There Goes the Neighborhood: Hip Hop Creepin’ on a Come Up at the U

This article offers a critical perspective on the default mode of freshman composition instruction, that is, its traditionally middle-class and white racial orientation. Although middle-classness and whiteness have been topics of critical interest among compositionists in recent years, perhaps the most effective challenge to this hegemony in the classroom is not in our textbooks or critical discourse but in what many of our students already consume, the ghettocentricity expressed in the music of rappers like Kanye West, Jay-Z, and Eminem.

With cigarettes in their ear, niggerish they appear
Under the FUBU is a guru that’s untapped

My freshman year I was going through hell of problems
Till I built up the nerve to drop my a** up out of college

Picture this scene: Finely manicured lawns and gardens lying beneath clear blue skies as they bathe in the waters of rotating sprinklers; immaculate, treebare streets lined with just the right proportion of maples, birches, oaks—as if Nature herself had doled them out because she, like us, favors the symmetry; the clear, crisp chirping of fowl that have here no din to contend with their
merriment; freshly painted dwellings offering ample space and comfort though not outlandishly so; an elderly gentleman, a longtime resident, perhaps, retrieving the morning paper in his bathrobe and slippers. Welcome to Perfectown, U.S.A. Or so goes the caption plastered across the bottom of America’s cable television screens. As America looks on, vicariously sharing in this dream of bliss and tranquility, something quite unexpected occurs. Out of nowhere, seemingly, ominous clouds loom. And accompanying them a motorcade of black sedans—each bearing an array of suited security like the kind that escort presidents or heads of state—followed by a mega, fully-loaded bus, custom-painted black. Quickly, the entourage comes to a grinding halt. Various passengers—male, female, children, mostly black, though there appears to be no intent to discriminate, especially among the several ravishing beauties aboard—disembark, furniture in tow and a wheelbarrow, also custom-painted black, containing an appetizer of sorts. Clearly, silence is about to be broken in Perfectown.

What is the cause of this disruption in the daily life of Perfectown? Well, it’s moving day, and a new resident is settling in. The last to emerge from the bus, this new resident takes stock of his new surroundings through chic designer sunglasses. He sports a white, XXL jersey tee over black baggy Sean Johns, fresh white sneakers trimmed in black, a black fitted (cap) with a slight tilt to the side, and a toothpick dangling loosely from the corner of his mouth. His wardrobe would be incomplete, however, without some “bling”: the symbol of the cross about his neck, a stud earring, a wristwatch, and a pinky ring—all in platinum, of course. From the bus, he walks . . . no, he glides . . . over to the “For Sale” sign in the front yard, dislodges it, and triumphantly tosses it aside. Meanwhile, the neighbors—all white—are watching. The elderly man looks on, curiously; a considerably younger male resident (if not a lackey of the actual homeowner) looks up from his hedge trimming, stunned; a woman—thirty something, possibly—having intensely observed the spectacle up to the time of this audacious act, glances over at her approaching husband and promptly faints.

So much for the legacy of Brown v. the Board of Education, this scene from a recent rap music video seems to infer. Were the dramatization to continue in this vein, one might expect another moving day or two or three. . . white residents fleeing Perfectown because, well, honestly, it isn’t quite so perfect anymore (property values have gone down considerably; the local school has become less academically rigorous, and the neighborhood isn’t safe like it was before they moved in). Yet, apparently, all is not lost for Brown because a
few brave souls—in the hip-hop imagination at least—have embraced its democratic impulse. The elderly white man shown earlier in the bathrobe joins the new neighbor’s housewarming party, taking a dip in his makeshift pool; another white neighbor, a middle-aged man (played by Access Hollywood’s then-host Pat O’Brien) pokes his head over the fence, and, enamored by what he hears, begins bobbing his head to the rhythm of the boogie, the beat (as the Sugar Hill Gang used to say); and a woman whom we do not see but whose shrill voice we hear as she briefly converses with her new neighbor.

This episode of the video is, in fact, most intriguing. It’s the morning after, and the new neighbor steps outside to get the morning newspaper—this time dressed in white, a white terry-cloth robe and Kangol cap. As he does so, across the way some other neighbors, possibly also new, gesture a cordial greeting. White teens—a girl and three guys—with heavily tattooed and pierced bodies and hair standing on end (the look of punk rockers, apparently) all appear delighted to see him. Knowing who he is (or what he is), they wave, flip him a thumbs-up, and some makeshift “gangsta” sign; two of the guys sport shorts with a sag, exposing the rim of their boxers. The look, on second thought, is less punk than, say, wigger, or some combination of the two. He waves back, perfunctorily, remarking to himself: “Damn. There goes the neighborhood!”

“P. Diddy,” his neighbor calls out as he saunters back toward the house.

“Ms. Johnson,” P. Diddy responds, “had a good time last night? Yeah, I saw you shaking that ass.”

“Yes, I was,” Ms. Johnson proudly if properly confirms.

“Alright, girl.”

Racially integrating private and personal spaces like neighborhoods has always been fraught with tremendous trepidation.

Won’t You Be My Neighbor? In a Land Called Make-Believe

When "Bad Boy for Life," the title of said video, appeared on the BET network’s Rap City in fall 2001, it struck me as not an unlikely characterization of contemporary suburbia—racially segregated communities being still very much the norm even with the growth of the black middle class. Racially integrating private and personal spaces like neighborhoods has always been fraught with tremendous trepidation. But whether or not African Americans integrate or are welcomed into predominantly white suburban neighborhoods is not the telling point of the video. The more critical—albeit subtler—point is integration of a very different kind, a sort of metaphysical or cognitive integration. A home invasion, Ice-T once called it—vulgar ghetto blackness encroaching upon
gentle suburban whiteness. The graphic on the cover of his 1993 album *Home Invasion* says it all. A white teenaged boy idly listens to rap (albeit the nineties' Afrocentric variety, Ice Cube and Public Enemy) on his Walkman, sports African medallions, and reads *Malcolm X* and ghetto realistic fiction novelist Donald Goines. Behind this noticeably innocent boy looms a swirl of violent imagery, reflecting, I suspect, not so much any real danger that the boy’s parents might encounter in the sanctity of their own home but perhaps the corrupting influence they wildly imagine rap or gangster rap having on their impressionable son.

Though a few West coast “gangsta” rappers (Snoop Dogg and then later Ice Cube of the gangsta rap trio Westside Connection) make an appearance at Diddy’s housewarming, his “invasion” of Perfectown, U.S.A, is anything but violent. Come strapped? Nah, yo, he come stacked: “Don’t worry if I writes rhymes, I write checks,” he assures us. Hova (rapper Jay-Z) casts this invasion/integration a bit differently: “I brought the suburbs to the ‘hood/made ‘em relate to your struggle/I made ‘em love you” (quoted in Todd Boyd’s *The New Hip-hop has, in other words, humanized not just blackness—for the civil rights movement did that—but ghetto blackness, given it a name, an identity, a voice, and a viable economy of expression. Moreover, hip-hop has made suburban youth aware of the lived experience (the actual and the embellished) of their inner-city counterparts, giving them cause to seek alternatives to the banality of suburban middle-class life.

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the whole G Unit crew, Jay-Z and others, and 72 percent of that coming from, to use West’s phrase, the vanilla suburbs—my, the numbers could add up.

So, if what Jigga (also Jay-Z) asserts bears any truth, then a lesson is to be learned here: This thing called hip-hop, this inner-city, youth-driven artistic and cultural movement has accomplished in our society what embattled multiculturalism has been powerless to accomplish—that is, to make the inhabitants of America’s inner cities relatable and indeed loveable. Hip-hop has, in other words, humanized not just blackness—for the civil rights movement did that—but ghetto blackness, given it a name, an identity, a voice, and a vi-
able economy of expression. Moreover, hip-hop has made suburban youth aware of the lived experience (the actual and the embellished) of their inner-city counterparts, giving them cause to seek alternatives to the banality of suburban middle-class life. And yet, dissed and dismissed by the older generation (baby boomers, principally), hip-hop has had few opportunities to capitalize on this quest for “ghetto realness” among suburban youth. Instead of reaching out to youth in communities and schools by drawing on their potential for critical consciousness through rap and hip-hop, politicians, parents, and media pundits (witness Brent Staples’s recent diatribe on rapper 50 Cent in The New York Times) censure such creative expression, turning a deaf ear to a generation increasingly shaped by the digitally-mixed and -sampled rhetoric of hip-hop. Even the academy has proven little better in this regard. Harvard president Lawrence Summers recently discredited a prominent member of the Harvard faculty (Cornel West) because, among other things, West used the medium of the spoken word (a kind of rap CD) to tap into this generation’s sonic sensibilities. Professors don’t dance or boogie, I guess.

Within pedagogical fields like composition, I doubt that very many of us would publicly censure (or censor, for that matter) student interest in hip-hop. (Colleagues of mine have allowed their students to write about hip-hop, but then the reason I know this is because the students were directed to me for help with the subject.) Even with such generosity of spirit among us, I wonder whether we see student consumption (and production) of hip-hop as a way to engage them, as a serious way to explore, for instance, the complex dialectic between the social constructions of blackness and whiteness, the ghetto and suburbia. Perhaps we see this conspicuous consumption of hip-hop music and culture as creating for us a moral impasse, as undermining the noble work that we do, not simply because of the slang and nonstandard grammar in rap lyrics (there is our pledge, “The Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” after all) but because the blackness hip-hop projects is, well, too black, so out of sorts with the blackness we have come to recognize from multicultural readers and critical studies of race. This blackness hasn’t been altogether invisible among us; we have seen it as a link to the African American oral tradition (e.g., Yasin and Smitherman), as a form of literacy (e.g., Richardson and Campbell), and even as a writing pedagogy (e.g., Rice and Sirc). Yet, I don’t think that we have seen it as a counterpoise to the
hegemony of whiteness and middle-classness in the academy and in composition. Although whiteness has of late been a rather contested topic of discussion among our ranks (see Trainor, Beech, and Marshall and Ryden), I suspect that many of our students learn more about what it means to be white and middle class from someone like Eminem than from anything we teach them. Hate him or love him, Eminem possesses, as I’ll show, a unique vantage point from which to make whiteness, lower- and middle-class whiteness, visible. Such visibility is crucial, I believe, if composition is to equip students with the critical integrity and consciousness they need to be effective thinkers and writers in a democracy.

**Truth or Dare: The Games People Play**

Now let’s go meet the neighbors—that is, the middle-class teacher from Perfectown who teaches freshman composition at the neighborhood university—and see what might happen were hip-hop to come a calling. For this, I draw on Lynn Bloom’s essay in *College English* entitled “Freshman Composition as a Middle-class Enterprise.” I then add my own musings on the subject based on experiences I have had teaching first-year writing, often with hip-hop as subject matter or frame of reference.

With little or no qualification, Bloom asserts that “freshman composition is an unabashedly middle-class enterprise” (655). Shereasons that

...freshman composition, in philosophy and pedagogy, reinforces the values and virtues embodied not only in the very existence of America’s vast middle class, but in its very well being—read promotion of the ability to think critically and responsibly, and the maintenance of safety, order, cleanliness, efficiency. (655)

Freshman composition is such an enterprise because, she claims,

Composition is taught by middle-class teachers in middle-class institutions to students who are middle class either in actuality or in aspiration—economic if not cultural. Indeed, one of the major though not necessarily acknowledged reasons that freshman composition is in many schools the only course required of all students is that it promulgates the middle-class values that are thought to be essential to the proper functioning of students in the academy. When students learn to write, or are reminded once again of how to write (which of course they should have learned in high school), they also absorb a vast subtext of related folkways, the whys and hows of good citizenship in their college world, and by extrapolation, in the workaday world for which their educations are designed to prepare them. (656)
While Bloom believes that the middle-class orientation of freshman composition generally operates “for the better,” she does have misgivings—“particularly when middle-class teachers punish lower-class students for not being, well, more middle class” (655). She gives no indication of how frequently middle-class teachers mete out such punishment on their lower-class charges and, consequently, to what extent “middle-class standards may operate for the worse” (655). However, if such standards are adhered to at all in composition teaching, then they reinforce a normative that, in my view, punishes or renders powerless students of every social class. This I intend to show based on the middle-class values Bloom finds inherent in the teaching of college writing.

Eleven middle-class values “saturate” college composition courses, according to Bloom: Self-reliance, responsibility; respectability; decorum, propriety; moderation and temperance; thrift; efficiency; order; cleanliness; punctuality; delayed gratification; and critical thinking (658–67). While the underlying assumption behind this list troubles me—that members of the lower class can’t value, say, order and cleanliness apart from some deep longing to be middle class—I do believe that many of these values embed composition teaching, as Bloom states, “no matter what theories, pedagogical philosophies, or content we embrace” (658). It would be hard to imagine, for instance, any instruction in writing, even in this era of postmodernism, void of admonitions about thriftiness (i.e., economy of style) and cleanliness (i.e., standard grammar and usage).

Of the values on her list, the second—“Respectability (‘middle-class morality’)”—is arguably the more counterproductive in the composition classroom because it reflects the middle-class concern with propriety at the expense of critical dialogue in the pursuit of truth. Bloom cites Mary Louise Pratt’s “Arts of the Contact Zone” and Richard Miller’s “Fault Lines in the Contact Zone” to show how middle-class teachers often impose an air of respectability on student writing that “transgresses . . . normative boundaries” in subject or point of view (659). When faced, for instance, with topics or views that are racist, misogynistic, or sadistic, “[o]ur initial, middle-class impulse is to suppress the topic, to punish or try to rehabilitate the author, or to deliberately overlook the paper’s attempt to wreak havoc in the contact zone and comment only on its ‘formal features and surface errors’” (659–60). I am particularly struck by what Bloom points out here about the middle-class impulse to suppress a controversial topic or ignore (albeit politely) a politically incorrect point of view—for that impulse parallels what Lorraine Delia Kenny in Daugh-
ters of Suburbia: Growing up White, Middle Class, and Female terms a culture of avoidance in predominantly white suburban communities like Long Island’s Shoreham-Wading River (SWR).

By imagining and then later finding myself back within this community, I quickly came face-to-face with some of its more prominent cultural features, namely, its culture of avoidance, by which I mean a culture based on social indirectness, moral ambiguity, and the historical and everyday silences that sustain SWR’s normative and hence privileged life. (11)

The middle-class writing teachers Bloom refers to are, theoretically, products of SWR—except in Bloom’s conception of them they are classed but not raced (also gendered, but that’s another essay). These middle-class teachers could very well be (again, in theory) Hispanic American, Asian American, African American, or any combination of these, but they could also be (and often are) white—an “unarticulated” and “unacknowledged” construct just as much as class was in the New Hampshire college town of Bloom’s youth (657). How can there be a middle-class orientation in freshman composition apart from race, apart from whiteness as a classed position bearing cultural capital? As Kenny puts it,

The biology and economics of race and class are only part of what it means to be white and middle class. What one values or expects from the world, how one communicates, dresses, and is educated, for example, say more about what being white and middle class is all about, than does one’s skin color or bank account. (25)

“What one values or expects from the world,” and “how one communicates, dresses, and is educated” do have a decided effect on one’s identity as white and as middle class. Korean-Jewish-American Amy could, as such, identify as white middle class, but only up to a point (25–26). Heterosexual dating and the multiracial college experience, Kenny aptly notes, tend to make the previously “white” (i.e., the biracial growing up in a predominately white suburb), “nonwhite” (26). In a way, then, the very absence of race as a corresponding function of composition underscores the “silences that constitute white middle-classness as a cultural norm” (2). Silence or indifference about race or racism is clearly a privilege only those who are “without” race possess.

As an African American man of a lower-class background, I don’t possess this privilege. Of course, with a PhD and steady employment for the past twelve years, I have taken up residence in my own Perfectown—well, if you call
living next door to undergraduate students nine months out of the year perfect. And I teach composition not unlike my white middle-class colleagues, with strict attention to order, efficiency, economy, and . . . uh, maybe not so strict when it comes to cleanliness. I am more liberal than most when it comes to requiring that students use standard English, but it ain’t like some folks claim (see Young), that I privilege the black vernacular above any other variety of English black people can and do speak. If anything, I privilege black vernacular speakers more than the indiscriminate use of invariant be, zero copulas, and tense-aspect markers (e.g., been, done). I privilege black vernacular speakers having, if possible, a self consciousness independent of white middle-class (linguistic) judgments or standards. Po’ black students, like e’rybody else, need instruction in standard English grammar and discourse. But students (of all racial and social backgrounds) also need to recognize the power of language, of rhetoric through the manipulation of linguistic codes, conventions, and styles. And you sho can’t get that from the sanitized approach to language in conventional pedagogical models. For all their shortcomings, hiphoppas could teach us a thing or two about the persuasive power of language.

So as to the matter of respectability, that impulse to aversion, to suppress impropriety in students—it don’t come quite so naturally to me. And it may have little to do with my being black, for with today’s black upper and middle classes (take PhDs John McWhorter, Bill Cosby, and Cecil Brown), respectability or middle-class morality often trumps the sensibilities of inner-city youth in particular and the perspectives of the black urban poor generally (the two are not necessarily one and the same). If, say, a young brotha from the projects, an aspiring rapper, isn’t rapping about something positive, about something “uplifting” to the black community (as if we all shared the same postal code, material resources, and faith in the system), then he’s a public menace, a traitor to the cause. But as Todd Boyd writes, this kind of sentiment often comes from the older civil rights generation that today finds itself bitterly at odds with the hip-hop generation.

Civil rights often imposed a certain unspoken code of moral behavior, which suggested that one should “act right” so as not to offend the tastes of dominant White society and so as to speed up one’s entrance into the mainstream, while recognizing that only certain Blacks and a certain Black style would be accepted into the corridors of Whiteness. This having been the case, hip hop can now step in and
further the pursuit of fame, fortune, and wealth, without giving up the phat farm, as it were. Hip hop could care less what White people have to say. As a matter of fact, hip hop, more accurately wants to provoke White people and "bourgie ass niggas" to say something, while laughing all the way to the bank. (*The New H. N. I. C.* 10–11)

Hip-hop's indifference to the values and views of the middle class (white and black) I have, to some degree, come to share not because I see myself at odds with the civil rights generation—the generation in which I came of age and am immediate heir to—but because middle-class morality (the *culture of avoidance*, specifically) has proven of little real value to me, having witnessed firsthand its sinister deceit. University administrators—I learned not long ago from a series of encounters with one at a Big East school—aren’t obliged to explain the obvious contradiction between their words and their actions regarding sensitive issues like the retention of faculty of color. This administrator did, quite according to Kenny’s description of M. P. Baumgartner’s moral minimalism, “everything in [her] power to ward off face-to-face confrontation, while working the system, when necessary, to [her] advantage” (20). Her tactic: *be cordial, polite, smile, and commend him on the excellent work that he’s doing—anything to avoid telling him the truth that, in spite of what you said publicly about being committed to hiring and retaining minority faculty, this is your neighborhood, and he’s no Sean P. Diddy Combs.*

For me, the culture of avoidance in the classroom is especially pernicious because it creates the illusion of truth, of moral and intellectual superiority by sheer force of denial—whether the issue in question is racism, drug abuse, or, as in the case of SWR, teen pregnancy and abortion (Kenny 21–22).

Ian Marshall and Wendy Ryden believe that such evasiveness in the classroom can have detrimental effects—namely that “it suppresses an interrogation of the teacher who often has power and authority invested in their whiteness, and it shuts down dialogue, thereby affirming racism as good” (241). I agree with this assessment of the classroom situation, though I’m not sure that students would infer from such pedagogical sidestepping that racism is good. More likely, students would assume that racism is a nonissue, that cries of racism carry a burden of guilt they aren’t entitled to bear. For me, the culture of avoidance in the classroom is especially pernicious because it creates the illusion of truth, of moral and intellectual superiority by sheer force of denial—whether the issue in question is racism, drug abuse, or, as in the case of SWR, teen pregnancy and abortion (Kenny 21–22). Ultimately, our insistence on normative boundaries in student speaking and writing hinders learning and adversely effects the last value on
Bloom’s list, critical thinking, the reputed “principal virtue of freshman composition” (666).

**The Come Up: Critical (Hip-hop) Consciousness at the U**

_Hiphop is the mental activity of oppressed creativity. Hiphop is not a theory and you cannot do Hiphop. Oppressed urban youth living in the ghettos of America are Hiphop. Rap is something you do; Hiphop is something you live._

—KRS-One, Ruminations (2003)

Bloom makes no explicit mention of how the virtue of critical thinking contributes to a middle-class bias in writing instruction, except to suggest that critical thinking is often believed to be linked to standard English and, presumably, its perceived native speakers (read “the white middle class”). Yet, the very idea that critical thinking is a natural attribute of the middle class in itself reeks of bias, as she, too, seems to suggest in the conclusion of the essay: “Critical thinking can occur in any language” (671). I teach many middle- and upper-middle-class students at Colgate, yet I don’t find them to be significantly better critical thinkers than students of mine from working class or poor backgrounds. They strike me as well versed in the protocol, as properly schooled in the formal characteristics of expository prose (e.g., the tendency in the sciences to avoid subjective references like “I”) but falter when asked to think beyond established rule. University of Virginia professor Mark Edmundson writes quite convincingly about such students. While he credits them for their firm belief in equality and fairness, he laments that “[w]hat they will not generally do, though, is indict the current system. They won’t talk about how the exigencies of capitalism lead to a reserve army of the unemployed and nearly inevitable misery” (Harper’s 42). Such critical reflection would be, Edmundson says of the current academic climate, “getting too loud, too brash. For the pervading view is the cool consumer perspective, where passion and strong admiration are forbidden” (42). My students aren’t completely uncritical of this cool consumer perspective—well—at least when it comes to their more well-to-do peers (the upper- or upper-middle
class students whose parents can afford Colgate’s exorbitant tuition and still send them off to school in a Lexus SUV, BMW, or Hummer with sufficient disposable income to bear that monied look—a pink polo with the collar conspicuously flipped up). Their critiques are typically out there, far from their own personal lives and the social and political systems that make their lives appear so perfectly normal, so morally imperative. So assured are they of this imperative, that they can’t fathom—to give an example from my spring 2004 introductory writing class—Piri Thomas’s love for the mean streets of Spanish Harlem over the Long Island suburb his family moved to when he was a teen (see Down These Mean Streets). When challenged about such knee-jerk assumptions, these students get defensive, take guard for fear of a personal attack on their character.

Given classroom experiences like these, I am inclined to concur with Edmundson’s assertion that “Students now do not wish to be criticized, not in any form” (47). However, I would not go so far as to say that the “culture of consumption never criticizes them,” at least not not when it comes to the culture of hip-hop. Though social and political critiques in rap music are today more the exception than the rule, rap artists are not afraid, as Edmundson supposes we teachers are, to piss their customers off (48). (And I believe hip-hop’s white suburban customers would indeed be pissed off by many a rap song if they weren’t fiendin’ for that cool, gangsta bravado that rappers have made a nearly indispensable commodity of youthful masculinity.) So when a popular rapper (who happens to be white) readily acknowledges in his song (“Without Me” off the CD The Eminem Show) an Elvis Presley factor in his popularity and record sales, students can hardly deny—as mine did so adamantly in a research writing course I taught in spring 2002—the racial-identity politics in the marketplace of American popular music. This may be less a matter of critique than correction, but Eminem’s perspective on the marketability of whiteness may get such students to question their reasons for wanting or preferring to dispense with race as a critical factor in American consumer culture. In the end, though, the point is not to piss off students (our customers), or even to criticize them per se. It is to engage them in honest and forthright dialogue, to prompt them to question social constructs and their vested interests in them so that they can truly think freely and independently.
Bloom’s colleagues—those who suggested that she add critical thinking to her list in the first place—suppose that composition teachers already do that, that “[w]e use the [comp] course to teach and encourage students to think for themselves, to read and write critically” (666). Maybe. I have some doubts about whether we really teach students to think for themselves, that is, in ways independent of the prescriptions Bloom has outlined. On that occasion when white students in my introductory composition class couldn’t fathom Piri Thomas’s repudiation of the suburbs, a handful of students from New York City (three African Americans and a Latina from lower-class areas of the city) took exception and vouched for his rationale, his substantial ties to a vital city life. As writing teachers, guardians of middle-class virtue in the academy, how many of us would be equally understanding and accepting of Thomas’s choice? Do we ever see the suburbs (ideological as well as physical) as less than idyllic, even oppressive to those citizens who don’t share our sense of belonging?

This Long Island was a foreign country. It looked so pretty and clean but it spoke a language you couldn’t dig. The paddy boys talked about things you couldn’t dig, or maybe better, they couldn’t dig you. Yeah, that was it; they didn’t dig your smooth talk, and you always felt like on the rim of belonging. No matter how much you busted your hump trying to be one of them, you’d never belong, they wouldn’t let you. Maybe they couldn’t. Maybe they didn’t belong themselves. (Down These Mean Streets 88)

Hiphoppas like KRS-One might consider Piri Thomas’s preference for Harlem an early (in the 1940s and 1950s) testament to an “independent collective consciousness of a specific group of inner-city people”—his definition for “True Hiphop” (Ruminations 179). This consciousness is expressed daily throughout the cities and, to a lesser extent, suburbs of America in the form of Breakin,’ Emceein,’ Graffiti art, Deejayin,’ Beatboxin,’ Street Fashion, Street Language, Street Knowledge, and Street Entrepreneurialism (179). But the essence of it is the creative energy that KRS-One describes below.

We must remember that all those that truly feel and express a passion for Hiphop are tapping into a reservoir of creative energy that others simply cannot access. This is what makes us special! This is what makes us a unique community/culture/nation! We (Hiphoppas) intuitively tap into creative dimensions/energies that are simply inaudible and invisible to others. Rap music is not just about words that rhyme. Rap music interprets and teaches the soul of the Hiphop community. To write a rhyme, draw a piece, create new dance moves, mix, cut, scratch or beatbox, Hiphoppas must access a collective consciousness commonly called Hiphop. It is known amongst attuned Hiphoppas that in order to excite and/or draw the respect of the crowd one addresses, one must mirror the soul of that
crowd. One must be able to interpret and redeliver with a deeper moral insight or with greater clarity the souls of people. (190)

The hiphoppas KRS-One depicts here sound much like Victor Villanueva’s rhetors, organic intellectuals or conscious users of language (Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color 59). They mirror the souls of the crowd—some of our students—yet impart a different consciousness, a kind of Freirean critical consciousness (Bootstraps 54) that if properly channeled could affect change in the whole freshman comp enterprise: students, teachers, and the classroom environment (55).

Now, I don’t mean to put hip-hop on a par pedagogically with Paulo Freire’s profound philosophy of education or to suggest that hip-hop in and of itself will make students more proficient critical thinkers. But since, as I will further show, hip-hop and its ghettocentric worldview are ever pitted against the American mainstream or middle class, it makes sense to draw from it to counteract white middle-class hegemony in composition. As critical pedagogue Peter McLaren argues, the ghettocentricity of hip-hop reminds white observers that, for one thing, they are raced.

On the other hand, ghettocentricity is a constant reminder to white viewers that they themselves are white. Whiteness—that absent presence that outlines the cultural capital required for favored citizenship status—becomes, in this instance, less invisible to whites themselves. The less invisible that whiteness becomes, the less it serves as a tacit marker against which otherness is defined. (41)

Are students in my writing courses reminded of their whiteness when exposed to the ghettocentricity of hip-hop? It’s difficult to say. But the fact that many rappers from America’s inner cities emit great pride in their ghetto pedigree (which, as I have indicated, is its own kind of blackness quite apart from the black upper and middle classes) suggests that my students cannot assume that everyone shares (or aspires to share) in their middle-class sense about the world (however varied that sense may be across local and regional boundaries). Economically, of course, ghetto youth crave the leisurely income the middle and upper classes possess, including a pimped-out house in the ‘burbs (as MTV Cribs attests). But even star-studded rappers Jay-Z, Nelly, and 50 Cent ain’t exactly traded in they ghetto pass to become white middle class in culture and consciousness. Street culture and street consciousness (again “true hip-hop”) have had a pretty enduring effect on inner-city youth. After all, being ghetto or ghettocentric isn’t incompatible with the acquisition of wealth, to which the Ali and Murphy Lee term boughetto—bourgeois and ghetto—may aptly apply
CAMPBELL / THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD

(from the song “Boughetto”). Why else do folks in the ghetto hustle so hard? Survival? No doubt, but also for stylin’, that is, in hip-hop speak, to be *ghetto fabulous*.

For McLaren the reputed gangsta rapper principally serves as this counterculture, ghettocentric force, challenging bourgeois political and social structures like the Perfectowns of America.

The gangsta rapper serves in this context to remind white audiences that Utopia is lost, that the end of history has arrived (but not in the way Fukayama predicted), that the logic of white Utopia is premised upon white supremacy and exploitative social relations, and that whites have mistakenly pledged their loyalty to the Beast. Gangsta rap reveals the white millenarianist project of democracy to be rounded upon a will to sameness, a desire to drive out people of color from the mythic frontier of the promised land. In this sense, gangsta rap transforms the “brothas” into avenging angels who call upon whites to redeem themselves or face the wrath of God—a God who will send forth not locusts or floods but angry black urban dwellers taking to the streets. (32)

The biblical allusions here are a bit over the top, the “gangsta apocalypse” of 1992 notwithstanding; yet, I think that McLaren’s point about the role gangsta rappers play in the white imagination makes sense when one considers the extent to which mainstream Americans have felt themselves (physically and morally) under siege from hip-hop’s black gangstas and thugs. For Pepsi to renge on an endorsement deal with rapper Ludacris (not even a so-called gangsta rapper) because one man (none other than America’s current caped crusader of conscience Bill O’Reilly) deemed the rapper’s music offensive speaks to mainstream America’s fear and willful control of hip-hop’s “unruly” and “unrepentant” nature.

This kind of control, this kind of juice among America’s purveyors of middle-class virtue suggests to me that as writing teachers we cannot allow whiteness and middle-classness to go unchecked in the classroom. If we abandon the critical perspective here because we see the values of one group as superior to others, as the principle aim of composition pedagogy, then we really aren’t preparing students to become—as many of my fair-skinned colleagues like to say—citizens, active participants in the shaping of our democracy. Being citizens of a democracy, in my view, shouldn’t be about class, aspiring to or being middle class; it should be about learning to live peaceably and justly with other citizens, especially with those who differ from the middle-class ideal. If composition is what Bloom perceives it to be, then the democracy we are preparing students for doesn’t look so democratic after all.

339
One of the reasons that I find Eminem such an appealing rapper is that he represents a different kind of whiteness, one far removed from middle-class privilege and entitlement. It is a whiteness that, oddly enough, many whites might not recognize (or acknowledge) because it encompasses not only the lived experience of that silent white majority, the poor and working class, but also blackness, the hip-hop strand of blackness that beyond the natural talent he clearly possesses gave Eminem those indispensable ghetto qualities: authenticity and realness—what hip-hop headz call street cred. Indeed, this is a whiteness that doesn’t appear very “white” at all—except of course when corporate execs exploit it to market their product (e.g., Eminem’s multimillion-dollar-selling CDs). As baffling as ever to those who would presume to know him, Slim Shady says, “I am whatever you say I am.”

And I just do not got the patience (got the patience)... To deal with these cocky Caucasians
Who think I’m some wigger who just tries to be black
‘Cuz I talk with an accent
And grab on my balls, so they always keep askin’
The same fuckin’ questions (fuckin’ questions)... What school did I go to, what ‘hood I grew up in

(“The Way I Am,” Angry Blonde 93)

In “Critical Pedagogy’s ‘Other’: Constructions of Whiteness in Education for Social Change,” Jennifer Trainor worries that multicultural and critical teaching on whiteness may create “rhetorical frames that demonize whiteness and white students” (647). She believes that we “need to help students articulate antiessentialist identities as whites and to work through the paradoxes of constructing an antiracist white identity” (647). What such an identity (or identities) might actually look like is unclear, though I find it difficult to imagine one isolated from blackness, particularly ghetto blackness, which is far more powerfully demonized inside and outside our neighborhood (the academy). For white middle-class students to articulate an antiessentialist or antiracist white identity may require the imagination or insight of one who has, to a degree, credibility as both black and white. For many (though not all) of our students that person would have to be hiphoppa extraordinaire Eminem. Naturally, I don’t mean the part of his persona that is associated with homophobia and misogyny—two tendencies of hardcore rappers that teachers and students should avidly critique, though not without some serious consideration of the context in which they manifest themselves. Rather, I mean the part that is but not entirely of whiteness. While Eminem is not above using his whiteness as
cultural capital vis-à-vis blacks (as in the racist comments he reportedly made long before he became a rap star, see Jenkins in *XXL* (March 2004), he's also quite clear about his antagonistic image vis-à-vis whites.

See the problem is I speak to suburban kids who otherwise would of never knew these words exist / whose moms probably never woulda never gave two squirts of piss, till I created so much motherfuckin turbulence

("White America," *The Eminem Show* liner notes)

Some liken Em's antagonism to the white rocker's rebellion against the social and political establishment (thus, his enormous popularity), but because of Eminem's close association with ghetto blackness and his mocking caricatures of those white figures the mainstream media tends to adore (e.g., Brit- tany Spears, Christina Aguilera, and N' Sync), it is more than that. As Eminem himself acknowledges above, he is the veritable thorn in the side of white suburbia.

Far more important than this, however, is the fact that Eminem does what many students (rappers as well) are reluctant to do, that is, to be openly self-critical. As Dave Kehr says of Eminem in the person of Jimmy Smith, Jr., the character he plays in *8 Mile*,

... he turns the taunts against himself, rapping about his own failures and hu- miliations, his trailer park mom and his dead-end job. It is by abandoning the rapper's pose of violent confrontation, and by instead incorporating his own doubts and agonies into his identity, that he defeats his opponents. (*New York Times* 15)

Critical thinking of this kind—confidently self-critical and self-reflective—is not, I believe, what we tend to ask of students in freshman composition courses. But if students can't begin to broach the hard questions about their own racial and social identities, then how can we expect them to think and write critically, in a way that demonstrates command of the responsibilities of citizenship? Perhaps, to take this a step farther, if Trainor's informant Paul were asked his impressions of Eminem or his thoughts about B Rabbit (aka Jimmy Smith, Jr.) and his brand of rap in *8 Mile*, he would feel less threat- ened by critical discourses on race. In the broader context of American popular culture, this discourse may prove to be, in Edmundson's words, "easy plea- sure, more TV" for our students (48). Yet there's also the distinct possibility
that it will raise students’ consciousness, help them gain a critical consciousness about themselves in relation to the cultural material (e.g., hip-hop music, video, and film) they otherwise passively consume.

Let me conclude with another example, a hip-hop-oriented movie called *Black and White* that I use in my introductory course on writing in the social sciences. Apart from a few salacious scenes that are sure to unnerve the custodians of middle-class morality, critical analysis of the film could lead students to question presumptive racial and social categories. As it happens, some of the white characters adopt hip-hop culture as their own, so much so, in fact, that they believe they have been granted license to dub themselves not *wiggers* but *niggers* (well, actually, “niggaz,” as if that makes any difference when the word is used by whites). Charlie (played by Bijou Phillips), the most noteworthy character in this regard, is the daughter of an investment banker who expects his children to assume the attitude and behavior of their high station in life. A rebellious daughter who sports a fake gold tooth and lies to him about being at a place she calls the “libary” isn’t what a Central Park West upbringing is supposed to produce. Yet, Charlie’s dilemma is that hip-hop—its edgy gangsta style, no less—is a more attractive mark of identity than anything she has inherited from her father (other than his money, of course). But as she herself admits early on in the classroom scene, the hip-hop thing for her is just a fad, soon to be gone with the passing of time like today’s low-riding jeans and bare-midriff tops.

In that same classroom episode, on the other hand, Kim’s (played by Kim Matuloya) ideas about racial identity are not quite so superficial as Charlie’s. “Sometimes you just don’t wanna be what your race is supposed to be,” she professes to the class. Apparently, for whatever reason, she hasn’t always felt it necessary or particularly gratifying to stick to the script of customary white behavior (whatever that means for her). Though her knowledge of blackness appears to be limited to Ebonics and hip-hop, she is right to question the racial categories into which we are so neatly socialized. Is there a certain way to be white? A particular way to be black? I ask my students during our discussion of the film. They seem at a loss for an answer, but eventually they all agree that, no, there isn’t one way to be white or black. And yet, many of them write in their journals that Charlie and her gang were not being “themselves.” A curious expression, so I’m prompted then to ask what alternatives they have. The students are stumped, except to offer the tautology that they should just be themselves.
Realistically, Charlie could be the little princess her father wishes her to be, what SWR parents generally expect of their daughters. Or she could be totally removed from her father’s prim and proper world by mixing with the niggaz uptown in neighboring Harlem. Charlie has other alternatives, of course, something between these two extremes, but the popular imagination seems to limit youth to two choices: one the model of success and all things American; the other, well, the anti-American Dream, what Bill Cosby meant (the first time) when he berated poor black folk for not doing their part in the black struggle for—what was it?—equality, morality, responsibility (ah, yes, middle-class virtue #1). Cosby’s rants notwithstanding, black urban ghettos can’t be all that anti-American if corporations are making a buck every time a hip-hop CD is released, a commercial using break dancing or rapping is aired, or an item of urban clothing is sold downtown more so than uptown. I guess even black ghetto nihilism can be a commodity of market value in mainstream America.

A question lingers, however. At one moment in the film, Cigar (Wu Tang rapper Raekwon) queries rhetorically, “Can you be ghetto without living in the ghetto?” Hardly, but it says something that white suburban teens would even dare to consider that remote possibility. So, ready or not . . . hip-hop is on a come up at a college near you, and so what if there goes the neighborhood!

Works Cited


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