogy and cultural modeling framework present a concrete instructional method that invites the language and cultural epistemologies of students of color into the classroom while challenging ostensibly neutral curriculum and classroom practices that implicitly privilege white ways of knowing and speaking. Critical pedagogy and critical race pedagogy render social and structural critique central to classroom discourse, rather than a peripheral implication of altered praxis. Hip hop pedagogy is a culturally relevant pedagogy in that it utilizes the routine cultural practice of students of color to develop academic competencies, but it must also be a critical

pedagogy if it intends to do anything more that assimilate students to participate in oppressive institutions without providing them the tools or self-efficacy to contest their oppression.

Hip-Hop Research in Education

In recent years, research on hop in education, and hip hop culture more broadly, has begun to take root in academia. Petchauer (2009) identifies three primary heuristic categories in hip-hop research: historical and textual, social commentary, and grounded studies. The first and most prevalent field of hip-hop studies is the historical and textual. Written primarily by academics for an academic audience, the historical and textual heuristic attempts to analyze the sociohistorical evolution of hip-hop culture and the sociolinguistic features of hip-hop practices. (e.g. Bradley, 2009; Dyson, 2001, 2010; Ogbar, 2007; Perry, 2004; Potter, 1995; Rose, 1994, 2008; Smitherman, 1997) Although the historical/textual framework helped to establish hip hop as a legitimate domain of inquiry, it is nonetheless disconnected from the lived experiences of those who engage in hip hop as a cultural practice. The social commentary hermeneutic of hip-hop research generally takes the shape of journalistic documentation of hip hop culture from the perspective of researchers with privileged insider status. (e.g. Asante, 2008; Chang, 2005, 2006; George 1998; Watkins, 2005) Despite providing insight into the lives of those actually immersed in hip-hop culture and the hip-hop industry, social commentary research typically provides no methodological considerations, connections to other bodies of research, or theoretical underpinnings that might augment its ability to shed light on less localized phenomena. The majority of hip-hop research in education falls under the

category of grounded studies. Grounded studies focus on the meaning-making processes of those who engage with hip hop, where significance is derived from participants rather than texts. (e.g. Dimitriadis, 2005; Hill, 2009; Stovall, 2006; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004) Grounded studies bridge the divide between theory and local practice while providing a methodological specificity that allows finding to suggest broader implications.

Hip-hop research in education, frequently conducted by teacher researchers, can be categorized into three distinct, yet frequently intersecting, foci: hip hop as a bridge to academic knowledge, hip hop as a pedagogical space for the development of critical consciousness, and hip hop as a locale of individual and collective identity formation. Generally aligned with the tradition of culturally responsive pedagogy, the use of hip hop as a bridge to canonical knowledge positions hip hop as an intellectual and pedagogical resource in the classroom. When students engage in the production and interpretation of hip-hop texts, they enact skills that are analogous to those required for rich participation in subject areas discourses, therefore educators can build upon the competencies embedded in hip-hop practices in order to foster deeper understanding of academic texts. Hip-hop research that focuses on the transformative potential of hip hop in the development of critical consciousness draws upon the work of critical scholars and critical race scholars to create a pedagogical space in which hip hop serves as a tool to critically interrogate and act upon the world. Researchers whose work centers on the ways in which students make meaning of self and others by mobilizing hip-hop texts in the process of identity formation tend to focus on the experiences of students rather than

the texts themselves, identifying how engagement in text can perform, contest, and reconstruct individual and collective identity.

Hip Hop as a Bridge to Academic Learning

Ernest Morrell and Jeff Duncan-Andrade (Morrell, 2008; Morell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002, 2004) were both English teachers in an urban, Northern California high school when they began to notice students exhibiting precisely the sort of analytical skills that they hoped to develop in their English classrooms when engaging with hip hop outside of school. Designing a poetry unit in their senior AP English course that paired canonical poetry with hip-hop texts (lyrics) that shared either thematic similarities or employed similar literary devices (metaphor, irony, symbolism, etc.), Morrell and Duncan-Andrade hoped to invite students' hip-hop based literate practices into the classroom while creating critical discourses that connected both hip-hop and canonical texts to students' lives. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) designed their hip-hop poetry unit with three objectives in mind: to utilize the students' involvement in hip-hop culture to scaffold critical and analytical skills that they already possess, to provide student with the awareness and confidence necessary to transfer these skills onto the literary canon, and to enable students to critique the messages communicated to them through popular cultural media that permeate their everyday lives. (p.90) Within the unit, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade first located hip hop as a poetic genre within the specific sociohistoric context of postindustrial America. They then paired readings of Elizabethan, Puritan, and Romantic poetry with specific, pre-selected hip-hop texts. Students created justifiable interpretations of the texts and the parallels between them, which they

presented to the class. Students also wrote poetry, conducted poetry readings, and wrote critical essays about a hip-hop song of their choice.

Morrell and Duncan-Andrade found that the unit generated exceptional interpretations of both canonical and hip-hop texts, such as the student who connected Grand Master Flash's "the Message" and T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" as parallel critiques of rapidly decaying societies. They also found that the use of hip hop fostered critical dialogue with texts and allowed students to relate their burgeoning understanding to broader social and historical contexts. Moreover, by linking the reading of poetry to hip hop and students' lived experience, they found that students created powerful and meaningful connections to canonical texts.

A number of other teachers have developed what, with varying degrees of flexibility, amounts to scripted curricula pairing hip-hop texts with traditional classroom tasks. Sitomer and Cirelli's (2004) offering, *Hip Hop Poetry and the Classics*, is essentially a book of worksheets that link pieces of canonical poetry to hip-hop analogues through thematic parallels and language use. The edited volume, *The Hip-Hop Education Guidebook: Volume 1*, (2007) is a collection of lesson plans written almost exclusively by practicing teachers. Ranging in content from Math and English to Social Justice, the lessons typically last a single class session and prescribe both texts and teacher-student interactions.

Hip Hop as a Space for Critical Consciousness

Though frequently generated in classroom settings and still concerned with academic learning, a number of researchers have chosen to focus on the capacity of hip

hop to challenge dominant discourses and to help students develop a critical stance with respect to their social and institutional contexts. As part of a unit in an urban high-school social studies class called Society and Social Inequalities, David Stovall (2006a) conducted six workshops that used hip-hop texts as a springboard for critical discussions of issues that impacted students' lives. Stovall locates the violence, consumerism, and misogyny commonly attributed to the "thugged out" music many of his students prefer as a space for critically investigating oppressive constructs in students' lived experience. During the course of the workshops, Stovall uses teacher-selected lyrics from underground hip-hop artists Black Star, Outkast, and Talib Kweli (Reflection Eternal) paired with the writings of James Baldwin and Howard Zinn to ignite critical discourse around the deceptiveness of depictions of the luxurious lifestyles of hip-hop artists and the parallel deceptions that exist within schools, particularly the omission of the histories and stories of people of color. Stovall explains, "As an alternative to situations that are dehumanizing and depersonalized, the infusion of hip-hop culture can provide the context for students to develop a critical lens in approaching subject matter and its relevance to their daily lives. Hip-hop culture, as relevant to the lives of many high school students, can provide a bridge to ideas and tasks that promote critical understanding." (p.589)

Working with preservice teachers at San Francisco State University, Akom (2009) developed a critical hip hop pedagogy (CHHP) that draws on critical traditions, particularly Freirean pedagogy and critical race pedagogy, in order to construct a pedagogical space in which hip hop is a means of conscientization. In the critical tradition, CHHP is focused on action, not just critique. Akom explains, "CHHP starts from the premise that hip hop is an important lens for socio-political analysis and

representation of marginalized communities, and that youth-driven research on hip hop and popular culture is an instantiation of reading and acting upon the world, that is, critical pedagogy." (p.55) Akom's study looks at two components of a teacher education class at SFSU. The first component was a series of town-hall style interviews called "Inside the Hip Hop Studio" in which prominent artist, activists, and scholars in the hip-hop community participated with an audience of 130 students in debates, performances, and interviews about issues germane to both hip hop and students' future classrooms, particularly race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. The second component of the class was a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project in which students conducted an asset-based community case study using Freire's problem-posing method. Students were then asked to use hip hop to educate the public about the problem that they had studied. Akom found that "the community case study provides students with an opportunity to use hip hop culture to hold a mirror to society: to name problems, to identify relations among problems, and to re-imagine them into new strategies utilizing transformational resistance." (p.62) Runell (2007) also used hip hop with primarily white preservice teachers at the University of Massachusetts in order to critically investigate teachers' racist and sexist assumptions about hip-hop culture and its impact on the lives of students.

Williams (2007) used dialogic Freirean, hip-hop based discussions, or "critical cultural ciphers", to help eight urban high-school seniors construct counternarratives and develop critical consciousness using Freire's problem-posing method. Based on discussions on topics chosen by students related to hip hop, such as violence, misogyny, and drugs, though not related to specific texts, students were asked to define hip hop,

identify specific problems within hip hop, analyze the causes of those problems, and develop actions to address them. Williams found that, although students had difficulties identifying actions that might confront the problems that they had identified, students nonetheless revised and reconstructed their thinking about topics impacting their lives while using hip hop as a critical lens.

Jawanza Kunjufu's (2005) *Hip Hop Street Curriculum*, though essentially a workbook, uses hip-hop culture as a springboard for the critical interrogation of structural racism and vast social inequalities, including the commodification of black youth culture, the decimation of urban communities, the eurocentrism of the official curriculum, and the prevalence of the prison-industrial complex.

Hip Hop and Identity Formation

Several researchers have also investigated the manner in which youth mobilize hip hop in order to perform, contest, and reconstruct personal and group identities. Although Heidi Hallman's (2009) use of hip hop in a Midwestern school for pregnant and parenting teens was explicitly meant to challenge the basic-skills curriculum typically proffered this "at-risk" population, her primary objective was to examine hip hop's capacity to provide the young women a space to contest assumptions and dominant discourses about teen motherhood while re-imagining their own identities and constructing counternarratives. Through journal writing, personal narrative, and poetry writing, Hallman explains that hip hop "assisted [students] in asserting their own agency as teen mothers while critiquing the discourses that framed them as teen mothers." (p.45)

Like Hallman, Marc Lamont Hill's (2009) use of hip hop in the classroom concerned itself with literacy development and critical understanding, but concentrated specifically on the role of hip hop in identity formation. Hill's eighteen-month ethnographic study centered on Hip Hop Lit, an English Literature class that he designed and co-taught at an night school alternative program at an ethnically diverse high school in south Philadelphia. In Hip Hop Lit, hip-hop texts were not used as a bridge to "real" literature, rather hip hop was treated as literature and studied in its own right. Hill organized readings into six themes: Roots of Hip Hop and Literature, Love, Family, "The Hood", Politics, and Despair. At least eight texts were read within each theme, some selected by the teachers and some by the students. Students asked to write and share journals, engage in group reading and reader response, and write a final paper that either analyzed a hip-hop text or presented and described an original hip-hop text that they had composed. Through journal writing, sharing of personal stories, and discussion around provocative texts, Hill's class tackled issues that challenged and re-imagined the identity of both the students and the teachers, including authenticity ("the Real"), vulnerability ("wounded healing"), collective memory, and generational identity. Hill found that hip hop provided a terrain across which students were able to perform, contest, and reconstruct individual and collective identity.

Bronwen Low (2011) documents her experience co-teaching a six-week performance poetry course at a racially diverse urban high school. Spanning two years, Low's study focuses on the negotiation of student identity through participation in a critical hip-hop classroom, or what she refers to as the "operational curriculum" rather than the intentional curriculum of the class. The course, which culminated in a school-

wide poetry slam, utilized the critical consumption and production of hip hop texts to interrogate racialized and gendered identities within the texts, within the school, and within their own lives through self-reflection, poetry/lyric writing, and critical interrogation of the messages embedded in both mainstream and underground hip hop, that is both critiques of systemic racism and the ubiquity of the "n-word" and the "b-word." In a school that marginalized both hip hop culture (through the "moral panic" of teachers and administrators) and youth of color (though teacher expectations and a racialized tracking system), the course also served to "flip school scripts," as white students in the Advanced Placement sections of the course were routinely outperformed by black male students in the non-college-track section, who went on to win the poetry slam each year that the course existed.

Greg Dimitriadis' (2005) four-year ethnographic study of black youth at a Midwestern community center examined the way that youth engage hip hop in identity formation in out-of-school settings. Specifically, Dimitriadis examined the ways that youth mobilize hip hop in order to (re)define themselves and give meaning to their lived experiences. For example, two students at the community center used the music of Dirty South artists to construct an idealized southern heritage that protected them and gave them a sense of history and stability. He also found that the myth that Tupac Shakur survived his 1996 murder was adopted by students as a means of shielding themselves from feelings of vulnerability in their own chaotic and often violent world. Dimitriadis argues that the meaning of these texts is intertwined with the identity of youth and is constructed by them. He says, "Young people have different and distinct relationships with these texts, relationships that are affect-laden and that resonate across many and

multiple dimensions of their lives in ways that textual analysis alone cannot predict." (p.124) The challenge for educators, then, is to re-imagine curriculum to include the meanings that students make in order to negotiate their identities and navigate their worlds.

Critiques

A few researchers have also provided analysis of the limitations of hip hop in the classroom. Bronwen Low (2009) examined the resistance of many teachers and administrators to integrating cultural texts into classroom instruction, an aversion that she feels has largely been neglected by hip-hop educational researchers. When the microphone was cut off by the principal during a hip-hop performance of a pre-approved text at a school talent show, Low viewed it as an opportunity to investigate the "moral panic" that teachers and administrators felt with respect to hip hop. Low found that adults in the school felt discomfort with texts that shifted expertise to their students and challenged accepted norms within the school. Similarly, Rodriguez (2009) found that hip-hop culture, and its immediate association with youth of color, invoked stereotypic images amongst white preservice teachers that led them to negatively judge students, devalue their academic expertise, and essentialize their identities.

Michael Newman (2007) challenged the almost universal tendency of hip-hop educators to use underground, politically progressive hip-hop texts. In his own creative hip-hop course at a high school in Queens, Newman found that students preferred hardcore hip hop, with its consumerist messages and capitalist allegiances, because they saw progressive hip hop as contrary to and critical of their own aspirations for wealth and

social mobility. Baszile (2009) also warns of the perils of co-opting hip-hop culture in the classroom, particularly as a means of accessing the official curriculum. She suggests that hip hop presents a form of counter-curriculum in which students negotiate identity and make meaning in a space that denies the value of their practices and beliefs; by hijacking those processes as avenues of access to the very disempowering practices that they seek to counter, Baszile sees the potential of hip hop decimated as it is forced into a space where identity is necessarily constricted.

Summary

My project bridges the three frames that have characterized research on hip hop in education while expanding on the current literature by: providing detailed literary analysis of hip-hop texts and parallel canonical texts while describing their interaction in the classroom; documenting the implications of hip hop as a critical lens through hip-hop based participatory action research; interrogating the role of original hip-hop composition/production in identity formation; and tracking the long-term impact of hip-hop pedagogy by recounting the stories, as well as the personal and intellectual trajectories, of youth after they have left the hip-hop classroom. While a number of scholars (particularly Ernest Morrell, Jeff Duncan-Andrade, and David Stovall) have documented the intersection of hip hop as a scaffold to literary understanding and a critical lens for interrogating structural inequalities, none have examined the production of hip-hop texts as a means of mobilizing youth identity within the school and larger sociopolitical contexts.

Chapter 4

This Dark Diction:
Language and Literacy in the Classroom

The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to my language. It's terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with books that are less than his own language.

-Toni Morrison, 1981

He said I write what I see
Write to make it right, don't like where I be
I'd like to make it like the sights on TV
Quite the great life, so nice and easy
See, you can still die from that
But it's better than not being alive from straps
Agree? A Mead notebook and a Bic that click when it's pushed

-Lupe Fiasco, "Hip Hop Saved my Life," 2007

At Lincoln, as at innumerable similar apartheid schools, the linguistic and literate practices of youth were not only marginalized within the classroom, but also served as a means of circumscribing their possibility and dictating the quality and content of their school experience. Language and literacy served as gatekeepers to academic knowledge, rationalizing the reproduction of racial hierarchies within schools and, hence, society-at-large while denying students access to intellectual work beyond the "correction" of their linguistic practices and the acquisition of school-sanctioned, print-centric alphabetic literacy. Rather than recognizing, much less recruiting, the repertoires of practice and skills embedded in the linguistic and literate behaviors of students, those behaviors

became descriptors of limited intellectual promise. By engaging the figurative understanding and problem-solving skills enacted in the rich literate lives of youth, hip hop in the classroom not only provides a bridge to the sort of challenging, domain-specific academic discourses routinely denied students of color, it also allows students to (re)imagine and (re)construct themselves as literate beings

Andre

Have I sone crack to you?

Damn
I know it's you, it's gotta be true
I remember your face and you reppin' your crew
I know I done sone you a bag or two.
When I see you walk away
With that crack in your shoe,
I wonder am I the murderer that's killing you.
Is it me be contributing
To all the death in the youth?
Damn could it be true, but what else can I do?
This all I know, selling crack to you
And I wonder who I would be, my possibility
If all this crack weren't on the streets
How is it that this crack lands
In young black brothas hands?
I know it don't come from over here.
Crack cocaine weed amphetamines
I know I don't get this shit from overseas
How about you? Know it ain't me
I ain't the author of the master plan
The master's plan
Wonder if I be playing into the master's hand
But back to the question at hand,
Would I be out here selling nicks and dimes
Committing all these crimes
Or would I be out here making rhymes
If this crack weren't here to consume my time

Have I sold crack to you?

I know it's you, it's got to be true
I remember you from your face and your crew
I know that I've sold you a bag or two.
When I see you walk away
With that crack in your shoe,
I wonder am I the murderer that's killing you.
Am I the one contributing
To all the death in the youth?
Could it be true, but what else can I do?
This is all I know, selling crack to you
And I wonder who I would be, my possibility
If all this crack weren't on the streets
How is it that this crack lands
In young black brothers hands?
I know it doesn't come from over here.
Crack cocaine weed amphetamines
I know I don't get this it from overseas
How about you? I know it isn't me
I'm not the author of the master plan
The master's plan
Wonder if I'm playing into the master's hand
But back to the question at hand,
Would I be out here selling nicks and dimes
Committing all these crimes
Or would I be out here making rhymes
If this crack weren't here to consume my time

In the spring of 2006, two of my students had their poems selected from thousands of entries for publication in a citywide anthology of youth writing. One of the two students so honored, a massive and sweet-natured young man named Andre, had overcome a profound disdain for all things even marginally school-related and in the time that I knew him he had metamorphosed into a self-styled cipher. When I had met him two years earlier, I could barely persuade him to come to class, much less put pen to paper. By the time of the gala release and poetry reading celebrating the student writers, I was collecting flack from fellow teachers lamenting the fact that Dre wouldn't stop writing. A seemingly endless series of notebooks filled with almost painfully precise script would be discovered hidden under his math worksheets or wedged surreptitiously within the pages of a history textbook. Dre's assumption of the identity of writer, his growing commitment to communicating his experiences to the world, may have re-engaged him with school and helped him to re-imagine his own intellectual vistas, yet it was nonetheless frequently dismissed as not only distracting, but also somewhat trivial. "Being a poet won't get him a job," was a common refrain, generally accompanied by some variety of teeth sucking or eye rolling.

Dre himself didn't see his writing as a matter of practicality; he voiced no naïve dreams of emcee super-stardom and he seemed ambivalent about the extent to which his constant interaction with the written word had improved his academic performance more generally. Nonetheless, writing his life had given shape to a more concrete vision for its trajectory, despite what his teachers might say. Two years earlier, Dre would discuss his future in nebulous and largely pessimistic terms, circumscribed by a fairly realistic understanding of the social, economic, and temporal limitations of his occupation as

"hustler." Writing through that identity, discursively situating it within the structural and social contexts that had created and possibly necessitated it, had led Dre to suspect that he was himself the one being hustled. He ceased to subscribe to an identity that he saw as pitting himself against his people and his own possibility and he began to construct a plan for his life that negated what he felt others saw as a foregone conclusion: his desperate decimation of his own community, his imminent incarceration, his early demise. By the time that his poem was published, a few months before his high-school graduation (an achievement that he had long since ceased to anticipate), Dre had already enrolled for the fall in a technical college to become a certified electrician. Despite the apparent impracticality of his poetry, it had led him to a vision for his life that was nothing if not practical; it has allowed him to aspire to a space in which hustlin' was no longer necessary and where he would cease to be anyone's shill.

The publication of Dre's poem served as a sort of personal vindication, particularly with respect to the subject matter and language of the piece selected. Despite its transformative role in his understanding of self, his writing about gangsta identity had been roundly censured as inappropriate. My students and I routinely honed our skills in graphic design by creating brightly colored posters pairing poetry and photography to display in the school's decaying and otherwise barren hallways. When Dre's poem about selling crack, superimposed on a desolate cityscape, was mounted outside my classroom door, complaints from other teachers provoked my principle to order me to take it down. I was told, in no uncertain terms, that it was not to be displayed anywhere in the school, not even in my own room. It wasn't just content that irked everyone, either; it was his language choices. Although the word "shit" was omitted from the poster-version of the

poem, Dre's belligerent insistence on invoking vernacular ("sone", "done sone", "ain't"), despite its consonance with the content, had elicited something of an uproar. "That's not even proper English," I was admonished by a colleague. "What are you teaching these kids, anyway?" When I pointed out that he had also used the subjunctive, a tense that I had never personally heard pass that particular teacher's lips, I was greeted only with a scowl.

In truth, Andre himself had expressed some trepidation about writing in vernacular, even more so when typing his poem he was inundated by a technicolor sea of red and green lines underscoring his fear that his words were not words and the language of the streets was not a language at all. Dre knew perfectly well how to express his ideas in "standard" English, or the Language of Wider Communication (LWC), as Geneva Smitherman (1998a) prefers to call it.[9] He even knew that he was using the subjunctive when he used it and he knew why he was using it: to illuminate the presence of a double consciousness, the philosopher and the hustler, the man he could be and the man he was forced to be. While many of his teachers had at some point read Lisa Delpit's work and ostensibly supported the concept of code switching, Dre's poem exemplified code meshing, which many literacy scholars (and innumerable black authors) suggest as an alternative to code switching. (Campbell, 1994; Graff, 2003; Wardhaugh, 1986; Young, 2007)While code switching builds upon the language of students to acquire mastery in "codes of power" (Delpit, 1995), it nonetheless suggests a fundamental incompatibility between the two registers; one must speak either the language of the home or the

[9] Although standard English is certainly a misnomer in that it implies that the dialect of middle and upper class white Americans is standard and that there is something sub-standard, or at least non-standard, about the language of those who are not white and middle class, I use it here as a common referent to the normative dialect privileged in schools.

language of the school. While code meshing also insists on the acquisition of academic registers (and the utility of AAVE in its attainment), it does not posit the linguistic practices of students as merely a bridge; rather it argues that embedded in those practices are rhetorical skills and means of expression that are lost in standard English. (Graff, 2003) As Toni Morrison suggests, some things can only be said in one's own language. Dre's poem employed the artful integration of routinely segregated codes while, at the same time, aptly illustrating that some stories simply cannot be told in standard English alone.

I was the one who attempted to allay his fears and encourage his language choices, not only because they were the right words, the appropriate words, to express the experience he was communicating and the character he was creating, but also because the language itself had a power and a cadence that was inherently beautiful. I reminded him of the poets that we had read, of Nikki Giovanni and Amiri Baraka, Saul Williams and Kent Forman. Would Gwendolyn Brooks' poem have been as good if it were called *We Are Really Cool*? Were Hurston and Walker mistaken to make Janie and Celie speak in the lyrical and versatile tongues of the linguistic communities from which they were meant to come? Was Toni Morrison wrong when she said that some things could only be expressed in Black English or when James Baldwin (1979) called it "this passion, this skill…this incredible music"? In short, I knowingly and willfully convinced Dre to be true to his art and to the ideas that he wished to convey. So when his poem was met not only with censure but censorship (I was literally told, "This kind of writing has no place in the school"), Dre felt betrayed and I felt that I had unwittingly misled him. I attempted to defend the poem, to describe the thoughtful precision of his linguistic choices. I even,

with Dre's consent, offered to have him recite the poem in "proper" English, to prove that the language was in fact a choice and not necessitated by what was widely perceived as ignorance. Apparently artistic license held little weight in the rigid institutional context of the school and I failed to convince anyone that Dre's choices or my support of them held much merit. The decision stood and the poem was removed.

The experience had been a slap in the face, a startling blow not only to my own understanding of my teaching and my relationship with Dre, but also to his burgeoning conception of his intellectual self and its place within the school. The attack was not simply against the quality of the poem, its artistry, but against Dre's person, his language and his thoughts. The fact that his work was chosen for publication from over 10,000 student entries (as his acceptance letter informed him in a congratulatory tone) seemed an indisputable assertion of its value, a pointed and incontrovertible response to his numerous naysayers. In fact, the teachers who had led the crusade against him were both incredulous and incensed, but were nonetheless muted in the matter. Dre's success, in tandem with the full text of his poem, was commemorated in the school paper and celebrated at a school-wide assembly. With little discussion, the poster was allowed to return to its place in the hallway.

Needless to say, when the editors of the anthology made the decision, unbeknownst to either of us, to "correct" Dre's poem, we were both devastated. On the night of the book release and poetry reading, held at a chic and cavernous coffeehouse in a hip north side neighborhood that Dre had never visited before, there was a barely perceptible current of agitation pulsing under his carefully constructed semblance of serenity. He was meticulously coifed: his Bernie-Mac style mini-fro was freshly lined

and as crisp and smooth as an eggshell, a blindingly white pair of new Air Ones gleamed luminously beneath freshly pressed jeans lined with a ribbon of design echoed in the collar and sleeves of his starched shirt. He had downplayed the importance of the event whenever we discussed it, even as he would whisper hints of hesitation about the prospect of reciting to an audience of what he presumed would be not just white folks, but artsy, intellectual white folks. "It's cool," he would say. "I'ma try to make it out." The appearance of ambivalence was undermined not only by his attire, but also by the entourage that escorted him into the café on the night of the event: a mother, an auntie, a grandmother, two sisters, and a best friend.

"I thought it wasn't a big deal," I teased.

"It's cool," he repeated. "They just wanted to come. I couldn't tell them no." He shrugged his shoulders and smiled nervously. Despite the contrived confidence—shoulders back, head up, an aloof and indifferent gaze as he placidly scanned the crowd—I saw his hand tremble as he placed it on his grandmother's shoulder to introduce us and there was a subtle sheen of perspiration at his temples and above his intermittently quivering lip. "You're gonna be great," I smiled reassuringly. He raised an eyebrow and looked at me like I had lost my mind. "I know. I got this."

I walked with him to the registration table to add his name to the list of poets who would be performing and to procure the five free copies of the anthology that all the young authors received. A normally gregarious Dre barely nodded his head in acknowledgement as the pert young white woman behind the table greeted him enthusiastically. She glanced down at his immaculate signature on the sign-in sheet. "Oh, you're Andre," she chirped eagerly, tilting her head in order to meet Dre's gaze. "I

absolutely love your poem. So powerful!" Again Dre nodded his head, this time managing to muster a timid half-smile. "Thanks," he almost whispered and then looked at her in expectant silence, waiting to see if more talk would be required of him. She continued to smile, but with a flicker of flustered discomfort in her eyes. What does a pert little white woman say to a young black man who writes about dealing drugs? She seemed relieved when the silence was broken by another young poet approaching the table. "Come on," I took Dre's arm. "Let's go show your family the books."

We hadn't even made it back across the room before Dre stopped dead in his tracks. "What is this?" he asked me.

"What do you mean?" I looked over at him and he tilted the open book in my direction, pointing to a line halfway through the table of contents. I craned my neck to see the words: *Have I sold crack to you?…..Page 65*. "What is this shit?" he repeated, pulling the book back and rapidly flipping through the pages. He stopped abruptly, read for a moment, and looked back at me beseechingly. "You knew about this?" It wasn't so much an accusation as an entreaty. His eyes were imploring and his hand was shaking visibly as he held the open book out to me. I scanned the page, slowly shaking my head. I was rendered utterly speechless. I had no idea what to say to him. "It must be a mistake," I meekly murmured, knowing full well that it wasn't. Dre didn't dignify my cop-out with a response. He continued to stare at me, his expression shaped by an increasingly complex aggregate of emotions—anger, disbelief, disappointment—that I found difficult to decipher. What must he be thinking? Of me? Of this place? Of the so-called honor of having his words bastardized, made "acceptable"? "Hold on," I whispered. "I'll fix this,"

knowing that I couldn't even as I was saying that I could. I took the book and headed back to the table.

"Can I help you?" the perennially smiling white girl inquired cheerfully, tilting her head in a way that suddenly seemed more patronizing than pert. "Who are the editors?" I almost yelled, surprising myself with the volume and ferocity of my own voice. "Where are the editors? Are they here?" Her smile slipped away momentarily but was quickly recovered. She opened her smiling mouth to say something, but stuttered. Rather she raised her hand and pointed to a small congregation of middle-aged white folks hovering around the buffet table.

Of course they wouldn't change anything. The only admission that anything ought to be altered was offered after they had already denied the existence of error. They were seemingly apologetic, but their apologies were devoid of content, crafted to placate an inexplicably irate woman wielding a book like a weapon. Startled, confused, scared not by the weight of their mistake, but by the scene I was about to make, they pleasantly, patronizingly, brushed me off. "So sorry. Really we are. But of course there's nothing we can do about it now." By the time that I made my way back to Dre and his family, they were already gone. He didn't come back to school for weeks.

Black Speakers in White Classrooms

In the study of language in school, pupils were made to scoff at the Negro dialect as some peculiar possession of the Negro which they should despise, rather than directed to study the background of this language as a broken-down African tongue—in short, to understand their own linguistic history.

-Carter G. Woodson, 1933

Carry my voice through Queen City
With stories that make the horrible seem pretty
Niggas is Proctor and Gambling with their life
I take my anger, handle it, and channel it through the mic

-Crunch Ex, "Broken Anglish," 2001

I sincerely wish I could say I was shocked by the anthology debacle. Whatever surprise or disillusionment it may have elicited came not from the fact that it happened, but that it had happened outside of school. My own involvement in hip hop, and its aesthetic antecedent spoken word, had somehow convinced me that the inflexible ideologies of the classroom were anathema to the ethos of poetry, to language as art. The fact that the editors of the volume chose Dre's poem at all signaled some appreciation of its literary merit and, I erroneously supposed, an understanding of the narrative and artistic value of his linguistic choices. Not so. It was, after all, a student anthology and the role of student implies a power dynamic that renders youth subject to the authority of adults as arbiters of the worth of their words and ideas. Apparently, the fact that Dre was a student, even if he was someone else's student, required his conformity to conceptions of appropriateness that he never would have conceded had he been given the choice. As a student, of course, he had no choice.

My experience with Andre was neither the first nor the last time that I was forced to grapple with the devastating implications (both personal and pedagogical) of the language ideologies entrenched in schools and the minds of teachers. Not only were my students censured for their use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE, also known as Ebonics, Black English, or Black Vernacular English),[10] but I was also

[10] The term "Ebonics" was introduced by linguist Robert William in the 1970's as an alternative to the more commonly used "Black English" as a means of underscoring its grammatical continuity with African

censured for my unwillingness to censure them, even if my work, my entire praxis, was premised on the belief that my students' linguistic practices were a resource rather than an impediment. The antipathy expressed by teachers towards both AAVE and its community of speakers may reflect the attitudes and bigotries of white society as a whole, but teachers are uniquely positioned to render rational those language ideologies by ensuring the sociopolitical location of AAVE and replicating linguistic hierarchies through instructional practices that disadvantage students who speak "stigmatized dialects." (Godley, et al., 2006)

Much of the deficit discourse of the 1960's was couched in assumptions about the inferiority and undesirability of AAVE and its impact on the cognitive development of black students. (Bereiter & Engleman, 1966; Deutsch, 1967) The compensatory programs of the War on Poverty were largely premised on the belief that AAVE speakers were intellectually stunted by the inadequacy and limited expressive possibility of their home language. (Delpit, 2000) It was further assumed that linguistic deficit implicitly impacted school achievement and could, in fact, explain school failure. (Hess & Shipman, 1965) Of course, the presumed inferiority of AAVE is still alive and well, both in the minds of the general public and the policymakers who serve as the arbiters of institutional norms. The profound and unquestioned universality of these assumptions was perhaps most visible in the uproar elicited by the Oakland Ebonics Resolution of 1996, which simply suggested that Ebonics was a legitimate language and that schools should use this language to build proficiency in standard English. (Perry & Delpit, 1998; Smitherman &

Language Systems, rather than English. Although certainly more accurate from a linguistic and sociopolitical standpoint, "Ebonics" is also steeped in associations with the gross misinterpretation of black language that surrounded the Oakland Ebonics controversy of 1996. (Perry & Delpit, 1998; Smith, 1998; Smitherman, 1998, 1999, 2006) For this reason, I choose to use the term AAVE when referring to the home language of my students.

Cunningham, 1997) Not only did the media misrepresent the meaning of the resolution and roundly condemn Ebonics as a substandard dialect of English, it also invoked a frightening minstrelsy that unabashedly expressed the enduring racism of white America, at least with respect to the language of black folks. “Some momma, she writes me and ax why I don’t write no column in Ebonics,” writes Mike Royko in the Chicago Tribune. “I tell that hoe that be wack because I don’t know how to talk Ebonics,” (cited in O’Neil, 1998) a truth that is obviated by the fact that he both associates Ebonics with slang terms (“hoe” and “wack”) and also fails to follow its most basic grammatical rules. Comedians and pundits alike openly mocked and ridiculed Ebonics in a modern-day metaphorical black face, replete with “I’s be”s , “you’s is”s, and generally stopping just short of “yessuh massa.” Though generally delivered in more diplomatic terms, the cacophony of Ebonics detractors included the voices of America’s most powerful politicians and policymakers; President Clinton referred to Ebonics as “slang,” while then Secretary of Education Richard Riley described it as a “nonstandard form of English.” (Perry, 1998)

Unlike the expansive spectrum of folks who jumped on the Ebonics-bashing bandwagon and regurgitated its racist rhetoric, the Oakland Resolution was based on a broad body of research by linguists and Africanist scholars who had, in fact, established that Ebonics is a distinct, expressively rich, and rule-governed language with phonological, phonetic, morphological, and syntactical roots in West African Language Systems and that treating it as a substandard dialect of English has profound pedagogical consequences for black students. (Delpit & Perry, 1998; Duncan, 1995; Hare, 1973; Smith, 1974; Smitherman, 1973, 1998a, 1998b, 1999, 2006; Turner, 1973; Williams, 1975; Woodson, 1933) While the lexicon of Ebonics is derived from English, its

grammatical structures are descended from Niger-Congo African languages, suggesting that Ebonics is no more a dialect of English than English is a dialect of Latin. (Smith, 1998)

If the mountain of scholarly evidence weren't enough to suggest that AAVE is a coherent, comprehensive, and rule-governed language, its status as such is evidenced by the ease with which its speakers can identify an imposter. As someone who grew up in a majority-black neighborhood and is therefore self-consciously conversant, if not necessarily fluent, in AAVE, the likes of Royko and his ilk attempting to mimic the language were immediately obvious and outlandish to me. I intuited the existence of the rules of AAVE long before I read any research on its syntactical structure primarily because it was always so easy to tell when those rules were being broken. When, in the course of discussing language, the question is posed to my students (as in "You know when white folks be frontin' like they talk like they black?" i.e. iterative "be" and zero copula) it elicits an outpouring of illustrative examples, including a startlingly precise understanding of the specific conventions being violated by white speakers. Although they all know white folks who really *do* talk like they're black (namely the few white folks they know who live or grew up in the black community), they can recognize immediately when that is not the case. There are rules that must be followed and, when they're not, errors are as identifiable as when a foreigner omits a pronoun or jumbles the past perfect.

If we revisit the original version of Dre's poem through the lens of the established syntactical and phonological rules of West African languages (and, hence, Ebonics or AAVE) we find it to be, in almost every sense, canonical and we also find that its

alteration affected not only the cadence and tone of the poem, but also it's meaning. While the word "sone" may be strictly a phonological marker reflecting the absence of consonant clusters in AAVE, the term "done sone" communicates a fundamentally different meaning than the alternative "have sold." Dre's use of the aspectual or iterative "be" indicates habitual or intermittently recurrent action ("I be playing into the master's hands") or a temporal continuity that is lost in its standard English translation ("I am playing into the master's hands"); likewise, "done sone" is aspectual, suggesting that the action was finite and in the remote past, whereas "been sone" would imply a past iterativity possibly continuing to the present, and the English alternative "have sold" communicates no sense of place or duration within the continuum of history. (Green, 2002; Smith, 1974; Smitherman, 1998a, 1998b, 1999) In this sense, a more accurate translation of "I done sone" would be something along the lines of "I did once, at some point in the past, sell", which, of course, smacks of a far more egregious alteration than what the anthology editors certainly saw as simply a minor matter of grammar. Likewise, Dre's use of the zero copula when he writes "This all I know" is consonant with African and AAVE verb structures in which copulative verbs are unnecessary and therefore canonically omitted. Dre's use of the word "brotha" represents both the phonological patterns (postvocalic /r/ deletion and consonant-vowel vocalic patterns) and the socio-cultural African and African American tradition of invoking kinship terms with reference to members of one's community. (Green, 2002; Smith, 1998; Smitherman, 1998a, 1998b, 1999, 2006) Not only did the standard English rendition of Dre's poem transform its meaning in terms of its narrative voice, its inflection and tempo, and its sociopolitical

positionality, but also in terms of its actual import and efficacy. It was, as Dre said, "shit."

When it comes to the question of schools, it's important to draw a distinction between the impact of language itself and the impact of attitudes about language. Despite research confirming the cognitive and linguistic benefits of bilingualism and bi-dialecticalism, including AAVE, and the breadth of the linguistic repertoires and the awareness of code switching among students who maintain their home language while acquiring school language, those students are nonetheless placed at a disadvantage because they are disadvantaged by the beliefs and behaviors of their teachers. (Alim, 2004; Nieto, 2009; Stubbs, 2000; Williams, 1991) Studies of teacher attitudes have documented their negative evaluation of the academic potential and social competence of AAVE speakers, their routine underestimation of the linguistic abilities of those students, their belief in the ungrammaticality and undesirability of AAVE, and their assumptions about the intelligence, family origin, future success, and even morality of students who speak AAVE. (Baugh, 2003; Cazden, 2001; Cross, et al., 2000; Delpit, 2000; Godley, et al., 2006; Lippi-Green, 1997; Smitherman, 2000; Smitherman & Villanueva, 2000) In the estimation of student academic potential, teachers gave precedence to linguistic markers over the presence of actual student work and their evaluation of the same student work was lower even in the absence of linguistic markers if the student was believed to be a speaker of AAVE. (Hudson, 1980; Giles, 1971; Godley, et al, 2006) Cazden's (1988) seminal study showed that white teachers in particular negatively evaluate not only black students' language, but also their discursive style. With all linguistic markers removed, white teachers nonetheless judged the non-linear stories of a black student to be

incoherent and unstructured while black teachers deemed the same story logical and engaging. Moreover, white teachers evaluated the academic potential of the storyteller to be limited while black teachers found her to be exceptionally bright. As Heath (1983) suggests, the "ways with words" of privileged groups are posited as an ideal normative standard for all human expression, while deviation from that standard is read as deficit.

In effect, language has become a form of legitimate prejudice, one that legitimates inequality while shifting the blame from skin color to discursive practice as a euphemism for a sort of hybrid bigotry that references class more explicitly than race and thus cloaks itself in colorblindness, much like the culture of poverty rhetoric. (Perry, 1998) Vershawn Ashanti Young (2007) explains:

> The full achievement of Brown is deferred—because the progress towards making race not matter stopped when the focus shifted from color to performance [of identity]. Thus language, dialect, and accent must now be understood, at least in regard to black people, in the same way that skin color wrongly used to be (and in some cases still is), as outward signs of inward flaws, as verbal manifestations of inherent inferiority, as faults of character. (p.74)

It is the performance of blackness (through speech and discursive practices, among other behaviors and aesthetics) rather than blackness itself that invites censure and provides a deceptively deracialized explanatory model for enduring inequalities.

It isn't only white teachers who subscribe to language ideologies that denigrate African-American linguistic practices. A whole host of black folks (including Maya Angelou, Jesse Jackson, and Al Sharpton) have voiced their objections to the suggestion

that Ebonics has any place in schools. Most notably, or at least most outlandishly, Bill Cosby's ongoing invective against Ebonics (which he calls Igno-Ebonics) illustrates the level of hostility elicited by the Ebonics debate among some members of the black bourgeoisie. His diatribe against what he terms "lower economic people" is startling both in its willingness to dehumanize ghetto dwellers and blame them for their social and economic condition, but also to articulate (and elaborate) the minstrelsy of black speech perpetuated by the white media. In an address delivered to the NAACP in 2004 (ironically, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the *Brown* decision), Cosby rhetorically reduces black youth to the insentient "it" while relentlessly mocking their language and behaviors. "It's standing on the corner. It can't speak English. It doesn't want to speak English. I can't even talk the way these people talk. 'Why you ain't where you is go, ra?' I don't know who these people are." Although Cosby's abhorrence for the ways of black folks of the "lower economic" ilk may be extreme in its rhetoric and misrepresentation, it nonetheless illustrates an ideological divide that is both generational and born from class allegiances.

While members of the Civil Rights generation may feel that young blacks are not holding up their end of the "deal" (as Cosby suggests), the assumption that white society, on the other hand, has delivered on its promise of equality is evidenced only by their own success and admittance into the ranks of the American bourgeoisie. By shifting blame onto the behaviors of the black underclass, rather than acknowledging that the Civil Rights movement benefited some while leaving millions to fester in economic apartheid, the black middle and upper class (like white society more generally) is able to escape any implication in the obvious injustice embodied by the existence of the ghetto. (Young,

2007) Hip-hop culture and the hip-hop generation have shouldered much of the blame for both celebrating black vernacular and supposedly glorifying those behaviors that ostensibly prevent black youth from realizing the American dream. Bill Stephney explains:

> Most of the people who have been opponents of Ebonics are the same ones who have been dismissive of Hip-Hop. There is a segment of the older Black generation, the middle class, civil rights leadership, that is anti-youth. Most of them have no idea if Ebonics works as a method of reaching Black students. But because they are so busy being reactive to anything that mainstream White politicians are against, once again they are not speaking out. And they haven't scratched the surface in understanding how the Hip-Hop Generation views the issue. (quoted in Smitherman, 1997, p.229)

Theresa Perry, (1998) on the other hand, argues that the real reason for the black backlash against Ebonics is that, after the end of the ignominy of black hair, "Black Language is the last uncontested arena of Black shame." (p.6) While language may allow the middle class to distance itself from the "it"s that have been left behind ("I can't even talk the way these people talk") and provide a buffer against the racialized gaze of white America, it also serves as a handy scapegoat, an all-encompassing explanation of the profound limitations of de jure desegregation. (Lippi-Green, 1997)

In my own experience, some of the most sanctimonious and virulent opposition to my use of AAVE as an instructional resource came from black teachers, particularly older black teachers, who seemed to argue not so much its inefficacy as its utter and absolute inappropriateness. While white teachers would frequently tip-toe around the

issue of the inherent inferiority of AAVE, focusing instead on its utility as means of acquiring mainstream linguistic practices, black teachers were generally the only ones willing to openly deride the language of black students, calling it "slang" and "sloppy," "lazy," "incorrect" English. Despite a contingent of black teachers in the school who not only supported my pedagogical choices but also implemented similar practices in their own classrooms, it was this group of black elders who were the first to invoke my whiteness as a criticism of my praxis. Given white folks general sheepishness with or outright evasion of any dialogue around race, "Who does that white girl think she is?" was undoubtedly an utterance intended to elicit deference to their opinion without reference to research (largely conducted by black scholars), my own experience with students, or any of the other black teachers in the school.

Despite the evidence that suggests that curricular approaches that build upon the linguistic practices of black students improve both their academic achievement and their mastery of standard English, teachers continue to view AAVE as inappropriate and unprofitable in school settings and oppose its use as an instructional resource. (Alim, 2005; Ball, 1995; Godley, et al., 2006; Lee, 2007; Moll, 1992; Nieto, 2009) Adopting what Smitherman (1971) describes as an "eradicationist" stance, schools see the language of students of color as an impediment, a burden that must be abandoned for students' own good. (Nieto, 2002; Smitherman, 1971, 1972, 2001) English teachers in particular feel that it is their job to "correct" the language of black students (and more vigilantly than they correct the grammatical errors of students that are not dialect-related), even as those constant corrections stunt the intellectual processes of the students being corrected. (Delpit, 1995, 1998) Moreover, the messages tacitly communicated through the attitudes

and instructional practices of teachers, their insistence on the inherent inferiority of an integral facet of student identity, also impacts the attitude of students towards school. (Delpit, 1995, 1998; Kohl, 1994) Smitherman (2001) explains that, with respect to language, "Many of our students resort to not-learning as a means of resistance; a way to hold on to the one part of themselves that they feel cannot be taken away." (p.230)

It almost goes without saying the damaging effects of the bigoted beliefs of teachers with respect to language and linguistic practices of their students. There exists a voluminous body of research suggesting that students routinely perform to the expectations of their teachers and that lower expectations result in lower performance. (Bowie & Bond, 1994; Ferguson, 2003; Godley, et al., 2006; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) If teachers, and particularly white teachers, consistently underestimate the intellectual capacity and linguistic ability of their black students, the consequences can be catastrophic for those youth, both individually and as a group. The language ideologies embedded in schools, the implicit belief that black speech is inferior, are fundamentally racist from any perspective, but when viewed through the lens of CRT they become far more insidious than is the impact of the aggregate of bigotries of individual teachers. Rather, they are rendered a vehicle for the recreation of racial hierarchies and the maintenance of class stasis, not only within the school, but also within society as a whole. Like all deficit discourses, that of language is self-sustaining, it rationalizes itself; pedagogical responses to beliefs about the sociopolitical location of the linguistic practices of students of color reproduce inequalities that maintain sociopolitical subjugation and therefore justify the beliefs. Schools uncritically adopt what Moll (1992)

describes as "an obsession with speaking English," as if it could eradicate poverty and racism when the obsession itself is a reflection and iteration of social inequalities.

The example of Andre, like innumerable similar stories, is illustrative. Here was a young man who had a disabled identity (ED) ascribed to him due to a disengagement with school that was, in some respects, a response to its denial of his discursive and linguistic practices, at least if anything can be inferred by the role that language played in his subsequent re-engagement. Even as his language became a vehicle for overcoming his "disability," for connecting with school spaces and mastering school content, it was nonetheless censured, not only as undesirable and inappropriate, but also as unprofitable and impractical despite evidence to the contrary. In fact, its impracticality is suggestive of the limited expectations of teachers with respect to Dre's intellectual potential and future prospects. "Being a poet won't get him a job" is indicative not only of the perimeters permitted him in terms of life outcomes (at best, a job) but also his confinement to those jobs in which intellectual virtuosity, or even intelligence, is seen as superfluous.

The Politics of Literacy

> *The debate on the "best" way to teach reading continues to rage. Like clockwork we hear of new techniques and strategies followed by a reprise of alleged tried-and-true methods…However, rarely does this debate ask the question, "Why become literate?"*
>
> *-Gloria Ladson-Billings, 1992b*

If the truth is told, the youth can grow
They learn to survive until they gain control
Nobody says you have to be gangstas, hoes
Read more, learn more, change the globe

-Nas, "I Can," 2002

During the 2005 school year, the year that Darnell was in my junior English class and Andre had his poem published, the students a Lincoln were required to take the ACT for the first time after years of alternative portfolio assessments administered students labeled severely or profoundly disabled prior to NCLB. The previous year had included a test run with the four highest-performing eleventh-graders (performance, in this case, being measured strictly by reading level) that resulted in three scores under 16 and one student who walked out on the second day, never to return to school. Having permanently lost a student to the process the year before, in the weeks leading up to the ACT, in an attempt to contextualize and challenge the sorts of knowledge privileged by standardized tests, my students and I scripted our own assessment, which we called "The Real ACT," to be administered not to fellow students, but rather to teachers. The test, adhering to an ACT-like multiple-choice format, primarily measured mastery of the grammatical structures and lexicon (but not slang) of AAVE: aspectual verb tenses and vocabulary items like "the Amen corner" or "kitchen" (as in the hairline at the nape one's neck). Not surprisingly, many of the teachers in the school refused to take the test; those that did, particularly the white teachers, did not fare terribly well. That being said, despite being somewhat bolstered by the poor performance of their teachers with respect to epistemologies in which they themselves were expert, the ACT experience was nonetheless devastating for a number of my students.

An accommodation afforded special-needs students taking the test was the provision of a reader for those with significant reading delays associated with their disability. Requests for the accommodation were made for some, but by no means all, of our students who qualified, the number limited not by the needs of students but rather the

absence of teachers available to act as readers. The decision of whose disability to accommodate, according to the school's case manager, was made on the basis of student "ability", again measured solely by standardized reading assessments; students whose reading scores were closest to the ceiling for qualification were judged to be the most intelligent and therefore the most likely fare well on the test given the provision of a reader while those with the lowest scores were essentially written of as lost causes and left to fend for themselves. Students with significant cognitive delays who had acquired some level of basic reading proficiency therefore had the test read to them while students like Darnell, who no discernible disability beyond their lack of school-based print literacy, did not. Thus, when the day of the test rolled around that April, I spent two days laboriously reciting the ACT script to an EMH (Educably Mentally Handicapped) student who quietly sobbed for the majority of the twelve hours required to read the test to her, while in an adjoining room Darnell napped next to his unopened test booklet.

Both Andre and Darnell, like almost all of my students, were subject to a litany of labels that largely circumscribed their relationship with school: delinquent, deficient, disabled. The identity that they chose to ascribe to themselves, that of writer, stood in stark contrast to the pervasive stigma and marginalization that accompanied their identification as struggling readers. The term, indifferently applied to both young men without reference to the disparate roots of their "struggle," was conflated with disability in ways that allowed teachers to place them into narrow categories that dictated instruction while positioning success with school-based print literacy as a gatekeeper to all academic knowledge. Both had been placed beyond the bounds of normative school

literacy practices and, therefore, outside of avenues of access to quality instruction or high expectations.

The prevalence of autonomous models of literacy in schools (Street, 1984, 1993, 2002, 2005) that posit reading and writing as a neutral and discrete set of decontextualized mechanistic skills sever connections to authentic academic literacies and meaningful literate practices while justifying the placement of students in what Rose (1985) describes as "scholastic quarantine." (Beach & O'Brien, 2007; Franzak, 2006; Tierney, 2007; Vesudevan & Campano, 2009) Sonia Nieto (2009) explains, "Poor teaching methods and approaches are often institutionalized as what children 'need,' and the result is a watered-down curriculum, a focus on 'basics skills' that never progress to more rigorous standards, and low expectations of students." (p.54) The reductive literacy practices of schools, the myopic attention given the technical dimensions of literacy, deprive marginalized readers of opportunities for meaningful interactions with texts while grossly underestimating their ability and the richness of their own literate lives. (Alvermann, 2001; Johannsen & McCann, 2009; Means & Knapp, 1991; Moje, et al., 2000) Remediation aimed at struggling readers, disconnected from real academic work and the lives of students, results in mispaced, low-quality instruction that not only fails to provide students with authentic contexts for literacy tasks, but also often, understandably, results in disengagement and resistance. (Tatum, 2007)

In the case of Andre and Darnell, as with all of the students at Lincoln, their scholastic quarantine was more or less absolute. Although I hadn't imagined my primary task as an English teacher to be the disconnected delivery of this discrete set of literacy skills, the presumption was precisely that. English as a content area was taught

principally through textoids and worksheets that imagined reading as decoding and comprehension as the extraction of literal meaning while both ignoring and undermining the real purposes of literature. Rather than attending to the role of literature in the development of intellectual and aesthetic versatility or its possibility for enriching understanding of the world, English instruction at Lincoln was limited to basic literacy skills primarily due to the presumption that fluency alone demarcated the confines of student competence. If they couldn't or wouldn't read, then clearly they were incapable of more intellectually demanding tasks, such as meaningfully engaging with challenging texts. For both Dre and Darnell, the remedial focus of instruction was as insulting as it was disengaging. For Darnell, who had an actual, physiological reading disability (dyslexia), years of formulaic phonics instruction had both had no impact on his reading level while confining him to intellectual work that was far below his actual ability level. For Andre, it was this confinement alone, the conflation of disability with literacy, that constructed what was consequently deemed a struggle with the printed word. It was his "reluctance" to read the bullshit being substituted for actual academic work that positioned him as illiterate and in need of further remediation.

Literacy assessment, with its insistence on categorizing and labeling, has borrowed heavily from Special Education's medical model of ability measurement, in which student are organized along a normal distribution with each particular point along the Bell curve accompanied by a specific, all-encompassing identity: proficient or struggling, able or disabled. (Artiles, 1998; Franzak, 2006; Gutierrez, et al., 2009, Klenk & Kibby, 2000) While Special Education paradigms literally pathologize students and locate decontextualized variability within the individual child, the label "struggling

reader", applied to any student (Special Education, ELL, "at-risk") who has failed to demonstrate success with print literacy as defined by the school, also reflects deficit discourses that determine instructional practice and dictate identity within school contexts, while eclipsing students' actual capacities. (Alvermann, 2002; Trent, et al.,1998) Vesudevan and Campano (2009) explain that literacy policies and curricula are "mired in discourses of student deficit and, sometimes, by implication, family and community pathology." (p.313) The etymology of remediation (from the Latin "to remedy" or "cure") is indicative of the ethos that undergirds it, the presumption of individual pathology and the need for compensatory action. As Rose (1985) suggests, literacy instruction in schools represents "an ideology of remediation that carries with it the etymological wisps and traces of disease." (p. 193)

In both Special Education and literacy instruction, the creation of categories that connect access with "ability" serve to mask the politics of exclusion and justify academic apartheid. Disproportionate representation of students of color in Special Education and remedial literacy programs provide quasi-scientific explanations for the recreation of racial hierarchies in schools. With respect to Special Education diagnoses, McDermott, Goldman, and Varenne (2006) suggest that schools subscribe to a "culture as disability" perspective, in which "the ambiguities of racial, ethnic, and linguistic labels and the politically consequential agendas for which the labels are made relevant, and the ties between [disability status] and minority status are intertwined." (p.12) Like Special Education policies, schools' focus on a narrowly-defined literacy agenda devoid of sociopolitical context allows seemingly neutral instructional practices to segregate students largely along racial lines. (Ladson-Billings, 1992a; Morrell, 2008; Prendergast,

2003) Yet literacy in schools and literacy policies directed at schools define what reading is and who counts as a reader in ways that privilege the literate practices of some (namely, white middle-class students) over those of others. (Alvermann, 2001; Giroux, 1992) Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992a) explains, "The literacy message in the United States is decidedly apolitical while at the same time advancing a political agenda that helps maintain the status quo." (p.381) Functional literacy is presented as a panacea for all social ills without interrogation of either how those social ills are reiterated by the ideologies invoked around literacy in schools or who benefits from positioning literacy as the arbiter of academic access. Stuckey (1991) takes this argument further by suggesting that the privileging of school-based literacy is devised to maintain existing social and economic inequality. Class and racial hierarchies can be traversed through the acquisition of mainstream ideas of literacy only insofar as literacy can effectively continue to demarcate class and racial difference. As literacy codifies and legitimates pre-existing stratification, when it ceases to do so (when literacy acquisition ceases to be class and race specific), then literacy can no longer serve as the litmus test for social and economic success. Seeking literacy-based interventions to address social and economic inequality fails to acknowledge the extent to which that inequality itself determines the value of literacy. If every poor, urban student of color were to become highly literate, would literacy continue to serve as the gatekeeper for mainstream success? As Mos Def (1999) would say, "They say they want you successful, but then they make it stressful; you start keepin' pace, they start changin' up the tempo."

Focus on the technical aspects of print literacy serves to exclude not only by serving as a gatekeeper to academic and life success, but also by preempting the

liberatory promise of literacy. While literacy movements in other countries (Brazil, Cuba, Guinae-Bassau, China, Tanzania; see Ladson-Billings, 1992b) have focused on the potential for human uplift inherent in literacy as a tool for social change, failure to ask the question "Literacy for what?" (Ladson-Billings, 1992a) in the US has resulted in policies and instructional practices that disconnect literacy from its possibility to challenge those social arrangements that it purports to remedy. While embedded in power dynamics that extend far beyond the school, mechanistic views of literacy limit the ability of students to act as agents in the alteration of those dynamics. Literacy policies presume the implicit value of narrowly defined, school-sanctioned literacy practices even as those definitions of literacy deny access to legitimate academic discourse and tools for critical understanding. They circumvent the potential of literacy as a vehicle to criticize and rewrite dominant and disempowering scripts. (Alcoff & Mohanty, 2006)

At a school like Lincoln, where the question "Literacy for what?" is rarely posed with respect to the purposes of the printed word in the intellectual life of anyone, much less its potential to enact social change, there is very little evidence of that Gee (1990, 1999, 2000) terms the "social turn" in literacy research. The school, and many others like it, continues to construct illiteracy within students and construct school experiences around illiteracy, organizing instruction in ways that make students look like failures then blaming that failure on them. While schools may reduce the literate identity of students to quantifiable measures of mastery of discrete, technical skills, literacy researchers have long argued that literacy is contextual, culturally mediated, and embedded in social practice. (Alvermann, 2001, 2002; Alvermann & McLean, 2007; Gutierrez, 2001; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Heath, 1983; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Majors, et al., 2009;

Street, 1995, 2003; Vesudevan & Campano, 2009) Based on a body of research documenting the local literate practices of communities and the socialization into different types of interaction with text (Heath, 1983; Ochs, 1988; Scribner & Cole, 1973, 1978; Street, 1984), New Literacy Studies (NLS) challenges the homogenous and static view of literacy enacted in schools by arguing that literacy is embedded in the social, cultural, historical, and political milieu in which meaning making occurs and is mobilized in different ways by different communities across multiple contexts. (Gadsden, 1993; Gee, 1999, 2000; Gutierrez, et al., 2009; Street, 1995, 1998; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1989) Moreover, NLS scholars suggest that literacies are embedded in social hierarchies and that school literacy (or schooled literacy) is inherently ideological, privileging the literate practices of dominant communities while dismissing the culturally situated literacies of others as either inferior or non-existent. (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gee, 1990; Graff; 1987; Leander & Zacher, 2007; Moje, 2000; Street, 1993, 2003)

Despite the ascription of literate (or illiterate) identity within the school, both Dre and Darnell evidence the ways in which youth engage texts in order to construct themselves as literate beings outside of the classroom. A growing corpus of research documents the ways in which youth enact literate practices for their own purposes and participate in out-of-school literacy activities. (Alim, 2007; Hill, 2009; Kirkland, 2007, 2008; Kinloch, 2007; Knobel, 1999; Lewis & Del Valle, 2009; Mahiri, 2004; Morrell, 2008; Moje, 2000, 2002) As Hinchman (2007) explains, "Most youth are able to enact situated literacies that serve them within the contexts that they find most important." (p.121) Despite Dre and Darnell's voluntary and purposeful participation in literate activities outside of school, those skills and competencies were not only not recruited in

the execution of academic tasks, they were also frequently seen as anathema to the goals of education. Narrow, school-sanctioned definitions of literacy disregard the richness and vitality of the literate lives of youth while positioning their practices as beyond the frames and norms of school. (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Moje, 2002; Tierney, 2007) In the case of hip hop, youth literacy practices are even positioned as a threat to those norms. (Low, 2011; Moje, 2000; Vesudevan & Campano, 2009)

Despite institutional contexts that invoke what Dyson (2003) refers to as "the nothing assumption," or the widely-held belief that students enter school with little or no relevant knowledge, scholarship on out-of-school literacy practices suggests that students, even those deemed disabled or struggling, enact precisely those problem-solving skills required in the English classroom within their own situated literacies. (Alvermann, 2001; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Lee, 2007; Majors, et al., 2009; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002, 2004) By building upon students' repertoires of practice and creating what Moje (2002, 2004) and Gutierrez (2008a, 2008b) describe as a "third space", a hybrid framework that recruits the competencies of students and grounds instruction in their funds of knowledge, teachers can effectively bridge the divide between in-school and out-of-school literacies while validating the literate identities of youth. (Hinchman, 2001; Leander & Zacher, 2007; Moje, et al., 2004; Smagorinsky, 2001) Franzak (2006) explains, "It is this space, where teachers foster students' critical awareness of their own literacies and link them to school-based practices, that we have the best chance of engaging students who resist response-based pedagogy." (p.223-224) Moreover, by inviting the literate practices of youth into the classroom, we can construct

spaces in which limited conceptions of what literacy means no longer serve to circumscribe the intellectual possibility of our students.

Hip Hop and Cultural Modeling

As discussed in Chapter 3, Carol D. Lee introduces the Cultural Modeling Framework as a means of engaging the community-based literacies and linguistic repertoires of students whose primary discourses are not consonant with the discursive practices of schools. (Lee, 2007, 2006, 2004, 2000, 1998, 1993, 1992; Lee & Majors, 2003) Although a number of scholars have developed pedagogical frameworks designed to build upon the knowledge and existent competencies of students as a bridge to school-sanctioned content, CMF is unique both in that it provides a model for domain-specific (in this case, English/Language Arts) scaffolding and in that it explicitly draws upon the everyday practices of youth themselves, rather than the practices of adults in which students may be only peripherally involved. CMF identifies the problem-solving strategies at work in the everyday vernacular and literate practices of youth and maps those strategies onto domain-specific modes of reasoning embedded in academic discourses. In Lee's cultural modeling classroom, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and particularly the rhetorical practice of signifyin(g), serves as a scaffolding for the reading of canonical texts. Lee argues that students' implicit understanding of the figurative meanings embedded in AAVE and signifyin(g) engages competencies analogous to those enacted in school-based literary analysis.

According to Lee (1998), literary reasoning requires an understanding of the multiple (non-literal) and obscured meanings evident in literature, the historical stance of

texts, intra- and inter-textual connections, and the creation of themes that communicate "scripts of human experience." (p.132) AAVE and signifyin(g) instantiate literary reasoning and interpretive problem-solving because of their wealth of word-play and figurative meaning as well as their location within African American oral tradition and, subsequently, the written analog of African American literature. The tacit understanding of youth embedded in their participation in culturally-based literate and linguistic practices represent what Lee (2007) describes as "cultural data sets," artifacts and modes of reasoning with which students themselves are expert, often more so than teachers. When the problem-solving invoked within cultural data sets is mapped onto analogous domain-specific interpretive problems, students are not only more able to meet the demands of discipline-specific tasks by drawing on their own expertise and repertoires of practice, but they are also more equipped to apply those strategies and skills across multiple contexts.

Through its use of vernacular as both a rhetorical structure and a socio-political stance, hip hop exemplifies not only the figurative and historical meanings of AAVE and signifyin(g), but also creates a unique discourse with its own normative techniques and specific invitation to literary reasoning. Like AAVE and for many of the same reasons, hip hop can serve as a classroom resource within a cultural modeling framework: it is steeped in figurative language and frames the literary reasoning of students conversant in the discourse of hip hop, either as experts or novices. The textual (both lyrical and musical) composition of hip hop is an expression of multiple registers of situated meaning embedded in the African American literary tradition and the construction of contemporary black urban identity.

By inviting the linguistic and literate practices of youth into the English classroom, hip hop challenges deficit discourses that ascribe non-literate identities to youth of color and limit their access to legitimate academic discourses. It recognizes the vitality and richness of the literate lives of youth while constructing bridges to the codes of power that elude them in instructional practices that demean and dismiss their intellectual potential. By recruiting the tacit knowledge embedded in everyday practices, hip hop creates a space of possibility in which students not only experience the possibility of realizing the relevance and salience of literature as an intellectual domain, but also to re-envision their relationship with school and their identities as literate and learned beings.

Chapter 5

Knowledge Rain Down in Buckets:
Hip Hop as Literature

Well now you're forced to listen to the teacher and the lesson
Class is in session so you can stop guessin
If this is a tape or a written down memo
See I am a professional, this is not a demo
In fact call it a lecture, a visual picture
Sort of a poetic and rhythm-like mixture

-Boogie Down Productions, "Poetry," 1987

The use of hip hop as a scaffold for literary reasoning in the English/Language Arts classroom requires both an appreciation of the literary aspects of hip hop and the skills embedded in figurative understanding of hip-hop texts in order to map those skills onto domain-specific academic tasks. It certainly also requires a recognition of the purposes of literature that extends beyond rote comprehension and literal understanding of basic plotlines. At many urban schools, and certainly at Lincoln, literature is treated not as a means of enriching one's understanding of the world or nurturing intellectual virtuosity, but as a vehicle for the acquisition of print fluency. While the use of hip-hop texts, as with any textual interaction, may improve fluency and basic comprehension, its true promise, as Lee suggests, lies in its ability to enact literary reasoning and illuminate themes of human experience. Bradley (2009) explains that, "More than any other contemporary form of linguistic expression, rap plays with words in ways that jar us from our settled sense of reality, opening up new ways of seeing and feeling." (89) It is this generative space, the interpretive terrain between the literal and the figurative, that allows

both hip hop and literature to expand intellectual possibility and transcend simplistic readings of reality.

Signifyin(g) the Rhyme

Way, way down, in the ghetto Tee
The badass pimp stepped on the signifyin' rapper's feet
And the rapper said, Nigga can't you see
You're standin' on my motherfucking feet?

-Schoolly D, "Signifying Rapper", 1988

Lee's focus on the rhetorical practice of signifyin(g) is informative if only because hip hop is, in every way, an artistic form steeped in signification. Signifyin(g) is often described, or circumscribed, as the African American technique of competitive insult, baiting and boasting, most frequently associated with the dozens or playing the dozens. The dozens, however, are only the most visible or oft cited example of a broader rhetorical schema constructed around word play, figurative language, and subaltern meanings that shapes a literary and vernacular continuum from pre-diasporic oral traditions to the Harlem Renaissance to hip hop, the most contemporary manifestation of signification. Gates (1988) traces signification to its diasporic roots in order to broaden its definition to encompass black rhetoric more generally. He says, "Signifyin(g) is the black trope of tropes, the figure for black rhetorical figures." (p. 51) Signification represents a rhetorical framework through which the figurative forms and meanings of African American literary and vernacular traditions, including hip hop, can be situated and understood both as literary expression and as representation of social, political, and historical process.

Signifyin(g) is defined by its subtext and multiple meanings/readings; it is the art of obfuscation and double-entendre. In that it is inherently, often entirely, figurative, it requires complex literary reasoning to be rendered fully coherent. Like canonical forms (the dozens, toasts, etc.), hip hop encompasses all of Geneva Smitherman's (1997) eight features of signification:

1. Indirection, circumlocution
2. Metaphorical-imagistic
3. Humorous, ironic
4. Rhythmic fluence and sound
5. Teachy but not preachy
6. Directed at a person or persons usually present in the situational context
7. Punning, play on words
8. Introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected

The figurative nature of signification is located in its role as a discursive space of black resistance to the disempowering norms of dominant culture. Even the term "signification", a pun on the white word "signification" or naming/meaning, is a subversion of these norms through wordplay. The figurative understanding of that which is signified represents a subaltern semiotics through which dominant linguistic norms are appropriated and recontextualized. Gates (1988) explains, "By supplanting the received terms associated concept, the black vernacular tradition created a homonymic pun of the profoundest sort, thereby marking its sense of difference from the rest of the English community of speakers." (p. 47) By signifyin(g) against meanings and conventions that

are assigned by and privilege white speakers, signification creates a space in which the figurative becomes subversive.

Hip hop represents an instantiation of signification, located within African American rhetorical traditions both through its use of the rich figurative wordplay characteristic of signifyin(g) and also through its appropriation and reconstruction of dominant scripts. Potter (1995) explains, "Signifyin(g), briefly put, is both the trope of pastiche and a pastiche of tropes, and its most central trope is that of the sly exchange of the literal for the figurative, and hip hop is its most profound and lively incarnation." (p.18) Hip Hop composition employs the art of signifying not only lyrically, but also musically. In that signifying is a deconstruction and reconstruction of text, Hip hop is musical signification; the deejay deconstructs the musical canon to create new meaning, engaging other texts and traditions, using artifacts of cultural discourse as reference and response for reinterpretation. Bradley (2009) explains, "Born of pastiche, rap instrumentals often assemble something new out of the discarded fragments of other songs, shaping order out of chaos." (p.146) Likewise, Dyson (2007) describes hip hop as the musical equivalent of chitterlings, where scraps cast off by the dominant culture form the basis of the creation of a rich and novel cuisine and cultural consumption is transformed into culture production through ingenuity and appropriation. In this sense, hip hop not only exemplifies signifying as a rhetorical structure, it *is* signifying: it is an act of recontextualization. (Perry, 2004)

Lyrical content in hip hop also recontentextualizes canonical scripts; it engages other texts and exploits stereotypes in order to critically reconstruct meaning and respond to disempowering texts. Flippin(g) the script is an archetypal example of signification.

Rose (1994) states that "Sampling in rap music is a process of cultural literacy and intertextual reference." (p. 89) Like sampling, flippin(g) the script is inherently inter-textual: it reinterprets existent or historical texts and discourses in the construction of novel and often subversive scripts. Forman (2002) explains that "rap artists are actively and intentionally involved in what might be termed discursive bricolage, enacted through the accumulation of fragments and shards from an array of social discourses and stylistic elements of pop culture." (p. 11) By engaging, appropriating, and reinterpreting varied discourses, hip hop not only makes dominant scripts legible, it also challenges and re-envisions them; it creates a space in which students can construct meaning over and against canonical texts. (Potter, 1995)

Figurative Language in Hip Hop

I bomb atomically
Socrates' philosophies and hypotheses
Can't define how I be droppin' these mockeries
Lyrically perform armed robbery

-Inspectah Deck with Wu-Tang, "Triumph", 1997

My metaphors are dirty like herpes, but harder to catch

-Immortal Technique, "Industrial Revolution", 2003

Although signifyin(g) creates a rhetorical umbrella beneath which hip hop finds common ground with Afrodiasporic oral and literary traditions, the text structure, normative techniques, and literary forms of hip hop are unique both because of its specific enactment of figurative language and because of the distinct social, political,

geographical, and socioeconomic stance that it represents. (Dimitriadis, 2005) Hip hop composition employs multiple text structures and a litany of literary forms, including: metaphor and simile, symbolism, homonymic/homophonic, pun, allegory/conceit, personification, irony/satire, epithet/kenning, alliteration/assonance, onomatopoeia, anaphora/epistophe, acrostic/acronymic, and signification through literal and non-literal constructions of authenticity, or the "Real" (as in "keeping it real").

Metaphor and simile in hip hop are figurative in a canonical sense, but they are also transcendent; they have the ability to "transform and expand the universe in which the MC dwells". (Perry, 2004, p. 65) As metaphor allows the emcee to transcend his environs, it allows the listener to transcend the literal understanding of the prevalent themes of hip-hop discourse, particularly the black urban experience. Thus hip hop provides both community-based text through which discipline-specific academic reasoning is practiced and it also reifies the ability of literary reasoning to impact understanding of everyday life through the critical and transformative reading of environment.

Despite ubiquitous reference to the use of metaphor in the rhymes of hip-hop emcees, its presence is far less common than simile, which is the bread and butter of hip hop poetry. Isolated examples, such as Lil'Wayne (2011) saying, "I'm in hell's kitchen with an apron and a hairnet," certainly do exist, but more common are complex, extended metaphors that rely on other literary devices (homonyms and puns in particular) in the construction of figurative meaning. For example, In J-Live's (2001) battle rhyme "School's In" the use of straightforward metaphor with identifiable tenor and vehicle ("My words are wet with crystal clear wisdom so they glisten" and "This is the direction

that my pen should be draggin' to transform your dollar cabs into bandwagons") are built into the broader metaphor of schooling his foe, which gives sense and coherence to the text as a whole. Simile in hip hop, like metaphor, is both straightforward, as when Tajai (1993) rhymes, "I flip the script like a dyslexic actor", and also embedded within broader figurative meaning. When Jean Grae (2002b) spits, "I'm like a bundle of dough in a knot/ In a purse under your cot/ Undiscovered lines like connecting the dots," the series of seemingly simplistic similes are rendered legible through understanding of the text as a verbal assault on a misogynistic and materialistic music industry. The overarching trope becomes the underappreciated value of her knowledge and skills ("a bundle of dough in a knot") as a counterpoint to the material wealth heaped on lesser emcees. When she says, "I'm illuminating like a thousand frozen wrists in the glint of the sun," the broader trope affords multiple readings, not only the easily legible interpretation of the strength of her illumination, but also its relationship to the culture of bling that she criticizes.

The ambiguity of simile and metaphor, the interpretive space that exists between the tenor and the vehicle, is often bridged through the cultural knowledge shared by the emcee and a particular audience. Without understanding of these referents ("flip the script," "frozen wrists"), the rhymes are rendered relatively simplistic and frequently even incoherent. While the familiarity of this cultural lexicon may render students of color far more adept at deconstructing the figurative meanings embedded in hip hop, its relative inaccessibility to the culturally ill-versed is largely responsible for the mistaking of figurative for literal (particular with respect to gangsta identity) that has garnered hip-hop culture such censure, a fact that I will touch on at length later in this chapter.

As in the African-American literary tradition and the Western canon, allegory in hip hop, or its poetic analogue conceit, unveils idiosyncrasies and explicates overarching themes of human experience. Allegory is home to the "big lies" and narrative exaggeration of the hyperbolic emcee, but it also a space of textual resistance; it engages literal or (stereo)typical depictions of reality and identity and undermines them by creating subaltern, and often subversive, counter-text. Tricia Rose (1994) explains, "Rap music is, in many ways, a hidden transcript. Among other things, it uses cloaked speech and disguised cultural code to comment on and challenge current power inequalities… a large and significant element in rap's discursive territory is engaged in symbolic and ideological warfare with institutions and groups that symbolically, ideologically, and materially oppress African Americans." (p. 100-101) This is nowhere more evident than in metaphorical and allegorical representations of the ghetto, which in the popular imagination exists outside of the sociopolitical contexts that constructed it. A common trope in hip hop, frequently elaborated into conceit, is the metaphorical analogy of slavery and the middle passage to contemporary urban existence. The comparison, figuratively wrought, demarcates continuity with afrodiasporic literary forms and experience while challenging representations of ghetto life that do not attend to the impact of systemic and endemic racism. The analogy is most often expressed through distinct instances of metaphor and simile, as when Immortal Technique (2003b) spits, "The subway stays packed like a multicultural slave ship/ It's rush hour, 2:30 to 8 non stoppin'/ And people coming home after corporate sharecropping," or when Talib Kweli (2000a) rhymes, "These cats drink champagne and toast to death and pain/ Like slaves on a ship talkin' about who got the flyest chain." The trope also plays out across entire texts

as allegory or conceit, as in Kweli's (2000a) "Africa Dream" or Jean Grae's (2008) "The Time Is Now." Grae's rhyme is illustrative of the ways in which conceit, expressed across the homophonic terrain of hip-hop poetics, elaborates the relationship between tenor (in this case, contemporary black America) and vehicle (slavery) in ways that construct a conceptual complexity with multiple registers. She spits:

Blacker than a boatload of Africans

Or rather like them

This struggle, we can't win

Back bent over 'til it slacks and cracks

Can't hustle harder

I'm like my father

Only in denial, though

My mother is like, 'I know"

And my brother is quiet so

I fight further

'Til I type murder

Family cycles will fly further

Than expected

Beyond contextualizing murder metaphors (which I will discuss at length later in this chapter) within the historical discourse of African American struggle, the conceit, continued throughout the entire song, not only underscores the similarities between slavery and contemporary black existence, but also constructs a continuum played out across generational divides. In his track "New World Water", Mos Def (1999c) also

employs slave metaphors ("Fools done upset Old Man River/ Made him carry slave ships and fed him dead niggas"), but within a conceit that posits water as a metaphor for neocolonialism and global oppression, drawing connections not only between slavery and contemporary injustice in America, but also between the policies and ideologies that subjugate people of color both locally and internationally.

Another common thread in hip-hop allegory or conceit is the use of personification to recontextualize the role of the tenor within the metaphorical relationship. Two obvious examples of this are Nas' (1996) "I Gave You Power," in which he rhymes from the point of view of a gun, and Common's (1994) classic "I Used to Love H.E.R.," in which his straightforward narrative about a turbulent relationship with a woman serves as an allegory for the evolution of hip hop. In both cases, figurative reading both transforms understanding of the text and creates a space in which the tenor (guns and hip hop) is re-envisioned through the ambiguity and possibility presented by metaphorical comparison.

Carol Lee (2007) specifically points to the Fugee's track "The Mask" as an example of symbolism in hip hop, and one that she uses in her own English classroom to scaffold figurative reasoning in the interpretation of symbols in canonical texts. Hip hop is rife with symbolism, often embedded within metaphor or conceit in ways that both elaborate analogies and provide clues to the multiple meanings of figurative texts. Mos Def's water and Nas' gun, for example, become symbols for entire ideologies (neocolonialism and gangstaism, respectively), where understanding of those ideologies is enriched by symbolic representation while the symbol simultaneously shapes understanding of the metaphor. Chains, independent of broader slave metaphors,

symbolize a continuity of black struggle and serve as a referent to historical racism. Tupac's rose that grew from concrete (taken up by other emcees) invokes the immense potential of a people placed in an environment devoid of sustenance.

Hip-hop texts employ every literary device characteristic of canonical poetry: clearly rhyme schemes and rhythmic patterns, but also assonance and alliteration, homonyms and homophones (for example, J-Dilla's "So fly get pest control"), puns, anaphora and epistophe (Jeru the Damaja's "Kick Rocks" or Zion-I's "How Many Times"), onomatopoeia (KRS-One's "Woot! Woot! That's the sound of the police" or Talib Kweli's "Co Coi Coi Clak Clak Clak"), and acronyms and acrostics (Wu-Tang's "C.R.E.A.M."). It also employs literary forms that are more characteristic of what is generally considered prose. Certainly metaphor and symbolism shape figurative understanding of much school-sanctioned fiction, but other forms employed by hip-hop texts also mirror canonical texts and inform multiple readings. Use of epithets (naming) and kenning (the use of compound phrases as adjectives) in both hip hop and epic poetry, for example, helped to shape my students' understanding of the construction of good and evil, of hero and villain, in our reading of *Beowulf*, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Text Structure

Once upon a time not long ago
When people wore pajamas and lived life slow

-Slick Rick, "Children's Story", 1988

In this journey you're the journal, I'm the journalist

-Talib Kweli, "Eternalists", 2000b

Figurative language in hip hop is played out across distinct text structures that lend coherence and purpose to literary elements while mirroring or diverging from the structures that shape school-sanctioned texts. Imani Perry (2004) identifies four forms or structures of hip-hop storytelling, each rooted in African American oral/literary tradition: narrative, exhortation/proclamation, description, and battle.

The narrative form is chronologically linear and is exemplified by the fantastic yarn of the imaginative emcee (for example, All Natural's "50 Years), the morality tale of the conscious emcee (Grandmaster Flash's "The Message"), and the street documentary of the real emcee (Ice Cube's "It Was a Good Day"). The emcee as narrator is a post-modern African griot, historically situated in the tradition of Dolomite and Brer Rabbit.[11] In Hip Hop, narrative is a source of education and edification, but it also communicates the shared identity of emcee and hip-hop head. The narrative form closely mirrors the traditional plot structure and character development of typical Western canonical texts.

The exhortation/proclamation form is most often associated with boasts and toasts of the arrogant emcee, exhorting his own skills and lyrical dexterity while simultaneously wreaking havoc on a specific competitor or a general type, such as the ubiquitous wack emcee. Murder metaphors that were later reified into murder narratives have their origins in the verbal hyperbole of the exhortation. The form is also responsible for the broadly held sentiment that hip hop talks about nothing. If exhortation organizes and gives sense to the text related to the form, then it is only through an understanding of the form that

[11] The connection between the African poet/historian/musician and contemporary Hip Hop (and before that toasts, carried from Jamaica to the South Bronx via the person of Kool Herc) is well-documented, and explicitly referenced by a number of artists (the emcee Griot, the album "Innercity Griots", etc.); Dolomite and Br'er Rabbit, along with the Signifying Monkey, in the African American storytelling tradition that descends from West African griots, are the wily tricksters who use their wits and verbal skills to defeat and frequently humiliate their enemies.

the text is truly coherent. Perry (2004) explains that lyrical content of the exhortation/proclamation "only loosely centers around a general theme and allows the author, through the use of exempla, to spiral into a wide diversity of formulations, metaphors, and analogies to make the point. The creative space is so expansive that the logic of the moment can be lost to the casual listener." (p. 82-83)

Description, generally associated with freestyling, is much like narrative, but lacks a linear timeframe. It is often exemplified by series of seemingly non-sequitur descriptions of the local environment or the world-at-large. In description, verbal cleverness and lyrical virtuosity are valued over obvious coherence and the rhyme often follows a stream of consciousness rather than a discernible external structure.

While the exhortation/proclamation and description forms closely resemble the stream-of-consciousness and episodic, non-linear text structures more common to African and African-American, Latin American, Native American and Asian canonical texts than the Western canon typically engaged in literature classrooms, they also provide the most salient examples of figurative language in hip hop. The text is rendered coherent, it is made legible, only through engagement with the word-play that circumscribes it.

Exhortation/Proclamation and description also serve as the terrain across which hip hop's political and social allegiances are most commonly constructed. It is here that the critical and transformative reading of environment is invoked through the figurative. Disparate and otherwise non sequitur tales and imagery cohere around the use of subversive metaphors that re-appropriate and re-envision stereotypes of both hip hop and young, urban, black identity. For example, in "Crack Music" Kanye (2005) flips white, middle-class depictions of the parasitic, drug-infested inner-city by employing crack as a

unifying metaphor, conceptually correlating drug-addiction in the black community, institutional racism, the decimation of the urban economy, and white society's ravenous consumption of the very culture it is destroying. He says, "When our heroes or heroines got hooked on heroin/Crack, raised the murder rate in D.C. and Maryland/We invested in that, it's like we got Merrill Lynched/And we been hangin from the same tree ever since/Sometimes I feel the music is the only medicine/So we, cook it, cut it, measure it, bag it." The disempowering connotations of crack are inverted through its figurative usage, as the metaphor (and hip hop itself) becomes a vehicle for reparation. "So our mamas ain't got to be they cooks and nannies/And we gon' repo everything they ever took from granny/Now the former slaves trade hooks for Grammy's/This dark diction has become America's addiction"

Recurrent metaphor and figurative language in the proclamation/exhortation and descriptive forms also serve to signify or flip the script on the violent, sexist, and avaricious imagery for which hip hop is most commonly censured. For example, Biggie's descriptive tales of (metaphorical) murder, sex, and material excess become a unified and subversive commentary on the stereotypes he invokes through an understanding of those tales as ironic, an understanding that is necessitated both by obvious clues to authorial intent and by the need engage multiple registers in order to make sense of the text. When Biggie juxtaposes murder metaphors and overtures of obscene consumption with episodes that clearly call those values into question, he spotlights the figurative nature of his own claims. Biggie murders on the mic, but of the real murderer he says, "Swear he put the G in Game, had the Gucci frame/I can't recall his name (what was his name?)/You mean that kid that nearly lost half his brain/Over two bricks of

cocaine?/Gettin' sucked by crackhead Lorraine/It's a shame, dude's a lame, what's his name?" (1997) Even the title of the track ("You're Nobody (Til Somebody Kills You") denotes the ironic intent of the text. Despite the ubiquity of literal readings of murder metaphors, they are also employed for the purpose of political commentary. While Ice Cube's (1991) "I Want to Kill Sam" may have him unloading clips into the mouth of a fictional character, it is clearly a figurative response to the rage invoked by the endemic and dehumanizing nature of American-style racism.

With obvious connections to the African American tradition of playing the dozens, the battle form is a type of competitive insult. Unlike signifyin(g), although the battle may employ simile to incite, the text as a whole is not metaphorical. Rather, metaphor is a means of making insult explicit. In terms of scaffolding literary reasoning, in the battle genre (as in the dozens), the explicitness of purpose makes the metaphorical meaning accessible. When Qwel (2001) says, "I drop lines like Samoans on tightropes" or "You're fly like crippled ostriches", the use of simile may be evident, but it is the nature of the genre and the clarity of purpose that renders the figurative meaning so legible. Similarly, when metaphor is employed in a battle rhyme, students' understanding of the nature of the genre explicates the metaphorical import of the text. When Blueprint (2002) says, "You're not ill, and if you are/My notepad's full of medicine/Plus my freestyle is Excedrin/Take two and call me back with a new style," the multiple registers of the term "ill" enacted by the battle genre serve as a lens through which subsequent metaphors are reified.

The "Real"

Shell toes the only time you seen shells, bro
And hell no, your students not criminal
The only time they popped lead, they was poppin' pencils…
Your whole image drawn on the story board in the office
Plus your story's boring, so come off it.

-the Primeridian, "Change the Meridian," 2011

It's a paradox we call reality, so keeping it real
Will make you a casualty of abnormal normality

-Talib Kweli with Black Star, Respiration, 1998

Realism in hip hop, though generally associated with highly problematic (and packaged) notion of gangsta authenticity, pivots around a variety of axes, each of which posits different criteria of realness. Hip hop's quixotic wistfulness that raps nostalgic for the golden age of *Illmatic* and *Resurrection* while transforming something as simple as the Adidas shell toes I've been rocking for the past twenty years into both a new fashion and an assertion of hip-hop positionlity locates old school as real, regardless of whether or not it's hard. Similarly, many hip-hop heads identify realness with the underground: with lyrical virtuosity, with the challenging politics of conscious emcees, but more than anything with inaccessibility. One must be committed, work hard, to sniff out/produce the good ish and prove one's self real. Gangsta identity and street credibility have certainly most commonly, and uncritically, been evoked to construct narrow perimeters of what counts as real, or "reel" as M.K. Asante suggests to denote the extent to which performative black identity has been co-opted and marketed by a white music industry. In the next section I will touch on the political implications of the corporate construction of gangstaism, and the generative space created by critical examination of the political economy behind the creation of a monolithic black identity devoid of concern or critique

of the social and economic conditions underlying the existence of the ghetto, it is important to note that the figurative is also at play in the presentation and performance of gangsta authenticity.

Gangsta narratives are deeply rooted in signifyin(g) and particularly the African-American oral tradition of toasting (long narrative poems of hustlers and outlaw figures, or heroes that get over on white society) that is abundantly evident in hip-hop's immediate poetic precursor, the rap poets of the 1960's and 1970's, particularly Gil Scott Heron, the Last Poets, and H. Rap Brown. Interestingly, though certainly not surprisingly, outlaw tales are also deeply diffuse in European American narrative traditions (from Jesse James to the Godfather to the songs of Woody Guthrie) without ever being invoked to define what it means to be white. Unlike white representations of outlaw heroes, toasting and gangstaism both suggest subversive political allegiances and edify the figurative; it is wit as much as brawn that provides the hustler with his power and prowess (see Shine and the Signifying Monkey). Like toasts, gangsta identity in hip hop is an act of signification. Ironically perhaps, realism in hip hop is also largely metaphorical. As Dyson (2007) suggests, "Realism depends on mythopoetics. Realism depends on artifice and fiction to create its narrative thrust." (12)

The Real is not simply a representation of reality; it is an assertion of identity, allegiance, and an organic relationship with the communities from which hip hop arose. (Krims, 2001) It is not in conflict with, and can even be communicated through, the figurative aspects of hip hop; if the figurative expresses allegiance to urban black identity, then it is authentic and therefore real. Like toasting and signifyin(g), gangstaism employs figurative self-mythologizing as an overt, if misunderstood, response to

disempowering representations of black identity. As an art embedded in signification, a large part of it's value lies in subaltern meaning; it presumes a level of mis-taking, particularly among white folks, who are prone to confound figurative for literal. Bradley (2009) explains, gangsta rap "share [an] impulse with the tall tale of the oral tradition. As an audience we have yet to condition ourselves to understand rap's tall tales as acts of projection. Rap's relation to reality is like an inside joke that much of the listening public doesn't get. The joke lies in the MC's winking assertion of the truth of obvious fictions." (p. 163-164) The alarmist assumption that black youth fully subscribe to the fictive worldview of gangsta identity ignores the intellectual complexity of those youth, their access to cultural knowledge that renders irony and hyperbole legible, the metaphysical complaint embodied in depictions of ghetto life, and the extent to which the most simplistic gangsta imagery was largely constructed by whites for white consumption. It is precisely this consumption, the manufacture and marketing of essentialized black identity by a profit-driven and fundamentally racist music industry and its ability to construct a simplistic and decontextualized understanding of black youth and urban reality, that complicates readings of gangsta as figurative or hyperbolic. As gangstaism has been coopted by folks who intentionally or unwittingly misunderstand and misrepresent the urban lament and figurative boast it embodies, it has come to construct a sort of minstrelsy that both undermines gangstaism's subaltern messages and justifies the very racialized social injustices that gangsta originally documented and spoke against.

The ghetto and the street serve as organizing principals around which the hyperbolic hustler acquires meanings that transcend simplistic representation of gangsta authenticity in the white media. Perry (2004) states, "The frequent calls in the hip hop

community to keep it real not only require the maintenance of an authentic black urban identity; they also constitute a theoretical space that functions as a living testimony to African American experience." (p. 87) In that the space is theoretical and identity conceptual, the real is also fictive. The Real is political and ideological; emcees can be real without living the realities they communicate. Fidelity to the political paradigms of poverty, urbanity, and blackness constitutes a realness that potentially supersedes physical reality. As Dyson (2007) suggests, "The metaphysical root of hip hop is connected to the ghetto regardless of whether or not many of its artists grew up there. Its almost irrelevant whether or not you grew up there." (p. 11) Even those emcees whose histories do include some slight resemblance to the street narratives that they weave (Ice-T, Eazy, Snoop, 50cent), their histories as hustlers are far removed from the cartel fantasies that they depict in their rhymes. Representations of realness in mass-produced and mass-marketed hip hop create a conflict between the literally real and the ideologically real, undermining hip hop's socio-political identity while exploiting racialized stereotypes. The market appeal of the Real also encourages emcees to live the lives of urban excess and despair to which they bear witness in their rhymes.

This mistaking of figurative for literal, the uninformed assumption that hip-hop narratives are direct representations of a reality that is terrifying to (though eagerly consumed by) white America, that typically limits the ability of teachers, among others, to understand hip hop as art. Bradley (2009) explains, "MCs have been taking far greater liberties with voice than their public stances of authenticity would suggest. Rap becomes much more interesting as poetry and rappers become more impressive as poets when we acknowledge rap as a kind of performance art, a blend of fact and fantasy, narrative and

drama expressed in storytelling." (p.163) By assuming a simplistic and superficial stance towards the artistic elements of hip hop, we not only discard the opportunity that it presents as literature, but we also neglect the possibility of interrogating the contextualized roots of authenticity (the metaphysical complaint that it presents) and the broader social location of its most problematic features, such as misogyny, violence, and consumerism.

Like all literature, some hip-hop texts are richer, more complex, and more challenging than others. Nonetheless, hip hop writ large is steeped in quite literally every aspect of literary reasoning required for the figurative understanding of any piece of great literature, from the metaphorical and symbolic, to the elaboration of narrative conventions (plot structure, narrative modes) and broader themes of human experience (love, loss, struggle). Our inability or unwillingness to recognize the extent to which these interpretive skills are embedded in the youth's everyday interaction with text lies both in our lack of understanding of hip hop as art, but also in the tendency of educators of urban youth of color to ignore these elements even within the canon, to neglect the transcendent space presented by figurative reasoning and problem solving in literature. If the true purposes of literature (intellectual virtuosity, more nuanced understanding of one's self and one's world) are to be honored and elaborated in our classrooms, hip hop provides a fertile terrain for transference of the skills students already to possess to those that we hope to invoke in our instruction.

Chapter 6

Thinkin' of a Master Plan
Critical Race Pedagogy and Hip Hop

We keeping it gangsta, say "fo shizzle", "fo sheezy" and "stay crunk"
It's easy to pull a breezy, smoke trees, and we stay drunk
Yo, I activism, attackin' the system, the blacks and latins in prison
Numbers of prison, they victims black in the vision
Shit and all they got is rappin' to listen to
I let them know we missin' you, the love is unconditional
Even when the condition is critical, when the livin' is miserable
Your position is pivotal, I ain't bullshittin' you

-Talib Kweli, "Get By," 2002

Hip hop in the classroom has the potential to invite the cultural epistemologies and discursive practices of students of color into school discourses in ways that challenge "deficit" explanations of student underperformance, contest white normative frames and colorblind ideologies, and provide a context in which students might develop a critical lens through which to understand the social, economic, and political structures that govern their lives. Hip hop in the classroom can also be a kind of multicultural tokenism, a disingenuous suggestion of curricular equality or a paternalistic "hook" to engage students of color in disempowering classroom practices. Critical race pedagogy provides a framework to realize the transformative potential of hip hop by making central the experiential knowledge of students of color while challenging educational inequality.

Homogenizing Multiculturalism

On a frigid January morning at a large neighborhood high school on Chicago's south side, junior English students are preparing to put on a show for their peers. The school's British Literature teachers, who design their curriculum as a team, created a

project for students to write and perform a rap about the story *Beowulf*, which they had been reading for the previous six weeks. The task given to students was to recount the major events and general storyline of Beowulf, while employing literary devices common in epic poetry, such as alliteration and kenning, in the composition of their raps. When asked, the teachers' explained that their decision to have students perform this act of basic factual recall in the shape of a rap was really an effort to make *Beowulf* more relevant to the lives of their all-black student population.

Black and Latino history, where they exist in schools, are almost always homogenized and depoliticized. Rosa Parks was just a tired domestic rather than an activist and Martin Luther King, Jr. was an assimilationist rather than a revolutionary. Marcus Garvey and Fred Hampton don't exist at all. Hispanic heritage is more about tacos and sombreros than Zapatistas or Che Guevera. Cesar Chavez is a farm worker and not a militant socialist while Arizona, California, and Texas were never a part of Mexico. Black history is not a dynamic narrative of struggle and resistance, but a bibliography of black inventors, performers, and athletes. In an institutional environment in which inclusiveness is generally synonymous with tokenism, it's hardly surprising that hip hop might be co-opted as a "hook" to engage students in an otherwise whitewashed curriculum. It does not necessarily follow that that its inclusion is meant to invite the language, cultural epistemologies, or experiential knowledge of students into the classroom. On the contrary, as in the case of the *Beowulf* rap, hip hop can serve as a means of feigning cultural responsiveness while cajoling students of color into participation in a basic literacy curriculum centered on the white canon. As curricula in urban schools become increasingly narrow and skills-driven, eschewing critical

understanding and shutting out the cultural and experiential knowledge of students, (Lipman, 2003) the appropriation of superficial symbols of black culture within schools serves only to mask hegemony and reproduce inequality.

If ninety percent of teachers in the US are white, having themselves likely attended majority-white schools in majority-white neighborhoods, (Marx & Pennington, 2003) it is perhaps not surprising that celebration of diversity in schools recognizes only the most benign and familiar facets of non-dominant cultures. King (1991) suggests that celebrating diversity becomes conceptually problematic for teachers who have little experience with diversity and even less real understanding of inequality. Moreover, she found that such teachers tended to see even acknowledging racial difference as something tantamount to racial separatism. In fact, many white teachers attempt to suppress what little they do know about the cultures of their students in an effort not to "see color" in their classrooms. (Lewis, 2003; Sleeter, 2005) Clearly, the possibility of any real celebration of diversity in classrooms is limited when teachers make every effort not to see their students as diverse. Likewise, any critique of the role of race and racism in normative school practices, student outcomes, and institutional inequalities is curtailed if the existence of race is routinely denied in schools.

The Ideology of Colorblindness

Critical race theorists have provided an incisive analysis of the impact of deracialized discourses in schools and the prevalence of the ethos of colorblindness. (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate; 2006; Parker & Stovall, 2004; Marx & Pennington, 2003; Lynn & Adams, 2002; Duncan, 2002b; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002b;

Lopez, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Roithmayr, 1999; Tate 1997; Delgado, 1996; Gotanda, 1996) Bonilla-Silva (2009) outlines four general frames of colorblind racism: abstract liberalism, naturalization of racial phenomena, cultural racism, and minimization of the importance of race. (p. 26-29) Abstract liberalism is the belief that society is essentially just and that people are routinely rewarded for their merit and ability rather than the color of their skin. In schools specifically, colorblind racism's reliance on the myth of the meritocracy requires teachers and administrators to construct deracialized explanations of disparate student outcomes while simultaneously allowing them to ignore systemic inequalities. (Parker & Stovall, 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2002) To the colorblind racist, racism is anathema to the tenets of white humanity; it is the aberrant act of a rogue individual, rather than an inherent and mundane characteristic of US social, economic, and political structures. If one is not a skinhead or a Klansman, then one is clearly not a racist and is not personally implicated in oppression.

In order to protect their self-identity as non-racists and to preserve their belief in society's basic fairness, colorblind teachers must find other means of explaining the failure of schools (and themselves) to effectively educate students of color. In order to do this, colorblind racism typically employs rhetorical tools that shift the blame for school failure onto the shoulders of students and the communities from which they come, constructing students of color as deficient for either cultural or economic reasons. (Bonilla-Silva, 2009) The belief is that poor communities and communities of color do not adequately educate their children; they do not foster literacy or cognitive development, nor do they emphasize the importance of school, therefore students enter school less able to meet its intellectual demands. Traditional social science research and

teacher education programs tend to utilize the deficit model to explain disparate academic performance of students of color, thus perpetuating its prevalence among teachers. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002a)

Cultural and economic explanations of school failure are particularly attractive to teachers because they allow us to escape any personal implication in student underperformance. Marx and Pennington (2003) found in their work with white pre-service teachers that while teachers' lack of understanding of student culture made them reliant on stereotypes in the classroom, their self-perception as colorblind allowed them to see themselves as benevolent quasi-martyrs struggling to mitigate the deficiencies of their students. Some even described their work with children of color as "charity." These teachers exhibited what Delgado (1996) refers to as "false empathy", the paternalistic belief that white people can imagine the experiences and intuit the concerns of people of color by simply putting ourselves in their shoes. We can envision what it must be like to grow up in a violent neighborhood or to not have much money, therefore we can fully understand what it's like to be our students. False empathy de-racializes the experiences of people of color by depicting them from the perspective of one who has not experienced racism. It does not interrogate inequality or white complicity in its reproduction because it does acknowledge race as a real issue in the lives of people of color.

False empathy allows teachers to love their students while simultaneously adopting an ideology that blames them for their own struggles. Duncan (2002b) argues that stories that teachers and administrators construct to explain the marginalization of students of color in schools actually contribute to their oppression. The perceived cultural

difference and deficiency of young black males, in particular, paints them as so completely and oppositionally "other" that they have become a population that is "beyond love."[12] They are so marginalized that they are excluded from society's "networks of care" and denied useful participation in social life, yet no one is really concerned because such marginalization is seen as a natural outcome of their oppositional otherness; their oppression is seen as neither remarkable nor all that interesting.

Making Whiteness Visible

White

Not a pale pink, powdery-peach, but white
White as snow, white as light, white as right
White as virgin vows veiling pretty pink pussies
Painting wide white ways to white picket fences
In a white-bred suburb a million miles from here
White
White like a clan of cracka kin cappin' coons
White like mayonnaised melodies of Eminem tunes
White like a Reagan in the Bush and a Clinton in the tree
White like Miss America and the Statue of Liberty
My white thoughts are pale cops to relief of responsibility
I didn't rape your grandma
I didn't beat your dad
I don't support the prisons
I don't think brothas are bad
But klan capes cloak the width of my pleas
A less cowardly me, a more forthcoming me
Claims the pain of the world as my history
That diploma on the wall and the job that I got
They're a nail in the coffin of that kid slangin' rocks
This success was bought
My bills the wills of dead Choctaw kin
An eighth of my face can't absolve that much sin
And just when I thought I might make amends
Damn…we went and did it again

[12] The term "beyond love" is borrowed from Delgado (1996).

-K. Daphne Whitington (me), 2005

The first time that I did a free write with my students on the topic of race, they were taken aback. It wasn't so much the quality of the poem, though they certainly seemed to like it; rather, it was the fact that not a single one of them had ever heard a white person talk about being white. They had all assumed that when I said we were going to write about race, I would be writing about them and not myself. In fact, my students, hesitant and a little bit leery, could barely be coerced to even utter the word "white" in my presence. Students who would hurl racialized epithets at one another with seemingly unselfconscious ease, would nonetheless timidly apologize if I happened to overhear them even describing a person as white. Calling someone "that white lady" would elicit censure from fellow students: "Don't say that," they would admonish. "That's racist." The taboo of recognizing whiteness in the school seemed fully sanctioned by white teachers, many of whom seemed genuinely offended and even a little hurt to have their race referenced in the speech of students.

The invisibility of their privilege is, in fact, integral to many white teachers' concept of self. King (1991) explains, "Any serious challenge to the status quo that calls this racial privilege into question inevitably challenges the self-identity of White people who have internalized these ideological justifications." (p.135) White teachers' psychological investment in their deracialized selves helps to ensure the intractability of colorblindness as an ideological construct in education. Certainly, if whiteness cannot even be mentioned in schools, then its role in shaping school culture and classroom discourses is necessarily obscured. The invisibility of whiteness allows it to play a normative, though seemingly neutral, role in schools and classrooms; the tacit acceptance

of white values and discursive practices means that the culturally sanctioned beliefs of whites and the privilege that they carry are presupposed, the standard against which the experiences, language, behavior, and knowledge of others is measured. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002a, 2002b; Grillo & Wildman, 2000; Wildman & Davis, 2000) Colorblindness demands assimilation of students of color, or what Bell (1996) calls "cultural genocide"; if we're all the same, it's only because "they" have to become like "us". (Parker & Stovall, 2004)

Critical Race Pedagogy and Hip Hop

Critical race pedagogy challenges the seemingly neutral practices in schools that present whiteness as a normative frame. It disrupts prevailing ideas about fairness and merit and it contests the majoritarian story that depicts students of color as deficient. (Parker & Stovall, 2004) It invites the experiential knowledge, discursive practices, and cultural epistemologies of students of color into the classroom while challenging the systemic inequalities that impact their lives. It recognizes the importance of building a curriculum that makes central the knowledge of those "being pushed to the bottom." (Yosso, 2011) It requires reflexivity on the part of teachers and the examination of the role of whiteness and privilege in their classrooms. Critical race pedagogy has the potential to unify critical narratives of the failure of schools to effectively teach youth of color, while guiding educators who wish to catalyze change. (Lynn, 1999)

Jennings and Lynn (2005) build a framework for critical race pedagogy that serves as an educational praxis analogue to the legalistic origins of critical race theory. They suggest five essential tenets of critical race pedagogy: (1) critical race pedagogy

must recognize and understand the endemic nature of racism; (2) critical race pedagogy must recognize the importance of understanding the power dynamics inherent in schools; (3) critical race pedagogy advocates for justice and equity in both schooling and education as a necessary if there is to be justice and equity in broader society; (4) critical race pedagogy is cognizant of the necessary intersection of other oppressive constructs such as class, gender, and sexual orientation; and (5) critical race pedagogy emphasizes the importance of reflection and self-reflexivity. (p. 25-27) Yosso (2002) in her discussion of critical race curriculum, chooses to focus specifically on the practices of teachers and the manner in which deficit discourses tend to rationalize racist curricular processes. She says, "A critical race curriculum exposes the white privilege supported by traditional curriculum structures and challenges schools to dismantle them." (p.102) She also delineates basic frames for critical race curriculum: critical race curriculum insists that that the knowledge of people of color should be central; it challenges dominant discourses and assumptions about intelligence, language, meritocracy, and the deficit view point; it is committed to social justice, not only to critique, but also to action; and it constructs counter-narratives that draw upon the lives of students of color, it explicitly listens to and learns from students of color. (p.98)

Without adopting a critical framework, hip hop in the classroom surrenders its transformative potential; it is neither a true invitation of the discursive practices and culturally-based knowledge of students nor is it capable of creating a critical lens through which students can understand and challenge the social, economic, and political structures that impact their lives. Outside of a critical framework, hip hop in the classroom becomes what Ladson-Billings (1999) describes as "the 'right strategy or

technique' to deal with (read: control) "at-risk" (read: African American) students." (p.22) In effect, it becomes a Beowulf rap. In fact, if we look at educators who have written about their use of hip hop in schools, those who have not employed an explicitly critical framework have reduced the role of hip hop to that of an instructional ploy. Sitomer and Cirelli, (2004) for example, have presented connections between hip hop and poetry as, quite literally, an entire book of worksheets, a pre-packaged and static set of activities designed only to engage reluctant learners. Although Sitomer and Cirelli may fare better than, say, the "rappin' mathematician" at inviting the community-based knowledge of students into the classroom, in that they at least recognize that literary skills are employed in the interpretation of hip hop as text, they in no way make that part of their project explicit. Rather, texts familiar to students simply provide a bridge to "real" literature.

The uncritical use of hip hop in the classroom clearly, whether intentionally or not, neglects the liberatory potential of hip hop to provide a context for the development of critical perspectives through which students might investigate and act upon the world. (Stovall, 2006; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002) Akom (2009) explains that "hip hop is an important lens for socio-political analysis and representation of marginalized communities, and…youth-driven research on hip hop is an instantiation of reading and acting upon the world, that is, critical pedagogy." (p.55) If hip hop is divorced from its roots in urban black identity and its long history of challenging social and economic inequality, then it is robbed of its capacity to do anything more that assimilate youth of color into the normative frames of schools and white society.

Critical Readings of Hip-Hop Texts

See in the game it's cool strolls and platinum thugs
Stack the cash, drugs and women; bubble in crime, trouble in time
I stay humble with mine, had drama for words
Encountered some birds who tried to take the shine
But I'm illuminating like a thousand frozen wrists in the glint of the sun
Worth the Franklin Mint and Wall Street combined into one

-Jean Grae, "No Doubt", 2002a

As Bronwen Low (2011) suggests, trepidation on the part of teachers with respect to truly (not as a benign hook) inviting hip hop into their classrooms may have less to do with a lack of understanding of its literary merit than it does with a fear of the themes introduced by hip-hop texts and the shift in expertise, from teacher to student, that unsettles classroom hierarchies and renders the teacher vulnerable. In my classroom, as in those of many hip-hop educators, this shift in expertise is precisely the point. Empowerment is not something that teachers can give students. Despite our best intentions and/or our liberal fantasies, we are not the saviors of urban youth. True empowerment of youth means creating spaces in which they can develop their own agency and their own critical understandings of their own world. As teachers, we can provide a platform and we can provide skills and strategies, but if the critique and the agency don't belong to the students, then it can hardly be called empowerment. With respect to hip hop, precisely those themes that strike the most fear in the hearts of teachers—violence, materialism, misogyny, homophobia—are those most in need of critical spaces of redress if hip hop is to realize its revolutionary potential.

Like many hip-hop pedagogues, I am guilty of dominating the mic in terms of the hip-hop texts introduced into the classroom. While Newman (2007) suggests that the conscious, progressive lyrics favored amongst teachers who introduce hip hop into the

classroom are met with disdain by students because their anti-capitalist rhetoric contradicts students own dreams of upward mobility, I have not generally found that to be the case. While I, like Morrell (2004, 2008) and Stovall (2006a, 2006b), had a propensity towards introducing a fairly finite set of emcees with undeniably progressive stances (Common, Nas, Lupe Fiasco, Talib Kweli, Jean Grae, Mos Def, All Natural) as exemplars in the classroom, chosen as much for their literary and thematic consonance as for their politics, one of the first activities in which we engaged was a critical reading of student-chosen texts that revealed a surprising lack of allegiance to the worldviews represented by those texts while simultaneously engaging all of those issues for which hip hop receives such censure. These critiques addressed not only political, but also literary content in ways that respected artistry while challenging ethos; in fact, throughout the year, the artists introduced by students in our critical reading session (Lil'Wayne, 50 Cent, Jay-Z, Dipset, Biggie) were intentionally represented in our comparative readings as exemplars of literary form: of metaphor, simile, irony, epithet, anaphora, etc. Consistent reference to the lyrical virtuosity of artists esteemed by students, along with this front-loading exercise of critical reading of entirely student-chosen texts, seemed to create a balance between texts that I chose because they were exemplars of literary form or thematic unity and students' own expertise and understanding of hip hop, which in many respects outweighed my own.

The year of my study, 2005, was the first year that I engaged in these critical readings. As I had spent two years pedantically combating what I, too, presumed to be the worldviews of students by avoiding mainstream hip hop, in 2005 a pedagogical breakthrough was presented to me by way of a co-teacher. During the previous year, I

had been fortunate enough to happen across a clip on Chicago Public Television about a local non-profit organization, Street-Level Youth Media, that worked with local youth on digital audio production, specifically hip hop. Given the bent that my classroom had already assumed, I approached the organization to partner with Lincoln. While the program would grow beyond my British Literature classroom (see Chapter 8), initially it involved collaboration with a single co-teacher who came once a week only during class time. Simeon Viltz, my first co-teacher, was an emcee and producer who represented half of a local hip-hop duo, the Primeridian.[13] It was Simeon who introduced the practice of critical reading, an exercise that would become a fixture in my English classroom for years to come.

Simeon, and I in every year since, invited students to bring in the lyrics to their favorite songs for listening sessions and a subsequent dissection of both beats and lyrical content. In this particular year, student choices were predominated by 50Cent and the Dipset, specifically Juelz Santana, with whom I was more or less unfamiliar prior to our classroom critiques. While listening sessions revealed both the lyrical virtuosity of the artists in question (as Simeon said in a later interview, "I never knew Juelz had flow like that.") and their space in our classroom, they also uncovered a general lack of allegiance to the underlying ideas expressed in the rhymes. Simeon explicitly set up our listening session to identify appeal on three fronts: beats, lyrical style/flow, and content. Almost without fail, the more (morally) questionable the content, the more students emphasized the appeal of the beats as the reason for their selection. The two songs brought in by the most students, Juelz Santana's *There It Go! (The Whistle Song)* and 50 Cent's *In Da Club*

[13] The Primeridian is part of the All Natural/Family Tree crew, a fixture in the Chicago underground hip-hop scene anddiscussed more at length in Chapter 7.

were both essentially innocuous club anthems perpetuating misogyny and materialism in easily dissectible ways. In truth, not a single student jumped to defend the content of the lyrics. Rather, they were more readily critical of the messages communicated than we were as teachers. Just as I occasionally find myself bopping my head to banging beats before I even notice bros, bankrolls, and hoes in the lyrics (like "I beat the pussy up/That's the hook right thurrr," which I continue to blast despite my best intentions), so too did students adhere more to an aesthetic than an ideology. Students were quick to contest all of those themes that teachers ascribe to their identities via their fidelity to hip hop that we see as violent or avaricious or misogynistic. Inviting the lyrics of student-chosen hip-hop artists into the classroom in the first place not only engaged those discourses in critical ways, but also created a template for future critical inquiry into all manner of texts.

Music Box

The roots of hip hop were too sweet and new
We had visions with predictions
That actually came true.
Ambient harmony polluted the air,
Voices and choices surrounded everywhere.
But now our media sours and rots
As we watch our tradition decay in a box.
Violent remarks and critical proof,
Acid rain melting through our lyrical roof.
And now you will observe how infected we are
From the poisonous tips that tear through our hearts.
Sincerely, Mr. Radio & Mrs. Radio

-Student

I brought hip hop into my own classroom as a pointed response to a growing awareness of the fact that the existent competencies and out-of-school literate practices of my students were not recognized or valued within the school. As a hip-hop head from adolescence, I knew that my students engaged, on a daily basis, precisely those skills and abilities that they were deemed incapable of acquiring by other teachers. Moreover, hip hop's role in my own political and intellectual development made me acutely aware of its ability to foster critical understanding of larger social and institutional contexts. Hip hop could not exist in my classroom without a critical framework, because its whole purpose was to critique and contest spaces that were disempowering to my students on both a micro (school) and a macro (society) level. Making race central to this critical framework may have been obviated by the fact that I've always worked in all-black schools, but I think the issue of language and culture was even more important. The overt hostility towards blackness, and black masculinity in particular, that I witnessed in school, the uncritical adoption of white epistemologies and discursive norms and the blithe devaluing of black language and literate practices, necessitated the centrality of race. While my colleagues may have wholeheartedly embraced the "culture of poverty" explanation for our failure to educate our students of color, it always seemed clear to me that it was euphemistic; it was a means of circumscribing otherness, while otherness in urban schools was clearly, if implicitly, racialized.

Chapter 7

They Schools:
Hip Hop, Critical Literacy, and the British Canon

You can save all the pep talks, all they need is the proof
Say the sky is the limit, but we all need a roof.

-All Natural, "Southside (Chicago)", 2005

In my British Literature class at Lincoln, hip hop was both studied as literature in its own right and as a means of accessing the British canon by mapping the domain-specific knowledge embedded in student's understanding of hip hop onto school-sanctioned texts and through critical comparative readings around what Lee (1993, 1995, 2007) terms "themes of human experience." Although most scholars, including Lee herself, refer to the process of building upon the cultural knowledge of students in school settings for school-like purposes as "scaffolding" or "bridging," the suggestion that texts with which students were expert served solely as a means to build up to or arrive at an interpretive aperture to a European tradition posited as implicitly more complex, more meaningful, or more valuable did not exist in my classroom. Rather we engaged in a sort of intellectual bricolage, (Ladson-Billings, personal communication, 2011) an extraction of the interpretive strategies, literary reasoning, and meaning making made available by both sets of texts to feed a reservoir of resources that might inform and enhance our understanding of all texts as well as our world at both a proximal and a distal level.

Despite the explicit primacy afforded by the name of the course and the prescribed content coverage, hip hop was treated no more as a scaffolding to British literature than Chaucer served as a scaffolding to Sadat X; rather our reading of each

enriched our understanding of the other in ways that compressed hierarchical notions of what counts as literature. The organization of this chapter around three central works of the British canon might also suggest a privileging of the official curriculum, however being unitary while our hip-hop texts were relatively numerous they serve primarily to demarcate discrete temporal and thematic units. They were also chosen due to the distinct and relatively disparate problem-solving skills and strategies for literary reasoning embedded in their interpretation. It may also be notable that attention to our study of British poetry has been omitted. This intentional omission is the outcome of both a linear relationship to all poetry obviated by my treatment of hip-hop poetics in the previous chapter and its thorough investigation by a number of other scholars, specifically Ernest Morrell, Jeff Duncan-Andrade, and Bronwen Low. Instead, I choose to focus on thematic unity and figurative understanding in the comparative readings of hip-hop texts and three pieces of British prose whose relationship to those texts, while not immediately evident, proved to be deeply generative.

Beowulf

Narrative Modes, Epithet, Hyperbole, and the Myth of Good and Evil

She smiled
And then commanded me to that door in back,
Explained to me this Crime of being black,
I was deflowered,
Raped!
So I balled up into a fist and hated
Pounded upon the prison gates until the rage abated,
Until the knuckles of my soul were mutilated
And difficult to clench

-Kent Forman, "Chicago," 2005

Mic ripper, girl stripper, the Henny sipper

-Notorious B.I.G., "Ready to Die", 1994

The versatile, honey-stickin' wild, golden child

-Nas, "The World is Yours", Illmatic, 1994

As I began my third year teaching *Beowulf* in 2005, the hyperbolic rhetoric of the "axis of evil" was still fueling a full-fledged war and simplistic and jingoistic depictions of Arabs (or "ay-rabs" as they were known on the Southside) were still a salient topic of discourse. While the simplicity with which these stereotypical, and largely distal, images could be dissected as racist or politically motivated as a means of constructing a lens through which to understand narrative perspective and hyperbole in *Beowulf*, by my third year of interacting with the text with my students, our focus had generally moved much closer to home: from dichotomous representations of good and evil embedded in depictions of Arabs to similarly decontextualized, stereotypical, and politically motivated misrepresentations of urban youth and young black males in particular. Our discussions of Iraq became a brief segue into a far more heartfelt and often transcendent discourse on the ways in which popular perceptions regarding black youth both ignored their lived experience while simultaneously shaping it.

That year, and most every year since, our reading of *Beowulf* was preceded by a reading of hip-hop texts interrogating the ways in which place (hood, home, city, sociopolitical positionality) informs our worldview followed by students writing around the same theme. While accessing the unreliability or one-sidedness of *Beowulf* as an epic tale also came from an investigation of literary devices (epithet and kenning, in

particular) meant to mythologize self, it started with an examination of the neglected perspective, that of Grendel the monster (and, to a certain extent, his mother). The text of Beowulf begins with a relatively brief and subsequently ignored account of his origins: a sorrowful life in a hellish underworld to which he is cursed by heredity and from which he has no hope of escape. His initial ire is provoked not by some monstrous impulse, but by the agony he feels in the joy of others given his state of unjustified and perennial condemnation. While our initial hip-hop unit, broadly titled "Where I'm From," preceded our reading of *Beowulf*'s initial stanzas, it provided a context that immediately called into question the perspective presented by the text as a whole, introducing the concept of narrative mode while laying the groundwork for a critical reading that could transcend the antiquity of the piece and inform our understanding of our own world.

Where I'm from

I'm from the slums
Where everyone got a gun
And you will get shot over rock
Not two, but one
Where I'm from, your life is worthless
They will take it in a second
Without a purpose
Where I'm from
On every corner there's a dealer
In every group there's a cluck or a stealer
Why? Cause I'm from a slum
Where bums ain't got no food,
So they searching for crumbs
Where drugs are the source of money
Where kids get strung out
And go from smart to dummy
I am from a place of black race
Where kids' brains waste
And cops give chase
So if you wondering where I am from

Let me tell you
I'm from the slums

While our reading and subsequent deconstruction of All Natural's (2005) "Southside (Chicago)" and Kent Forman's (2005) "Chicago" introduced a host of literary devices (metaphor, simile, conceit, personification) and figurative reasoning writ large, our purpose in reading was as much to examine the ways in which the figurative can jar commonplace representations of self and place as to identify it within students' own lexicon. Both pieces invoke somewhat stereotypic images of urban life and flip them, so to speak, drawing into question both how they are constructed and the manner in which they are typically imagined.

All Natural, a duo from the same Southside neighborhood as many of my students, has a long history of being among the most overtly political hip-hop acts to come up in Chicago's underground scene. While our class would revisit this track and others by All Natural later in the year when we began to expressly focus our attention on inequality in Chicago, our original reading examined the way in which mainstream depictions of urban life (hustling, banging, predatory youth) are transformed when located within a broader social and political context. The piece begins by painting scenes of urban violence and avarice that, while generally jibing with the detached and hyperbolic portraits of popular projection/imagination, nonetheless resonate with respect to lived experience and the hyper-localism invoked in the rhyme. CapD (All Natural's emcee) spits:

Blew up in Harold's 44[14]*, kid you shook and it show*

[14] Harold's Chicken Shack, an infamous and ubiquitous culinary staple of Chicago's south and west sides, is as noted for being "ghetto" as for being good and, for that matter, greasy. Harold's 44 (i.e. the Harold's on 44th and Cottage Grove) refers to a specific Harold's, which many of my students have frequented, and

Spot's about to blow, get your order to go

Now, tell me, what was on your mind, hat cocked to the side

There's a code to Chicago that you have to abide

Mean muggin' on the Southside is not for the wise

You got your pop and your fries, now I'd advise you to ride

They be bangin' on the Southside (like it ain't no thang)

Critique of the conditions within which tales of bangin' and hustlin' can be read as rational rather than aberrant begin at the proximal level, with the motivations of the youth themselves ("shorties[15] hustle for a dollar, not a quarter to show/ so when we talk about a battle, they ain't lookin' to flow"), before examining distal influences. While the first half of the piece depicts a series of scenes of seemingly indifferent violence and distorted values, the final stanzas contextualize those attitudes both within the construction of specific communities and national ideologies that sustain their neglect:

Lost souls gotta have it, they can never detox

When liquor stores litter literally every block

Next to street-corner preachers where the elderly flock

And now it all fits together like connecting the dots

See, the system sets it up as every man for himself

People doing anything that they can for the wealth

Some will hustle everyday to put some cans on the shelf

---

is a prime example of the ways in which hyper-localism depicts realities that are actually real while providing physical geographies around which critique can pivot.

[15] In Chicago vernacular, "shorty" generally refers to a young person, rather than its more common (if somewhat misogynistic) usage as a referent to a female or, specifically, an attractive female.

Every city across the nation's an identical scene

People making ends, but they not sharing the means

Shorties start to keep presuming 'til they parrot the scene

Chasing an illusion 'til they inherit the dream

Cap D also briefly sets his sights on the role that schools play in uncritically perpetuating these ideologies, or selling the mythology of meritocracy to youth. He rhymes, "You can save all the pep talks, all they need is the proof/ Say the sky is the limit, but we all need a roof." This linear progression ("connecting the dots") from the lived experiences of youth to the broader social contexts that shape them provided an ingress into an number of avenues of thought that would reemerge throughout the year in increasingly complex ways, specifically the value of students' own experiences in shaping an understanding of a world that, in turn, shaped their experience. With respect to *Beowul*f specifically, it allowed us to begin to complicate narrative perspective by contextualizing it. It also served to call into question simplistic, one-sided accounts that mask ideology in ways that would later allow our interpretations of *Beowulf* to inform our understanding of precisely those issues addressed by All Natural.

In our class, listening/reading sessions were typically followed both by intense discussion about the themes invoked by the piece being examined and a subsequent writing session around those themes. While these writing sessions invited both rhymes/poetry and prose, students almost invariably responded in formats similar to the piece being read. The theme "Where I'm From", which unified our discussions and writing around both the All Natural and the Kent Forman pieces (see below), the former asked students to complicate representations of place by locating them within a broader

context while the latter requested that they do so through use of figurative language. While the All Natural piece served to introduce my students to discussion about the broader social, political, ideological, and economic contexts of the ghetto, most of their writing revolved around the ghetto itself and the ways in which its existence shaped their lives and the behaviors of its inhabitants, only occasionally touching on the ways in which the ghetto itself had been shaped.

Trying to Survive

Living in the 'jects you got roaches and rats
Walking up the hall you got blood on the wall
On the elevator you see babies having babies
On damn near every floor it's a vacant
Under the building you got men slanging
Having sex with kids not thinking
Some smoking and drinking
Some robbing and killing
Not a day goes that homeless people get by
Every day there's a child born
Every day a family mourns
Not a day goes by that our people don't cry
Every night there's a drive-by
Innocent kids' lives
Some in the projects ain't got no heat
Trying to survive
In the middle of the night
You hear rat bites
On the shelves, your last noodles,
The rats done doo-doo on
Left us here with millions of roaches and spiders
So the police can come and indict us
The white man knew what he was doing
When he put us in buildings
Together as close as me and you
Knew that we would be the fool and make our own rules
40strong is where I grew

A recurrent theme in students' writing was an awareness of the extent to which the most seemingly horrifying experiences of urban life had been normalized by their ubiquity.

The anaphora in the student piece above ("Every day there's a child born/ Every day a family mourns/ Not a day goes by that our people don't cry/ Every night there's a drive-by") clearly underscores this normalization, the everydayness of death, and was echoed throughout my students' writing:

Just Another Night
Time and time again
As I pick up my pen
As my thoughts emerge
These were the words

I was awakened from a dream
By a dreadful scream
And to my surprise
Through all the noise, I heard her cries
This woman just witnessed her son being murdered
She told him to get up, but he never heard her
I wondered if she had known of the things he had done
This was a payback
just-for-the-boy-he-killed-two-days-before
So I slammed my window tight
And I thought to myself as I began to write
It hurts me to say,
But this is just another night

While the normalization of tragedy in the black community was a theme that we would revisit (and for which student work would become exemplars) as we began to examine structural influences in more depth, particularly around our reading of *A Modest Proposal*, with respect to *Beowulf* and narrative perspective, we followed another emergent theme derived directly from the All Natural piece, namely the ways in which the ubiquity of tragedy comes to shape attitudes and behaviors:

The Hood
The hood is a grimy place
With all the drugs and the killing.

You can't walk down the street
Without a stab in the back.
I know all this, but it's like I'm stuck in the hustle.
Every time I try to get out,
The hood keeps pulling me back.
This is not a maze,
This is just a trap.
The hood is like a clucka
That's stuck on crack.
It's like a game of cat and mouse,
But the killing is black on black.

Hustler Music
(a haiku trilogy)[16]

she was a crack baby
screaming away in the night
childhood devoured by anger

she grew up quickly
started hitting the pipe
like her mama did

hustler when I was twelve
on my feet at the trap house
playing with the rats

The Kent Forman piece, "Chicago", while interrogating broader contexts of urban experience like Cap D and All Natural, also flips the script metaphorically, invoking the figurative as a means of transcending simplistic depictions of ghetto life. While not typically taken as particularly figurative, our reading of *Beowulf* would problematize narrative perspective both through this front-loading examination of how perspective is shaped and how different perspectives conflict, but also through the study of figurative language common to both hip hop and epic poetry, specifically epithet or kenning. Thus,

[16] Perhaps obviously, none of these stanzas are actual haikus. The student who wrote this piece was entirely aware of this fact, but was fascinated by the simplicity and the idea of haiku while not wanting to edit syllables in order to technically adhere to the form. He nonetheless felt the title was appropriate, despite its technical inaccuracy.

the thematic unity of the Forman piece ("Where I'm From") was complemented by its introduction to the use of the figurative as a means of reframing literal or commonplace understanding of text. The Forman piece, *Chicago*, like Common's *I Used to Love H.E.R.* (1994) and Nas' *I Gave You Power* (1996), uses isolated instances of metaphor elaborated into conceit through personification in order to re-envision both tenor and vehicle. In this case, it is Chicago, rather than hip hop or guns, who plays the part of the woman. Forman's piece, like Common's and Nas', relies on personification to complicate simplistic readings of place, invoking a wistful romanticism around womanhood that underscores the beauty belying the brutality of urban life, the simultaneous sweetness and ugliness of home. He begins:

Because I am a patriot, I love this bitch

You dig?

This sprawling, bawdy breathtaking witch

This pig,

Sometimes

She has her moods

So stoically endured by her black bastards,

She broods

While the metaphor (Chicago as a woman) is made transparent from the first line, if not from the title of the piece, it is precisely this transparency that renders the relationship between tenor and vehicle so cogent. Chicago is a bitch, and yet beloved. The metaphor of womanhood provides a physical geography for the polarity of urban life:

"Chi"?

I know her for a great American Janus

'Cause, once, I was a ghetto urchin

Playing in her anus

Tenement yards

Dodging shards

Of shattered spirits

While locating his youth within her anus (and placing her more desirable bits somewhere downtown), the personification of Chicago also provides an avenue for understanding her beauty, a sweetness of home that is often absent in depictions of inner-city experience and critiques of urban neglect. Forman writes "You see, I love her/ I love her awesome sunrise hair/ I love the wealth/ She will not share/ with me," before spiraling into a series of images depicting the splendor of specific spots on the Southside: "Wells St. is a symphony of joints/ And from the Point/ You can see a Disneyland loop/ At night/ A swarm of Technicolor fireflies/ And ragged velvet skies." Metaphor unsettles commonplace understanding of marginalized spaces and their inhabitants, reframing the readers' experience of both.

In response to the Forman piece, students' writing generally focused either on use of the figurative to jar perception of place or the dichotomous relationship between the beauty of home and the brutality of the ghetto (one student, for example, employed the loaded metaphor of "slipping on nectar"). In many cases, examination of the latter theme eclipsed the role of metaphor and simile, which served strictly as a vehicle (almost an afterthought) for expressing the relationship between the reality of the urban existence of youth and the nostalgia of home.

K-Town

On the Westside there is no liberty
Instead all you see is illegal activity.
You don't hear peace and quiet,
Instead all you hear is gunshots and riots.
But still its touch is as smooth as silk
Though sometimes its taste is bitter as milk.
It might seem strange,
But when I'm away the smell I miss,
Though when I'm here, I know it smells like piss.

In other cases, metaphor and simile became organizing principles around which depictions of the dichotomous relationship took shape. Following a discussion in class around the utility of sensory language in the construction of metaphor, simile, and imagery, a number of students chose to follow that tack, constructing conflicting images through metaphor and simile embedded in description of sensory perception.

Taste of Chicago[17]

Chicago smells like doughnuts
Some mornings,
Sticky and sweet

Chicago sounds like the woods
When the birds are chirping
Or trees falling
When shots go off

Chicago looks like New York after 9/11;
It's ground zero
After the attack

Chicago tastes like chemicals,
Acid burn that singes your tongue

Chicago feels gritty

[17] The title itself is a play on the name of Chicago's largest summer festival, where hundreds of thousands of tourists and city folk flock to the resplendent grounds of a multi-billion dollar park complex constructed by Mayor Daley while communities of color were crumbling under his reign.

Like collard greens
That have yet to be cleaned

A number of students also allowed metaphor itself to become the central focus, the underlying beauty of the city not expressed explicitly, but through the transcendent quality of the figurative and its ability to reimagine urban reality.

Welcome

Welcome!
Welcome to this windy city
Where guns seem to pop up like tulips
And the massive waves of hungry
Greedy hands seem to clench
At green bundles of parsley
And when asked for some to cook with
They open their hands
Like wads of gum
Were stuck between every finger
Welcome to the city!
Where mouths open as wide and as deep
As potholes
With stomachs that can never be filled
Not even with bits of bullets
That are bitter with hate
And spitefulness
Welcome! Welcome!
To this place where the ground
Is filled with dusty, rigid skin
That's so thirsty
Not even the fruit-bearing wind
Can repair and mend
Its ILLs
Welcome to Chicago!
Welcome! Welcome!

With respect to our reading of *Beowulf*, the interpretive reasoning embedded in our understanding of and response to both the All Natural and Kent Forman pieces, namely

destabilizing perspective by contextualizing, rearranging, and transcending fixed notion of place and personhood, allowed us to enter the text ready to perform those same literary operations. Thus, the positioning of Beowulf as hero and Grendel as monster were met with an understanding of narrative perspective that called those positions into question from the start. The reading of *Beowulf* as hyperbole, as an exaggeration or distortion of reality, was further fed by the serendipitous consonance of kenning and epithet, forms popularized by *Beowulf* before being abandoned and reassumed by emcees nearly a millennium later. Epithet, the recurrent replacement of proper names with descriptive phrases, is so ubiquitous in hip hop that is scarcely notable, so while Christopher Wallace, for example, is not Christopher Wallace, but rather The Notorious B.I.G., Biggie Smalls, or Big Poppa and Dante Smith is an anonymous character who exists only as Mos Def, so too is Beowulf "The Lord of the Seamen" and "the Geatish Hero" while Grendel is "bone crusher" and "blood gusher," the "woodland walker" and "midnight stalker." Kenning, a particular form of epithet that is either not recurrent or replaces common nouns (for example, in *Beowulf*, war becomes "weather of weapons"), has also been resurrected by modern-day emcees. Both in *Beowulf* and, more obviously, in hip hop, the purpose of epithet and kenning is self-aggrandizement, the mythologizing of one's tale or one's person, or the villainization/deprecation of a foe. While hyperbolic intent may be fairly straightforward when GZA (1995) spits, "The body-dropper, the heartbeat-stopper/ child-educator plus head-amputator" or when Nas (1994b) refers to himself as "the versatile, honey-stickin' wild, golden child"," it was our understanding of self-mythologizing in hip hop that allowed us to read hyperbole in *Beowulf* and further unsettle the authority or reliability of the narrative voice, which in turn allowed us to

locate hyperbole in hip hop outside of instances of epithet and unsettled mythologized accounts of gangsta identity. Our comparative readings of isolated instances of epithet and kenning in hip hop and *Beowulf* mapped authorial intent by identifying the epithet, the person or noun being figuratively represented, and the net impact of representation, typically either aggrandizement or demonization.

Treatment of *Beowulf* in high-school classrooms generally attends to basic elements of plot and, at most, the form, meter, and poetic devices typically employed in epic poetry. Our study of *Beowulf* did all of this, while simultaneously positioning our interpretation of the text in ways that might illuminate our understanding of our lives and our world, a goal that was consistently posited as the true purpose of literature. Poetic form was treated in the manner described above, while comprehension and recall of plot structure were embedded in the destabilization of narrative voice and the application of that destabilization to contemporary discourses.

One of the summative activities of our reading of *Beowulf* was a dramatic retelling of the entire story from Grendel's perspective, ala John Gardner.[18] Recounting the story from the perspective of the "monster" (transporting it, in this case, to the low end or the wild hundreds—the area of Chicago south of 100th Street) certainly demonstrated an understanding of the plotline of the story, but also permitted a personal connection to the tale (the horrific environment, the villainized beast shaped by a context over which he had no control, the single mother grieving for the loss of her child) and reconstruct the ways in which my student, as youth of color, had been depicted in popular narratives of good and evil. Historically contextualizing both *Beowulf* (the curse of Cain and the

[18] A portion of this particular lesson was filmed by the Oprah Winfrey Show and is available at: http://www.oprah.com/style/A-Deserving-Teacher

Moorish invasions, as mentioned in Chapter One) and the resurrection of epithet and kenning by contemporary hip-hop artists (looking specifically at the tradition of toasting/badman tales and H. Rap Brown's (1969) "Rap's Poem") allowed us to draw fairly linear connections between the villainization of Grendel and the villainization of black youth in the popular imagination.

The ongoing salience of the war in Iraq and the demonization of Islamic culture and peoples in the popular imagination continued to provide an initial entrance into a comparative reading that would center on race more broadly. One of the primary reasons that I persisted in utilizing the example of Arab peoples, beyond the fact that its distance from student lives allowed a detached analysis that lead comfortably into more personal discussion of race, was that many of my students had wholly and unselfconsciously bought into the anti-Islamic diatribe. Interrogating a mythology to which they themselves had generally subscribed allowed a more critical reading of the figurative aspects and narrative voice in *Beowulf* while illuminating the functions, mechanics, and persuasiveness of mythologies that impacted their lives more directly. Though students were universally aware of anti-Arab rhetoric in the sense that they had been exposed to it on a daily basis for years, we engaged in a close comparative reading of a number of quotes and articles that exemplified anti-Arab mythology and its consonance with the hyperbolic discourse posited by Beowulf. A brief example would be our examination of George W. Bush's "axis of evil" rhetoric and quotes from the president such as, "We're taking action against evil people. Because this great nation of many religions understands, our war is not against Islam, or against faith practiced by the Muslim people. Our war is a war against evil. This is clearly a case of good versus evil, and make

no mistake about it -- good will prevail."[19] While any number of texts might have been introduced to contest the simplistic proposition of good vs. evil as a justification for a politically and economically motivated war, our goal in this short lesson was to unearth the functions of rhetoric and hyperbole, discourses of good and evil, and reframe them. Thus, we read and listened to a single piece that essentially flipped Bush's argument on its head. Immortal Technique (2003a), in his track "The 4th Branch", spits:

The voice of racism preaching the gospel is devilish

A fake church called the prophet Muhammad a terrorist

Forgetting God is not a religion, but a spiritual bond

And Jesus is the most quoted prophet in the Qu'ran

They bombed innocent people, tryin' to murder Saddam

When you gave him those chemical weapons to go to war with Iran

This is the information that they hold back from Peter Jennings

'Cause Condoleeza Rice is just a new age Sally Hemmings

I break it down with critical language and spiritual anguish

The Judas I hang with, the guilt of betraying Christ

You murdered and stole his religion and paintied him white

Translated in psychologically tainted philosophy

Conservative political right wing ideology

Glued together sloppily, the blasphemy of a nation

Got my back to the wall, cause I'm facing assassination

[19] Parkside Hall, San Jose, California April 30, 2002

Guantanamo Bay, federal incarceration

How could this be, the land of the free, home of the brave?

Indigenous holocaust and the home of the slaves

Corporate America, dancin' offbeat to the rhythm

You really think this country never sponsored terrorism?

Human rights violations, we continue the saga

El Savador and the contras in Nicaragua

And on top of that, you still wanna take me to prison

Just cause I won't trade humanity for patriotism

The piece goes on to derail anti-Arab rhetoric and jingoistic hyperbole from every possible angle. Students' response to this piece was revelatory in a way that positioned critical reading as essential to every text that we would read throughout the year with respect to its impact on their own perception of the world. As, line-by-line, Immortal Technique unveiled the lies that students themselves had been fed, the force and function of rhetoric and the power of language were made evident. While our classroom activity involved close reading and discussion around the piece in relation to the Bush quotes and *Beowulf*, the song itself draws connections to racist discourses residing closer to students' own lives and allowed a segue into our examination of the rhetoric of good and evil with respect to mythologies of race and depictions of youth of color in the U.S.

I've consistently been taken aback by the extent to which white distortions of black culture and community have impacted my students, not only in terms of the ways in which they are treated by white folks who have bought into those misrepresentations ("rational racism" as Dinesh D'Souza would call it), but also in terms of their perceptions

of themselves. Students' almost universal willingness to blame gross social inequalities on the fact that the black community is generally lazier, more violent, and less intelligent than everyone else while simultaneously crediting white folks' success with their ethics and ingenuity continues to startle my sense of justice, even after all these years. A question as simple as "Why does the ghetto exist?" (a natural offshoot of the "Where I'm From" lesson) invariably elicits all manner of finger pointing that never (literally never) implicates the broader society that constructed and sustains it. While misrepresentation on a personal level (for example, being stopped by the police for no reason) could be understood as such, there was almost no elaboration of that understanding to broader contexts or to a reading of behaviors and circumstances as anything more than individual bigotry. Racism itself was understood (as it is, conveniently, by most white folks) as an amalgam of personal prejudices rather than systemic or structural; it was generally viewed as an evil that could be visited upon white folks as easily as blacks. This belief that racism constituted a personal disposition rather than an endemic situation formed part of the mythology around which our discussions evolved. Dismantling mythologies surrounding Iraq and good vs. evil allowed us to reveal the inner workings of those discourses in ways that called into question popular depictions of blackness (and individualism, and meritocracy, and any number of American mythologies that serve to subjugate or rationalize subjugation) and bring critical examination of race into our repertoire of practice in ways that would echo throughout the year.

Examination of the misrepresentation of youth of color referenced both our earlier discussions of kenning, hyperbole, and gangsta identity as well as hip-hop texts that

specifically addressed the villainization of blackness, including Mos Def's (1999b) *Mr. Nigga:*

You can laugh and criticize Michael Jackson if you wanna

Woody Allen, molested and married his step-daughter

Same press kickin' dirt on Michael's name

Show Woody and Soon-Yi at the playoff game, holdin' hands

Sit back and just think about that

Would he get that type of dap if his name was Woody Black?

O.J. found innocent by a jury of his peers

And they been fuckin' with that nigga for last five years

Is it fair, is it equal, is it just, is it right?

Do you do the same shit when the defendant's face is white?

If white boys doin' it, well, it's success

When I start doin' it, well, it's suspect

Don't hate me, my folks is poor, I just got money

America's five centuries deep in cotton money

Although close comparative readings of this and other hip-hop texts were generative, they were scarcely necessary. After our interrogation of the misrepresentation of Muslims in the media, introduction of the very subject of the misrepresentation of young black males, and youth of color more generally, generated a wealth of insight that illuminated our destabilization of mythologies of good and evil in *Beowulf*, as well as contemporary American society. A simple statement of the fact that the majority of crime in the U.S. is committed by white folks (a truth about which students were initially entirely

incredulous), in contrast to representations of the color of crime in the media and incarceration rates, elicited discussion that contextualized students' own experiences and provided a platform for the construction of counter-narratives. Despite the extent to which many students had bought into American mythologies that villainize and pathologize communities of color, blaming them not only for their own condition but any number of social ills, examining the facts and the political, economic, and social contexts of even one of these mythologies (the criminality of black youth) served to shed light on all of them and revealed the positionality of narrative perspective in the popular depictions of African Americans, even on the evening news. Although these readings generated very lively discussion in class, we did not explicitly write around them. Rather, they laid the foundation for future critical readings and introduced Critical Race Pedagogy into the classroom as a fundamental facet of those readings; race would forefront our critiques because racism was so profoundly ensconced in the society that we were critiquing. The issue of misrepresentation, the disconnect between the lives of youth and the depiction of black folks in the popular imagination, was revisited frequently in student writing and our entire year (including our participatory action research project described below) was structured around the creation of narratives that contested those depictions. Some student writing specifically addressed the instability of "truth":

T.R.U.T.H.

When you let the white man adopt your given freedom,
And he has you thinking you have no choice but to believe him,
If you have no strength to beat him,
Then your life depends on you to be him.

Or what if grandma Zoe tells you no, you can't go to the candy store,
But you still sneak past it, thinking that you had it.
Thought everything was flower petals and honey baskets,

But now you eternally chillin' in a marble casket.

Or how about if this dude was sippin' some red wine
Telling your girl she past fine, knowing she don't mind
But instead of being kind, you wanna put that nine to his spine
Before niggas get outta line.

When a male tells a female, "I love you," then we get to talking about us,
Now we finna go to the crib on that bus
Thinking our relationship swimming in this water park we call trust
Next thing you know, a hug lead to a touch, a touch lead to a lust
But after that final thrust, this nigga accidentally bust.

When you see a little girl skipping down the street
Running right past this nasty, perverted freak,
And he thinking about making her shriek under and on top of them sheets
Nowhere to be found….aw, yeah, that's right: the police.

While others wrote themselves into the destabilizing process, creating depictions that countered limitations placed on them by others and society-at-large:

Through Their Eyes

When they look at me
All they see
Is my 2-for-24 black jeans
My 5.99 white tee
My 11 and 1/2 Reeboks
They see the nappy hair on my head
But they don't see
The man I'll grow up to be
They don't see
My white-and-gold Ph.D.
They don't see me
Changing the world for the better
They see what they want to see
And that's fine with me

Eye Am

Eye am a figment of your imagination.
Eye am the dust particle that floats yards away,
But yet I still make you sneeze.
Eye am the emperor of all gods, kings, and Spartans
When it comes to making the impossible possible.
Eye am the spirit that makes ghosts look like humid fog.
I'm embedded with a golden skill for the ability to materialize
Objects that you desire.
This art I study gives the human nicknames, such as:
Chronically astonishing and permanently unforgettable.
I give you a sample of my hobby and, during the demonstration,
It melts into your brain and drips off every nerve.
I give birth to metaphors while you're like,
"How you do that?" and "Do you worship the devil?"
Eye am the twist of every elegance and the epic of each velocity.
My kamikaze examples have no mercy
And I delete every mission that defines gravity.
This delusional disease has been protracted for centuries,
And has been spread from hemisphere to hemisphere.
Angels and demons will never adapt to my description.
Eye am more than a myth…
Eye am a magician!

While other students contested depictions of black youth generally and created counternarratives that repositioned their entire generation:

Society Today

I'm sick and tired of all this violence
I don't think we need another moment
Of silence
Going through life everyday
Seeing innocent teens shot by strays
I'm tired of this black on black crime
Young kids with dime
Bags, that is
Tired of the sad life they live
Young boys got dead-beat daddies
No one to look up to
Young people putting it in their minds
This world they must rue
But they not tryna listen

All they want to see is the bling that glistens
Listen!
They are fools of the community
Being ruled by devilish foolery
But in the end it's up to you and me
Truthfully
Our young men standing on corners
When they should be sitting in class
And they wonder why our generation is so sad
Maybe because they got gym teachers tryna teach math
See statistics say our race
Is the least likely to make it out of high school and graduate
But I want to take the time out to prove them wrong
Cuz they honestly think
We're a species of morons, an ignorant throng
But they not tryna take time out and see
That we are moguls, young royalty
The future is in our hands
And we have the state of mind
That can only expand
We're here to make our generation a success
A horizon full of you, wise, witty teens
That are truly blessed
So all your tongues can now confess
Cuz I know that these lyrics that I'm spitting
Are so in depth
Now I'ma just take time and catch my breath!
I know we can make it
Through anything we can make it
When storms bring us down, we put on our crown
Cuz I believe we can make it
You'll never know 'til you try
So stop your crying and dry your eyes
People will notice sooner or later
Cuz deep down inside you know you're truly greater
Than them all
It's time to stand up and fight for the truth
Cuz you know that there's a star in you
Don't let people step on your dreams
Having confidence is all you need

Student responses, while repositioning themselves with respect to the representations of youth of color that dominate the popular (white) imagination, typically

relied nonetheless on narratives of meritocracy and self-determination. Understandably, students' own sense of agency with respect to their lives and communities hinted at systemic inequalities while avoiding discourses that would allow those inequalities to be determinate in their own lives, discourses that inevitably hemmed in an understanding of their own possibility and fueled a sense of hopelessness. Thus education and individual uplift remained the sole means of combating hardship that may or may not be structural or endemic to an inherently racist society. As our work as a class evolved, we began to seek means to acquiring agency with respect to broader inequalities while respecting and fostering students' capacity to overcome those inequalities on a personal level.

Chickenheads, Gold Diggers, and Hoes
Mary Wollstonecraft and Gender in Hip Hop

Who you *calling a bitch?*

-Queen Latifah, "U.N.I.T.Y," 1993

Our reading of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* served as a continuation and contextualization, in some respects, of the interrogation of misogyny in hip hop that evolved out of our original critical reading of student-chosen hip-hop texts discussed in the last chapter. As a non-fiction work, Wollstonecraft was read thematically rather than figuratively, with hip hop serving as platform for investigating themes of gender and equality in contemporary America and the lives of students. While readings of Wollstonecraft in English classrooms (which, from my experience, are nonetheless infrequent) occasionally touch on contemporary examples of gender inequality, such as wage disparities, domestic violence, or under-representation of

women in government, they tend to focus on the distal (treatment of women in Muslim nations, for example) and the abstract (statistical inequalities with respect to employment or wealth, for example). While we examined these issues as well, hip hop provided a fertile terrain for examination of gender inequality and the construction of gender in the lived experience of students.

The objectification and marginalization of women in hip hop, like the materialism the permeates hip-hop lyrics, is a reflection of the salience of those attitudes in broader society, even if hip hop is greeted with more censure for expressing them. Misogyny and homophobia were not created by young black males even if male emcees are often credited with authoring its elaboration in the new millennium. While our reading did occur in the wake of the controversy surrounding Nelly's "Tip Drill" (2003) video, for our purposes it was helpful that the controversy arose less from the video's content than from the protest against it staged by the young women of Spelman College. The song, in heavy rotation on hip hop and R&B stations as most Nelly tracks were at the time, included the chorus, "It must be your ass, cuz it ain't your face/ I need a tip drill" and any number of lines laden with similar social insight (not to mention lyrical virtuosity), such as: "I need a freak that will not choke/I need a freak that let me stick it down her throat." It is perhaps noteworthy that neither the lyrics nor the bulk of the video, in which bikini-clad women (decapitated by the frame or positioned backwards) shake their asses as Nelly's crew handle them and literally hurl money at their vaginas, were responsible for the uproar. Rather, it was a single shot in the video, in which Nelly swiped a credit card between the cheeks of a faceless woman's rear, which prompted the students of Spelman to request an explanation and apology before he was allowed to make an appearance on

campus. Likewise, it was the response of these young women, rather than the Nelly video, and other similar responses by black feminists, that provided a space for us to interrogate sexism and resituate the discourse of Wollstonecraft in ways that informed our understanding of our own environment and lives.

My British Literature class, comprised almost entirely though not exclusively of young men, generally approached our reading of Wollstonecraft without any clear awareness of the existence of sexism or its historical roots. I, on the other hand, came to our reading with an excruciatingly acute understanding of my position as a young white feminist teaching about another white feminist to a group of young black men. In many respects, I feel that hip hop, and hip hop feminist responses to misogyny and articulation of counternarratives, was the only possible avenue towards addressing sexism in the lives and culture of students without being paternalistic or pedantic. The issue of misogyny originally arose during our critical readings of student-chosen hip hop texts, a discussion in which my (black, male) co-teacher took the lead in addressing the objectification of women in hip hop. Although that discussion certainly demonstrated students' willingness to question the ways in which women were both depicted by male hip hop artists and the exclusion of women in the hip hop industry, it didn't necessarily interrogate sexism in students' lives, communities, or broader society. Our comparative reading of Wollstonecraft and texts by female hip-hop artists, as well as explicitly pro-woman male emcees, provided an opportunity to delve more deeply into the conversation about gender inequality in our lives, in hip hop, and in society-at-large. It is also perhaps noteworthy that almost all of my male students came from female-headed households and, contrary to the images of women that they often uncritically consumed within their interactions with

popular media, nonetheless had strong female figures in their lives whom they universally respected, if not revered. In fact, student writing and discussion often returned to the issue of teen parenthood and single motherhood as the central issues affecting black women, issues that were generally seen in a contextual vacuum and disconnected from both institutional sexism or the attitudes of men.

Our reading of Wollstonecraft, while explicitly recalling our earlier discussions around gender and misogyny, was paired with readings of three hip-hop texts, as well as excerpts from Joan Morgan's (2000) *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It D*own. The central hip-hop text that we examined was Sarah Jones' (2000*) Your Revolution*, a piece that served to draw an extraordinarily straight line between our earlier critical readings of hip hop not only to discussions of misogyny and sexism, but also to the relationship of misogyny with broader social uplift and revolution. In truth, overtly feminist messages are difficult to find in hip-hop texts, which is indicative less of the sentiments of female emcees scrounging to survive in a male industry, but of the choices of record executives who have fashioned an ostentatiously anti-woman sonic panorama. While some underground artists have managed to eek out a living while being overtly pro-woman (Sarah Jones, Jean Grae, Invincible, Rocky Rivera, Psalm One) and other, more at least marginally mainstream, artists have constructed a lyrical presence that evades the subject of gender, neither taking a firm stance nor in any respect subjugating women (Missy Elliot, Bahamadia, MC Lyte, Lauryn Hill), Queen Latifah is perhaps the only artists who has managed to be both successful and feminist, if at times tepidly so. Rather, the only truly acceptable feminism in hip hop is the strain of neo-feminism that confronts inequality solely across the terrain of sexuality and equates

empowerment to the re-appropriation of the female body through a reclaiming of female sexuality, ala Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, and Nicki Minaj. Perhaps it is evidence of hip hop's reflection of broader cultural trends that even the federal government seems to agree that women's place in hip hop is as objects and vixens, rather than agents or, God forbid, revolutionaries. The FCC deemed the Sarah Jones' song "patently offensive" and fined radio stations $7000 for broadcasting it,[20] while the Nelly video and the numerous songs cited by Jones in the piece (including Akinyele's (1996) outrageously misogynistic *Put It in Your Mouth*: "I'm all about mouth fuckin/ Only if you down for dick suckin'/ If not, be chair and a beer...keep truckin/ And fuck chapsticks/ I'm comin ashy as hell, wit chapped dicks/ For your chapped-ass lips) were in heavy rotation without a murmur of censure.

As a class, we had already read Gil Scott Heron's (1990) *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, and so understood the referent and its political and historical context. The Jones piece, which includes an intro explicitly honoring Gil Scott Heron, flips the critique: rather than interrogating the ethos consumerism and materialism that undermines social change, Jones resituates the critique around misogyny. "The revolution will not be televised" is transformed into "Your revolution will not happen between these thighs." Jones pulls no punches with respect to materialism, and even less so with respect to hip hop. She rhymes:

The real revolution ain't about booty size

The Versaces you buys or the Lexus you drive

And though we lost Biggie Smalls, your Notorious revolution

Will never allow you to lace no lyrical douche in my bush

[20] http://www.villagevoice.com/2001-06-19/news/counter-revolution/

You're revolution will not be killing me softly with the Fugees

Your revolution won't knock me up and produce lil' future emcees

Because that revolution will not happen between these thighs

Your revolution will not find me in the backseat of a jeep with L.L.

Hard as hell, doing it and doing it well

As much as Jones locates the limitations of the possibility of revolution in hip-hop ideologies that objectify women and limit their participation, she also identifies hope for revolution within hip hop that does not subscribe to those ideologies. She spits:

Your revolution will not be me tossing my weave,

Making believe I'm some caviar-eating, ghetto mafia clown

Or me givin' up my behind just so I can get signed

Have someone else write my rhymes? I'm Sarah Jones, not Foxy Brown

Your revolution makes me wonder, where could we go

If we could drop the empty pursuit of props and the ego

Revolt back to our Roots, use a little Common sense on a Quest

To make love De La Soul, no pretense … but

Your revolution will not be you flexing your sex and status

To express what you "feel"

Your revolution will not happen between these thighs

Will not happen between these thighs

Will not be you shaking and me faking between these thighs

Because the revolution, when it finally comes, is gon' be real

Jones' ultimate interrogation of what constitutes "real," gangsta identity laden with materialistic misogyny or true revolutionary ideology, revisited themes investigated by our class both within our critical reading of hip-hop texts and our investigation of the "real" during our *Beowulf* unit. With respect to Wollstonecraft, which we paired with a reading of Audre Lorde's (1982) *Ain't I a Woman*, Jones provided a space for investigating the continuity of sexism, from the suffrage movement to hip hop. This continuity was further elaborated by our reading of Talib Kweli's (2000) *For Women* (discussed below) and an investigation of the ways in which emcees, even male emcees, contest misogyny in their rhymes. While the white feminist perspective of contemporary sexism (income and wealth inequalities, under-representation in government, academic, and business leadership, sexual and domestic violence, etc.) were addressed as evidence of the persistence of Wollstonecraft's complaints in modern society, hip hop relocated the discussion to the black community, a space rarely addressed by white feminism, as effectively argued by Lorde. Hip hop allowed students to understand sexism in the context of their own lives in a way that a simple reading of Wollstonecraft certainly never could.

Although additional readings of hip-hop texts authored by female emcees, such as Queen Latifah's (1993) *U.N.I.T.Y.* and Jean Grae's (2002) *Thank Ya* (Bitter cause I'm written off as some sex kitten/ Freezy freaky bitches like in 80's mittens - it's so sad!), most of these artists, perhaps understandably, contested the objectification of women in hip hop and their exclusion from a male-dominated industry. The most incisive critique of sexism broadly writ actually came from male emcees. Reading of Brother Ali's (2003a) diatribe against domestic violence, *Dorian*, and Talib Kweli's (2000c) *For*

Women both historicized the discourse and expanded it beyond the confines of hip hop. Kweli's piece, which includes numerous references to Lorde, historical and contemporary struggles of black womanhood. He begins:

I *got off the 2 train in Brooklyn on my way to a session*

Said let me help this woman up the stairs before I get to steppin'

We got in a conversation she said she a 107

Just her presence was a blessing and her essence was a lesson

She had her head wrapped

And long dreads that peeked out the back

Like antenna to help her get a sense of where she was at, imagine that

Livin' a century, the strength of her memories

Felt like an angel had been sent to me

She lived from nigger to colored to negro to black

To Afro then African-American and right back to nigger

You figure she'd be bitter in the twilight

But she alright, cuz she done seen the circle of life, yo

Her skin was black like it was packed with melanin

Back in the days of slaves she packin' like Harriet Tubman

Her arms are long and she moves like song

Feet with corns, hand with calluses

But her heart is warm and her hair is wooly

And it attract a lot of energy even negative

She gotta dead that the head wrap is her remedy

Her back is strong and she far from a vagabond

This is the back of the masters' whip used to crack upon

Strong enough to take all the pain, that's been

Inflicted again and again and again and again and flipped

It to the love for her children nothing else matters

What do they call her? They call her Aunt Sara.

Kweli explicitly connects the historical adversity faced (and, in many respects, overcome) by black women with respect to both race and gender from the discourses embodied by Lorde to the contemporary struggles of women of color.

Teenage lovers sit on the stoops up in Harlem

Holdin' hands under the Apollo marquis dreamin' of stardom

Since they was born, the streets is watchin' and schemin'

And now it got them generations facin' diseases

That don't kill you, they just got problems and complications that get you first

Yo, it's getting worse, when children hide the fact that they pregnant

Cuz they scared of giving birth

How will I feed this baby?

How will I survive, how will this baby shine?

Daddy dead from crack in '85, mommy dead from AIDS in '89

At fourteen, the baby hit the same streets, they became her master

The children of the enslaved, they grow a little faster

They bodies become adult, while they keepin' the thoughts of a child

Her arrival into womanhood was hemmed up by her survival

Now she's 25, barely grown out her own

Doin' whatever it takes: strippin', workin' out on the block

Up on the phone, talkin' about

"My skin is tan like the front of your hand, and my hair…

Well my hair's alright, whatever way, I want to fix it, it's alright it's fine

But my hips, these sweet hips of mine invite you daddy

And when I fix my lips my mouth is like wine

Take a sip don't be shy, tonight I wanna be your lady

I ain't too good for your Mercedes, but first you got to pay me

You better quit with all the question, sugar whose little girl am I?

Why I'm yours if you got enough money to buy

You better stop with the compliments we running out of time,

You wanna talk whatever we could do that it's your dime

From Harlem's from where I came, don't worry about my name,

Up on one-two-five they call me sweet thang"

While the voyage from "Aunt Sarah" to "Sweet Thang" may be profoundly pessimistic in some respects, it nonetheless connected my students' perception of female peers to their mothers and ancestors while contextualizing the politics of blame and behaviors that students were inclined to condemn. Initially, discussion of depictions of women in hip hop tended to hold women themselves solely responsible for their own objectification ("They the ones shaking their ass. No one's forcing them"), whereas Jones and Kweli, Wollstonecraft and Lorde, placed those behaviors within a historical context and called into question the ways in which men (emcees, the music industry, society-at-large)

shaped what are deemed acceptable, marketable, and normal representations of womanhood and how those representation conflict with the lived experience of women. While additional readings of Common's (2000) *Song for Assata* and comparative essays between Wollstonecraft, Lorde, and hip-hop texts revealed an understanding of the more political aspects of contemporary womanhood, self-directed student writing, perhaps not surprisingly, tended to focus on motherhood and the sexuality of teen girls, in other words the struggles of the women closest to them. Furthermore, while willingly engaging in a critique of representations of women in hip-hop lyrics, student writing nonetheless ignored historical contexts and clung to ideologies of individual determination and self-respect.

Teen Parenthood

She was so confused by love
She let him in without a glove
Crying in so much tension
Her mother told her about bad decisions
See, she's a teen mother now
Thinking life would be easy
Now selling packs
Tryna make ends meet
She was so sprung off his words
But he wasn't even there
To cut the umbilical cord
Walkin' around the hood
In short skirts and v-necks
For herself, she had no respect
So savor the bitterness
That wraps around your taste buds
Show
That we can't afford to waste love
Cuz by age sixteen
The sex has already happened
But mama forgot to ask
If she was sexually active
Make her think and ask herself,
"Why didn't I go to Planned Parenthood?"

Not thinking that her plans
Were to be a teen parent
Growing up in the hood

Students connected even more strongly to the struggle and role of black womanhood as tied up in the role of mother and, more specifically, single mother. While we discussed the impact of single motherhood on the black community (particularly the impact on family income and the rates of poverty among women and children), it was the adversity faced by students' own mothers that most engaged them. Taking up Tupac's (1998) trajectory on his classic *Dear Mama*, many students chose to write odes or elaborate their relationships with their own mothers.

Dear Mama

Sometimes I feel her pain
But can't step foot in her game
A single black mother with no help
Juggling four kids on her own
I can see in her eyes that she wants to give up
But she never does. She just keeps plowing on.
She pushes to the limit, no matter what
With a sickly child while she's sick herself
I see her struggle and it's never enough
Working two jobs just to put food on the shelf
Sometimes it makes me cry see her go through all of this
And I worry that I might lose her in the mix
That's why I'll never defame my mother's name
Or disrespect her in any way
She puts food on the table and clothes on our back
A roof over our heads and pride in the fact that we're black
Unconditional love,
Dear Mama

Like Tupac's depiction of his loving, drug-addicted, Black Panther mother, students' representations of motherhood and womanhood were complicated by struggles that were not always won.

The Definition of a Mother

What is the exact definition of a mother?
What obligations or qualities may they give to their children?
What visions and opportunities may I receive from them
Besides serrated thorn needles
Interjecting into our vessels
What chores will I have?
Besides washing dishes full of bloody, broken plates
And taking out garbage
Full of cocaine powder and empty syringes?
I never thought I would see the day
Of how a body can decay and shred away.
Multiple stenches, regrettable odors
Pollution of sewage surrounds my lungs
As I beg for serenity to escape away.
But mother, how could you be the heathen
I knew you never was
And trade me for a tingling sensation
From your heroin buzz!
I hate the fact that if I made a mistake,
You would beat me bloody like a velvet cake.
My block was your replacement,
And I learned from the best,
But it's hard to rest at night with metal bullets in my chest
My karma is filthy, but my past is clean.
"Wake up, it's time for lunch."
Thank God, it was only a dream.

The Truth

The truth is that my mom is a junkie
and to me she is more of a monkey
She gave me up and started to hit that crystal dust
I asked my grandma what's up
and she said she's hooked on that angel stuff
It hurts me to hear
but the truth is
that it's been 15 years
and I'll talk about it for another three
until she comes through on her own two feet
I'ma end it this way and just say
that's
The Truth

While student responses to our numerous readings didn't necessarily represent a feminist metamorphosis, they were never intended to do so. Rather, they were meant to engage in an interrogation of gender that challenged the simplistic and misogynistic representations to which students were daily subjected. Certainly they made sense of Wollstonecraft and connected the text to their own lives in generative ways. As teachers shy away from inviting hip-hop texts into the classroom because they appear, often with reason, to objectify women, that objectification remains unchallenged because it is never discussed. Students' willingness to deconstruct the misogynistic messages embedded in hip hop both suggests an overestimation of youth's commitment to those messages and underscores the need to create a dialogue around them, lest they remain unchallenged, not because they reflect the views of young males of color, but because they predominate the views to which those young men are rooutinely exposed.

America Eats Its Young
Satire, Class, Participatory Action Research, and *A Modest Proposal*

America's still eating its young,
But I think she need to get slim.
Fast!
Somebody tell that heifer to exorcise her demons,
Stop chewin on black children
& reduce her jail cell ulite.

-Jemini, "America Eats Its Young," 2001

In January, somewhere between Shakespeare and Wollstonecraft, my juniors tackle Jonathan Swift's satirical political treatise, *A Modest Proposal*. The language is dense and the author's intent is obscured by irony. In short, any significant understanding of the text requires the sort of complex literary reasoning facilitated by a skills-set that is

applicable across texts and traditions. In addition, the political and social commentary embedded in the text requires a nuanced understanding of both the social and historical context of the treatise, and an ability to bridge the specificity of that context to explore larger themes of human interaction and experience.

The text, which uses irony to ridicule the attitudes of the rich towards the poor, is not only accessible to students through their literate practices outside of school, it also forefronts their role in the creation of literary meaning by addressing social issues with which they have immediate and personal understanding. The components of satire (irony, sarcasm, humor, exaggeration/hyperbole, and the underlying social commentary) are evident in the literary traditions (canonical and otherwise) of students as well as the literate practices in which they engage outside of school.

Examples of irony and hyperbole abound in African American literate practices such as signifyin(g) and the dozens and veiled social commentary is a hallmark of the African American literary canon. Moreover, contemporary popular youth culture frequently engages students in the analysis and interpretation of subtext through the use of satire. Students are certainly in on the joke when they watch Dave Chapelle or the Simpsons,[21] but the skills set that is naturally evoked in the creation of alternate, non-literal interpretations of Chapelle's comedy routines, for example, is not frequently or consistently enacted in classroom analysis of the literature of the enlightenment, or any other era. When Chapelle pretends to be a blind, black Ku Klux Klan member, for example, students immediately understand the irony and the underlying meaning, but they most likely do not understand it *as* irony, nor do teachers likely recognize its

[21] Both the Simpsons and the Dave Chapelle Show present multiple registers of meaning: the literal, often amusing, storyline as well as an ironic and figurative critique of contemporary American society. Chapelle, in particular, uses satire to address social inequalities and racial polemics.

understanding as the enactment of literary reasoning. Because the immediacy of the connection is evident neither to our students, nor to us, we often assume that that our students are deficient in precisely those skills that they daily engage outside of our classrooms.

When we adhere to a deficiency model and teach canonical literature in isolation—guiding unwitting students to the "correct" interpretation of a particular text—we do our students a disservice, both by failing to recognize the wealth of competencies that they bring to our classrooms, and by failing to develop an arsenal of literary skills that can be applied across diverse contexts. (Morrell, 2008) By isolating and making explicit the processes through which students engage in non-literal textual analysis outside of the classroom, it is possible to render legible the staples of the western canon while simultaneously questioning their primacy as uniquely complex or valuable works of literature. In my British Literature course, we accomplished this task by mapping our own meaning making across progressively subtle contemporary satirical texts. Following an initial exploration of primarily multimodal examples of satire (video, political cartoons, etc.) we analyzed the processes by which we understand these texts and generated a step-by-step model for the creation of alternate, non-literal interpretation of satirical texts, quite literally a map from literal to figurative and from figurative to authorial intent and embedded social commentary. We then applied this model to texts in which the extraction of alternate meanings was increasingly complex, such as Reg E. Gaines (1994) "Please Don't Take my Air Jordans", in which Gaines spits from the perspective of a youth so materialistic that he murders another kid for his shoes, and Brother Ali's (2003b) "Prince Charming", in which Ali speaks from the point of view of

a smitten young man who becomes a violent stalker. Utilizing the interpretive strategies we that had already mapped, we carried our interpretation of the texts from the literal to the figurative, explicating both the processes by which we understand subtext as well as the role of our own knowledge and experience of social context in the creation of meaning. For our examination of satire, we made explicit the steps taken to traverse the space between literal and non-literal understanding, namely: what is literally taking place, what does the author really believe and how do we know, who is being criticized, and what is the underlying social commentary. By using students' existent competency in figurative understanding we were able to track our mental processes using familiar texts and create a template that was then applied to the Western canon. In the case of the two hip-hop texts we examined, students easily understood the utility of satire and the figurative as a means of engaging and jarring commonplace perceptions. While a preachy polemic about social ills like avarice and violence against women might send the same message as the Gaines and Ali pieces, the net impact would be very different, an understanding that students expressed very clearly in our discussions surrounding the rhymes. One of the summative activities of our reading of *A Modest Proposal* was the student creation of satirical pieces that critiqued some social issue of concern to them, a project that placed in its sights George W. Bush, white folks, bad teachers, thugs, gangsta rappers (ala CB4) and teen mothers, among others.

The value of personal experience is particularly salient in any study of *A Modest Proposal* because it is a social commentary addressing issues that are evident in all of our lives as residents in a neo-liberal capitalist economy. By couching our reading of *A Modest Proposal* within a broader discussion of the impact of state policy on the

individual and community, we not only facilitated a more complex interpretation of Swift's intent, but we also allowed that reading to inform our understanding of our own lives and environments. Although the rich literally eating the poor for the good of the country may be an obviously ironic (though, oddly, to many of my students, not always all that obvious) proposition, when read alongside the eugenicist statements of Bill Bennett[22] and social critiques such as Jemini's (2001) "America Eats its Young" it is possible to locate both the power of Swift's observations and their connection to our own lives through overarching themes of class struggle and social inequality.

Hip Hop is certainly replete with critique of inequity, particularly with regard to urban communities of color. Talib Kweli defines the hip-hop emcee as a "social documentarian". Focusing on the role of hip hop as documentary, my students examined the way in which hip-hop texts communicate the realities experienced by their authors. In my British Literature class, we paired the works of contemporary artists like Immortal Technique and All Natural[23] with older pieces such as Melle Mel's (1982) "The Message" and Black Star's (1998) "Thieves in the Night" in order to create a sense of the historical continuity of hip hop's response to urban struggle and a more nuanced understanding of the historical contexts of that struggle. The other summative project for *A Modest Proposal,* and one that would continue throughout the remainder of the year, was a participatory action research project examining an issue in our community that

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[22] From the September 28, 2005 broadcast of Salem Radio Network's *Bill Bennett's Morning in America* : "If you wanted to reduce crime ... if that were your sole purpose, you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down."

[23] The examples of socially conscious Hip Hop are nearly infinite. In Chicago specifically, All Natural and the Family Tree crew (CapD, Iomos Marad, the Primeridian, Rita J., and others) provide a wealth of provocative yet positive lyrics. The other examples mentioned, and those I use most frequently in the classroom (Immortal Technique, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Melle Mel) are from New York. While Hip Hop tends to suffer from an extreme localism, there are a number of artists who defy classifications and broaden the scope of social critique, for example the white, female, Detroit-born emcee Invincible.

students hoped to impact. This sort of project (more recently referred to as Issues to Action) was provided a much broader scope by its partnering with the Swift piece. While Issues to Action projects typically investigate and address issues at a proximal level (often the school or the community), Swift's critique of institutionalized oppression, state policies, and their impact on the lives of individuals provided a space in which we might begin to understand the impact of more distal influence on the issues that impacted our lives. Using the Bill Bennett statement and the Jemini piece as a segue, Critical Race Theory framed our investigation in in ways that specifically forefronted the intersection of of race and class and the role of racism in the creation and maintenance of structural inequalities.

We combined our reading of *A Modest Proposal* with an exploration of specific policy decisions and their impact on the communities in which we live, in particular racist housing policies and the construction of the urban underclass. Located as we were, amid the rapidly vacating tundra of what was once the Robert Taylor Homes—and daily breathing the asbestos-laden dust of demolition—after much debate, we chose to focus our project on city/Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) policy, urban renewal, and gentrification, creating narratives, documentaries, and research related to the topic. Specifically, we looked at primary and secondary sources documenting the creation, abandonment, and eventual demise of housing projects in Chicago, the history of racial and economic segregation in Chicago, and analysis of the community impact of displacement and gentrification. The demolition of the housing projects were big news at the time, so contemporary news sources were abundant; we supplemented these sources with readings from Massey & Denton's (1998) *American Apartheid: Segregation and the*

Making of the Underclass, Venkatesh's (2002) *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto*, as well as historic news and photos from the archives of the Chicago Historical Society and original research in the form of interviews and community surveys. We also partnered with a local media-arts education organization, Street-Level Youth Media, (discussed at length in the next chapter) to learn audio production and engineering techniques in order to both create thematic audio collages of the community including interviews with displaced residents, storytelling, and found sounds and to compose, record, and engineer a CD. Hip-hop production in particular served multiple purposes in the classroom: it fostered literacy development through the creation/recitation of text[24] and the emergent multi-modal properties of music production; it further engaged existent knowledge and competency in literate practice; it helped students acquire critical understanding of both canonical and contemporary hip-hop texts through analysis of social, historical, and political subtext and themes; and it allowed students to gain proficiency in technologies related to audio production. Student work (writings, photos, interviews, and audio pieces) was then shared with local college students through online, multi-modal presentations and visits to college classrooms to discuss the struggles of urban youth.

The products of student research underscored not only a critical understanding of the myriad systemic forces at play in students' lives, but also their ability to act as agents amidst institutional cogency. The generative properties of hip hop were evident not only in students' participation in the literary reasoning exercised in the interpretation of text, but also in their critical analysis of environment and their production of counter-

[24] Lyric creation and recitation is particularly useful for students with reading delays, closely mirroring the Language Experience Approach (LEA).

narratives. Critical Race Theory provided an interpretive frame that allowed us to flip the script on majoratarian tales that invert blame, ignore historicity, and depict urban decay and dysfunction as something other than a manifestation of white supremacy. Our investigation of the historical foundations of Chicago housing policy lead to an understanding of wealth and poverty that relocated popular representations and the mainstream hip-hop dialogue surrounding both the ghetto and access to opportunity, deconstructing popular (including hip-hop) discourses glorifying consumption and recontextualizing narrative through our own production of research, text, and counter-narrative.

A rich understanding of any work in the Western canon requires skills that most students are fully capable of enacting in a different milieu, in this case their interpretation and production of hip-hop texts. By making students' figurative understanding explicit and engaging it across diverse literary contexts, teachers can both respect and utilize culturally based knowledge in the classroom. Furthermore, by applying meaning-making and problem-solving strategies across disparate interpretive venues, by mapping the underlying processes of interpretation, teachers can foster an intellectual versatility that transcends genre and content. That being said, the use of hip hop and out-of-school literate practices as a means of engaging the existent competencies of students has value beyond the figurative understanding of canonical texts. Hip-hop texts themselves provide a space for both deep literary interpretation and a critical analysis of social landscapes, not only scaffolding meaning-making in the classroom, but giving meaning to the work being done there.

Chapter 8

It's Not Where You From, It's Where You At
Identity Construction and Intellectual Trajectories

Life ain't a game; if it is I can't participate
Maybe I've changed, but my mind is in a different state
Cause now it seems more like a plan
I'm strivin' for perfection, so that's where I'll begin

-Talib Kweli, "Self Savior," 2011

Teacher research tends to stop at the schoolhouse door. Tracking student trajectories after schools is a tricky task, particularly in urban spaces. It problematizes pedagogy by calling into question its true impact. When students walk out of our classrooms, they nonetheless enter a world in which the impact of instruction may seem rendered obsolete by circumstance. Student engagement, improved test scores, and graduation rates may be nice to cite as evidence of success, but they are in no way guarantees. In neglected neighborhoods, devoid of any semblance of opportunity, a high-school diploma from a low-performing urban school doesn't necessarily mean a whole lot. By tracking students after they left my classroom, my purpose is not to suggest some magic bullet hurtling youth over the myriad obstacles that they must face, but rather to illustrate the ways in which students repositioned their relationships with school and reframed their identities through hip hop, to demonstrate that the spaces were generative and the results meaningful regardless of measurable long-term outcomes.

The students whose trajectories I track in this chapter were chosen precisely because they are so disparate, because they are illustrative as much of the limitations of

any pedagogy in the midst of structural inequality as they are testaments to its possibility. Despite ongoing contact with a number of students whose stories might be told as less complicated tales of straightforward success (college diplomas, decent jobs), selective analysis of the accomplishments of a lamentably atypical group of youth who have overcome their circumstances, though it may attest to the efficacy of my pedagogy, is neither entirely honest nor attentive to the impact of broader social and economic contexts. Critical Race Theory, as a frame of analysis, requires attention to those contexts that conspire against the success of youth of color independent of merit or ability, but it also demands recognition of outcomes not circumscribed by structural inequality. By telling the stories of youth who have remained mired in these contexts, my intent is both to reposition what "success" means with respect to students for whom avenues to traditional success are largely blockaded and also redirect attention to realities that are beyond the onus of schools to correct.

Digital Audio Production

Our work around literary reasoning and critical literacy was complemented by, and interwoven with, the music production project. Spanning the space of five years, the project was initially entirely curriculum integrated and contained within my British Literature class. It quickly expanded, though, to include more than a third of the students in the school, all of whom would eventually find themselves in my classroom. The project, initially imagined for the dual purpose of engaging students in digital technologies while provide a meaningful platform for our writing, took on a much greater

salience in the minds of many of the youth at Lincoln, several of whom continued on to pursue degrees and careers in audio production.

The project, a collaboration with a local media arts non-profit, Street-Level Youth Media, started as a weekly co-teaching session with a single emcee/producer (Simeon Viltz) and, within a year, had expanded to full-day visits from both a producer (Chris Lee) and an emcee/b-boy (Ben Nuniz) that included after-school programs and monthly trips to the recording studio. If student engagement alone is a measure, the program was wildly successful. In a school that boasted an attendance rate in the 60% range, attendance for audio production was near perfect. On our first trip to the studio, for example, I had casually dispersed permission slips to all participants who asked, anticipating that the bus, which would depart before school even started, would nonetheless be half-empty. Even the students who came to school regularly, generally came late. Nonetheless, on that first trip back in 2005, the bus pulled up in front of the building at 7:15 in the morning to find every single student, 36 in total, ready and waiting, permission slip in hand. I had so underestimated the turnout that there wasn't space on the bus. Students piled on top of each other, crowding three to a seat to squeeze in. Beyond simply engaging students in school spaces (chronic truants, for example, chilling in my room every day after school, working on beats), music production also served to create a space in which many students could reposition their identities with respect to school. Reframing themselves as producers rather than consumers, finding a platform for their voices and their talents, hip-hop production carried our work in the classroom beyond the walls of the school. The three students whose stories I recount below participated in the program to varying degrees, assuming different roles (one was a

writer, one was a producer, one was a little of both, but not much of either), yet all cite the experience as seminal to their understanding of self.

Aleah

One you never heard of I
Push it hard to further the
Grind I feel like murder but
Hip hop you saved my life

-Lupe Fiasco, "Hip Hop Saved My Life," 2007

Hip hop saved my life

-Aleah, 2011

"You're the reason I went to school. You're the reason I graduated. You saved my life," Aleah states bluntly as we casually sip coffee and linger over a southern-style brunch (buttermilk biscuits, spicy homefries) at a brightly colored, congenial joint on 75th street. Despite the beauty of this statement, the joy that it gives me as her as her teacher, I obviously contest. "What are you talking about, baby? You did that. I couldn't do that for you."

She gingerly forks her eggs and looks up at me with a half smile. "Why do you think I was a nineteen-year-old junior, Ms. Whitington? I never came to school like that. Even when I started with you, I would come into school just for your class and then duck out."

"Didn't I have you first period?" I ask.

"That's crazy, right?" she responds. "I would drag my butt out of bed at six in the morning to come to your class and I'd be out of there again by like eight. But you changed all that. Hip hop changed all that. It gave me hope. It made me want more for my life, and when Khalil was born, it made me want more for him. It made me see a world that was different."

At the time of our leisurely brunch, Aleah is twenty-six, a strikingly beautiful young woman with piercing eyes offset by a large gash down the side of her face and a vertical tattoo bearing the name of her six-year-old son hemming up against the scar along her angular jawbone. The son she adores so much and never ceases to speak of is not with her, not at the moment and not generally. She has weekly visitation concocted haphazardly outside of the court system and agreed upon by her because she doesn't feel capable of taking care of him in the manner that he deserves. "He's better with his father. He has a better life there. I wouldn't expose him to the life I live," she says with her eyes down, seemingly ashamed by her apparent abandonment of her beloved son. Despite her assertions as to the life-changing power of hip hop, and much to my own chagrin, Aleah is homeless, sleeping on the sofas of others and selling the credit on her Link card[25] in order to get by. Khalil, on the other hand, is a beautiful and precocious young man attending Catholic school while living with an older father and a new young wife in a charming Southside bungalow.

Khalil was born of a rape that I had lived through with Aleah six years earlier, including a late night emergency room visit and an unproductive interaction with law enforcement that viewed her skeptically and advised against prosecution. Aleah is a stud,

[25] Illinois' food assistance program, delivered via a debit-style card that is often bartered for cash by its recipients due to a general lack of other assistance by the state.

a young woman so mannish that she avoids the inevitable hassle and sour looks of gender-specific bathrooms by exiting locales to urinate in alleyways. Though Aleah herself has never voiced the slightest doubt with respect to her sexual orientation, it was this supposed gender confusion that landed her at Lincoln and, eventually, on the streets. In truth, most of the few girls that attended Lincoln were lesbians; the rest were generally deemed promiscuous or "over-sexed." In either case, it was sexuality, often preceded by a history of abuse, which was read as emotional disturbance and ascribed as disability. Aleah's mother, an extraordinarily godly woman ("Praise be. God is good" initiates her voicemail greeting), originally referred Aleah to specialized services in grammar school when symptoms of her sexual preference first became evident. As her sexual "confusion" escalated in adolescence, it was Aleah's mother who requested a more restrictive environment, pulling her from her neighborhood high school sophomore year and placing her at Lincoln. To no avail, Aleah's mannish ways continued and metamorphosed into a full-blown transvestite identity that prompted her mother to put her out entirely; a destitute daughter apparently being preferable to a gay daughter.

Aleah herself is quick to pathologize her own sexuality. When she was a child, a member of her mother's bible study group that met bi-weekly at the house, would creep into her room and touch her. "I think that's what did it," she says. "I don't think I was like this before that."

"Like what?" I ask.

" I don't know. I don't want to say messed up. I think you, your class, made me feel like it wasn't messed up, that it was okay to be who I am. But, I don't know, it's messed up because it messed up my life. It took me out of school. It took me from my

family. It robbed me of my son. So I kind of blame that. I blame it for making me the way I am."

"There's nothing wrong with you, Aleah," I respond. "Who you are didn't make those things happen. And those things happening didn't make you who you are. That lady, what she did, didn't make you who you are."

"I had a lot of anger, you know." She stops eating and assumes a vacant, distant gaze. " I had anger towards that lady, towards my mother, towards whoever was driving the car who hit me, towards the world," she sighs, fingering the wide gash on her cheek. I had never asked her about it and she had never told me. I look at her questioningly. "You know they just pushed me off the car. They hit me, stopped, shoved me off the hood, and drove away. Like I was an animal. Like I was nothing. I had a lot of hatred in my heart."

"So you feel like you belonged at Lincoln?" I ask, tacitly believing that few of my students, and certainly not Aleah, ever did.

"I guess so. I think so. Back then I was out there bogus. I wasn't going to school like that. I was smoking weed. I was fighting. Like I said, I had a lot of hatred in my heart."

I want to question how that hatred, bred from abuse and denouncement of her identity, had been isolated within her and read as disability, but I resist the urge to interrogate. "You feel like Lincoln helped you?" I ask.

"Hell, no. Excuse my language," she rebuts quickly. "Sorry, but no. At least not before you came. I didn't learn anything there. They treated us like we were slow, like there was something wrong with us. They weren't trying to teach us nothing."

"What made my class different?" I pry, remembering my first days at Lincoln and the sulky, sassy Aleah who had been the bane of my existence, had almost made me flee the school, and had most definitely left me sobbing at my own incompetence on numerous occasions.

"You believed in me," she states bluntly. "And then…I don't want to say you introduced me to hip hop, but you showed me where I was at, what I could be. Like it made me want to do something with my life. It made me think that I could do something with my life. It became my books, my knowledge. Common, Kanye…things I never knew, but truth. It became my truth. It became me."

I try for a moment to ignore the present Aleah, the homeless Aleah, the Aleah whose entire life was contained inside a backpack propped against our table, and recall the transformation that I had witnessed in her, the willful, belligerent, and occasionally cruel young woman who had metamorphosed into one of my best and most beloved students. Her trajectory after my classroom didn't suggest such an outcome, in any event. After having frittered away five years in high school while amassing less than two years of credit, Aleah completed her junior and senior years on time and graduated the year after I had her in my British Literature class, continuing to faithfully participate in music production in the interim. When her mother put her out, Aleah had moved in with the first of a long line of volatile women who seemed chosen as much for their ability to host her as for any compassion or stability they might give her. In the interim, during the five years spanning her ousting from her house and our brunch, I had become something of a surrogate mother, at least in times of crisis. When these invariably older women would put her out, cut her, bleach her clothes, leave her on the side of a highway two hundred

miles outside of Chicago, I was the one Aleah called. I was the one who rushed to rescue her. In the years preceding our brunch, though, the calls had become infrequent and full of good tidings. After a year or so of acclimating to adult responsibility and being put out of her mother's house, looking for work in Chicago while living off of women who treated her poorly, Aleah had found her way downstate to a good job in a plastics factory and a crib of her own. That had been the last news I'd had of her. She was gainfully employed, she was safe, she was happy. When I contacted her for an interview, I was somewhat startled by the serendipitous circumstance of finding her in Chicago, thinking she must be visiting her son and not imagining the truth. "What happened?" I ask.

"I wound up in jail," she replies without meeting my eyes.

"For what?" I voice my surprise, knowing Aleah's history but feeling certain that I also know the young woman that she has become, a young woman who adamantly, almost dogmatically avoids the sort of behaviors that typically land one in jail.

"The factory closed. I got laid off. I found another job in another factory in Champaign, but you know it's like cornfields down there and I don't have a car and there was no way to get from Danville to Champaign and they wouldn't give me another Section 8[26] crib while I had the one in Danville and I didn't want to be homeless. I didn't know what to do. So I let some friends stay in my apartment and they paid me rent so that I could stay in Champaign. I don't know. I was hungry. I had to do what I had to do." She still hasn't looked up from her barely touched omelet. She absently drags her fork across the porcelain, the slow scratching sound filling the silence as she pauses. "I didn't know," she says finally, quietly. "I guess they had stolen goods at the crib. They got picked up

[26] Section 8 is an Illinois low-income housing assistance program that has largely replaced public housing in the state, instead providing rental subsidies for low-income tenants.

for it, but since it was my place, it was in my name, I got picked up, too." She looks up at me beseechingly, "They dropped the case. It didn't stick. But I was in jail for six months. I lost my job. I lost my home. I was just trying to get by." There are tears welling in the corners of her eyes.

"Why didn't you call me?" I ask.

"I didn't want you to know, Ms. Whitington," she shakes her head and looks down again. "I didn't want you to see me like that, like this," she nods towards the swollen backpack with a toothbrush peeking out of a side pocket.

It's a slippery space tracking the trajectory of students after they leave you. It would perhaps be enough to allude to attendance, to graduation rates, to higher test scores, all of which I cite as evidence of the success of my instruction, but opening the door to the world into which students must enter subjects those quantifiable outcomes to all of the uncontrollable variables to which students themselves are subject. It would be enough to say that this recalcitrant, chronically truant girl had graduated and gotten a good job, without ever indicating that graduation and a good job sometimes aren't enough. Aleah is back in Chicago, living hand to mouth, looking for work, and trying to survive. I feel like I've failed. "You say it saved your life, but in the end, what did it really give you?" I, too, nod at the backpack.

"You don't know Ms. Whitington. That's why I didn't want to call you. I didn't want you to see me like this. I didn't want to disappoint you."

"I'm not disappointed in you, sweetie. I'm disappointed in myself. Seriously," I protest. "What good did it do you? You're on the streets."

"I wouldn't have graduated, that's for sure," she replies. "I wouldn't have gotten a job and I couldn't hope for another job without that diploma. And then I was really on some shit when I met you. I may be on the streets now, but I'm not out there bogus like I was. I'm on my business. I got my head right. I thank you for that."

"Now I live by the golden rule," she smiles. "All of this, I feel like this is just my past coming back on me now. But that's where the music comes in. It soothes my soul and my mind. It gives me hope. Seriously, what you taught me, hip hop, it's my motivation. It's my knowledge. It's my life. It's its own dominion, its own swag, its own style. It's a legacy. It roots me. I don't know. I can't explain. It's everything to me. It's who I am".

"I wish I were settled," she says, continuing to drag her fork across her plate. "I want to do good. I want to be an artist. I want to help kids, to talk to young people and help them like you helped me." She looks up and smiles again. "I want to come volunteer at your new school. I want to be able to give someone what you gave me."

I smile back, happy with her generosity, but still perplexed by her predicament. "You know, Ms. Whitington, I never would have left Chicago. I never would have imagined a world outside of South Shore. I never would have wanted to be more than what I was. I may not be there yet, but I'll get there. I promise I'm on my way."

Two days later, I put Aleah on a Megabus to Kansas City, to another friend (not a volatile female, but a friend) who would host her and another factory job far away from her son, Khalil. Despite her reassurances, I wonder. I wonder where she would have wound up otherwise. I wonder where she will wind up now. I think of my students who have been killed, who have found themselves facing endless stints in prison, and I feel

powerless. I hope Aleah is right. I hope that it really meant something, that it changed something. I try to evade the white-girl-savior syndrome that aspires to fairy-tale endings and demonstrable success and try to focus on the luminously brilliant woman that she has become, on the perhaps undeserved props that she gives me, and on the dreams that she has for her own future.[27]

Dante

Life's a bitch and then you die
That's why I get high
Cuz you never know when your gonna go

-Nas, "Life's a Bitch," 1994

A Better Day

I know there'll be a better day
More precious moments are on the way
And every day I wish my family the best
Because life is a blessing
Even through the pain, frustration, and the stressing
A lesson
Learned
Is a lesson that should be taught
To my younger siblings
Remember what grandmama said
Satan's trap lies right ahead
I did wrong, but don't look at it that way
I didn't do it because I wanted to
I did it for your sakes
To have a chance of a better life
Than I did
Dry your eyes, no more crying
Quiet
Listen to how beautiful…SILENCE!

[27] Six months after this interview, Aleah is gainfully employed in Kansas City and has her own apartment, returning to Chicago monthly to visit Khalil (and me).

Is
Do it for all the things
That our mother did
I know there will be a better day
Those precious moments are on the way
Best wishes for my family
To change the world is in my dreams
My grandma was a Christian
Her aim was for the good
But it wasn't my fault
I learned to bang in the hood
We weren't born
With a golden spoon in our mouth
Nor blessed with six bedrooms
For everyone in the house
I used to struggle with animosity
But I'm gonna change the game
Separated by apostrophes
Logically
I speak
Dismiss the violence
When it rains, it pours
But now the sun is shining
Gladly
Present the change
To make my family happy
Even without the loving care of a daddy
Sadly
Distressed
That's why I inhaled
Weed smoke in my chest
But I'm still here
Evidently, I am blessed.

-Dante, 2007

The verdant green midway sprawling as far as the eye can see lends a beguiling sense of tranquility punctuated by the clicking heels of young lawyers and well-dressed professionals climbing long concrete stairs in a procession towards a looming high-rise so stark that it smacks of fascist architecture. Which is only right, appropriate. The state as machine: clean, elegant, efficient, fueled by the bodies of young black men. It is neither

the first nor the last time that I will visit the massive complex at 26th and California that warehouses tens of thousands of people, mostly young men of color, while they await trial, before they are invariably shipped off to rural white communities in the far reaches of the state where they will provide profit, free labor, and congressional votes to folks who have never seen the ghetto and are more than happy to see its residents locked away like animals. I don't climb the stairs or enter the wide glass doors into the minimalist marble lobby; that entrance is reserved for respectable citizens fulfilling their civic duty as jurors and those who make a living off the incarceration of an entire generation. Visitors, the friends and family of that generation, are genially showed to the door in back. A walk west on 26th Street, past a block-long barren lawn enclosed in barbed wire, leads to a pothole-ridden side street and a squat, black guard post. ID, metal detector, you know the drill. I toss a lighter on the lawn for later retrieval; I forgot one particular on the long list of rules.

The wait is shorter than it is in the prisons downstate that I've had the misfortune to visit far too frequently. At county the cellblocks are smaller, each with its own entrance and waiting room. The wait on the women's blocks, which I had had far less occasion to visit, was barely perceptible. For Dante, I wait maybe fifteen minutes. I note, though I'm not sure it's noteworthy except as a reflection of the population incarcerated within the walls of the sprawling complex, that I am the only white person in the room. It is an unremarkable occurrence when visiting jails and prisons, or when existing in any context on the Southside. The waiting room is squalid and filthy, filled with folks far more invested in the lives of those they came to visit than I am. Fathers, brothers,

husbands, sons, the room is packed with teary-eyed women and children awaiting their twenty minutes of contact.

I had seen Dante the month before, at another brunch with a number of former students at the same joint on 75th. I called his cell for an interview and found it disconnected. I sent him an email and messaged him on Facebook with no response. Finally, I called his mother and found that he was in Cook County, booked on robbery charges As with Aleah, I felt disappointed, but not entirely surprised. Dante represented, had always represented, my worst fears with respect to my curriculum. I wanted to interview him because of his genius and his fierce fidelity to the project at Lincoln. He was both one of my most powerful poets and he also produced nearly half the beats that found their way onto our CD his senior year. He became a mentor to others. He finally graduated after a long history of multiple incarcerations. When I saw him a month earlier, he had a job, a shit job cleaning a candy store, but a job nonetheless. My fears arose not from where I saw him headed (I imagined his brilliant mind illuminating fellow students in the college where I had help him enroll), but from his militancy. While in many respects he was precisely the person that I aspired to inspire through my teaching—strong, articulate, independent, profoundly political—he also embodied all my trepidation about unleashing such a potent mind on a world in which I knew it would prove a liability.

Dante had wholeheartedly adopted a by-any-means-necessary mentality. A newly found black nationalist identity had become a rationale for essentially any behavior that he felt forced to engage in by the powers that be (a.k.a. “the Man”). If he had to slang to get by, if he had to rob and hustle, it was a choice coerced by a society that neglected and

mistreated him, by circumstances beyond his control. From our critical investigation of contemporary American society, Dante, rather than conforming to my own naïve and arrogant hope to "empower" students to become precisely the adults that I wanted them to be, had found a space in which to articulate an identity that complicated the purposes of my practice and had me questioning exactly what I was trying to do in my classroom. Even more perplexing was that Dante profoundly and urgently comprehended the discourses in which we engaged, perhaps more so than I did myself. Dante delved into those discourses unreservedly. He read ravenously; my classroom library is still speckled with histories of the prison industrial complex and the writings of Black Panthers, originally purchased at Dante's behest and raising the eyebrows of classroom visitors to this day. Dante's interpretation of these texts, and of discussions of institutional inequality more broadly, was certainly informed by an insight that I myself did not, and never could, possess. As a young black man living in a decaying, segregated enclave of the city, as a ward of the state, as a frequent visitor to youth detention facilities, Dante was in a position to make more meaning of texts that referenced his own life, his physical and existential condition, than I ever could. My willingness, my eagerness, to own the bright, articulate, political young man who exited my classroom five years earlier as the product of my own good teaching is jarred by the bars behind which he now resides.

Menard (SuperMax)

Her slow matronly flows caress your margins
Damp breath blows lies of saviors and sins
Slick wet hips slip outside of your grip
Like feminine fingertips brush past your lips
To tease and long, but not to touch

Light weaves her dusty memories
On looms of steal like clicking heals
Down hallways of your past
Sun serves as an ominous echo
Of places that you can't go
Horizons that you won't know
Clocking hours for men in towers
But only got jokes for you

Air wears bare like fraying ties
Binding breath and muting sighs
Crumbling seams in walls that bring
Anemic whispers and withered murmurs
Of promise undelivered
Decrepit and stale
Barely a frail reminder
Of lungs that used to breathe

Cradled in massive rock
Blocking the passage of time made to stand
Still halted by man
Converting boyhood rage
Into relics of days
Where the coming of age
Shapes faces
But not futures

-K. Daphne Whitington (me), 2004

I've seen innumerable students incarcerated, several (four) for first-degree murder, carrying sentences that will usher them to retirement age before they breathe free air or lay their eyes upon open horizons again. Dante's case—simple robbery, no firearm—promises a relatively light sentence, a few years maybe. [28]

Back when we were reading *Beowulf*, and simultaneously interrogating the criminalization of black identity in the US, we discussed the history of the prison system and its role in the repression of black folks. The absence of African Americans in prisons during slavery (why imprison those already in shackles?), the criminalization of

[28] Dante was, in fact, sentenced to three years at a medium security facility downstate.

"vagrancy" during reconstruction (making it illegal not to have that non-sharecropping job that white folks would not give), and the subsequent construction of a prison system populated by blacks not willing to replace one form of slavery with another, who noetheless literally found themselves back on the plantation (Angola, for example, a working prison situated on the site of a former slave plantation), providing free labor and profit in a new slave economy, all seemed to provide a sense of continuity, an understanding of historical context for Dante as much as it had for me. Dante studied the subject beyond what we read and talked about in class, fascinated by his own position within a post-Diasporic continuum, he seemed keen to construct an identity as intellectual that spoke against the ascribed identity of criminal that he, like so many of my students, had been shouldering for a lifetime. And yet here he was. Locked up. Contesting disempowering spaces by engaging in behaviors that allowed him to be completely consumed by them. In a conceited little corner of my white-girl heart that still saw myself as savior, I imagined Dante as a young Malcolm Little transformed into El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, a powerful Malcolm X. This personal bit of delusional self-comfort was not diminished at all by the fact that Dante saw himself much in the same light.

He doesn't deny the crime and I don't ask him to. Beyond the fact that it strikes me as foolhardy to ever speak about a case in a jail, before it has gone to trial, I don't really doubt that Dante did it. If it had been a violent crime, I might have balked, but petty property crime seems in sync with everything I know about him and the burgeoning philosophy that I had helped nurture. While I lament his incarceration more than his crime, Dante appears to lament neither. Rather, he positions imprisonment as a piece personal martyrdom, like his heroes Huey Newton, Mumia Abu Jamal, George Jackson,

and Malcolm X. He cites them offhandedly in an interview that I cannot record and in which I feel self-conscious, self-centered, taking notes. “It’s nothing, Ms. Whitington. It’s the price you gotta pay,” he says through a hissing intercom when I finally sit across from him looking through a scratched pane of security glass. He’s been reading. He asks me to send him books. “They can’t cage me,” he smiles.

It’s the first time I’ve ever visited a student in jail who doesn’t look down sheepishly, embarrassed, feeling they have somehow failed me. Dante meets my gaze directly, without an ounce of self-consciousness. I feel confused, wondering whether our work together had landed him here or whether it would give him the strength to make something good out of the inevitable evil visited upon him. In either case, I vastly overestimate my own influence. He smirks a little as I blame myself, drawing my attention to my own self-aggrandizement. “You didn’t make me, Ms. Whitington,” he shakes his head, almost pityingly. “For good or for bad, you didn’t make me. You showed me a road and I walked it. I’m walking it.” He smiles. “You can’t teach us to find our own voice and then act like it’s yours.” Suddenly it occurs to me how obscene it is for me to claim responsibility for Dante—by now a grown man—to take ownership of his thoughts and actions. I try to nurture critical, independent intellect and then tether it to my own agency, to the narrow experience and prim worldview of a middle-class white woman. I feel a bit like crying. “You’re absolutely right,” I reply.

Clarence

Hip-Hop past all your tall social hurdles
Like the nationwide projects, prison-industry complex
Broken glass wall better keep your alarm set

Streets too loud to ever hear freedom sing
Say evacuate your sleep, its dangerous to dream

-Mos Def, "Mathematics," 1999

Drug dealin' just to get by,
Stackin' money til it get sky high,
We wasn't supposed to make it past 25.
Joke's on you. We still alive.

-Kanye West, "We Don't Care," 2004

Clarence is a clean "win", a clear success of the sort that might be touted in a single-student case study as evidence of the immense potency and potential of my curriculum. In fact, his success is so thoroughly improbable that I find myself somewhat surprised to discover that it is ongoing as we sidle into a booth at a neighborhood diner. "So, tell me," I ask. "College?"

"It's good," he offers a broad grin. "It's hard, but I'm done with the core now so it's all music production. Just one more year."

When I met Clarence six years earlier, I had found him profoundly reserved. He would mutter monosyllabic responses to most any question and smirk beneath a raised eyebrow at any request for participation, with a look that suggested that I must be crazy for asking. I never saw him smile, much less laugh. I say this only to underscore the stark contrast to the grinning, gregarious Clarence who sits in front of me at the interview, a young man who seems, quite literally, like a different person. Clarence's initial disposition had me mistake him for a sullen loner (not an uncommon type at Lincoln) who was disengaged from school. Neither of those assessments proved to be in the least correct.

As to Clarence being a loner, it had occurred to me that he never appeared to have beef at the school, he seemed far removed from conflict, a fact that I initially credited to his apparent ambivalence. It was only after I had known him for a while that I began to notice his control of situations from which he seemed far removed. At first I only indifferently observed seemingly explosive interactions inexplicably de-escalate in his presence, what would have normally evolved quickly into a fight or brawl would rather subside into an anti-climactic and unexpected calm, adrenaline dissipating and would-be combatants dispersing. After several such occurrences, I began to note Clarence's understated interaction with those involved: a look, a nod or shake of the head. I never asked him directly, though he would eventually volunteer some information as he began to drift away from that world. Nonetheless, I unintentionally elicited specifics from fellow students, not suspecting the truth until I already knew it. "What was that?" I ask a young man at my elbow after one such incident, nodding towards Clarence. "How did he do that?"

"You don't know Ms. Whitington?" I receive in response, "Clarence got weight."

Right or wrong, I always attempted to remain intentionally ignorant of the particulars of gang life with respect to my students, understanding and acknowledging its prevalence and importance while belligerently evading details. I didn't want to know. I didn't want to bear witness. And then, I always wanted to imagine my students as somehow transcendent. I wanted them to overcome a world that I willfully misunderstood, as if my misunderstanding would somehow erase it. Nonetheless, I was an unwitting beneficiary of Clarence's weight, his status as gang leader. While imminent skirmishes always seemed to enigmatically de-escalate in my classroom under Clarence's

careful watch, the opposite seemed to be true in other locales. His very presence, without any physical involvement, could haul a minor incident into an all-out brawl. “I had your back,” he says now. “You know that.” I didn’t know it. Not really.

Clarence’s disengagement from school was also a misconception on my part. He may well have been alienated, but he certainly wasn’t disinterested. As our first year together progressed, I began to realize that Clarence recalled, with remarkable precision, most every word ever uttered in my classroom. Without ever outwardly interacting with those utterances, he consumed them all, digested them, made them his own. Clarence’s memory, honed to precision, was one of a vast network of coping mechanisms (seeming sullen indifference being another) meant to mask and protect against one of the most profound reading disabilities that I’ve ever encountered. Like Darnell, perhaps even more so, Clarence entered my classroom as a complete non-reader. Unlike Darnell, at least initially, Clarence did not position himself as a poet. Clarence was all about the beats. He took to music production with a prodigious ferocity that was startling. It was, it seems, his prodigy that fueled his ferocity, the easy acknowledgement of his skill and expertise that fed his fervor. The apparently (though not really) disengaged Clarence quickly set up camp in my classroom, mixing beats during lunch and after school, churning out one masterpiece after another. On Saturdays, he would trek one hundred and forty blocks (two buses and a train) northwest to Street-Level to collaborate with youth from other neighborhoods in weekend workshops, a distance he continues to traverse to this day, now as a mentor helping a new generation of shorties who, like himself, are longing to unleash their potential.

Music production may have catapulted Clarence into college, but it did so by mitigating a disability so significant that it had previously hemmed in possibility like a seamstress. I know this because Clarence tells me. In those words. During our community action research project around *A Modest Proposal*, I worked with a (African American, gay, male) professor to orchestrate our collaboration with a local university where my students (including Clarence) would eventually go to speak. This professor came to visit my students on a number of occasions, developing the web platform for much of our interaction but also sharing with them, among other things, his story as a black man earning his Ph.D. while simultaneously suffering from dyslexia. Even while this professor was describing his struggle ("Even now it's hard for me. I'm a Ph.D. and I still can't read out loud."), Clarence leaned over to me to whisper, "I'm gonna do it, Ms. Whitington. I am." Fast-forward five years, and here he is.

Clarence's print fluently improved almost inadvertently while in my class. Refusing additive instruction after school in the strategies I had honed in my years as a reading teacher, Clarence's fluency took shape around hip hop, bounding only after the fact to academic tasks. His tepid decision to participate in the rhymes spit over his own beats spawned a rapidly evolving fascination with the spoken and written word. At first in a halting and trepidatious freestyle and eventually via scrawling transcripts littered with backwards letters and syllables, Clarence's verse, while perhaps not matched to the genius of his beats, shared their rhythmic coherence and demonstrated a knack for metaphor and wordplay that was appreciated by all. It was this appreciation, the applause elicited by his way with words, that seemed to free Clarence from his cage and allowed him to imagine himself as a literate person. Like a floodgate finally opening, Clarence

wrote. In broken, phonetic, backwards script, he wrote not only rhymes, but class work, response to literature brimming with ideas that only now seemed allowed to escape.

I walked Clarence through the college application process, admiring his aspirations while nonetheless retaining a sincere pessimism about his prospects. The school was a local four-year college with a well respected media-arts department. He was applying to an audio production and acoustics program and, while his application included a digital portfolio of his work, it also included a transcripts riddled with relics of his former self and ACT score that reflected his admitted test strategy of random guessing. Clarence, like Darnell, had not been provided a reader. I urged Clarence to be straightforward about his disability, having inquired about the existence of services for students with special needs. He included a lengthy narrative about his struggle in his personal statement. Nonetheless, I wasn't very hopeful, neither about the likelihood of his admission nor his ability to navigate a college curriculum on the off chance that he was accepted.

When the letter came, followed quickly by news of grants and a partial need-based scholarship, I shared Clarence's excitement while trying not to temper our glee with what I felt were realistic reservations. I escorted him to orientation in August and made a by-line for the Office of Special Needs, setting him up with a service provider, a mentor, and software that would transcribe his papers and read his textbooks to him. Still stoic, I hoped for the best while preparing for the worst.

Three years later, he beams at me from across a table, having defied expectations that I wish I had never had. I no longer have any doubt that he will graduate. He has completed three years, working full-time through most of it and commuting daily more

than a hundred blocks to school (again, two buses and a train). He dedicates much of his impossibly limited free time to acting as a mentor to youth. I look at him now and want him to credit me with his success. I picture myself declining his gratitude, his subsequent insistence that I am to thank, followed by my eventual humble acceptance. While this scene actually does transpire more or less as I imagine it only a few minutes later, my anticipation of it strikes me as a sort of arrogance. I've never met anyone who has worked so hard to earn opportunities that were never given to him. That diligence and drive had virtually nothing to do with me. I feel almost self-conscious asking about his experience in my classroom, as if I'm begging for praise, for credit.

Like Aleah, Clarence selflessly credits me with his graduation. Unlike Aleah, Clarence had always come to school; he just didn't do anything there. "It's not that I didn't want to be there," he says now. "I just didn't have a place there. I didn't know where I fit in."

"School was rough," he continues, "I had been in an alternative school since first grade. I used to explode all the time. It was the reading thing. No one understood and I would just explode. I didn't feel motivated or encouraged. I didn't feel like anyone ever believed I was smart or that I could make anything of myself. I learned though. I always listened and learned as much as I could, even if my teachers weren't trying to teach me nothing."

I ask him about Lincoln. "It was different. It was an experience," he chuckles. "You know how it was. You'd come in the morning and five minutes later it'd be a fight. Them kids were crazy, for sure. Your little bebe kids, Ms. Whitington."

"Oh, you weren't one of them?" I smile, "Anyway, don't tease. I love my bebe kids. You know didn't no one start nothing in my room. You were my little angels."

"You right, you right," he laughs. "I won't say nothing about your babies. About Lincoln, though, it definitely wasn't what you would call a quality education, but I guess they did the best with what they had. They didn't expect much from us, but I don't know that we deserved high expectations. We really was some bad ass kids."

"So what about my English class," I ask, still somewhat self-conscious.

"It was the most interesting classroom I've ever been in," he replies. "The music thing, it changed my whole element. It changed my relationship with school. I don't know. It just…it just opened up the door for students to learn. Music production was just part of it, it was in English that it really popped off. Like I never knew what literature was. I never knew how it could speak to me. And when I really started to take it seriously, it was the hip hop…hip hop helped to get us to really understand the more difficult features of literature, like the deeper meanings." These are literally his exact words. "It made us understand more. It made us understand ourselves more. Like it really redefined me. It changed the whole way I saw myself. I never saw myself going to college. I never saw myself pursuing a career. I never even imagined it."

I leave Clarence feeling both elated and disconcerted by an interview so spot on that it sounds almost scripted. I couldn't have asked for a better testament, either in words or actions, than a soon-to-be college graduate singing the praises of my classroom. "One out of three," I say to myself, not really believing that Clarence is really any more a product of my instruction than Dante or Aleah, and not even believing that he is more of

a success as an intellect or a human being. Still, I know how it will look, despite their glowing recommendations.

I could have chosen to tell the stories of any number of other students, all of whom graduated high school, most of whom went to college (as did Dante, despite his current predicament), and many of whom finished. I could have just as easily stopped the story at graduation, as most teacher stories do, and let it rest on the merit of my students' work and their relative success in high school. I could have ignored the world into which my students entered with they left me and profited from the assumption that being bright and critical, understanding literature and graduating high school were enough to ensure some modicum of life success. In short, I could have told a story that was much more simple or simply one-sided.

I include Dante and Aleah because they rightfully complicate a story that needs complicating. They are instructive not because they illustrate what didn't work, but because they reposition what "working" means. A few months ago, I ran into a former student on the sidewalk in front of my home. A young man who was in my class during my first year at Lincoln, he remembers me before I remember him. "Ms. Whitington!" he calls. Apparently his sister is a neighbor of mine. I ask him how he's doing and he tells me that he's a month away from finishing his masters at DePaul. He's in a managerial position at the Social Security office downtown. "I think I'm going to leave, though," he tells me. "I've exhausted my room for growth there. I think I'm going to move to California when school is over." Somewhat flabbergasted, I stammer, "Wow. That's incredible. Good for you." He smiles and replies, "Ms. Whitington, I really have to thank

you." I'm anticipating (as always) some acknowledgement of my role in his success. "If it weren't for you, I never would have gotten involved in politics. I never would have thought about issues or thought I could have an impact. Your class really changed the way I see the world. It inspired me." He looks at me, laughs, and pulls open the chest of his button-down shirt like superman, exposing an emblem of a red, white, and blue elephant encircled by the words: Naperville Young Republicans. "I know you're probably a socialist, Ms. Whitington," he chuckles genially. "But it was your passion that that inspired me. It really did. Are you disappointed?" he asks, half jokingly. I tell him I'm proud of him, and really I am. Despite the fact that he is largely correct in his accusation of socialism, I am perhaps more proud of the politics, of the t-shirt, than I am of the good job and the master's degree. His membership in what I routinely decried as an odious and ill-informed class of political propagandists did not undermine the pride of inspiration. This is a case and point, a lesson to myself. You can't choose your students' identities, you can't dictate their beliefs; the important thing is that they do.

Empowerment is not a skill that is taught, it cannot be bestowed by teachers, rather it is a space in which youth negotiate their own identities and construct their own agency. And sometimes agency is simply not enough. My students did not come to me in a contextual vacuum and they did not return to one. All three repositioned their identities with respect to school spaces and, I think, the world. All three of them re-imagined their intellectual vistas. All three took vastly different trajectories largely shaped by circumstances that circumscribed their agency. Yes, Dante is deemed a criminal, but his criminality is born of a space that is ignored when criminality commences to define him. His by-any-means-necessary mentality grows from a place where any means frequently

are rendered necessary and their necessity does not negate the truth of his politics or the cogency of his words. Aleah was made homeless as much by a mother who didn't want her and a system that didn't serve her as she was by any actions of her own. All three had the deck stacked against them from the get-go by who they were, where they were from, and where everyone seemed to expect them (and seemed determined to help them) wind up. We cannot control the world that they walk into when they step out of our classrooms…and neither can they.

Chapter 9

You Ain't Flyer than Gravity
Implications and Limitations

There's a million different places where they chamber the chrome
Straight aim at your dome, take your chain and your stone
They say the whole world is a ghetto, who's to blame for the wrong?…
I just remain and hang alone, that's the game of the grown
But Chicago Southside is still the name the song

-All Natural, "Southside(Chicago)," 2004

Hip hop in the classroom, used reflectively and responsively, can serve as a means of utilizing the skills embedded in students everyday practices for school-like tasks while simultaneously challenging the sociopolitical contexts that generate the exclusion of the intellectual resources of students of color. Although those contexts may diminish the possibility of any curricular intervention to guarantee life chances, to promise success gauged via standard measures, challenging critical content-area instruction based in the cultural knowledge of students can help provide the tools to transcend the constraints of urban schooling and urban spaces. Hip-pedagogy did improve measurable outcomes amongst my students, repositioning their identities in relation to school and creating a generative space in which to contest contexts that limited their possibility, but it also fostered a resilience, an optimism and a sense of self that, by my students' own accounts, has served them far more than test scores.

Implications

There exist discrete, quantifiable metrics of the success of my project. Print fluency improved as much as four grade levels in a single year. Test scores elevated from abysmal to slightly less abysmal. In a school with daily attendance hovering slightly over sixty percent, attendance in my classroom consistently topped ninety percent; on studio-trip days, it was rare to have even a single student absent. Save two students who were murdered and two who wound up behind bars for lengthy stints (at least one of which was horrifically unjust sentence…but that's another story), all of my students graduated. Given the statistics—ED students have a 30% graduation rate nationally, even worse in urban areas (Meiners, 2007)—this alone is an accomplishment, a recommendation of instructional success. My work, and the success of my students, was recognized both locally and nationally, garnering me not just the stint on Oprah, coverage on numerous local newscasts, and a front-page story in the Chicago Sun-Times, but also a Chicago Public Schools High-School Teacher of the Year Award and a Milken National Educator Award. Nonetheless, I feel as if the real product of our work, like the power of my students' words, is far less tangible.

Like all qualitative research, my work is neither generalizable nor necessarily replicatable. Particularly the digital audio production, at least at the time of my study, was the only program of its kind in Chicago, if not the nation. The stories of the youth with whom I worked, my story as their teacher, and the stories that we constructed together in the classroom are just that: they are stories. They illustrate a place of possibility balanced by the inevitable constraint of both school spaces and urban realities. They provide at most a model. They are not, nor should they be, a template. In fact, an

underlying premise of the work that we did was that a template for instruction, a Sitomer-and-Cirelli-style worksheet,[29] is neither possible nor desirable. If a goal of hip hop in education is to resituate instruction around the voices, expertise, and competencies of actual youth, then any suggestion of universals is anathema to the project. Without the presence of those real voices, their lived experience and a pedagogical responsiveness to their individual thoughts and concerns, hip hop in the classroom becomes a worn platitude not dissimilar from any number of staid strategies meant to hook "at-risk" youth, to draw them into discourses that blithely disdain who they actually are, the world in which they really live, and the possibility that students themselves either possess worthwhile knowledge or might act as agents of change.

Hip-hop pedagogy is about engaging and critically reflecting the context of student lives. As a specific example of culturally relevant teaching, it serves as an illustration of the ways in which educators can draw upon the lived experience of students in the classroom, regardless of what those experiences are. Whether they be urban black youth, first-generation immigrants, or wealthy suburbanites, all students engage in meaning making and problem solving in their everyday lived experience. The problem-solving processes of dominant groups may be more readily reflected in the traditional curriculum, but that does not render them more valuable, only more easily identifiable. With respect to critical interrogation texts and our world, wealthy white students, perhaps more than anyone, are in need of a space in which to engage and reconfigure oppressive paradigms. While the contexts and cultural practices of individual students may vary greatly, the macro context of our racist, misogynistic, and avaricious

[29] Sitomer and Cirelli are authors of *Hip Hop Poetry and the Classics*, a collection of worksheets pairing hip-hop texts with canonical poetry.

society is static across specific localities. Those students who will be entrusted with maintenance of the status quo need to be engaged in the endeavor of understanding of its impact on communities from which they are often far removed. It is not an easy task isolating the domain-specific knowledge and skills embedded in students' cultural practices; it requires both a deep understanding the content-specific problem-solving strategies required in the classroom and a commitment to earnestly analyzing students' everyday cultural practices in order to identify analogous skills. It must reflect the context of your students' lives, not mine.

Several elements of the project (music production, intellectual trajectories) have previously been either unexplored or under-investigated. In particular, examination of the poetics of hip hop, its function as literature in its own right, has not been thoroughly interrogated, at least with respect to its relation to classrooms. While part of the purpose of introducing hip hip into school spaces is certainly to shift expertise and to jar hierarchies of classroom authority, a fundamental understanding of the figurative and thematic underpinnings of hip hop poetics is nonetheless essential to teachers, particularly those who are not old-school heads and do not necessarily identify with hip-hop culture.

Although teachers who work with hip hop should certainty rely on the intellectual resources of youth and give weight to the quality of students' own critical and figurative readings, it is nonetheless unlikely that students themselves can isolate generalizable meaning-making strategies or themes (much less apply them to canonical texts) without actual instruction. Teachers, then, must develop an understanding of the breadth and depth of hip hop as literature, the figurative reasoning and critical discourses embedded

in our reading of hip-hop texts, while explicitly identifying the domain-specific and thematically salient interpretive processes that we wish to elaborate. Without a concrete understanding of the mechanics of hip-hop poetics, teachers (at least English teachers) are not likely to make the most of its interpretive potential. Likewise, a lack of understanding of the contemporary social critique and metaphysical complaint communicated by hip hop means that an immense opportunity for critical inquiry is squandered, as is the possibility of interrogating themes of human experience in canonical works in ways that inform students' understanding of their own world. Without foisting our own interpretations onto students or usurping their authority with respect to hip-hop texts, teachers must nurture their own deep analyses and understandings of hip hop if it is not to be relegated to the role of instructional "hook."

The use of hip hop as a simple instructional strategy, as a means of attempting to engage students in an otherwise whitewashed curriculum, leverages the cultural knowledge of youth in ways that nonetheless undermine its cogency. There really is something wrong with an entire year being dedicated to British Literature, particularly in schools that serve students of color exclusively. Positioning hip hop as an instrument for engaging students uncritically in a curriculum that marginalizes their lived experience and cultural discourses (including hip hop as anything more than a bridge) is an almost blasphemous belittlement of its power and underestimation of its potential. It co-opts students' connectedness to hip hop only to drag them into school practices and a curriculum that fails to enrich their intellectual lives and their understanding of the world. Superficial treatment of hip hop, hip hop as "hook" rather than as art or critical discourse, also fails to recognize and utilize the myriad institutionally-valued skills and strategies

embedded in its interpretation. It fails to acknowledge or elaborate the ways in which students daily enact the very proficiencies that we blithely accept as gatekeepers blockading their success.

Even as hip hop in my classroom did produce measurable improvement in academic outcomes, its presence was positioned against the sort of test-driven curricula that monopolize policy discourses and too often shape classroom practice, particularly in schools most vulnerable to high-stakes accountability mandates. As discussed in Chapter 3, test-centered instruction paired with generally lower expectations with respect to students of color often results in a remedial curriculum devoid of meaningful academic content. Culturally relevant pedagogy, characterized by a responsiveness to specific students and their culturally-based knowledge, requires a paradigm shift not away from academic rigor, but rather towards it. Even as my students did become conversant in codes of power and improve performance on school-sanctioned litmus tests of academic and life success, their work effectively reframed what excellence means, and what it can look like even among the most "at risk" of students in the most dysfunctional of environments. Their work didn't just meet the standards, it exceeded them, both in terms of content-area skills and knowledge and also the practical and critical application of content to context, the use of those skills to understand and act upon the world.

The emphasis on standardized testing embedded in policies like NCLB may compel educators to teach discrete skills and concepts in isolation, but Special Education has a long history of remedial instruction focused almost exclusively on basic skills and rote comprehension. Undoubtedly, this emphasis on remediation has been bolstered by the fact that historically Special Education has not required teachers to have studied the

subject that they teach, stressing methodologies of control over deep content-area knowledge. Test-centered instruction in general education signals a shift towards a Special Education model that is already so widespread that it has acquired its own sort of dogma, an ethos of remediation and low expectations so profound that it seems impervious to higher standards of teacher preparation. Hip-hop pedagogy requires a distinct and diametrical opposition to the view of education as an aggregate of skills and strategies, students as receptacles, and their cultural communities as obstacles. It not only requires an understanding of our students can and do engage in challenging intellectual work, but also that challenging intellectual work is, in the end, the real purpose of education.

Limitations

The tentativeness of teachers with respect to the introduction of hip hop into the classroom, and its subsequent misuse as a benign if clever ploy to engage students, pivots around two axes: a personal unfamiliarity with hip hop and a fear of contemplating the themes that it engenders. In truth, both of these caveats suggest sites of possibility.

An absence of elaborate knowledge of hip-hop history, culture, and poetics, may indeed prove more of an advantage than a liability if it is accompanied by a sincere shift in authority and expertise, a semblance of reverence for the knowledge of students. It is those of us who identify as hip-hop pedagogues and claim the status of full-fledged heads who risk credibility by attempting ownership of a culture that we view in many respects to be our own. No matter how “down” we are, however much we feel we relate or understand, there still exists an immense generational and experiential divide that must be

traversed when we invoke hip hop in schools. White teachers in particular—but really all teachers as well-educated, middle-class professionals of a different generation—must be careful to concede expertise. It is precisely this shift in authority, this repositioning of student knowledge, which is at the heart of hip-hop pedagogy. Perhaps the greatest danger of integrating hip hop into school spaces is the probability of co-opting, or at least appearing to co-opt, student knowledge and imposing upon it our own agendas, instructional and otherwise. Without sincerity, without an earnest respect for the knowledge of students and hip hop as art, the project is dead before it begins; students can read the arrogance of age and the colonization of culture.

With respect to the themes engendered by hip hop, it should seem self-evident that students actually live in the world from which those themes emerge. I have, on occasion, seen white teachers violently object to discussions of race via hip hop in the classroom, for example. "It will just make them angry!" they shriek in response to provocative texts, as if middle-aged white ladies were actually introducing students of color to the concept of racism, as if it weren't already part of their everyday lives. If glamorization of violence, consumption, and misogyny did not already saturate students' lived experience, it would certainly not have acquired a profile powerful enough to have penetrated the narrow consciousness of teachers as a class. Our very awareness of the prevalence of these themes in students' discourses should suggest the need to engage them in the classroom, rather than leave them unexamined and placidly consumed. Our neglect, in any event, certainly does not make them disappear.

Another Brotha

It is not news
The crumbling hopes that seal his fate
Nor the slew of shorties
Who traverse his wake
No reporters post up on concrete paths
Meandering from realities
That merit no mention
No pan of the camera
Not a word falling from pursed lips
Lingering over black death
Salivating
At the loss of black breath
Gazing
With one eye shut
Winking knowingly
While weaving tales of depravity
Blood on the block or a ticket to jail
Another brotha down
Young black male
Ka pow pow!
The details unimportant
A mother's grief, perhaps
Not more
The hood as hieroglyphic
Simple system of signs
Singing of pathology
Making us sigh
At clichéd predictability
Another brotha down
Young black male
Ka pow pow!
Bullets hush a hissing seam of silence
Loudly lamenting violence
While gagging open mouths
Muting screams of splintered dreams
If it bleeds, it leads
Where are the cameras now?
Another brotha down
Young black male
Ka pow pow!

-K. Daphne Whitington (me), 2011

As amply illustrated by the life trajectories of my bright and able students, a severe limitation of any classroom project enacted in urban spaces is the simple fact that classrooms alone can only do so much to mitigate the endemic dysfunction that largely, if inadvertently, dictates student outcomes. No matter how bright and capable students are, no matter how prepared they are to succeed, they nonetheless exit the classroom into a world that does not necessarily invest in the success nor value or reward the brilliance and ability of students of color. Critical race analysis of the social and institutional contexts that limit student access to the sorts of success indifferently promoted by American mythologies of de-racialized meritocracy provides an avenue of escape from the profound pessimism of defining youth by the margins of predetermined possibility. It allows us to look beyond the stories of failure constructed amidst institutional cogency and recognize the existence of an excellence that is only amplified by its acquisition against daunting odds. The brilliance of youth in spaces where brilliance is neither nurtured nor anticipated is only rendered more luminous by an understanding of the buoyancy that it embodies. For my students, this resilience that was only elaborated by an understanding and repositioning of self, a recognition of self within/against disempowering spaces. If Dante is in jail and Aleah is homeless, they never the less maintain a sense of who they are that transcends their physical reality. As Dante says, "They can't cage me."

As the onus for gross social inequalities fall on the shoulders of teachers, in the tradition of American individualism and the myth of meritocracy, it must be noted that instructional interventions carry inherent and insurmountable limitations. Despite our best intentions, or *Dangerous-Minds*-style self importance, there remains the fact that our

students live in a world that has no interest in seeing them succeed, that in fact tacitly conspires against their success. The most we can do is to provide them with a space, with the tools, to keep fighting, to recognize (if not realize) their immense prowess and potential.

Hip hop is certainly not a panacea. It is not a magic bullet to cure the ills of urban education. No curriculum is or can be. Nonetheless, hip hop does provide a space of possibility and a means of introducing the wealth of knowledge that students possess into classroom tasks, building on student competencies while honoring their epistemologies and contesting contexts that serve to exclude them. As an avenue of access to canonical texts, hip hop draws upon the everyday proficiencies of youth in order to build institutionally-valued skills and foster deeper understandings of literature. As a space for critical consciousness, hip hop both engages broader themes of human understanding that undergird all great literature and also connects those themes to the lived experience of students in generative ways. By involving students in deep and meaningful inquiry while honoring their voices and ways of knowing, hip hop also has the power to reposition students with respect to disempowering institutional spaces, to help them re-imagine their identity and their possibility.

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Appendix A

(This document has been reformatted to fit the page)

Name: Katherine Whitington Course (Level) English III Week January 30, 2006

Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
ILS/BM/PD	**1.A.5.b** Analyze the meaning of abstract concepts; **1.B.5a** Relate reading to prior knowledge and experience; **1.B.5b** Analyze the defining characteristics and structures of a variety of complex literary genres and describe how genre affects the meaning and function of the text; **2.A.5c** Analyze the development of form and purpose in literature; **2.A.5d** Analyze the influence of historical context on form, style, and point of view; **3.B.5** Produce documents for specific purposes and audiences; exhibit clarity of focus, logic of organization, appropriate elaboration and support, and coherence; **4.B.5** Use speaking skills to participate in and lead group discussions.				
Objective	• Prepare to read Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" through an in-depth analysis of satire as a literary form • Examine the metaphorical/non-literal subaltern meanings in satirical text through comparative analysis with contemporary examples of satire • Examine the social, political, historical, and economic contexts of satire as a means of unearthing metaphoric and/or ironic content • Discuss the meaning and component parts of satire • Discuss the reconstruction of meaning in the reading or ironic and satirical texts • Read and understand "The Loving Family", "U Mean I'm Not?", "Straight outta Locash", and "Prince Charming" • Complete "Satire Translation" graphic organizer for each comparative text read • PSAE/Work Keys grammar study				
Assessment	Graded written work; un-graded written journaling and bell-ringers; written grammar exercises; informal, performance-based assessment				
Learning Activity **Before** *During* *After*	*Bell Ringer*: *What does it mean to be sarcastic?* -Discuss bellringer responses, including everyday examples of sarcasm -Use sarcasm discussion as	*Bell Ringer:* *Can you think of any examples of satire from TV, movies, or music? How do you know that it's satirical?* -Discuss bellringer responses and brainstorm contemporary satire examples on the board	*Bell Ringer:* Black Sheep, "U Mean I'm Not?" text. *What does it mean to be hard? What are the emcees trying to say about being/pretending to be hard?* -Discuss bellringer responses and brainstorm satire	*Bell Ringer* : *Why would a writer write the opposite of what they mean? If the purpose of satire is to ridicule or make fun of your subject, why is satire a particularly good way to do that?* -Review student satire pieces	*Bell Ringer:* *If Ali isn't the narrator in "Prince Charming", what is he trying to say about the narrator by speaking in his voice?* -Second reading of "Prince Charming" with individual journal

	segue into definition of irony and its role in the genre of satire -Read and discuss "Understanding Satire" handout, including the historical function of satire in political and social critique -Identify, as a group, examples of satire genres and complete concept map in journals	-Read and discuss "The Loving Family", identifying actual/literal meaning for comparison with implicit/satirical or ironic meaning -Clip: Dave Chappelle, Season 2, Episode 6: "When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong". -As a group (in preparation for later small-group and individual work) complete "Translating Satire" graphic organizer for both texts	in hip hop examples on the board -Watch and discuss CB4 clip: "Straight outta Locash," identifying actual/literal meaning for comparison with implicit/satirical or ironic meaning. Identify specific clues particular to these two texts: namely, caricature, exaggeration, and hyberbole. -In small groups: complete "Translating Satire" graphic organizer for text	(homework). Outline student-identified satirical clues for class reading. -First reading of Brother Ali's "Prince Charming" with journal responses on possible interpretations -Introduce the importance of historical context by looking at the author's history and other clues for hidden/subaltern meaning -As a group, complete "Pro-Con T" on text content and authorial belief to underscore the clear contrast between authorial voice and narrative voice in satire	responses of possible interpretations, with particular attention given to the way in which the narrator might be being ridiculed or made fun of -Students work in small groups (2-3) to complete "Translating Satire" graphic organizers deconstructing/re constructing textual meaning -As a group, create a satirical skit or description that includes a distinct social commentary
CRI Connection	Fluency, Word Knowledge, Comprehension, Writing				
Accommodations	Scaffolded reading, graphic organizers, reciprocal teaching, cooperative learning, choral reading, one-on-one, dictated writing (LEA)				
Technology	none	Television	Television, audio recording of text	Audio recording of text	Audio recording of text
Materials	"Understanding Satire" handout, concept map	"Translating Satire" graphic organizer, "The Loving Family", Dave	Black Sheep "U Mean I'm Not" text, "Straight outta Locash"	Brother Ali "Prince Charming" text, Pro-Con T,	Brother Ali "Prince Charming" text, "Translating

		Chappelle clip	clip, "Translating Satire" graphic organizer	"Translating Satire" graphic organizer	Satire" graphic organizer
Homework	Vocabulary Maps	Complete concept map	Find a piece of satire (cartoon, song, story) and explain why it is satirical	Complete Pro-Con T	Complete handout
Teacher Reflection	Initially satire was a very difficult concept to master, since the literal meaning of the text is literally opposite the actual meaning. We scaffold the reading of satire extensively through the deconstruction/reconstruction of meaning in several contemporary pieces in relatively familiar genres. Introduction at the level of sarcasm (as in the everyday usage of students where the skill is already isolated and identified) has been very helpful. I find that when it's put in terms as straight-forward as, "Wow! I really love that	It's almost shocking the ease with which my students discern subaltern meanings in the context of Chappelle or Black Sheep or CB4, constructing more nuanced analysis than most adults I know who interact with these texts. The "gangsta" parodies are read through a concrete understanding of the "gangsta" persona and both how it plays out in the lives of those who assume it and the unacknowledged hyperbole of those who consume it. My kids totally get this. What's interesting is that they are so willing and capable of problematizing the identity even as they frequently ascribe to it. There hasn't been much discussion of the real consequences of "keeping it real", but rather a real understanding of the "real" is a mythology and a dogma that needs to be challenged; that the consumeristic "real" is neither who they are nor who they aspire to be. It is a mockery of their lives that needs to be ripped apart. And they are totally able to do it and see it in that light. I can't wait to see their own satirical pieces.		By using concrete and contemporary satirical pieces for initiation into the genre, students come to understand this author/character conflict. Brother Ali is more complex because the text isn't all that hyperbolic, so the dissonance and points of differentiation between what the artist really think and what the character does and says are more subtle. Some of the kids have problems with the irony of this piece not because it's so outrageous (as is sometimes that case with A Modest Proposal), but because they don't see it as outrageous at all; the Prince Charming character (violent, possessive) reads	The skit is a precursor to a larger, end-of-the-unit student satire piece, but also I think a good way to put themselves in the author's shoes as we move into our reading of Swift. The social commentary caveat is integral, as they sometimes want to poke fun with out any substantive critique. The last two years (and this year, as well) the subject of the skit was George Bush, which is actually pretty helpful as a segue to satire about government policy. This year they focused on the Katrina response. Brilliant. Once we get past the initial

	dress," or "Really? That was so helpful\. Thank you.." (when what is meant is really the opposite) helps introduce both the usage and purpose of irony, as a means of ridiculing and communicating opposing messages.		as real. Even the confusion is helpful, though, as it lets us look for other clues, like the title and information about the author (other tracks, the fact that he's a devout Muslim, etc.)	difficulty and subsequent resistance, this unit is one of my favorites. It's challenging, but also a lot of fun.

KEY: ILS (Illinois Learning Standards), BM (Benchmarks), PD (Performance Descriptors)

Appendix B

Name_____
Date:_____

Identifying Satire

Who/What is being made fun of?

What are they saying/doing?

What does the author really believe?

What is the commentary the author is making?

Appendix C

Co-Teacher Open-Ended Interview Protocol

Name:_____ Date:_____

Personal Background

What is your history as a teacher? What is your involvement in hip hop? How did you wind up at Las Casas? What have you done since, either with teaching or with hip hop?

Las Casas

When were you at Las Casas? How often and for what period of time? What did you do there? How would you characterize your experience?

Interaction with and Impression of Students

What were the students at Las Casas like? How do you feel they responded to you and to the project? Do you have any memories or stories of particular students who stood out to you?

Rationale for Audio Production

Why did you think it was important to teach students to produce their own hip hop? Were there motivations beyond the acquisition of technical skills? What impact did you hope to have?

Perceived Benefits

What impact did you witness your work have on students academically and intellectually? Were there other positive outcomes? Do you have specific recollection or documentation of students who were impacted by the experience? Did you witness an evolution of student writing or thinking while you were working with them?

Limitations

Can you recall instances where the impact of the program felt either unproductive or negative? Can you think of any examples when involvement may have been an investment that harmed students?

Specific Recollections

Do you have any specific stories, memories, or writings that might illuminate the project in your mind?

Appendix D

Simeon Viltz, visiting artist/co-teacher (2005-2006)

the Primeridian (2008) Whistle While You Work. On *Da Mornin Afta*. Chicago: All Natural Records.

Wake up in the morning and I meditate
On positive thoughts, hoping my day goes straight
And then I play to the east and start making them beats
From the soul release, putting a hold to the beast
From composing songs, speak flows for the street
Spelling the soul, just be warned, make the knowledge be born
Now the sun gone rise
I'm jogging at the lakefront takin' it all in stride
Then go back inside, take a shower and get back in the ride
About a half an hour, I arrive at the gig
Now these kids gone try, cause I work at a school
They know better than to lie, see I ain't no fool
I teach music production and computer club
But this one kid was discussing how we shooting them slugs
I'm like "Whaaaat? Last week you was the class clown.
I'll write your name on the board if you don't sit your ass down."
The started laughing. This wasn't no laughing matter.
Matter fact some crack is what he have on his bladder
And it had to be after the raps he heard all summer
Now he gone off the rock and on the block he's a runner.
I'm like, "Daaaamn. While you work."

Appendix E

Student Open-Ended Interview Protocol

Name:_____ Date:_____

Due to the my personal knowledge of these students' lives and their vastly different post-secondary trajectories, follow-up question maybe individualized, and may also involve texts produced by students while at Las Casas.

Las Casas

When were you at Las Casas? How long did you stay? Did you graduate? How, in your opinion, did you wind up there? What was the school like? What was my classroom like?

Post-Las Casas

What have you done since you left Las Casas? Did you feel like the education that you received there benefited you? Why or why not? Do you feel like your time there had any impact on what you have done with your life since you left?

Hip Hop in the English Classroom

What purpose do you think that hip hop served in my English class? Was it useful? Why or why not? How was it different than other English classes? Do you think you learned a lot? If so, can you think of examples? Do you have any other recollections that might describe your experience, positive or negative?

Digital Audio Production

How involved were you in the digital audio production project? What impact do you think it had on you? Did it change the way you saw yourself at all or how you thought about the world? If so, how?

Specific Recollections

Do you have any strong memories of your experience of our time together or the work that you did? Do you have any stories or writings that stand out to you?

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EDUCATION

University of Illinois at Chicago Chicago, IL
Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction August, 2005-May 2012

- Research and dissertation on the out-of-school literate practices of urban youth of color

Northwestern University Evanston, IL
Master of Science in Education September 1998-June 2000

- Concentration in Secondary English; additional endorsement in Italian

University of Pennsylvania Philadelphia, PA
Bachelor of Arts September 1995-August 1998

- Concentration in Italian and Philosophy; graduated Summa Cum Laude

PRESENTATIONS and AWARDS

- Winner, 2007 *Milken Foundation National Educator Award*
- Winner, 2006 *Suave Performance Plus CPS High School Teacher of the Year Award*
- Finalist, 2005 and 2006 *DRIVE Award* for Innovative Teaching
- Presenter, "One Time for your Mind: Literate Practice, Literary Analysis, and the Narrative Construction of Self in Hip-Hop Production", National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) annual conference, New York City, 2007
- Presenter, "Let the Rhythm Hit 'Em: Literacy Acquisition and the Narrative Construction of Self in Hip-Hop Production", National Reading Conference (NRC), Los Angeles, 2006
- Presenter, "The Nancy Jefferson Project: Fostering Literacy in Incarcerated Youth", National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) annual conference, San Francisco, 2002
- Presenter, Illinois Reading Council (IRC) annual conference, Springfield, 2002

WORK EXPERIENCE

Percy L. Julian High School Chicago, IL
English and Special Education Teacher, Poetry Coach August 2011-Present

- Coached first-year poetry team to the finals of Louder than a Bomb, the largest youth poetry competition in the world.
- Designed and implemented curriculum-integrated participatory action research projects addressing youth violence in Chicago.
- Partnered with Street-Level Youth Media to create and produce an album of youth poetry, jazz, and hip hop

Chicago Public Schools Chicago, IL
City-Wide Teacher August 2009-August 2011

Big Picture High School, Back of the Yards Chicago, IL
Case Manager, Special Education Teacher August 2008-June 2009

- Oversaw IEP development and implementation for all special education students while providing services in an inclusive setting.

- Developed school-wide project with workshops in audio documentary, using digital recording/editing techniques and to create an award-winning audio collage of student autobiographical writing.
- Served as Service Learning Coach, coordinating service-integrated curricula with teachers and service opportunities in the community to help students log an average of 195 SL hours prior to graduation.
- Coordinated student services, including homebound instruction, state services (Action for Children, DRS, etc.), free eyeglass program, and post-secondary services.
- Developed and oversaw the first school newspaper, "In the Picture."

Las Casas Occupational High School Chicago, IL
English and Special Education Teacher August 2003-June 2008

- Winner of the 2007 *Milken Foundation National Educator Award* and the 2006 *Suave CPS High School Teacher of the Year* award
- Taught freshman, junior, and senior English, as well as the first AP English Language and Composition class ever offered at Las Casas
- Worked with severely and profoundly emotionally disturbed students with secondary and tertiary disabilities of LD, EMH, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and mild autism
- Wrote grants, secured funding, and developed partnerships with Street-Level Youth Media, Young Chicago Authors, and local writers and emcees to create writing and audio production workshops in school
- Created curriculum integrating hip hop, personal narrative, and digital audio production into English/Language Arts classroom; developed community justice curriculum incorporating neighborhood documentary and research, photography/visual arts, music production, interviews and personal narrative in the creation of a multi-modal, online collaboration with local college students
- Designed, edited, and produced anthology of student writing, "Chronicles of the Street", with accompanying EP of student-produced music
- Developed and implemented school-wide instructional improvement plan including presenting staff development, creating a team-teaching and peer-coaching program, and establishing cross-curricular literacy interventions
- Created a student-edited newspaper, literary arts magazine, parent newsletter, and monthly press release
- Submitted student writing for publication and had five students published; participated in extra-curricular activities, including taking students to poetry workshops, music-production classes, poetry slams, and college fairs; sponsored student clubs, including LBGT, yoga, and drama

Safe Routes to School Chicago, IL
Program Manager January 2003-August 2003

- Taught and designed curricula and to be integrated into the CPS Great Body Shop health curriculum
- Developed and managed a database of student transportation for the Department of Transportation
- Worked with school administrators and local politicians to improve facilities within and around schools

Nancy B. Jefferson Alternative School Chicago, IL
Teacher/Literacy Specialist July 2000-August 2002

- Worked under grant through National Louis University
- Worked with 7th and 9th grade juvenile detainees developing literacy skills and written expression
- Developed and implemented experimental curricula throughout the school; responsible for formal and informal staff development
- Found funding for and helped teach writing workshops in cooperation with Young Chicago Authors