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“An Art of Truth in Things”: Confronting Hip-hop Illiteracies in Writing Classrooms at Predominantly White Colleges and Universities

Tessa Brown

Abstract

This article interrogates how hip-hop composition pedagogies can interrupt what the author terms the “hip-hop illiteracies” that circulate in predominantly white institutions (PWIs). An analysis of four college writing classrooms that integrate hip-hop texts at one PWI reveals pervasive anti-Blackness in student attitudes, but also in the research and course design as well as in department-mandated course texts. The analysis demonstrates the need for writing pedagogies that name and teach Black language, writing, and meaning-making practices while also asking students, teachers, and administrators to reflexively examine their own identities’ locations vis-a-vis those practices. The author advocates a reflexive pedagogy that asks students to locate themselves vis-a-vis power as a starting point for investigations of language and culture. The author concludes that hip-hop pedagogies have significant critical social justice possibilities in institutionally white educational contexts, but these benefits are not automatic and demand pedagogies of reflexivity, sociolinguistics, and intersectional feminism.

Keywords

AAVE, anti-Blackness, hip-hop pedagogy, PWIs, reflexivity, whiteness, writing studies

In an Instagram post from Spring 2014, rapper 2 Chainz is photographed from behind, facing an arena full of fans, his arms outstretched above him, his locs hanging down his back. The audience, washed out by the lights backlighting the star, fills the floor and three balconies of a college sports arena. Their arms raised in ecstasy, the rapper’s fans appear overwhelmingly white. Beneath the posted photo is 2 Chainz’s caption: “[Central New York] University was a Movie.” While the growing literature on hip-hop pedagogies overwhelmingly focuses on educating students of color using hip-hop styles and texts in classrooms (e.g., R. Brown, Craig and Kynard, Green, Hill, Kirkland, Lindsey, Love), 2 Chainz’s concert at what I call Central New York University (CNYU), held while I was conducting my research on hip-hop pedagogy there, points to the need to engage with white students’ and white educational institutions’ participation in hip-hop culture and pedagogy. As of 2017, hip-hop

was the most popular music genre in America (Sanfiorenzo). A quick walk around campus housing on a Friday or Saturday night at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)—or a scroll through Tiktok’s most popular white influencers’ feeds—can quickly demonstrate the massive consumption of hiphop sounds, fashion, gesture and language by white and other non-Black American youth.

These hiphop expressions are a subset of what Elaine Richardson terms “African American Vernacular Discourse” (1), the unique communication practices shared by Black Americans. This discourse includes, but is not limited to, the linguistics of African American Vernacular English, a distinct, grammatical variety of English that has unique phonetics (sounds and pronunciation), lexicon (words), and grammar that descend from West African languages. AAVE’s sounds and meanings are shaped by continued segregation, oppression, and joy of African-descended peoples in the United States, even as Black communities continue to negotiate ambivalence around the power and appropriateness of the language in a range of settings (Jordan, Richardson, Smitherman). Yet Richardson also acknowledges that hiphop artists are not producing discourse exclusively within and for Black communities. Rather, hiphop artists are “performing products” (12) whose personas are created in negotiation with the demands and desires of white audiences and white-led entertainment companies. These mass-marketed representations of Black people can cater to white imaginations of Black folks as hypersexual, violent, or criminal (Hurt, Love, Lindsey). At CNYU, 2 Chainz’s visit also coincided with an explosion of racist discourses on campus, including the circulation of a video of a white student-athlete using the n-word, which some attributed to her proximity to Black friends and Black musics (“Hanna Strong”). These contradictory occurrences reflect the paradoxical nature of anti-Blackness, as racist tropes and behaviors about and toward Black people circulate *alongside and in tandem with* the enthusiastic consumption of Black cultural products. While this event and others provoked anti-racist activism on the CNYU campus (Samuels, Democratizing Knowledge Collective), they are also an ongoing occasion for teacher-scholars to interrogate the possibilities and risks of hiphop pedagogies in predominantly white spaces.

Following Richardson’s eponymous study of Black artists’ production of “hiphop literacies,” in this study, conducted in four college writing classrooms at one PWI, I inquire about hiphop *il*-literacies and ask how hiphop writing pedagogies can promote critical engagement with mass-produced hiphop and language and literacy in majority-white classrooms. My findings show that while hiphop easily engages students, classrooms will reproduce existing hiphop illiteracies without careful course material on Black Language, linguistic racism, and intersectional feminism. Hiphop pedagogies’ social justice possibilities and risks are shaped by the paradoxes of hiphop fandom more broadly. In the United States, hiphop’s uptake by white fans is complex and contradictory, as white hiphoppers’ identification with rap’s resistive politics is shaped by decreasing opportunities for all Americans (Kitwana, hooks qtd. in Kirkland) even as consumption can veer into the fetishistic and anti-Black (Yousman). In this context, the growing numbers of programs and institutes in predominantly-white higher education institutions like Harvard, Stanford, Cornell, Tulane, Duke, the Uni-

versity of Virginia and the University of Arizona themselves must be interrogated, even as these programs create space for scholars and students to engage hip-hop studies' interdisciplinary attention to language, literacy, and education; sound production and digital technologies; the arts and performance; studies of space and place; and more. The entrenched and growing presence of hip-hop education in predominantly and historically white spaces demands attention to how hip-hop circulates in these school and campus communities and how it is engaged in classrooms at PWIs that may or may not themselves be predominantly white.

My own identity as a white Jewish woman hip-hop pedagogue who has been teaching at PWIs for ten years also keys me into the need to interrogate hip-hop instruction in these contexts led by white instructors. Studies on the accelerating appropriation of Black discourses by white youth via social media have continually pointed to anti-Blackness as the frame that makes sense of the unceasing commodification of Black people, Black culture, and even Black affect in United States history (Judy, Parham, Sobande). Understanding anti-Blackness means seeing commodification of Black culture and Black people as central to American capitalism. Beyond the exploitation of Black labor that is perpetuated through racialized systems of poverty and incarceration, anti-Blackness is critical cultural theory that plots the throughline from the original commodification of enslaved Africans, to the fundamentality of exploited Black artists and sounds to American musical history, to contemporary non-Black youths' accelerating uptake of Black cultural practices and forms including language, fashion and makeup, and physicality and dance (see Lorenz).

As theorists of Black language and literacy pedagogy increasingly insist language educators celebrate Black students'—and all nonstandard-English-speaking students'—use of their home discourses in literacy classrooms (Baker-Bell, Young et al), hip-hop emerges as a site for helping students recognize and appreciate Black cultural practices. This work needs to be approached carefully by and for those outside Black communities, as Black scholars have demonstrated that despite widespread AAVE usage among Black Americans, community members themselves can use or even celebrate Black discourse practices while disagreeing on the circumstances of its deployment (Jordan, Smitherman). This study builds on others which insist we help students engage hip-hop critically, appreciating artists' genius but also interrogating how mass-mediated hip-hop songs and images cater to dominant stereotypes about Black language and Black people, including in specifically gendered ways that pigeonhole youth of color into exaggerated gender roles (Lindsey, Love). As hip-hop pedagogues, we must explicitly and dialectically engage hip-hop's contradictory cultural behavior as both a resistive Black art form and as a site of appropriation and misrepresentation by non-Black people. We must also engage an intersectional feminist lens that draws attention specifically to Black women's and Black LGBTQIA people's experiences in hip-hop, and how hip-hop's gendered messages shape widespread perceptions of Black gendered identities (Lindsey). Engaging Black art, white consumption, and anti-Blackness demands educators push through what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva terms "colorblind racism," a denial of race that protects racial inequalities by refusing race itself—as a reality, and as a category of analysis that can promote anti-racist remedies.

In his analysis of interviews about race with white people and people of color, Bonilla-Silva demonstrates how colorblindness as a rhetorical strategy for racism manifests in contemporary whites' near-inability to discuss racial realities in clear terms, a phenomenon reflected upon by the students in this study. Because "whiteness refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed" (Frankenburg qtd. in Hunter and Nettles 388), examining racialized discourses involves not only what is said but what is unsaid, what is included as well as what is omitted. Taking a stance against colorblindness and whiteness means not just acknowledging difference but actively assuming an "antiracist," versus a nonracist, stance (Bonilla-Silva 15-16). Refusing to name race protects what Bonilla-Silva terms the "white habitus," a way of being that "creates and conditions [white people's] views, cognitions, and even sense of beauty" (123). Arguing that "race and whiteness structure our thinking" (10) and, ultimately, our research design, Kirsch and Ritchie promote a "rigorously reflexive examination of ourselves as researchers that is as careful as our observation of the objects of our inquiry" (9). My study contributes to our understanding of linguistic ideologies within the white habitus at one PWI, and the mis-understandings white and non-white students hold about language, fluency, and intelligence that can fester when reflexivity is not practiced, which I term hiphop illiteracies.

Within English education, hiphop pedagogies include education in both literature and literary analysis as well as critical language pedagogies that center on hiphop's prominent use of Black discourse practices, particularly African American Vernacular English (AAVE), educating students to the variety of linguistic discourses and the ways in which power governs socially privileged and marginalized language practices (Alim). Hiphop composition studies can be situated within a wider terrain of hiphop language, literacy, and literary studies. Studies of hiphop in K-12 language arts classrooms with student of color populations show that positioning hiphop lyrics as literary texts develops students' literary analysis skills, and can open up conversations on identity, violence, trauma, gender, and representation that support students' self-esteem and engagement (Hill, Love, R. Brown). Hiphop's multimodal culture of "5 elements"—rapping, producing, breakdancing, graffiti, and dropping knowledge—has been an object of literary and rhetorical study since at least Tricia Rose's fundamental 1994 *Black Noise*, which attended to both the rebellious, griot-descended verses of rap lyrics as well as the Afrodiasporic loops and ruptures of analog and digital hiphop beats. Within composition studies, which focuses on writing education for college-aged students, hiphop scholars are at the forefront of theorizing how 21st-century writers and mixed-media composers use digital technologies to make meaning in fragmented, hypercirculatory media environments and how these hyper-contemporary practices can help educators craft more relevant pedagogies for students (Banks, Craig and Kynard, Green). My own survey of colleagues teaching hiphop in college composition classrooms found that college writing instructors use hiphop texts as objects of analysis for traditional academic writing, and also invite students to produce hiphop genres like mixtapes and liner notes (T. Brown "Schooled"), a practice also discussed by hiphop educators like Banks.

Methods and Findings: Emergent Anti-Blackness in the Classroom

In order to understand the benefits, risks, and impacts of a hip-hop composition pedagogy at a PWI, I conducted a classroom study of four such courses, two taught by myself, and two more taught by a colleague, the Black American writer Nana Adjei-Brenyah, a fellow graduate student at the time and now a successful published author. As I discuss extensively below, this study demonstrated the need for composition courses in predominantly white contexts to confront and illuminate anti-Blackness, including linguistic anti-Blackness. Through the grounded analysis of ethnographic notes, student exit interviews, my own teaching, and department-mandated curricular materials, I located anti-Blackness not just in student attitudes but in my own research design as well as in the textbook I used (see Brown “What Else” for a fuller discussion). Research shows that writing students learn best when their complete identities, including but not limited to their linguistic identities, are welcomed into the room (Ball and Ellis, Ivanić). Yet by attempting to teach a hip-hop composition pedagogy without creating opportunities for students to reflect on their own inextricably raced and gendered identities, my course, and to a lesser extent, my colleague’s, preserved a colorblind environment in the classroom that limited students’ understandings of the power dynamics of language prestige and language subordination and their own participation in these systems. And all of our courses failed to teach about AAVE as a condition for understanding hip-hop discourses, thus perpetuating our students’ hip-hop illiteracies.

Ultimately, my analysis demonstrates the need for writing pedagogies that name and teach Black language, writing, and meaning-making practices while also asking students, teachers, and administrators to reflexively examine their own identities’ locations vis-a-vis those practices. While hip-hop pedagogies have significant critical social justice possibilities at PWIs, they also come with risks that must be addressed head-on through practices and pedagogies that center Black discourses, reflexivity, and intersectional feminism. In the context of the predominantly white university, hip-hop becomes a vehicle for all composition students to understand how Blackness and anti-Blackness circulate through our everyday language, challenging students to move towards more explicit and reflexive relationships to their language choices. My research suggests that teaching and practicing reflexivity are core solutions to the paradoxical rhetorical action of hip-hop in predominantly white spaces. I advocate a reflexive pedagogy of power and identity that asks students to locate themselves vis-a-vis power as a starting point for investigations of language and culture. As I show in this study, hip-hop pedagogies have significant critical social justice possibilities in institutionally white educational contexts, but these benefits are not automatic and demand pedagogies of reflexivity, sociolinguistics, and intersectional feminism.

There were four classes in the study: a freshman required writing course taught by me; a sophomore required writing course taught by me, and two sections of a sophomore required writing class taught by Nana, then a master’s student in creative writing. I was a doctoral student during the study, and Nana and I designed our own curricula in accordance with broad dictates from our program, while also integrating hip-hop materials in consultation with one another. This IRB-approved study allowed

me to collect ethnographic notes during and after classes, and collect student writings (n=60) and conduct interviews (n=20) with participating students. Students in all four classes wrote drafts and revisions of 3 papers, including literacy narratives, close readings, and research papers. All were taught during the 2013–2014 school year at Central New York University, a private Research-1 university in upstate (locals would say Central) New York. The surrounding city itself has a large Black population ringed by predominantly white suburbs and was shaped by late 20th century segregationist practices like white flight, systemic Black poverty, unaccountable city services, and violent policing.

The students in this study were exposed to three separate, but similar, curricula. My freshmen and sophomore courses integrated hiphop songs, videos, and scholarship that engaged themes of literacy, discourse, the writing process, citation use, and Black Language with non-hiphop texts from writing studies on the same themes. Nana's two sections of his sophomore course focused on hiphop culture as a subject of inquiry. Although he did not incorporate many texts from writing studies, literacy, or composition research, he presented rappers as writers making purposeful writerly and rhetorical choices, and challenged students to see rappers' lyrics, musical choices, and visuals as purposive, meaningful, and contextually responsive. All three classes opened with and were framed by Tony Silver's graffiti documentary *Style Wars*, which explicitly engages questions of writing, multimodality, rhetorical effectiveness, and the writing process, as well as with either the entire album or tracks from Kanye West's debut album *The College Dropout*, which both implicitly demonstrates and explicitly engages with questions of rhetorically appropriate discourse choices and African-American compositional style. All students also read Joseph Harris's chapter "Coming to Terms," from his book *Rewriting*. Students in my classes engaged with writing studies scholarship by authors like Deborah Brandt, James Paul Gee, John Swales, and Rebecca Moore Howard, as well as writing studies scholarship that more closely addressed hiphop and Black language and rhetorical practices by authors like Tricia Rose, H. Samy Alim, Geneva Smitherman, and David Kirkland. Nana's sophomore students also engaged with dialect diversity through June Jordan's essay "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan."

While I read and reviewed student writings and my ethnographic notes, I limited my qualitative coding practice to transcripts of the 20 student interviews I conducted. Instead of working to assess my students' writing and "grade" them in my analysis to determine what or how much students learned, I instead let students tell me for themselves what they learned, how they evolved as writers and critical thinkers, and how they felt about the course they had just taken. All participating students received strong final grades of As or Bs in the courses, and as you will see in the discussion, I was still able to assess student learning through their oral reporting of processes and concepts they encountered. This focus on interviews corresponds with the feminist methodological principle of co-creation of knowledge with research participants, and echoes the assessment priorities expressed by Toni Cade Bambara, unearthed in my archival research elsewhere, that students can orally self-assess when given "uninterrupted time to rap" (qtd. in T. Brown "Let the People Rap" 120). Since students who

came in for interviews overwhelmingly (though not exclusively) enjoyed the course and touted their own learning about writing, these data ultimately illustrate how and why hiphop worked in the composition classroom for students who did respond positively to the material. The interviews illustrate broader attitudes about race, language, and culture that extend beyond measuring learning outcomes, but they also show that students' mastery of general topics in writing far outpaced their understandings of sociolinguistic concepts.

Following a grounded theory methodology (Charmaz), I open-coded and wrote coding memos throughout the data analysis process as I developed my theory. By repeatedly coding these 20 transcripts in order to consolidate and clarify my codes (Saldaña), I ended up with 8 main codes, which I further consolidated into 3 major phenomena (See Table 1, below). During my open coding stages, I noted identity, affect, genre, and transfer as preliminary themes. Eventually, the coding process uncovered the trenchant anti-Blackness in my students' relationships to hiphop, standard English, and Black Language, an anti-Blackness that existed among students of all races and genders, both longtime hiphop fans and those new to the genre. It also showed the white habitus of the classroom and even my research design, as I noticed a totalizing binary between whiteness and Blackness, with almost nonexistent opportunities for Asian, Latinx, or Indigenous students to self-identify or be culturally recognized. The coding process also revealed to me students' deep identifications with hiphop pedagogy. I found that hiphop, a contradictory art form which is both resistive and commodified, *rhetorically appeals to students learning in the contradictory ideological context of anti-Black commodity capitalism*. As such, I conclude that teachers must make personal decisions, rendered public to students, about whether hiphop will be mobilized merely to engage students in the acts of writing and research for individualistic gain or whether hiphop will be critiqued towards solidarity-building understandings of literacy, writing, and discourse which are consistent with the knowledge of our field.

In my preliminary analysis of interview transcripts, I realized that I had not requested students' self-identifications by race, gender, or other demographic markers. Recognizing this, I added a question in the interviews I had not conducted yet; thus, some students gave fuller accounts of their own identities and how those identities shaped their experiences of the course. In the discussion of student interviews that follows, I identify students by race or other signifiers only when they did so themselves. Recognizing my own failure to invite students to self-identify further shaped my recognition of the way I had perpetuated the white habitus in class and shaped the analysis itself, below. According to student preferences, some student names are pseudonyms and others are not. I proceed with referring to Nana as my colleague to keep the focus on our students. When editing student interview excerpts for publication, I removed some fillers (um, like, you know) but retained others to preserve the flavor of the language. I preserve students' natural language and do not use [sic] markings.

Table 1: Codes, Frequencies, and Phenomena

| | My students | Colleague's students | Totals | Combined phenomena |
|--|-------------|----------------------|--------|---|
| <p>1. Identification grounds investment</p> <p><i>Students remark that their investment in or engagement with course materials and assignments was facilitated by the relevance of course materials to their own experiences and interests</i></p> | 12/13 | 7/7 | 19/20 | Affective identification grounds all students' investment in the writing and research process and promotes overall criticality and investment in learning |
| <p>2. Metacognitive understanding of writing as a process</p> <p><i>Students describe their own writing process, recognize it as evolving in the class, and/or recognize writing as a process all writers go through</i></p> | 13/13 | 7/7 | 20/20 | |
| <p>3. Reading or listening more deeply</p> <p><i>Students say the class has led them to interrogate texts more deeply, whether reading more deeply into written texts or listening more carefully to hiphop or other music</i></p> | 4/13 | 5/7 | 9/20 | |
| <p>4. Literacy as an evolving, situated practice</p> <p><i>Students display an understanding of literacy as a broad array of reading and writing practices that occur in situated contexts and evolve over time</i></p> | 4/13 | 5/7 | 9/20 | |
| <p>5. Texts, genres, and discourses as rhetorically situated</p> <p><i>Students recognize all texts, genres, and discourses as responding to rhetorical situations that involve audiences, goals, physical contexts, timing, community norms, and other rhetorical parameters</i></p> | 10/13 | 3/7 | 13/20 | |

| | My students | Colleague's students | Totals | Combined phenomena |
|---|-------------|----------------------|--------|--|
| 6. Social construction of error <i>Students acknowledge that error is a political rather than a linguistic reality and that error and correctness are not static but are rather rooted in rhetorical situations</i> | 9/13 | 0/7 | 9/20 | Despite hiphop fandom, anti-Blackness is widespread in student understandings of language and culture and whiteness was the default classroom habitus in all classes studied, as reflected in about half of student interviews. [Recommendation: Thus, AAVE, white supremacy, and linguistic discrimination must be explicitly named and taught to be understood and to disrupt classroom whiteness] |
| 7. Depictions of Anti-Blackness <i>Students affirm or confront stereotypes around Black people or Black musics, as well as white students' comments that they have been derided by white peers for enjoying Black musics</i> | 8/13 | 6/7 | 14/20 | |
| 8. Encountering the white habitus in class <i>Students affirm white discourse norms in class including fear of discussing race or the whiteness of the classroom environment. Includes places where students of color identify racialized tensions in class as well as where white students affirm that there is no racialized tension in class</i> | 6/13 | 5/7 | 11/20 | |

Despite the limitations of my research design, student exit interviews were instructive in demonstrating the critical social justice possibilities for hiphop composition pedagogy in predominantly white environments—and the stakes and challenges for educators navigating these contexts. Students' interviews are complex as they reflect pedagogical failures and successes, while richly testifying to students' learning, struggling, and thriving in the context of colorblind capitalism, anti-Black violence and the emerging Black Lives Matter liberation movement. Interview transcripts show students negotiating dominant and resistive discourses about literacy, language, and linguistic racism, and the insufficiency of sociolinguistic lessons.

I found that

- (1) Affective identification with hiphop and multimedia course material grounds all students' investment in the writing and research process and promotes overall criticality and investment in learning;
- (2) My writing studies and my colleague's creative writing approaches using hiphop both helped some of our students appreciate the rhetoricity and value of all texts, but in different ways;

- (3) Despite hiphop fandom, anti-Blackness is widespread in student understandings of language and culture, and whiteness is the default classroom habitus, as reflected in about half of student interviews.
- **Recommendation:** AAVE, white supremacy, and linguistic discrimination must be explicitly named and taught to be understood and to disrupt classroom whiteness.

The phrase I ultimately chose for my first code, **identification grounds investment**, reflects students' repeated reflections of education as a market in which one exchanges resources like time, interest, and energy for returns like grades and future financial success. This code was ubiquitous in student interviews, as was my second code, **metacognitive understanding of writing as a process**. Together, these two codes showed that students found it easier to pay attention, understand course concepts from writing and hiphop studies, and move through the research and writing because of the relevance of hiphop, its connection to current events, and their freedom to choose research projects that resonated. Further, a third prominent code, **reading or listening more deeply**, indicated that this increased investment and positive affect in class helped students develop their criticality, engage with challenging concepts, and confront the ambient anti-Blackness that had precluded them from fully *hearing* the hiphop texts they already enjoyed.

Students' understanding of literacy studies concepts developed differently based on my own and my colleague's pedagogies. My attention to literacy concepts meant that more of my students than my colleague's recognized **texts, genres, and discourses as rhetorically situated** (code 5). Surprisingly, given my colleague didn't explicitly teach using a new literacies framework (Street), both his students and mine recognized **literacy as an evolving, situated practice** (code 4), suggesting perhaps that honoring rap inherently helped students validate a wider range of texts and literacy practices. With my colleague's creative writing approach, however, his students described consciously writing to engage audiences while my students did not. My students also became aware of the anti-Black and anti-youth **social construction of error** (code 6) in popular assessments of language, whereas my colleague's students didn't evidence this knowledge at all. (The name of this code comes from Chris Anson's acknowledgement that all writers and speakers make errors, but that which errors get focused on are often shaped by cultural scripts.)

Both code 6, **social constructions of error**, and code 3, **reading or listening more deeply**, overlapped significantly with code 7, **depictions of anti-Blackness**. In discussing error and listening, students reproduced and critiqued anti-Black discourses that dismiss rappers and Black Language users as ignorant and illiterate and therefore not worth listening to. Students' comments reflecting the **social construction of error** reflected how error had been socially constructed to privilege white standard speech, leaving them thinking that Black speech and Black speakers were ungrammatical, lazy, or wrong. For many of them, class introduced them to the idea that Black language choices are purposive, meaningful, contextually appropriate, and rooted in the languages of the African diaspora. While only my students could name AAVE and linguistic racism, and often only with introductory success, my col-

league's students also reported that the class helped them recognize the intentionality behind Black artists' hip-hop compositions. Black, white, and Asian students all described how both my own and my colleague's courses helped them notice and combat anti-Black linguistic attitudes. Finally, in order to identify the **white habitus in class** (code 8), I had to key into lapses and evasions. This code occurred when students described what they couldn't, wouldn't, or were afraid to say about race and racism, or where they described white logics or white students dominating class conversation.

Students Voicing Hip-hop Literacies and Illiteracies

We can see the interrelatedness of the codes and the phenomena in comments from Jonathan, a Black sophomore in one of my courses. A computer science major, Jonathan relied heavily on the language of investment in explaining the effort he gave the course:

... basically if you wanna invest my time into actually doing this project, cause I'm not giving in like two hours after I've started writing—so it's like, this is not so bad, I'm reading all these stories that either a) I've read before or b) I actually enjoy reading about the person, so I'm going to keep reading, keep researching, taking this information and producing something worth the professor reading basically.

Jonathan contrasted this investment with a feeling he usually encountered in his writing process of “giving in.” Jonathan felt that instructors “should like, pay attention more to tailoring our prereq[isite]s to be meaningful to what we actually wanna—basically, make it something that we would want to invest our time in.” Jonathan even went so far as to suggest that this engagement in and identification with the course protected him against committing plagiarism. This comment was deeply affective, as Jonathan charted the spectrum between “the fear of plagiarizing” when writing about “old texts” and the “refreshing” sense of creating new knowledge:

This whole like fear of plagiarizing is very hard when we're like recycling these old texts, and it's like, there's only so much that can be said about this text that has been around like forty years. I'm pretty sure the majority of things that can be studied of them, have been said, so it's like what more can I say when I'm researching all these things....So since hip-hop is relatively new, the time frame is thirty years, there's not that much done on it yet, and we were bringing out even more relevant topics that happened in the last ten years, so like, that was a very refreshing thing, like, oh I can let out all my thoughts and it not be mistaken for someone else's...it's either that or like, what more can I do with this text that I don't even, I don't even relate to, I don't even, basically care about, like tomorrow I'm not even going to be thinking about this topic after I turn in my paper. But I'm always gonna be thinking about what [artist] Frank Ocean is doing next, I'ma go check on this blog and things like that, so it's like, I wanna just invest everything I'm

saying and all the thoughts I have into this paper and if I don't there's no need to really plagiarize.

Jonathan described how his interest in the subject matter bolstered his confidence and helped him invest in the writing process, allowing him to know himself better as a writer and recognize writing as a process. He confessed:

So like reading and writing are actually two of the subjects that I don't enjoy the most, and especially writing, because I get really bad writer's block when I do write academically, but in terms of social media, that's mainly where I write...[But now] I don't really see myself as that horrible of a writer any more...I guess my confidence kinda grew...I feel like this time around I actually felt as if I, in all aspects of my topic, I knew exactly what I was talking about. 'Cause sometimes...I don't really understand all of the elements fully, so it's like, eerrhhh, I'm kind of confused on the situation but I don't have time to discuss it or research it anymore.

Martin, a freshman, described how reflecting on his everyday literacies in a literacy narrative assignment built his confidence. He said:

I got to college thinking that these classes are going to be really hard, I'm not that well of a writer, and then ...when you told us to write a blog [about our personal literacies], I really enjoyed writing the blog, so once I started writing the blog, my confidence in writing just grew more....As a kid I never really liked reading. I was always, whenever they would ask me to read something in school, like, "Read this book," it was always like I had to do it for school, I would never do it on my own....But then, when we did the literacy [unit] I realized I've been reading magazines my whole life. I actually have been reading, I am reading, I just never saw it as reading because it's something I really enjoyed.

Martin's comments highlighted the ways that new literacies pedagogies that acknowledge everyday acts of reading and writing build student confidence. Other student commentary indicated the anti-racism inherent in recognizing a range of everyday literacies. Martin connected learning about hip-hop sampling practices to his own uptake of advanced argumentation techniques.

Sometimes in my text that's what I often do, use older texts and, then I source them, and then I use something that I've written before, I use it into a new essay that I have to write, or something that I read from, I base my work off of that, to make it better....Yeah, and every time I listen to a song, I'm like, Oh, sampling!

My colleague's student Ruth, a Black woman, specifically associated the course's appeal with its multimodal curriculum and the heavy presence of music. She told me, "it was nice to come to class and not be given something to read every time but you're listening to the music or he's playing music while you're talking and then you're starting to get a feel for hip-hop —I'll say it was very relaxing." For Ruth, an International Relations major, the same feelings that engaged her in class were what made hip-hop

universal. Reflecting on her research project on hip-hop in the Arab Spring, she described sharing a song she was researching with a friend:

I had a friend last night listen to one of the songs that I was listening to, can't understand what it's saying but it has such a nice beat and it's one of those songs like it's the beats that I associate with that feeling [of] hip-hop and so she was listening to it – she's like *this is nice* and I'm like *right* and I even – it's a song for the revolution telling people to – *the revolution has just begun, long live Egypt* and all this stuff but she just listening to the beat even if I didn't see that, just the beat, you know, already has me...

Ruth's classmate Rachel reiterated the power of music to engage students. "There's something to the way a song makes you feel when you hear it" that engages students in a way written texts can't.

My student Anum echoed the importance of the course's relevance to her learning. She told me,

I loved it...It really made it seem as if we were learning about modern events or current events that happened and instead of just sitting down and reading or analyzing lyrics from songs, it was more about what we thought about the world outside of that class, does that make sense?

For Anum, having hip-hop in the classroom helped her feel understood. Professors, she told me, "they don't come from the same environment as you did...they had way more than you did...the majority of them will probably not have the same connection as artists or rappers will, you know?" This identification with course material carried Anum through a difficult writing process. "It took me like at least 6 or 7 hours sitting down just to find out what I was trying to say and...I decided to just list out all the sources that I had and find out what was in common with them...so it took a lot but I finally narrowed it down to like a main point, which was hard to do...it was very time consuming." Interestingly, Anum, who identified herself as a major hip-hop fan, located hip-hop's ability to ground student identification and investment in the neoliberal scripts of overcoming or bootstrapping that were inherent in the music. She told me,

That's why I love Eminem is because he brings up his past and tells people that this is what I had...I had less than you have and I came out to be this successful so if you have this then you can be even more successful...It lets them know that these rappers are with you and they know how you feel and they're rooting for you to be able to achieve whatever you can. I think that's why people relate to hip-hop is because they know that message and they just keep going for it.

This statement highlights the contradictory nature of hip-hop as the subject of a liberatory pedagogy. Hip-hop motivates students and can scaffold critical learning even as it often reinscribes dominant discourses like the hegemonic American notion that hard work is always meritocratically rewarded rather than that opportunity is structured by systems of racism, sexism, and empire.

Interest and identification with course materials helped students invest in close reading in class work and beyond, pushing past ambient anti-Blackness that dismissed hip-hop music's value. Chrissy, a white woman, explained that learning to listen to music more closely "taught me a lot...like not judging right away, not just skimming the surface, you know, like looking a little bit more deeper into different things." Multiple students from both my colleague's and my own classes said that their critical engagement with music in the course had changed how they listened to music on their own. Rob told me, "before this class it was kind of, like, bobbing my head, like listening in my car, but now I like to listen to it—and understand it—more than just, bounce to it." Chrissy told me that although people think "hip-hop is ignorant," she found that "as we picked apart pieces of the songs, you realized that they have a lot more meaning." Although Chrissy was a longtime hip-hop and R&B fan, she described being called an "Oreo" and a "forty-year-old Black man in a white woman's body" by her white female friends for preferring rap and R&B to the pop music they liked. However, she still believed that "even though people say that rap is like just talking and yelling, I think that like those two types of music [rap and R&B] you honestly have to have the most talent for." A white male student, Dan, shared similar experiences, commenting that "my friends always made fun of me...for listening to too hard of rap...and my parents were always against it whenever I played it in the car they'd always be like all this foul language, how do you listen to this."

Neither my courses nor my colleague's sufficiently taught sociolinguistic approaches to AAVE. The lingering hip-hop illiteracies in student exit interviews demonstrate that hip-hop discourse must be taught sociolinguistically to combat pervasive linguistic racism. Even my students who read texts on Black English by Sutherland lacked a deep understanding of AAVE as a grammatical language that is perceived socially as low-prestige, but is not intrinsically inferior to white mainstream English (Baker-Bell), demonstrating that these key concepts were not sufficiently prioritized in class. Anum clarified how anti-Blackness leads to discrimination against the Black Language practices of rappers. She referenced our class discussion of Kanye West's song "We Don't Care," in which I drew attention to West's choice to use the Black Language structure of the zero copula (Baker-Bell, 76) in his affirmation "We smart." She told me:

So, I didn't really think about this before this class that a lot of the lyrics from like Black English is—it's not really known as grammar. It's usually known as Black people can't or they can't—they're not as literate as white people are or people in the society and it really opened my eyes trying to figure out that they are—they are literate, they just choose to make it their own language to speak out to the um—they try to make a message out to society and I thought that was—I didn't really think about that before this class.

This statement reflects a developing, but still shallow, recognition of the value of Black Language that misses its own rule-following grammaticality. For David, a white freshman, learning about language varieties laid the foundation for him to listen to and really *hear* minoritized speakers in the future.

We talked about the way [Jay-Z] spelled something [in his memoir], and how most academics wouldn't like ever think to teach that type of lyric or that artist just cause of the way he spelled—I think he spelled “cuz” like “c-u-z” when it was really supposed to be “because.” And I made the point in class that we wouldn't, we would probably overlook that a lot of the times... [But now] I don't really care if something is spelled wrong as long as I can find meaning in it for myself, and I think others can too . . . Just because it's spelled wrong I don't think changes the validity of it.

David's comments here crucially mirror that, in our society, speech in minoritized language varieties can be dismissed on an epistemic level: *invalid*. This moment and others brought home the stakes of my need to shift my pedagogy to make sure students understood language diversity, language prestige and subordination, and linguistic racism, since, like Anum, David still is referring to Black Language practices as “wrong.” Jonathan affirmed that learning about BL helped him make sense of why he was always told as a kid “that I talk very white.” Not learning about varieties of English had confused him as a child, and even learning about AAVE without lessons on language prestige didn't give him a full vocabulary for understanding the conflicting linguistic messaging he received. He said, “that always confused me cause, I always saw it as I'm speaking proper, but like, to say I'm not speaking Black enough, is kind of um, well not kind of, it's very insulting, and to connect improper speech with Black dialect is very, kind of, annoying, I guess, to say.” My class gave Jonathan space, but insufficient conceptual grounding, to discuss his linguistic upbringing.

These conversations occurred in the context of the nationally and locally emerging Black Lives Matter Movement and protests against police and vigilante killings of Black people. Tamika, a Black woman, told me that she was glad to explore issues of racial injustice in class, especially since “this whole year has been like not overly shitty but like more shitty for African Americans than in the past.” “I have a brother, I have like a young like Black cousin,” she told me, and “this class is definitely a good way for me to like incorporate my culture and my identity and my beliefs into my paper.” Chrissy, who was white, told me that while it was hard to talk about race in class, current events had brought racial politics to the fore.

The main issue is kind of just brushed aside until as of recent with all these riots and everything...I feel like even in class it's like too heavy of a subject if someone is African American in the class, it's just a really, really touchy subject to talk about in a classroom with people you don't know so you don't know how you're gonna offend somebody and especially like if our professor's African American.

Chrissy's white classmate Sarah echoed the sense of fear she believed white students felt around saying the wrong thing. For Sarah, who felt a lifelong awareness of racial injustice, she was thrilled to see the class open to these discussions, telling me, “I loved it.”

I think it needs to happen more in every class, in every possible way. I just think that the problem is that a lot of people are afraid of talking about it,

and it's a sensitive topic so people dance around it. But it's a topic that really needs to be addressed... especially with things like police violence and all the shootings that have been happening, it's really important to address things like that and this is still the only class that I've ever taken that's really like looked at what is happening right now and how it relates to other contemporary things like the music of right now...by being in a class that's willing to talk about it, um, I think you sort of just become more comfortable with the language surrounding it and being able to talk about it yourself and being more educated about it, so, I think it's really important. I liked it.

Chrissy and Sarah's valuing of forthrightness in my colleague's courses was echoed by Yetunde, a Black student in my sophomore class. But while Yetunde echoed the value of these conversations, she also felt more tension around racially charged moments in class. And while Sarah and Chrissy were happy and excited to be discussing race, Yetunde gestured toward the ways that, at least in my course, class was still too oriented around white students' learnings and needs. She said:

I just remember like moments in class where it was like really tense because people were talking about um, things that kind of – people don't like to talk about, but it was okay because it was in the text and it was part of the assignment, so like you could tell like they were uncomfortable, but they really want to say it so they were like really – you know you felt like the energy coming from them.

But Yetunde qualified her affirmation, locating herself at a remove from the conversation:

I wasn't glad that they were like siding with me because I'm an African American woman and this text promotes the culture that I'm supposed to identify with...but I was happy that they were like being honest with themselves about how they felt about it, you know? And not really being afraid to express that, so it wasn't – it wasn't moments about me, but more about I'm glad that I'm here with other people as they're getting through that, like they're working through that.

Yetunde's classmate Courtney, a Native American student, also saw white students dominating class discussion. "A lot of the male white students did express their views more so than anyone else. I don't know if that means they connected more with it or if they had more ideas, but they definitely do have some level of um, connection to it." The difference between Yetunde and Courtney's comments versus Chrissy and Sarah's comments taught me that class discussions were still too oriented around white students' coming to awareness and that I needed to find new strategies to center the learning and knowledge of Black students and students of color.

Their classmate Jonathan thought my class could have gone much farther in using hip-hop to confront not just national but campus racism and segregation. He told me,

Hiphop is actually a thing that can like unify students, because it's something that we all indulge in, especially because coming from [CNYU], it is like a known thing across the campus that we're like sort of self-segregated? So like, knowing what I guess the Black community takes so personal as hiphop is something that we could possibly share with every other culture on this campus as like unifying a topic of interest, and bring it to our discussions in class, and out of class... 'Cause one of the things about hiphop is it's kind of an art of truth in things, and one of the truths of [CNYU] is the climate our campus has, and discussing the type of environment we live in would be I think beneficial for everyone...and I think throwing in things like the hyper-sexualized activities and drugs and things, things that like hiphop are always mentioning, throwing those in there as well, cause again that's like another issue or topics that [Central] students can relate to.

In this comment, Jonathan breaks through the stereotypes that criminalize Black and brown youths while white students engage in the same behaviors with impunity, by ascribing the drug and alcohol abuse and sexual violence normally associated with hiphop texts to behaviors he witnessed on his elite PWI campus. Jonathan saw hiphop in the classroom as an opportunity to confront and repair campus harms.

For me, the stakes of this work were most apparent in a conversation with Ruth, a Black woman who had not been one of my students. The daughter of a conservative Black mother, Ruth shared with me deep feelings of inadequacy and fear. Her comments showed the ways that hiphop pedagogy can give students space to unpack the emotions and ideologies that shape their attitudes about learning. After asking me for advice about graduate school, Ruth told me,

That's good, because I'm like sitting here frightened about the future...One of the things that I realize in my life is that I haven't really accomplished a lot, I don't think I really earned a lot, so sometimes I doubt my own abilities, like sometimes opportunities especially from where I come from, they're presented to you and you do have to compete for it just a little bit, but you know you don't have to compete for it that much, so you get put into positions you do things, but I don't know if I really had the skills to do well with those, so I always question my writing, question everything, my own abilities....

Describing her enjoyment listening to Kendrick Lamar, who critiqued white supremacy while also demanding personal responsibility from his Black listeners, she told me,

My mom, you know, she was not – she's not – I don't wanna say she's not a African American supporter, but she's always on the side of the argument you know take responsibility and that's kind of how I've grown up and you know I debate with my mom back and forth cause I think like she's a little too conservative, like ma you have to acknowledge some of the systems of oppression too—and this is something she always does is like oh, those – that person did this, that person all right they're not doing this, well I go mom there're also other reasons behind why certain things are you know so-

cial economics you know it's different things, but I will say this, I did appreciate you know listening to artists who took a different stance, like took that responsibility stance.

Ruth's comments highlight for me how hip-hop is a source of contradictory commodity products that can both "retain the mass-mediated spotlight on the cultural stage and at the same time function as a voice of social critique and criticism" (Rose 101). Hip-hop's mass-marketed ubiquity makes it a powerful entry point for student learning, but we must go further than hip-hop products when teaching research-backed concepts. Thus, while hip-hop culture offers a space where students can negotiate the ways ideologies shape their lives on the level of the affective, Ruth's comments also show that she needs her courses to teach her *content* about these "systems of oppression," so she can gain not just space but *concepts* with which to understand her world. For writing instructors, these lessons should focus on how power functions through language. In these student interviews, we hear students working to fit their writing classes into their efforts to be successful, making judgments about writing courses' worth, making decisions about how much energy, time, and effort to invest in the study of writing, and balancing their individualized efforts to be successful in a world that has foreclosed opportunities for their generation, with their efforts to incorporate radical knowledge and build practices of solidarity on campus and beyond.

Outro: Confronting My Own Hip-hop Illiteracies

Conducting this study led me to significantly revise my pedagogy. These conversations taught me, a white teacher who had insufficiently named and combatted whiteness in my classrooms, that hip-hop does not automatically produce an anti-racist or radical curriculum, but rather that hip-hop's contradictory messages and ideologies themselves need to be interrogated with key theoretical tools from literacy studies, sociolinguistics, and women's and gender studies. In order to engage hip-hop culture more responsibly in my current course "Hip-hop, Orality, and Language Diversity," I open class with texts on hip-hop and English language variety. I teach that AAVE is a grammatical, rule-following language whose low prestige is a function of hegemonic American anti-Blackness, not any inherent inferiority of the language.

Noting the dominance of male voices in my course discussions and on my syllabi, I also reoriented my course materials to feature Black women and women of color artists and scholars. We open class by watching Jamila Lysicott's slam poem on dialect diversity, "3 Ways to Speak English," and build to three key readings: the first chapter of Richardson's *Hip-hop Literacies*; the third chapter of Tricia Rose's *Black Noise*, on the Afrodiasporic roots of hip-hop's beats and samples; and DJ Lynnée Denise's article "The Afterlife of Aretha Franklin's 'Rock Steady': A Case Study in DJ Scholarship," in which Denise autoethnographically theorizes her DJ practitioner knowledge as "erasure resistance" (64) that affirmatively curates Black queer and women musicians into rotation.

Instead of analyzing music by male artists, I focus our attention on female rappers like Cardi B, Chika, and Noname. I have also become much more reflexive in

identifying myself as a white mainstream English speaker, and I use reflective and reflexive writing prompts to invite students to self-identify, articulate their own language practices, and reflect on the ethical implications of their similarity or difference with the communities they are studying in their research.

Reflexivity brings forward the true diversity in the room; helps all students, including non-Black people of color, self-identify; and helps students connect to their passions and communities when researching. As a result, our class's research has gone global, multilingual, and feminist-forward. While hiphop's brilliance and viral appeal makes it an ideal vehicle for teaching students about writing, language, and literacy, this study shows that anti-Blackness can only be sufficiently understood and combatted in hiphop literacy classrooms at PWIs when students are offered critically reflexive literacy concepts, tools, and practices.

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