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WHAT THEY DON'T LEARN in SCHOOL

*Literacy in the Lives
of Urban Youth*

Edited by JABARI MAHIRI



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CHAPTER ELEVEN

What They Do Learn in School: Hip-Hop as a Bridge to Canonical Poetry

Ernest Morrell and Jeff Duncan-Andrade

As English teachers at an urban public high school in California, we bore witness daily to students who showed high intellectual abilities but were failing or significantly under-achieving academically. After seeing this for several years and with hundreds of students, it became obvious that the problem was not with the students or their intellectual capacities, but, rather, with the school's ability to help them reach their academic potential. We noticed, for example, that many students could critically analyze complex and often richly metaphoric hip-hop music that they listened to and then effectively articulate that analysis to others. Yet, most of these students were failing to exhibit the same analytical skills in class with regard to canonical texts. Through observation and study, we hypothesized that hip-hop music could be used as a vehicle for these youth to develop academic literacy skills that we felt could also transfer to other "literary texts." The pedagogical and curricular implications became clearer as we began to explore further how teaching hip-hop music as a literary genre could help scaffold and develop the academic literacies of youth who have often been labeled as "non-academic" or "semi-literate."

Through description and analysis of a curricular intervention that incorporated hip-hop texts along with canonical poetry texts, this chapter demonstrates a number of effective ways to reach urban youth and help them develop their analytical skills. It also delineates how this pedagogical approach can facilitate a more critical consciousness in these students. Following the reasoning of several literacy theorists (Ferdman, 1990;

Freire, 1970; Freire and Macedo, 1987; Street, 1993), and the findings of literacy researchers like Lee (1993) and Mahiri (1998), we argue for a broader definition of school-based literacy that encompasses cultural values, self-awareness, and the development of critical consciousness.

This chapter is divided into eight sections. The first is on critical literacy, critical pedagogy, and cultural identity, and it argues that students can be highly motivated to learn when course material is presented in the context of more authentic cultural frames. In the next section on hip-hop music as the voice of youth resistance, we develop additional arguments for how rap music is one such cultural frame for many urban youth. We also discuss the literary qualities of rap texts, their worthiness for serious academic study, and their viability for use in scaffolding other complex literary concepts. After presenting our methods, we provide a section on the poet in society where we describe and discuss the intervention model we created that incorporates and links popular culture texts to the study of mainstream canonical texts. The next three sections provide the classroom vignettes through which we make an analysis of this curricular intervention subsequent to drawing conclusions for teaching and learning in the final section.

Critical Literacy, Critical Pedagogy, and Cultural Identity

New Literacy Studies theorists (e.g., Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Ferdman, 1990; Gee, 1996; Street, 1984, 1993) have argued that social and cultural contexts have significant implications for the processes of becoming literate. Often, the failure of urban students to develop particular forms and practices of academic literacy stems from perceptions of inaccessibility of the school curriculum. Ferdman (1990: 187) argues that this inaccessibility is an outcome of the failure of schools to bridge effectively contrasting home and school cultures of urban youth. He noted that:

Literacy involves facility in manipulating the symbols that codify and represent the values, beliefs, and norms of the culture—the same symbols that incorporate the culture's representation of reality.

Students who are not from the dominant culture in a society often struggle to merge their culturally coded representations of reality with those reflected in the school curriculum. In contrast, Ferdman noted that students whose culture is valued or promoted through literacy instruction in schools will be more inclined to obtain a high level of literacy than those

students whose cultural frames are not. Implicit in Ferdman's argument is the idea that the lack of consideration given to the cultures and cultural values of children who are members of ethnic minority groups leads to unequal educational achievement based on ethnicity.

Beyond these discontinuities, Freire (1970: 47) noted the importance of using literacy as a vehicle to critical consciousness among people who are oppressed. A key element of Freire's work is that literacy must initially be taught in the language of the people:

Critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever the stage of their struggle for liberation. The content of that dialogue can and should vary in accordance with historical conditions and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality.

Later, Freire and Macedo (1987) discuss the importance of reconstituting a radical view of literacy in conjunction with radical pedagogy that revolves around naming and transforming those ideological and social conditions that undermine the possibility of community and public life organized around imperatives of a critical democracy. An emancipatory theory of literacy points to the need to develop an alternative discourse and critical reading of how ideology, culture, and power work within capitalist societies to limit, disorganize, and marginalize the more critical and radical everyday experiences and commonsense perceptions of individuals. Literacy, then, is part of the process of becoming more self-critical about the historically constructed nature of one's experience (Hull, 1993). To be able to name one's experience is part of what it means to "read the world" and to begin to understand the political nature of the limits and possibilities of life within larger society. To be literate is not to be free; it is to be present and active in the struggle for reclaiming one's voice, history, and future. As part of the discourse of narrative and agency, critical literacy suggests using history as a form of liberating memory. History means recognizing the figural traces of untapped potentialities as well as sources of suffering that constitute one's past. A radical theory of literacy needs to be constructed around a dialectical theory of voice and empowerment.

Freire argues that pedagogy should help to impart or uncover the literacy in oppressed people. When challenged by a critical educator, students begin to understand that the more profound dimension of their freedom lies exactly in the recognition of constraints that can be overcome. In the process of becoming more critical, people can discover for themselves that it is impossible to deny the constitutive power of their consciousness in the social practice in which they participate. Radical ped-

agogy is dialectical and has as its goal the enabling of students in the critique the hegemonic practices that have shaped their experiences and perceptions in order to free themselves from dominating ideologies, structures, and practices.

Freire used Popular Culture Notebooks in São Tomé and Príncipe in order to create exercises that validated the experiences of the learners. The reader's development of a critical comprehension of the text and the sociohistorical context to which it referred was an important factor in Freire's conceptions of literacy and critical pedagogy. He also argued strongly for the use of the native language as a prerequisite to the development of any literacy campaign that purports to serve as the means to a critical appropriation of one's own culture and history.

An extension of this argument to our own project suggests that students' language must not be viewed as subordinated and antagonistic to the dominant language. Rather, for the critical educator, language like that of hip-hop music and culture is culturally authentic and also, as we show in this chapter, a viable bridge between popular culture and the school culture. Given its literary substance, social critique and cultural relevance to urban youth, hip-hop music provides a salient cultural frame for developing literary.

Hip-Hop Music: Urban Youth's Voice of Resistance

"Just as F. Scott Fitzgerald lived in the jazz age, just as Dylan and Jimi Hendrix were among the rulers of the age of rock, it could be argued that we are living in the age of hip-hop" (Farley, 1999); Farley argued that the creative people who are talking about youth culture in a way that makes sense happen to be rappers and that youth are responding in many ways. Hip-hop artists sold more than 81 million CDs, tapes, and albums in 1998, more than in any other genre of music. Although hip-hop got its start in black America, more than 70 percent of albums are purchased by whites. Taking the lead from urban youth cultural and language styles, major corporations are adopting advertising schemes and creating products such as lines of clothing, and personal care and personal image goods, along with other consumables that cater to the "hip-hop generation." Even mainstream Hollywood, exemplified in the case of Warren Beatty's *Bulworth*, is dealing provocatively with issues related to hip-hop. Although the music is largely criticized by politicians, religious groups, and some women's groups, its proponents claim that it is here to stay

because it truly represents the vibrant voice of youth and points to problems that this generation and many other Americans face in daily life.

Hip-hop music emerged as a representative voice of urban youth partially because it is a genre created by and for them. Powell (1991: 245) noted:

[Rap] emerged from the streets of inner-city neighborhoods as a genuine reflection of the hopes, concerns, and aspirations of urban Black youth in this, the last quarter of the 20th century. Rap is essentially a homemade, street-level musical genre.... Rap lyrics concentrate primarily on the contemporary African American experience.... Every issue within the Black community is subject to exposition in the rap arena. Hit rap tunes have broached touchy subjects such as sex, sexism, racism, and crime.... Rap artists, they contend, don't talk that love stuff, but [rather] educate the listeners.

Baker (1993: 33) discussed the genre of rap music and gangster rap in particular as having an "anti-establishment expressivity that has scarcely been matched." His work also called attention to the prophetic nature of rap artists in their analysis of urban communities:

[Rappers] had been prophetic with respect to tensions between black urban youth and metropolitan police authorities. It was precisely the type of jury-exonerated violence against the black Rodney King that urban rap had in mind when it claimed that police justice was but another name for young-black-male victimization. And the fiery violence of the spring of 1992 in Los Angeles was just the kind of "armed response" that N.W.A. had prophesied in its versions of the strength of "street knowledge" recorded on *Straight Outta Compton*.

Indeed, during and immediately following the Los Angeles Insurrection of 1992, many rappers were called on to appear on talk shows, to be interviewed by news media, and generally speak as the representative voice of urban youth. In his 1993 album *Predator*, Ice Cube, a former rapper for N.W.A., proclaimed himself a prophet of the urban dilemma. Indeed, in an interview with bell hooks for *Spin* magazine in 1993 (cf., hooks: 1994), Ice Cube describes the purpose of his music in terms of helping whites to better understand the historical and ongoing dimensions of racism directed at blacks. He alludes directly to the educational purpose of his music—that he is not only trying to entertain, but to inform. His joking referral to the "Ice Cube library"—the music CDs he has produced—indicates that he feels his music is worthy of careful study. It is clear that many rappers consider themselves to be educators with at least a portion of their mission dedicated toward raising the consciousness of their communities. The influence of rap as both resistance and re-education for urban youth

permeates the work of artists like Lauryn Hill, Pras and Wyclef Jean of the Refugee Camp, Public Enemy, Nas and Mos Def. They all endeavor to bring an accurate, yet critical depiction of the issues and conditions of urban youth.

Giroux (1996: 1) takes a much less celebratory view of the impact of hip-hop culture on working-class urban youth, but, nevertheless, agrees that it is a worthy topic of study in urban schools. His work addresses the crisis confronting youth he labels a "generation under siege," enmeshed in a culture of violence coded by race and class. He notes the negative connotations of youth culture promoted in popular media that propel youth toward mistrust, alienation, misogyny, violence, apathy, and the development of fugitive cultures. These same media, he contended, have commercialized the working-class body and criminalized black youth. Critical pedagogues, he argued, must consider elements of popular culture such as hip-hop music as a serious site for social knowledge to be discussed, interrogated, and critiqued. Whether the power in its messages can be used for good or ill, few can dispute the impact of hip-hop culture in the lives of working-class, urban youth. Giroux promotes a synthesis of critical pedagogy and cultural studies to gain a critical understanding of how youth are being constructed differently within a hip-hop culture that is simultaneously oppressive and resistant and that represents violence as a legitimate practice in defining youth identity.

Mahiri (1998) builds upon New Literacy Studies theorists and critical pedagogical perspectives to contend that teachers could become sources of resistance to the ideology and practices of cultural domination and exploitation that permeate institutional structures in society by working to better understand and build on the authentic experiences of students who have been marginalized by the educational process. He argues that this could be achieved through the creation and implementation of counterhegemonic curricula. His work examines African American youth popular culture as a site where young people have forged a common identity manifested in dress, language use, music, video games, sports and common heroes. Mahiri argued that elements of youth popular culture such as hip-hop music potentially could act as unifying and equalizing forces in culturally diverse classrooms, and that certain of these elements could also provide motivation for learning traditional subject matter as well. In another work, however, Mahiri (1996) identifies a number of problematic issues and cautioned against thinking that rap music would be an easy fit in traditional school curricula and classroom communities.

Methods

In the context of the conceptual foundations outlined above, our teacher research and curricular intervention was planned and implemented to address the following questions:

1. In what ways can the utilization of elements of popular culture in the curriculum contribute to the pedagogical objectives of developing critical and analytical skills in under-achieving urban youth?
2. If these skills can be demonstrated in student critiques of popular culture texts, in what ways or through which pedagogical strategies can these skills transfer to student critiques of canonical literary texts?
3. Can this curricular approach increase students' political awareness and critical analysis of the personal, commercial, and ideologically charged messages and images communicated to them through the various media of popular culture, as well as through canonical literature?

Data collected throughout the unit of work included observations, field-notes, videotapes of student preparation and presentations, interviews, and copies of all written work. Our research was facilitated by the fact that as co-teachers of this unit we were able to interchange our roles in leading instruction and attending to the collection of data. When analyzing the student work, we focused on literacy events in which students were dialogically engaged with a hip-hop text or a canonical poetry text. As mentioned in earlier chapters in this book, Heath (1983: 350) defines a literacy event as "a communication act that represents any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes." In this study we expanded this definition to include communicative acts in which *any text* (including visual and audio texts) is integral to the nature of participants' interactions. This allowed us to consider hip-hop music in its various forms as being textual.

In our analysis, we looked for evidence of critical and analytical skills that are valued by K-12 and postsecondary institutions. At the same time we were attentive to literacy events in which the students demonstrated awareness and/or analysis of themes, messages, or images that revealed intentioned subject positions and coded power relations with respect to different people in society. To aid our analysis, we consulted the literature of critical, social, and literacy theories, as well as texts about strategies and competencies for college writing, state curriculum frameworks, and com-

mentaries from university professors and administrators regarding the qualities and attributes of successful students.

Ultimately, we chose to look for examples of students appropriating the tools and language of literary analysis when discussing both hip-hop texts and canonical texts. Specifically, we coded the data for instances of the use of literary theory and terminology and a willingness to deconstruct or problematize the texts. Furthermore, we looked for instances where students were able to construct and support an argument and defend it against opposing arguments. We also focused on whether and how students were able to make segues between the hip-hop texts, the canonical texts, and their own lives. Finally, we analyzed the data for examples of students politicizing the texts by relating textual issues to contemporary social problems and to their personal lives.

In this chapter we have focused on two key classroom occurrences: presentations and group discussions. Presentations were formal events during which small groups took over a portion of the class in order to collectively answer and dialogically draw out implications of a central question or issue that had been posed for analysis. Whole class group discussions occurred after each of these formal presentations in semi-structured question and answer sessions. For description and analysis of the students' literacy practices inside these two class activities, we selected three vignettes that illustrate the kinds of arguments, analysis of issues, and textual connections that the students were able to make. The first two vignettes—"Cell Therapy" and "Coleridge and Nas: Imagine a Better World"—occurred during formal presentations. The third—"Don't Shoot the Messengers"—occurred during the whole group question and answer session following a particular presentation. These vignettes are presented following a brief description of the intervention unit itself.

The Poet in Society: A Description of the Unit

There were several objectives for this unit that combined our simultaneous agendas of tapping into popular culture and facilitating academic and critical literacy development. We needed to cover the poetry of the Elizabethan Age, the Puritan Revolution, and the Romantics that were all part of the district-mandated curriculum for twelfth-grade English. In addition to a critical exposure to the literary canon, we felt it important to extend the issues and ideas presented in poetry and song into themes for expository writing. Other objectives were to develop oral and written

debate skills, to develop abilities to work in groups, to develop skills in formal public presentations, to develop note taking skills, and to develop abilities to both critique and write in different poetic forms such as the sonnet, the elegy, and the ballad.

We began the unit with a general overview of poetry and also attempted to define poetry and the role of the poet in society. We emphasized the importance of understanding the historical period in which a poem was written in order to more deeply appreciate the poem. In our introductory lecture, we laid out all of the historical/literary periods that would be covered in the unit (Elizabethan, Puritan Revolution, Romantics, and Metaphysical Poets from England, and the Civil War, Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Movement, and Postindustrial Revolution in the United States). It was our intention to place rap music and the postindustrial revolution right alongside these other historical periods and poems so that the students would be able to use a period and genre of poetry they were familiar with as a lens with which to examine other literary works, and also to encourage the students to re-evaluate the manner in which they viewed the texts from popular culture.

The second major portion of the unit was the group presentation of a poem and rap song. The groups were commissioned to prepare a justifiable interpretation of their poem and song with respect to its specific historical and literary period and to analyze the linkages between the poem and song. There were eight groups for this portion who were, after a week of preparation, each given a day to present to the class and have their arguments critiqued by their peers. The groups were assigned as follows

Group Poem	Song
1. "Kubla Khan," Coleridge	"If I Ruled the World," Nas
2. "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot	"The Message," Grand Master Flash
3. "O Me! O Life!" Whitman	"Don't Believe the Hype," Public Enemy
4. "Immigrants In Our Own Land," Baca	"The World Is a Ghetto," Geto Boys
5. "Sonnet 29," Shakespeare	"Affirmative Action," Nas
6. "The Canonization," Donne	"Manifest," Refugee Camp
7. "Repulse Bay," Chin	"Good Day," Ice Cube
8. "Still I Rise," Angelou	"Cell Therapy," Goodie Mob

Other poems used for this unit were: "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes and "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" by Thomas Gray.

In addition to the group presentations, students were asked to produce an anthology of ten poems that contained an elegy, a ballad, a son-

net, and a poem that described a place with which they were familiar. The title of the poem was to be the place that was featured. The students were asked as well to write a poem that conveyed a mood, a poem that dealt with a political, social, or economic problem that was important to them (racism, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, police brutality, poverty, homelessness, etc.), a love poem, a poem that celebrated a particular facet of life (first date, summertime, graduation, etc.), and two open poems that dealt with whatever subjects the students chose and that were written in any style they desired. Following the group presentations, we held a poetry reading in which each student selected five of his or her original poems to read for the class and on which to give brief comments. As an additional assignment to be completed outside class, students were asked to pick any song of their choice and write a five- to seven-page critical essay on it. They were also required to submit a transcription of the song.

Cell Therapy

Welcome to Room 330 at East Bay High.¹ It is a room with no windows, no heat, and little air. It has no computers or other technology except for the telephone. The wooden desks that fill the rows are all, from what we've been told, older than us, the teachers. The carpet has brown duct tape stretching across it to prevent the snags from ripping. On the chalkboard is a potpourri of information on topics ranging from the impending essay assignment, to the group projects, through to general college preparation and study tips. The walls are littered with *Time Magazine* pictures of the Million Man March, and the student uprising at Tiananmen Square. There are also posters of Malcolm X, W.E.B. DuBois, and famous women, Asian Americans, and Latinos. There are posters that have been created by students for past projects, famous movie advertisements, signs from marches and protests, and a section titled, In the News, for posting current event items. One wall is dedicated to literature and pictures related to college. This wall contains college newspapers and banners in addition to guidelines for admission and tips for college essays. There are four bookshelves located at different points in the room holding novels and anthologies that we have picked up over the years. In short, this is more to us than a classroom. It is a refuge and a home that we have tried to imbue with a spirit and a culture that stands in direct opposition to the many of the school's other constraints. On this particular day, Room 330 was abuzz with energy as the students were presenting their hip-hop/poetry projects. As the bell rang to start class, the four student lead-

ers are assembled in the front of the class. As the bustle dies down, one can detect a hip-hop beat in the background. The beat is emanating from a small CD player on the floor as Cham begins to speak. She glances down at her notes and then gives a big smile to the class as she begins:

- Cham: First we would like to analyze the title. Cell, we think, means two things. One is a small room in a prison. Or, it could mean...a cell in your body. Therapy means treatment for a disease. Cell Therapy is like treatment for your mind, your body. Something is going wrong. (You can hear Goodie Mob rapping lightly in the background as students begin to make notes from her comments.)
- Phan: Like cell, meaning jail. Or your mind or your brain cell (points to her temples) meaning jail therapy.
- Evan: You know cell therapy could be actual physical treatment...

The group shows a facility with the language and the tools of analysis by beginning their presentation with the multiple possible meanings of the title. The concept of holding simultaneous multiple meanings is an important one to students and scholars that engage in similar types of analysis. The remainder of the student presentation analyzes the lyrics within the dual context of the rap artists attempting to purify adulterated brain cells and attempting to alleviate the social ills that lead many urban youth into jail cells because of the adulteration of their brain cells. Next, the members of this group attack the beat of Goodie Mob's "Cell Therapy":

- Phan: Okay, we want to talk about the beat first. (Phan turns around and points to the CD player, which is still thumpin' Goodie Mob) It's really different, it's like a haunting music, it creeps up on you and then it goes boom, you know? (Cham reaches down to turn the music up a notch) So, it's kinda like, it goes on here to talk about the New World Order he's saying that this world is going to creep up on us and it's going to hit us in our face pretty soon.
- Brad: It creeps up on us like a fog in San Francisco. I associate fog with mystery and the world is creeping over us like an undercover mystery in a sense.
- Cham: What I noticed was the way that they rap the song. The way that they came...uh...if you listen to the rest of the songs on the album they don't sound like this. They don't sound as aggressive. He's like, you better listen up before this and this happens.
- Phan: You know like it's preaching. We have to listen to them, you know before it blows up in our face and we don't expect it.

The students (as teachers) embrace the notion that the beat should also be analyzed as text. Not only are the words important to the overall message of the song, but also the beat itself communicates. Phan describes the beat

as haunting and relates the themes in the beat to those of the actual text. The rapper-poets are warning against a New World Order that is colonizing the minds of urban youth. According to Phan, the beat underscores that message. Whether or not one agrees with her analysis, it is difficult to dispute that it is, in fact, analysis. The group has taken the title and the beat to establish the context for their interpretation of the text. They are constructing an argument and defending this argument by means of "textual" evidence. The group does not summarize; rather, they synthesize their understanding of the text and their emergent theory of its ultimate purpose. They have stated that they believe the purpose of the text to be critical, informative, and to deliver a social message to young urban listeners. For example, Evan argues:

All right, we're gonna hit the first stanza, but we're not really gonna go line-by-line (reads the first stanza). Okay, it starts with, "When the scene unfolds." Basically, we're in the midst of a new world order. A repercussion of the new order is that it's brought on people like young girls getting pregnant. We see that now, but it's going to be more widespread. It's also saying, "Sega ain't in this order, them experimenting in Atlanta, Georgia...United Nations overseas." We interpreted that, as far as Sega...we think that technology is really great now. We look at Sega Saturn, Nintendo 64, and the Internet and we say, "Technology just can't get any better than this." But what he's trying to say is that Sega is nothing compared to the technology they'll be using to take our minds over.

Evan has initiated the textual analysis portion of his group's presentation. He announces that they are not going to "go line by line" through the lyrics; instead, they will discuss the pertinent themes of each stanza as they relate to their overall argument. Evan does, however, read the first stanza and shows his understanding of the schema of literary analysis, where one does often engage the text line by line. He shows a willingness and ability to apply this schema to a hip-hop text and to deviate from that schema in a way that serves to strengthen his analysis.

Evan also demonstrates a willingness to read his world onto and into the text. Taking the Goodie Mob line, "Sega ain't in this New World order," Evan utilizes the group's lived experience with video games to underscore his point. Video games represent entertainment and diversion to the students in the class. The games are only a simulation and do not represent reality. Evan contends that Goodie Mob's message is that, in the new world order, the same technology will be used, but not as a game. In this order there will be real winners and losers who will not gain infinite second chances with the push of a reset button.

Finally, Evan and his entire group, show a willingness to politicize the text in relating it to everyday urban issues. Evan concedes that young girls in his community are getting pregnant in large numbers. "We see that," he proclaims. His reading of the text is not only informed by his experiences, it informs his experiences as well, because Evan is now discussing a contemporary social phenomenon within the context of an orchestrated world order that has multiple repercussions for the urban poor.

Coleridge and Nas: Imagine a Better World

Jawan, who has been waiting patiently with his hands behind his back while Pamela and Alice explain Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," takes the paper that he has been concealing and begins to "read" the text, which is Nas's "If I ruled the World." He says,

I kind of felt like [Nas] was trying to imagine a world where...blacks didn't have problems and was treated like everyone else. Like when it say (Jawan takes the packet with the rap texts and searches for a line. Everyone in his group has now switched from the textbook to the packet of supplemental poems and raps) when he talks about imagining smoking weed in the streets without cops harassing you and going to court with no trial, he's kinda saying imagine life without anybody bothering you or whatever. (Jawan lets the paper fly as he gestures with his hands to bring his point home) When he's talking about people bothering him, he's talking about white people.

As Jawan pauses, Pamela looks over his shoulder at the paper as both search the text for clues to support the argument that Jawan is making:

Teacher: I know that Nas doesn't have line numbers, but try to give us a general sense of where you are reading.

Jawan: I think when he says: "imagine going to court with no trial/ lifestyle's cruising blue behind my waters/ no welfare supporters/" he talking about people worrying about their struggle in everyday life, not worrying about their kids getting killed. Like I know my mom, she be worrying every night. Sometimes she can't even get to sleep for worrying or whatever.

Jawan has taken his paper and rolled it up, and as he talks about his mother a smirk comes across his face either from pain or embarrassment. Whatever the source, this particular portion of the song has struck an emotional chord with him. We knew Jawan's mother for the three years that he was in high school and knew that she did in fact worry about his safety—so much so in fact that she had seriously considered taking him

out of school and sending him to live with relatives on several occasions. It is important to note that, at this point, Jawan is reading his world onto and into the text to inform his interpretation and analysis.

This is not just about presenting an argument for a song for a grade; this is about imagining a better world for urban youth. This is a point that resonates with Jawan, his family, his classmates, and his community; and, as it does, it also brings emotion into the analysis. This reading of Nas and the juxtaposition against another romantic, Coleridge, allows the students in this group to read their world into the nineteenth-century British text as well and to understand how Coleridge also is imagining a better world than the one he is now confronted with. The issues that Coleridge and Nas are talking about are similar, and looking at Coleridge through the lens of Nas through the lens of this urban East Bay community have brought that point home in a way that both serves as a useful literary analysis and also informs the lived experiences of the students. It is a chance for Jawan to push the understandings of his classmates on these two texts, but it is also an occasion to share a troubling part of his life. Finally, it is important to consider that Jawan felt it an appropriate segue and a useful example to amplify his interpretation of the Nas text.

James, a counterpart of Jawan, adds to the discussion:

This point in the song is about...imagine you're out in the street and you're just getting harassed by police. In this world, there would be no cops harassing you. Not just for smoking weed, but just being there. (James' voice also fills with emotion as he lifts his hands in desperation and leans in toward the student-audience as he makes the point.) I felt that snakes represent not just the whites, but society in general. Some snakes tend to wrap around you and hold you...it's like society will hold you and strike like a cobra. You take example of Michael Jackson...he was big and society loved him, then they struck and said that he molested a kid. Society tends to do that to us...people of color, they can't wait to strike and bring us down.

James takes the metaphor that Nas uses of the snake to analyze both the society that Nas is describing as well as his own. In describing the danger of the snake and the way that snakes have of grabbing hold and striking, James uses the pronoun *us* rather than *they* which he would have to use if his analysis remained solely located in the song. He also extrapolates from Nas' text to issue a condemnation of society in general that tends to "strike and bring students of color down." The group continues with its analysis of the Nas song:

- Pamela: Like when it says "days are shorter and nights are colder," that's the way that the world is now, but that is not the way that he wants it to be. I don't think that the nights are any colder than they've ever been, but it's like [James] said, because you are up at night worrying, you get to experience that the nights are actually cold. I guess that would make your days shorter too because you worry about stuff.
- James: Like when he's talking about black diamonds and pearls, he could be talking about...like white diamonds and pearls are expensive and people tend to think that white pearls are better than black pearls just like society thinks that white people are better than black people and he wants to make things totally opposite. It's like weddings and funerals. Weddings are supposed to be happy occasions and people usually wear white. A funeral is a sad occasion and everybody wears black. Why is that? (James hunches his shoulders in a shrug) It's just a stereotypical view of society that white is always going to be better than black. It's something good, then people wear white, it's something bad, and people wear black, that's just the way that society looks at it (As he makes this last statement he pounds his hand into his paper with the same rhythm that he pronounces the words) Black diamonds and pearls could also mean the children.... If you look into the chorus part when they say walk right up to the sun, they are not talking about the (points to the sky) the sun that is making that heat, the son is our future.
- Alice: It could also be like the son, S-O-N, like the Son of God.
- James: Yeah, it's not the sun, S-U-N. If you look in this thing (he waves the packet text), you will never see sun, S-U-N, because it's like the son, Son of God, because we're all like the Sons of God.
- Jawan: (Holds up his hand to be recognized in his own group before speaking) Yeah I think it's like the sons are the children and take them to school and the sons, the children, will enlighten them because it's the next generation.

The members of the group are also able to consider multiple interpretations of the text as James, Alice, Pamela, and Jawan all offer slightly different perspectives of the meaning of such phrases as "black diamonds and pearls" or "walk right up to the son." When providing his interpretation, for example, James gives examples of the way that the color black has negative connotations in the English language and is usually associated with sadness, evil, or death. James relates the semantic with the physiological and psychological in making the political statement that society extends its negative connotations of black to those whose complexion is darker as well. He also implies that people of color have internalized some of these assumptions as well. Here both James and Nas imagine having a world where things black were considered of value, such as diamonds and pearls.

Don't Shoot the Messengers

This group, for its presentation, has engaged in an analysis of T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and Grand Master Flash's "The Message." During the question and answer period, Jermaine and Vuong are asked to sum up the relationship between the two texts:

Jermaine: Like we said before, they both have messages that are to society. You can interpret it two ways, uh... both of them are not just speaking to people that's around them, they're speaking to everyone...

Vuong: The line that I want to point out is, "No I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be/ Am an attendant lord, one that will do/ To swell a progress start a scene or two,/ Advise the prince; no doubt an easy tool." It's like, he's not the one that is going to do the revolutionary acts. He won't go out there and revolt, but he'll advise you on what you need to do. Because Hamlet was someone that...he lost his throne, I mean, he lost what's rightfully his because his father was killed by his uncle. He wanted revenge to take his throne. He's saying to the lower class I can help you, but I'm not going to be the one that takes up that throne because I am already someone that has power. I am the attendant lord I can help you right now if I wanted to...

Minh: So the two poems connect because they both put out a message saying that this is what's going on, you're in this position and they're in that position. Do something about it together, or else you'll be buried in your own problems. Take pride in yourself and have a long perspective...

Jermaine, Vuong, and Minh all answer the question in different ways, but each draws a similar Marxian correlation between the hip-hop text and the canonical text. Both Jermaine and Minh see Eliot and Grandmaster Flash as playing a proactive role in society through their poetry. Both also see poet's message as directed toward the working class in opposition to elite classes who have created—through their opulence and greed—the oppressive conditions that are at the center of each text. Vuong, however, does not see Eliot as a revolutionary character. He uses Eliot's reference to Prince Hamlet as evidence of the role of the poet as an advisor rather than a revolutionary. Vuong still arrives at the same Marxian analysis, though, as he critiques Eliot for aligning himself with the bourgeoisie. Following Minh's response, the group is hit with a barrage of questions from the class:

Brad: In the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," I'm asking about the yellow fog and yellow smoke, I want to hear your reasoning that it's representing the writer of the poem

Minh: First, we said that it represents industrialism. Then we looked at the verbs "rub" and "slipped" which represent work in industrialism

Minh, in his response to Brad's question, draws upon a historical criticism correlating Eliot's critique of the yellow fog and smoke that were permeating his world with the rise of industrialism in the early part of the twentieth century. He also holds on to his Marxian analysis relating Eliot's choice of verbs with the cause of the proletariat who were increasingly exploited during the rise of industrialism:

Phan: I just wanted to know why you thought it was significant about the women coming and going talking of Michelangelo. I know you talked about it being rich women, but I don't see why he mentioned it so many times.

Vuong: It's kind of, in the sense... it's a message right. Never mind what's happening to you, but look at what these people (raises his hand and his paper toward the ceiling) up at the top are doing. You're laboring, but what are they doing? Some people don't even realize it. They're just laboring. In "Native Son," Bigger Thomas' mom, all she did was work, work, work. She knows they're up there, but she didn't really care what they were doing. She just knew she had to work.

Jermaine: What he's saying is that the working class people are not questioning why they don't get to come and go talking about Michelangelo.

Minh: People don't really care about what's going on, they're just chillin'. So that's what you gotta focus on, 'cause people are gonna come and go and not help you.

Again, Vuong, Jermaine, and Minh respond to Phan's question with a Marxian critique. Vuong makes an analogy to "Native Son," a text the class had read prior to the poetry unit. Jermaine and Minh extrapolate from the text, from the themes of the course and, to some degree, from their own lived experiences as working-class urban youth. Jermaine actually uses the term *working class*, although Eliot never does in his poem. Minh employs the pronoun *you* when answering the question rather than *they* or *the poor* which would seem more appropriate given that the fictional poem was written over seventy years ago. His answer indicates that he sees Eliot as speaking directly to him and the class, sending a message across generations to raise consciousness and encourage revolutionary praxis:

Orlando: Do you think, from the introduction, that he's relaying some divine message and he's the poet like Dante? Because some guy named Guido da Montefeltro he's talking to Dante the poet. You know, if he could do it all over again, he would like calm down. But he can't and since people do not return from these depths of poverty, he can

answer their questions without fear of notoriety or being looked upon unfavorably.

Jermaine: I think that you can obviously see that [Eliot] was worried about the notoriety. Mr. Prufrock, the character in the poem, he was definitely worried about the notoriety. It says in the third from the last stanza: "Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare eat a peach?/ I shall wear white flannel trousers and walk upon the beach./ I have heard the mermaids singing each to each./ I do not think that they will sing to me." If you read the footnote at the bottom, it says that the sirens would attack those who were adventurous, those who had a lot of notoriety. I think he was worried about the notoriety because he said, "they won't sing to me." So he's saying, should I try to bring an uprising? If I don't bring an uprising, I won't get notoriety, they won't sing to me.

Both Orlando's question and Jermaine's response are evidence of fine textual readings. Orlando tunes into a footnote to the poem, adding his own class critique to Dante's text in anticipating how Eliot is applying it to his own poem. Jermaine chooses a stanza of his own to show the ambivalence of Eliot's protagonist, J. Alfred Prufrock, who was deciding what to do with the overwhelming secret he carries throughout the poem. Although Prufrock never reveals his secret, Jermaine is convinced that secret was powerful enough to start an uprising or at least raise the critical consciousness of all who became privy. Jermaine and Orlando have synthesized their own theories and critiques with the actual text and even gone so far as to include annotated references to support their comments. They also continue to read their worlds into the text, keeping at the forefront of the discussion the very real issues of poverty, oppression, and social transformation.

Conclusion

The unit was consistent with the original goals of being culturally and socially relevant, critically exposing students to the literary canon, and facilitating the development of college-level expository writing. The positioning of hip-hop as a genre of poetry written largely in response to post-industrialism was a concept with which the students were able to relate. The issues of joblessness, poverty, rage, and alienation all had resonance with the urban youth culture of which the students were a part. It also helped to facilitate the transition to understanding the role individual poets may have played in their own societies. As one student, Orlando, responded in an interview:

I think it helped me, because like I appreciated hip-hop like already. And, so now, I can appreciate poetry as well...y'all did a great job relating both of them...

The students were able to generate some excellent interpretations as well as make interesting linkages between the canonical poems and the rap texts. For instance, group two talked about how both Grand Master Flash and T.S. Eliot looked out into their rapidly deteriorating societies and saw a "wasteland." Both poets were essentially apocalyptic in nature as they witnessed death, disease, and decay. Also, both poems talk about a message, indicating the role of a poet in society as a messenger or prophet. Group six discussed the role allegory plays in their two poems where both John Donne and the Refugee Camp use a relationship with a lover to symbolize the love and agony the poets feel for their societies.

The unit reflected basic tenets of critical pedagogy in that it was situated in the experiences of the students, called for critical dialogue, critical engagement with texts, and related the focus texts to larger social and political issues. However, some criticisms we need to make were that students should have had a greater role in selecting the hip-hop texts that were included in the unit. As one student—Walter—observed:

The group presentations, putting the poem and the song together is a pretty good idea. I think that made us get pretty deep into the songs. Also, I think it would be kinda cool if the students would recommend songs. For analyzing, like (he points to the board) you know, in that format. Because, I think that there are a lot of artists out there, smaller time artists that really aren't recognized. They really have a lot to say as opposed to like Foxy Brown. I don't know, you could get a lot deeper than some of the mainstream stuff.

This student was not only excited about the juxtaposition of the rap and canonical texts, but saw the potential of critically engaging with the content of the hip-hop songs. His judgment of the value of hip-hop texts was not determined by record sales or popularity (what he critiques as "mainstream"), but by the depth of the lyrics and the message. Learning to critically analyze popular media as Walter has done is an empowering skill that will serve him well as a citizen in a democratic society, as well as in the post-secondary academy where such talents are highly valued.

Finally, the students were not only engaged and able to use this expertise and positionality as subjects of the postindustrial world to make powerful connections to canonical texts, they were also able to have fun with learning about a genre of music and literature with which they were familiar. As the unit was culminating and the students are

working independently on assembling their poetry unit portfolios, the classroom buzzes with energy following the final poetry readings. As students were working to meet the deadline for critiquing each other's work and assembling their packages, we asked Jermaine for some final comments:

I guess for me, what I got out of the poetry unit as a whole was this was probably the best thing that I've done in my whole years of school. That's what I do. I rap, I emcee or whatever. It's hard right now. I think it's hard right now sometimes for rap to get the respect that it deserves. Like, in a lot of cases, people don't always look at rap as...serious music. My thing is that I want to take rap to the level where it can be accepted by all people on all types of levels in different countries, because it is in different countries right now. No one thinks of it as Shakespeare or whatever. Shakespeare is a great writer, but no one thinks of it as Shakespeare or whatever. How come in every classroom, it can't be required? How come, on the AP [college course credit] tests, there's not rap songs that you have to look at and analyze as serious work, as actual serious work that somebody put their feelings into? Just as there are weak emcees, there are weak writers and people don't buy those books just as people don't buy those tapes or whatever. It's the same thing with rap or whatever. You get the better writers, and the better writers sometimes sell more, you have your bestsellers or whatever, you know what I'm saying. You might have your Grisham, or you might have your KRS One. You might have your...uh...who else writes excellent books...uh...you might have your Amy Tan, and you might have your Bahamadiah or whatever. So, it's like the same or whatever. So, I just want to say that this was a good, no a great unit. Every teacher should approach this unit in the same fashion that you guys did to open up and expand your mind or whatever. A lot of people don't understand certain aspects of rap, but they don't want to ask that next question. They might not listen to rap or whatever. Or they just might think that rap is garbage. It's not garbage. It's like actual music from like actual people.

Jermaine's comments powerfully reflect many of the goals and aspirations we had in the design and implementation of this classroom unit. In the future, we plan to re-engage and analyze the written data, conversations, and presentations for evidence of critical literacy events as well as proficiency according to the state frameworks and what is considered outstanding scholarship in postsecondary institutions. The goal is to show that the students engaged in both critical, intellectual work, and work that has currency in the academy and that will help them navigate the gate-keeping mechanisms that often preclude them from access to higher education and economic empowerment. Ultimately, however, hip-hop music should be able to stand on its own as a worthy subject of study in the academy rather than just being a bridge to something more "acceptable" like canonical texts.

Note

1. East Bay High is an urban, multicultural school of nearly 2200 students located in a large Northern California city. The ethnic breakdown of the campus is approximately 40 to 45 percent Asian/Asian American (Chinese, Vietnamese, and Southeast Asian), 35 percent African American, 15 percent Chicano/Latino, and 5 to 10 percent other immigrant groups (e.g., Bosnian, African). Less than 1 percent of the student population is white American. At East Bay High standardized test scores lag far behind state and national norms. The school regularly scores in the twentieth and thirtieth percentile on major standard assessments such as the SAT 9, the CAP, and CLAS assessments and the median SAT score, and for the past five years has been below 800, which would place an individual student in the tenth percentile nationally. According to the most recent state educational data 57.9 percent of the school population is eligible to receive Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC), and only one classroom is wired to the internet. The focal class selected for this study is an accurate cross-section of the school with respect to ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and academic performance.

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RESPONSE TO

“What They Do Learn in School”

Jeannie Oakes

Seeking both traditional and radical outcomes, critical educators Ernest Morrell and Jeff Duncan-Andrade juxtapose Samuel Taylor Coleridge with Nas; T. S. Eliot with Grand Master Flash, and Walt Whitman with Public Enemy in their twelfth-grade English class. They draw on new literacy theorists to ground their approach to poetry in the argument that academic failure among urban youth can be traced—at least in part—to social and cultural discontinuities between home and school. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade make the case that (a) traditional course material will be more easily and willingly learned when it is placed within the context of more authentic cultural frames; (b) the cultural authenticity and literary merit of hip-hop music make it such a frame for urban youth; and (c) the analytic skills learned through the frame of hip-hop can be transferred to canonical poetry, and, thereby, foster traditional academic literacy learning. Going beyond a narrowly utilitarian objective of transmitting the dominant cultural canon (or at the least, the typical spin placed on that canon by high school curricula) and echoing Freirean theories, they also assert that this pedagogy can promote emancipatory ends: “a broader definition of school-based literacy that encompasses cultural values, self-awareness, and the development of critical consciousness.” Morrell and Duncan-Andrade hope their students will both read the canonical word and read the world of their own experience in ways that prepare them to struggle to reclaim their “voice, history, and future.” Following Mahiri, these two teachers hope to become for their