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2. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF HIP-HOP MUSIC AS TEXTS

INTRODUCTION

Recontextualized: A Framework for Teaching English with Music shares numerous reasons to support the use of music in the English classroom. Using music from popular culture values students' life experiences and lends itself to in-depth discussions of the socio-political context sometimes hidden within texts. This chapter provides insight on how hip-hop music was created as a resistant and defiant expression of thought, and presents critical views of mainstream opinions. I work from a critical approach to using hip-hop music "as a means to draw out data about experiences, memories and feelings" (Allett, 2012, p. 4) as opposed to using the music as the source of data. The goal of this chapter is to ultimately encourage readers to think more critically about previously held assumptions about hip-hop music, and hip-hop music as texts (LaVoulle, 2015).

WHAT IS HIP-HOP?

Hip-hop culture is comprised of rapping, deejaying, break-dancing, graffiti, and entrepreneurialism. These entities converge to form what is commonly known as hip-hop culture. Although 'rap' is the most well-known element of hip-hop culture, it is only a part of the culture. What is frequently referred to as "rap" is a term used to describe the lyrical aspect of hip-hop music. When artists use conversation to transfer a message over a musical beat, it is called rapping. Hip-hop music is the music that emerged from hip-hop culture. Hip-hop texts, however, include any written, visual, audio, or spatial texts that relate to hip-hop culture. Hip-hop texts can include a rap song, written lyrics, video, magazines, etc.; however, this article focuses on only one form of hip-hop texts, hip-hop music.

Hip-hop music, a representative voice of urban youth (Alim, 2002; Rose, 1991), offers ample opportunity for critical literacy analysis. Hip-hop scholars (Alim, 2006; Mahiri, 2006) maintained that hip-hop music could be used to motivate and enlighten disenfranchised youth; in addition, evidence suggests that hip-hop music not only educate marginalized youth, but also educates millions of people of all ages worldwide. Music lyrics from hip-hop culture can provide unconventional points of view and voices often silenced in traditional textbooks (Lloyd, 2003) and therefore, educators can use the music to examine the relationships of power,

dominance, and socially constructed meanings embedded in multiple forms of media. Although using non-traditional texts like hip-hop music can both honor the real life experiences of students and create a positive learning environment in the classroom, teachers may feel tension when they relinquish control and embrace popular culture as an instructional method of critical literacy. Offering alternative viewpoints may lead to controversial topics or genres that may be unfamiliar to the classroom teacher. Therefore, the *Recontexualized Framework* offers teachers support from experts who are familiar with particular aspects of popular culture and can engage in in-depth critical discussion with students in a classroom setting (Callahan & Low, 2004).

CRITICAL LITERACY

Giroux (1988) argued that critical educators must consider elements of popular culture like hip-hop music as serious sites for critical literacy. Critical literacy teaches us how to deconstruct and analyze popular culture and to encourage analytical discussion about the multiple meanings of texts. Paired with hip-hop music, critical literacy helps students examine real-world problems, such as socioeconomic status, race, class, and gender, as well as how and why some voices or discourses are excluded from texts. As a critical approach, hip-hop music can generate rich discussion about race, class and economic status, and allow students the authority to question local, state, national and international events. Critical literacy has four components: (a) mainstream politics, (b) social justice, (c) multiple perspectives, and (d) transformation, which are used to empower students to read texts to understand the various ways that these texts influence them.

MAINSTREAM POLITICS

Producing and examining bias and perceptions that influence language use are seen as a way to *disrupt* the commonplace (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) of mainstream politics. In the English classroom, this dimension of critical literacy may assist individuals who are outsiders to hip-hop culture by providing them with details of everyday experiences through the lens of hip-hop artists. For example, the rap song "It was a Good Day" by Ice Cube (Jackson, 1992) is an example of disrupting the commonplace. In the classroom, teachers can use "It was a Good Day*"* to teach students to "assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text" (Common Core State Standards). The song presents the everyday life in south-central Los Angeles from hip-hop artist Ice Cube's perspective. Here Ice Cube shares his story through rhyme and detail, talking about smoking, drinking, having sexual relations, hanging out with his friends, and existing peacefully with the police. In the classroom, students can examine bias and perceptions of the rapper's activities in context as the song invites the listener into the everyday realities of the rapper, a young male in south-central Los Angeles in the mid-1990s. Hip-hop music

helps us examine everyday experiences through a critical lens, but it also can guide our understanding of acts of social justice and how power structures control and influence the media.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Hip-hop music serves as a good resource for demonstrating the social justice tenet which involves *reading* the world to uncover power relationships (Behrman, 2006; Green, 2001; Janks, 2000; Siegel & Fernandez, 2000). Songs like "It was a Good Day" expose that access to knowledge and consequently power is unbalanced among cultural and economic groups (Delpit, 1995). This imbalance of power led to one social or economic group exhibiting dominance over the others, and that domination is perpetuated by language. In "It was a Good Day"*,* the rapper questions the power structures in his Los Angeles neighborhood. The lyrics featured above reveals the rapper's belief that the Los Angeles police are in a position of power and "flex" this power by stopping Black drivers with no probable cause. The term "driving while Black" is now commonly used to refer to police harassment of Black drivers (Kowalski & Lundman, 2007). The large number of Black drivers stopped for minor traffic offenses has fueled beliefs that racial profiling exists because these Black drivers are more likely to receive traffic citations than their White counterparts. In the song, Ice Cube refers to the notion of driving while Black in his song by stating that during this "good day" Los Angeles police rode right past him, an unusual occurrence in 1990s south-central Los Angeles. Listeners are exposed to the power structure that exists between the Los Angeles police department and Black drivers; therefore, this is an example of critical literacy that gives students the opportunity to question who has access and the authority to make decisions.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Teachers can also use hip-hop music to examine multiple perspectives in texts. Reading a range of texts on the same topic encourages students to understand different points of view and how those points of view influence text. When educators incorporate multiple perspectives in the English language arts classroom, those teachers give attention to the ways language use creates social identities (Janks, 2000). As teachers become more familiar with the use of hip-hop texts, they may instruct students to interrogate multiple viewpoints by examining competing or counter-narratives. For example, an assignment that asks students to compare and contrast two hip-hop artists from two different rap genres (e.g., gangster rap and conscious rap) demonstrates multiple viewpoints (Hagerdorn, 1991). Students can attempt to understand both perspectives and critically read the text (lyrics). Gangster rap (also referred to as gangsta rap) is a subset of hip-hop music that evolved from hard-core hip-hop music closely associated with artists from the western coast of the United States (Chang, 2005). Gangsta rap contains violent lyrics about crime

and gang affiliation. Examples of gangsta rappers are Too Short, NWA, Bone Thugs-n-Harmony, C-Murder, Capone-N-Noreaga, The Criminalz, Da Lynch Mob, and Ghetto Boys (Hagerdorn, 1991). Conscious rap music consists of lyrics that focus on positivity, knowledge, and learning (Chang, 2005). Conscious rappers habitually create lyrics about social change and self-awareness, often embracing an element of political rhetoric. Rappers such as Talib Kweli, Rakim, Nas, Mos Def, and Common are known as conscious rappers. Conscious rap music has a high level of social consciousness.

In the song "I used to love H.E.R" (Lynn, 1994) rapper Common chronicles the transformation of hip-hop from social conscious rap of the 1980s to gangster rap of the 1990s. Common utilized a woman as a metaphor for hip-hop, substituting H.E.R. for Hearing Every Rhyme. Essentially the song makes an analogy with the denigration of women with the denigration of hip-hop. Teachers can use this song to teach the students to "Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone" (Common Core State Standards).

TRANSFORMATION

To be critically literate, individuals imagine multiple perspectives and possibilities, and also take action and effect social change (Green, 2001; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). Transformation allows students to critically read text and then move toward changing unjust and oppressive situations. Countless hip-hop songs embody this social transformation element of critical literacy, however "Black on Both Sides" by Mos Def (Bey et al., 1999), "Why" by Jadakiss and Anthony Hamilton (Phillips et al., 2004), "Tell the Children" by Tink (Home, 2014); and "Be Free" by J. Cole (2014) may potentially lead to more generative discussion between teachers and students about popular culture as a site of resistance (Morrell, 2004). These songs serve as a response to issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement and can be utilized in the classroom to encourage students to create their own response to injustices.

NARRATIVE: THE RAPPER AS GRIOT

Hip-hop music embodies narrative—the oral tradition of storytelling—which is one of the most distinctive forms of literacy. Hip-hop music, born out of the African American language community, extends the African ritual of call and response used to capture the audience and enhance the performance aspect of storytelling (Sternburg, 2016). Smitherman (1997) classified the hip-hop rapper as a postmodern African griot or a verbally gifted storyteller.

The song "Children's Story" by the rapper Slick Rick illustrates one of the many ways that rappers use the literacy practice of storytelling to communicate with their

audience. This song serves as a warning to children to avoid criminal activity and negative peer pressure. The song vividly describes the events that lead to a young boy's death during a crime spree that includes robbery and kidnapping. Ironically, this cautionary tale is told as a bedtime story and ends with a vibrant lyrical twist, depicting how the young boy meets his fate. To utilize "Children's Story" in the classroom, teachers should provide students with a printed copy of the lyrics and play the audio version followed with a discussion about misfortunes that falls upon youth who are "misled," and participate in illegal activities. Slick Rick's "Children Story" remains an influential piece of hip-hop music, however, another version, written by the rappers Mos Def and Talib Kweli (1998) exemplifies personification by depicting the tale of the wrong path that hip-hop music has traveled. With the use of personification, Mos Def and Talib Kweli gives human characteristics to hip-hop music. Used as data, this song portrays how some hip-hop artists allow the business aspect of hip-hop to overshadow the creative aspect. Used as a source to draw out data, this song can elicit responses to numerous topics such as authorship, plagiarism, credible sources, and the significance of editorials. For example, the line "Me and you kid we gonna make some cash, Jackin' old beats and makin' a dash…" illustrates the practices that some rappers use to gain fame in the hip-hop music industry. The song's tone and reference to "Jackin beats" and "makin a dash" refers to sampling other artists' music without proper authorization or compensation paid to the composers and presenting it as original music.

Mos Def and Talib Kweli's version of "Children's Story" is a harsh critique of what happens when hip-hop artists become more concerned with music production and less concerned with music creation. Void of creative ability, the Def/Kweli version describes circumstances occurring from dishonorable practices of hip-hop record company executives. This song supports the following Common Core ELA standard, "Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text." Utilized as a serious site for social knowledge, both versions of "Children's Story" offer an opportunity for students to critically examine the content of each text and ask complicated questions about language use and power, morality and ethics, and advantage and disadvantage (Comber, 2001).

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LESSON PLAN USING *A SONG FOR ASSATA* BY COMMON

(A SONG FOR ASSATA, 2000)

Instructional Goal

Students will critically read hip-hop musical text that supports the theme of social justice, and write an editorial that justifies the main character's escape from prison. The editorial must include details from the text in addition to factual information regarding the policies about political prisoners. Students will support their discussion with evidence from the readings.

Standards

1. The student identifies, analyses, and applies knowledge of theme in literary works and provides evidence from the works to support understanding. The student:
   a. Applies knowledge of the concept that the theme or meaning of a selection represents a universal view or comment on life or society and provides support from the text for the identified theme.
   b. Evaluates the way an author's choice of words advances the theme or purpose of the work.
2. The student carefully reads (musical and written) text to determine what the text say explicitly and make logical inferences about the meaning of texts.
3. The student assesses how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
4. The student draws evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Introductory Hook

1. What are some ways that that authors use *imagery* to tell the story?
2. Discussion question: How might imagery be used in music to tell a story?
3. Create a chart to list students' responses

Teacher Tasks

Provide a written copy of song lyrics for each student and play audio version of song
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-1-y7si-5Y
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-1-y7si-5Y
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-1-y7si-5Y
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-1-y7si-5Y

CRITICALLY READ HIP-HOP TEXTS

Allow students to listen to the song once while reading the written lyrics. Then play the song again, instructing students to highlight or circle words/phases that are essential to understanding the song's meaning.

Activity 1

Quick write activity: In one or two sentences, respond to the following questions.

- What is the song's message?
- Why do you think that the song was written?
- How did the song make you feel?

Activity 2

The following questions examine *A Song for Assata* as data that can be used in oral discussion.

- Which phrase does the author use to demonstrate mood?
- What are the examples of poetic expressions, metaphors, or figurative language?
- The author's use of words and phrases demonstrates *point of view*. Reflecting on the point of view that this story is told from, who is the victim?

Activity 3

The following questions utilize *A Song for Assata* to generate data, and should be assigned to students individually or in small groups.

- What does this song make you think of? Brainstorm the thoughts that you have about political prisoners after hearing this song.
- The rapper used the phrase, "scandalous the police were, as they kicked and beat her". What does that phrase mean to you?

Activity 4

The author/artist, Common, uses a variety of *imagery* to tell the story. In the passage on lines 13–17, what series of emotions does the author attempt to evoke from the reader?

a. The police
b. Assata*
c. The trooper
d. German nurse

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There were lights and sirens, gunshots firing Cover your eyes as I describe a scene so violent Seemed like a bad dream, she laid in a blood puddle Blood bubbled in her chest, cold air brushed against open flesh No room to rest, pain consumed each breath

a. fear: mortification and fright*
b. sadness: shame and neglect
c. love: affection and compassion

The author's use of words and phrases demonstrates *point of view*. Reflecting on the point of view that this story is told from, who is the victim?

a. The police
b. Assata*
c. The trooper
d. German nurse

Which phrase does the author use to demonstrate mood?

a. Scandalous the police were as they kicked and beat her*
b. In the Spirit of God, In the Spirit of the Ancestors
c. I'm thinking' of Assata, yes.
d. Walkie-talkies crackling, I see them when they take her

Which passage represents the author's use of the literary device known as *foreshadowing*?

a. Shot twice with her hands up
   Police questioned but shot before she answered
b. From North Carolina her grandmother would bring news that she had had a dream
   Her dreams always meant what they needed them to mean
   What made them real was the action in between*
c. They lied and denied visits from her lawyer
   But she was building as they tried to destroy her

Activity 5: Editorial

Compose an editorial to the local newspaper that justifies the main character's escape from prison. The editorial must include details from the text in addition to factual information regarding the policies about political prisoners.

RUBRIC: ASSATA POLITICAL PRISONER EDITORIAL

	1	2	3	Points earned
Organization	Passage lacks clear direction and is difficult to follow.	Information is presented logically and mentions at least one event from Assata's story.	Information is presented logically and chronologically describes Assata's story.	
Content	Student does not demonstrate a full understanding of the events in the story or evidence of justification.	Student demonstrates an understanding of the events in Assata's story but lacks justification.	Student demonstrates a complete understanding of the events in Assata's story and the ability to present justification for her escape.	
References	Student writing does not mention laws or common practices regarding political prisoners.	Student writing discusses political prisoners without specific legal reference.	Student writing demonstrates reference to federal, state or local information regarding political prisoners.	
Spelling/ grammar	Writing has four or five spelling or grammatical errors.	Writing has no more than two spelling or grammatical errors.	Writing has no spelling or grammatical errors.	