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POP-CULTURE, THE WRITING CLASSROOM, AND THE RHETORIC OF HIP-HOP

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Abstract

In this paper, I will contextualize hip-hop in the digital space, building on discussion centering on hip-hop's earliest days to consider how the genre has evolved in a way that continues to make it a rich site of research and conversation in the writing classroom. I will focus on a few key artists with great impact on the genre (based on established metrics used to measure popularity, such as streams, album sales, and recognition). These artists, I argue, push their audiences in particularly important, if sometimes arguably unsettling ways. I will also draw connections to social media, with a specific focus on Instagram as an extension of the creative output of current popular hip-hop artists to demonstrate the far-reaching potential of such digital spaces. I later discuss some of the advantages of hip-hop in the context of new technologies as a tool for teaching rhetorical strategy. I will identify the relationship between hip-hop and key objectives of the writing classroom, identifying how hip-hop can offer students an opportunity to examine different ways of communicating a message that accommodates both traditional and innovative media spaces.

Keywords: performance, communication, hip-hop, media, popular culture, social media



1. Background

I seek to engage with some important components of the scholarship on the musical art form of rap, and of hip-hop culture more generally, with particular attention to its continued value to the undergraduate writing and rhetoric classroom. Through engaging research within the areas of performance studies, writing studies, and Black digital rhetoric, I aim to showcase some of the reach and strategic use of hip-hop in the writing and rhetoric classroom as a tool for teaching.

I'll first share some of the background that is foundational to the argument for the form in the classroom. Some scholars have laid important groundwork within this conversation and championed the place for hip-hop in the college curriculum, highlighting the genre's importance as part of popular culture in the United States. In the book, *Hip-hop Music*, Marcia A. Lusted reminds us how young a genre hip-hop is, highlighting the importance of the historical context of it emerging in the 1970s. She writes,

Popular mainstream music was making a transition from the protest songs of the 1960s, which often dealt with issues such as the antiwar movement and questioning authority, to the songs of the 1980s, which included more lighthearted party and dance music... Funk music grew out of the rhythm and blues, jazz, and soul music of the 1960s, but with a heavier beat and psychedelic sounds. Compared with the lighter, dance-oriented popular music, hip-hop stood out as a very different musical genre. It was closer to the rebellion songs of the 1960s, which protested the Vietnam War (1954– 1975) and other social problems (Lusted 2018, 16).

Lusted highlights the social climate hip-hop emerges in, and it's important to note that as the genre grew, so did the various components that come together to make hip-hop culture. From the start, hip-hop wasn't only about the lyrics. Geneva Smitherman highlights in "The Chain Remain the Same: Communicative Practices in the Hip Hop Nation," that "The term hip-hop refers to urban youth culture in America. Hip-hop is manifested in such cultural productions as graffiti art, break-dancing, styles of dress..." (Smitherman 1997, 3). As the music developed, so did the various elements that were a part of the culture, including hairstyles, haircuts, and fashion. As the well-established hip-hop artist KRS One emphasizes in "Hip-Hop vs. Rap", "Rap is something you do, hip-hop is something you live".

In conversations about hip-hop's influence, it is important to keep in mind the impact the culture has had not just in the United States, but globally. With its roots in the 1970s, Bronx, New York, hip-hop's influence extends far beyond its early beginning by DJ Kool Herc, who is credited as its founder. Vanessa Oswald points out in *Hip-Hop, A Cultural and Musical Revolution*, "As hip-hop culture became more widespread in American society, it also expanded its reach into different countries, with each country incorporating a bit of their own cultural heritage into the movement" (Oswald 2019, 73). That people worldwide would be inspired by hip-hop culture and seek to be a part of the movement is not surprising. The genre invites creative approach, style, expressive language, and authenticity. The 2023 special issue of the academic journal *Global Hip-hop Studies*, titled "Hip-hop Atlas," is one publication that sought to document some of that growing impact and global conversation. This issue, released as part of a celebration of hip-hop's 50th anniversary, offers helpful information to readers wanting to get a sense of the wide reach of hip-hop culture in the world, including how hip-hop has developed in each country featured in the issue. This far-reaching and dynamic impact continues to be a subject to be researched, and the genre serves as a rich site of conversation. As scholar Jeff Chang points out, "...hip-hop's internal creative force does not rest. In the time that it takes for a group of kids in the neighborhood to go from wide-eyed youngans to confident teen arbiters of style, slang, swing and swagger to grown-folk moving



on and out...the culture has turned over again” (Chang 2006, x). Chang conveys hip-hop's fast-paced nature and its propensity for change. Hip-hop is ever-evolving, which makes it a continuously productive and enriching site of study and discussion.

2. Modern ways of accessing music and identifying artist impact through social media

In our current technological landscape, digital spaces factor into this conversation shifting the narrative to extend how hip-hop artists' content is consumed. It is important to consider some of the ongoing influences of hip-hop, including the influence of some key artists who have recently had a great impact on the genre. This is based on established metrics used to measure popularity, such as streams, album sales, and recognition. These are artists who've musically had a great impact in recent years and who I identify as having a matched influence in the online narratives they've started to create. These artists, I argue, push their audiences in particularly important, if sometimes unsettling, ways.

Much has changed in recent years regarding how music is accessed, primarily now through sources such as Apple Music and Spotify streams, YouTube, Clubhouse, and SoundCloud. CDs and records are very often now artifacts of nostalgia. According to the music data tracking site, *Chart-masters.org*, Drake was recorded as the most-streamed rapper in 2024 with 12.11 billion streams. This was also his eighth year taking the honor of the most-streamed rapper. Runners up included Travis Scott, 2nd, Ye, 3rd, Eminem, 4th, and Kendrick Lamar, 5th (Turner-Williams 2024). In pure album sales, however, the top-selling album of 2024 was Eminem's *The Death of Slim Shady* with 160,745 units sold, while his total units sold, including streams, were 772,470.

Radio and music videos have become just a few of the many ways people can access music, with traditional outlets facing decreasing audiences. With all these choices that audiences now have, artists and their management are tasked with developing innovative ways to engage listeners and maintain support. A key part of this has become listener engagement, with artists linking to their work and posting about new releases on social media.

3. The hip-hop artist and social media

We might look at a digital social media platform such as Instagram as a productive context for examining communication and presentation in connection with the messaging in hip-hop artists' musical output. Social media spaces like Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Twitch, and Snapchat present audiences with the opportunity to examine different ways of communicating a message, capitalizing on aspects of performers' discographies with visuals that also build a narrative. As Luke Fox points out in *XXL* magazine, “In the amount of time, it takes you to say “trigger fingers turn to Twitter fingers” [a quoted reference from Drake's 2015 diss track, “Back to Back,” in response to fellow rapper Meek Mill's diss track]

...your favorite rapper has likely tweeted a fresh music video. They could've revealed a new 'fit on Instagram. Maybe they shared an album update on Facebook or thrown down a dance challenge on TikTok. They might've teased a song snippet in an IG story, hosted a discussion through Clubhouse, published a down-and-dirty image on OnlyFans, offered a sneak peek at a studio session on Snapchat or uploaded a vlog on YouTube. And, there's a big chance that you interacted by liking, commenting or posting an emoji. Social media has become hip-hop's outlet of choice to get straight to the point with a message in myriad ways (Fox 2021).



There are layered references here. The initial reference of “trigger fingers turn to Twitter fingers” makes a tongue-in-cheek reference to rappers who may typically be associated with violence, becoming what might be considered internet thugs, opting to type out their frustrations through a tweet. Fox goes on to point to the dynamic nature of the visual and written communication of artists on various social media platforms, but also the speed at which rappers can release new material. Audiences might even come to expect some of their favorite artists to make themselves accessible in this way if the artist has been engaging through social media consistently. With so many ways of quickly sharing with their audiences online, there is constantly new content to watch, read, listen to, and unpack.

In the “Report of the Committee on the Advancement and Refinement of Rhetorical Criticism”, the authors demonstrate how a rhetorical perspective “...may be applied to any human act, process, product, or artifact” that “may formulate, sustain, or modify attention, perceptions, attitudes, or behavior” (Sloan et al. 1971, 220). The authors call on us to think about what counts in the list of artifacts that can be studied using rhetoric. They extend an approach that can broaden the way we engage visual texts when applied to modern day social media contexts. I highlight Instagram as a platform that offers the ability to present curated grids that audiences can view by visiting a user’s profile. On Instagram there is more value placed on visual aesthetic than on a text-based social media platform such as Twitter. The addition of Instagram posts and curated grids to the way in which artists can present themselves, I argue, has become a point of reference that invites a comprehensive look at how several actors work together towards the fullness of impact of those artists who capitalize on these digital spaces.

Drawing connections to social media sites more generally, with a specific focus on these sites as extensions of the creative output of current popular hip-hop artists, it is evident that digital engagement has far-reaching potential. There is an opportunity for artists to have contact with fans directly, potentially strengthening their fan bases and growing their follower counts, which can then result in additional revenue through support of their projects. An artist’s increased visibility can work to their benefit in online community engagement. Many hip-hop artists in social media spaces have furthered their impact, for better or worse. One example of the effectiveness of this can be found in one of hip-hop’s most notable rap battles, a heated exchange of diss tracks between Drake and Kendrick Lamar. As Promoed reports, “Over on Instagram, California hip-hop artist [Kendrick] Lamar gained an impressive 1.7 million followers, while Toronto hip-hop artist Drake gained 247,000” (Gliku and Lynagh 2024). This rise in follower count occurred towards the start of Drake and Kendrick Lamar’s diss track exchange in 2024 and the general popularity of Lamar’s single titled “Not Like Us” might be credited with the great increase of social media followers. Notably, Drake released his diss track to Lamar, titled “Taylor Made Freestyle,” directly to Instagram. Spaces like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat provide outlets for artists to extend their impact as fans flock to these digital spaces where promotion for new music can help to boost sales for artists’ records and increase their impact.

Social media access, of course, comes with its share of challenges for artists, especially regarding ease of access to their audience. Since social media operates on a rapid currency of exchange between users and their audiences, the moment an artist with a large follower count puts out a message, there is potential for it to spread quickly. Controversial hip-hop artist Kanye West, for example, has become as known for his social media rants, mental health struggles, and hateful online posts as much as for his music. West’s X account has previously been restricted for antisemitic comments and other material deemed inappropriate or offensive. As The Stanford Daily Reports, “Kanye West’s social media activity on X...presents a disturbing case study in how



platforms continue to struggle with the intersection of celebrity influence and content moderation” (Gottlieb 2025). According to the outlet,

...platforms shouldn't ignore the harm caused by giving someone in an apparent mental health crisis unchecked access to and influence over millions of followers. In fact, 32 incidents of antisemitic attacks linked to West's online hate speech have been recorded since 2022. It doesn't help that social media platforms benefit from high engagement. Since contentious posts drive more traffic, companies profit more, potentially at the expense of people's health (Gottlieb 2025).

Gottlieb exposes the incentives for social media platforms that make stricter regulation less likely. With this freedom, artists can cultivate their social media spaces, and fans who follow them can get more access than ever before. An Artist's unfiltered rant shared with an audience can create a cycle with fans having harmful accessibility and potentially encouraging the artist further through their continued engagement. We might ask how the choices these artists and their teams make in representing themselves online serve as effective or ineffective in relation to the messaging in their music.

Nicki Minaj is one such hip-hop artist who serves as a prominent example of a celebrity with a notable social media presence and following, having 220 million followers as of June 2025. The artist famously announced her pregnancy on social media and maintains an active online presence that promotes her work while visually reinforcing the themes in much of her music, particularly those centered on a luxurious and exciting lifestyle. Minaj's posts that range from stylized photo-shoots and business promotions to curated glimpses of her everyday life (often featuring bright pink, which has become a signature element of her branding) make for visually captivating images that can attract an audience. Referring to her fans as Barbies or Barbs is one way the artist endears them to her, since fans who adopt this title often indicate their devoted status as members of the artist's fan community. An artist's maintenance of a strong social media presence helps to keep fans actively engaged.

Social media sites present spaces where hip-hop artists can further share with the public about themselves, building more of a connection than would have been possible in earlier days of the art form. I refer here to the limit in reach of spaces most popular in the 90's, such as street ciphers, MTV music videos, and interviews in music magazines like *The Source*, *Vibe*, and *XXL* (Double XL), which can be credited in helping to popularize hip-hop culture, music, and trends during that time. In these days, artists maintained more mystery as without social media, there was more distance between the artists and their audiences. With so much added access to artists' work and lives, depending on what they share, there are also new ways to observe an artist's impact. Looking at how various actors work together helps to consider the fullness of artists' influence, and this invites an array of possibilities for sites of exploration and conversation.

4. Approaches that can yield productive results in the first-year classroom

With attention to analyzing artist messaging, we might consider the value of a multimodal approach. In her book, *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture*, Deanna Sellnow emphasizes that the rapid technological advances we've seen since the 1960s call for updated rhetorical methods. Sellnow writes, “Although the neo-Aristotelian approach remains a viable method for rhetorical criticism today, it is no longer the only or even the primary method for examining the many kinds of



rhetorical texts that may influence us today” (Sellnow 2017, 43). This neo-Aristotelian approach is well-established using Aristotle’s theory of rhetoric to analyze persuasive messages for effectiveness with attention to the audience and the use of rhetorical principles such as pathos, ethos, and logos. While this method can be effective in a variety of rhetorical situations, many scholars have worked to develop effective strategies for engaging new media.

In using social media platforms such as Instagram as sites of study for the classroom, an approach that includes focused attention to visual rhetoric can help students to think about layers of meaning and the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of artists’ messaging. In *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, Sonja K. Foss explains its importance by identifying the “pervasiveness of the visual symbol and its impact on contemporary culture” (Foss 2012, 303). Foss identifies that “Three characteristics appear to define artifacts or products conceptualized as visual rhetoric: They must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating” (Foss 2012, 304–305). These characteristics convey that images carry ideas to be interpreted. Additionally, it supports that visual artifacts become rhetorical when they have the potential to influence others. Emphasis is placed here on intentional creation and audience impact. Furthering this, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks points out that images participate in the production and circulation of shared beliefs. She writes, “Fierce critical interrogation is sometimes the only practice that can pierce the wall of denial consumers of images construct so as not to face that the real world of image-making is political—that politics of domination inform the way the vast majority of images we consume are constructed and marketed” (hooks 1992, 5). Hooks references interrogation as a “practice” important to challenging the images we encounter. The meaning of an image is not fixed as the viewers become active participants in meaning-making. Importantly, she makes clear that images are not neutral. Foss’s and hooks’s consideration of visual rhetoric can help students in the first-year writing classroom to understand how images shared by artists work together to communicate meaning to their audiences. Bell hooks’s attention to visual rhetoric elucidates this in specific ways relevant to engaging African American rhetoric, as she details in her work how visual representation is deeply implicated in systems of power and identity.

One approach Sellnow highlights that can be particularly useful when engaging visual media in the classroom is the narrative perspective, “a rhetorical method for examining ideological arguments conveyed through storytelling” (Sellnow 2017, 43). Scholars such as Walter Fisher, Sonja K. Foss, and Kenneth Burke highlight narrative as a mode through which audiences interpret and construct meaning. As Sellnow states, “A narrative perspective is valuable for studying popular culture texts because it proposes a systematic means by which to analyze how they function as stories and what underlying ideological messages are being conveyed in them” (Sellnow 2017, 54). This approach suggests that artifacts such as music, performances, and online content can be interpreted as narratives that reflect cultural values and beliefs.

The method of centering storytelling works well in a hip-hop context as the form, by nature, values storytelling. Additionally, scholars such as Geneva Smitherman have put forward in their scholarship the value of the role of the griot within a historical context and within the hip-hop community. The “griot” historically is a “storyteller and cultural historian” (Smitherman 1997, 4). Relatedly, Adam Banks provides additional ways of thinking of the griot in a digital context in his book *Digital Griot: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*. Banks draws a relation between African American rhetorical traditions and digital communication, exploring the possibilities for the classroom. Banks states,



I'm interested in the rhetorical possibilities that emerge from the culture that gave us the remix. The Preacher, storyteller, standup comic, everyday black people in conversation, and the DJ can help black students see themselves reflected more genuinely in the writing classroom and theory and can benefit all students looking for a greater appreciation of the multiple connected and diverging cultural influences on writing in a society that is (very slowly) becoming more genuinely inclusive and multicultural (Banks 2011, 14).

Banks points to various roles within Black communities, placing emphasis on the value of Black students seeing themselves through their recognition of these figures. Here, Banks also highlights the value to the entire classroom. Recognizing different rhetorical traditions can give all a greater understanding of others and create a more inclusive learning environment.

By examining how artists construct narratives about themselves through social media posts, music videos, and public statements, we can better understand how these digital stories shape audience perceptions and communicate broader cultural messages. We might then examine this in relation to the messages in the artist's music catalogue to consider how they work in tandem. As a method, storytelling and the role of the griot give flexibility to adapt to many hip-hop contexts, offering approaches that can act as a common meeting ground to consider the narratives that are created.

5. A model for social media analysis: Gilyard's & Banks' Insights on Black Twitter

With emerging technologies come new spaces for engagement, but also the opportunity to consider approaches that might be best suited for a given object of study. In their book *On African American Rhetoric*, Keith Gilyard and Adam Banks discuss Black Twitter as a rhetorical community. Black Twitter refers to the community of Black social media users on Twitter (now X) who collectively engage in cultural and political commentary often creating humorous posts and communicating through shared linguistic and rhetorical practices. Gilyard and Banks center Black Twitter as a modern space of African American rhetorical production. The authors' study serves as a model for approaches scholars might take to highlight sites of production in the ways they make meaning in culturally specific ways. The authors emphasize that scholars of African American rhetoric should look to these new technologies "as a site of inquiry rather than as merely a site of production of discourse" (Gilyard and Banks 2018, 123). This positions similar spaces as potential sites for further exploration, potentially leading to greater understanding of processes and practices. We might use this as a call for more attention to these sites of meaning-making and expression and lead with thoughtful curiosity within these spaces.

6. Hip-hop in the writing classroom

In Marc Lamont Hill's book, *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*, Hill identifies three questions that drive the research of his essential book. These questions are, "Why does it work?" "For whom does it work?" and "What's at stake when it works?" (Hill 2009, xviii). I've adopted these questions as helpful to my teaching practice, as they inspire intentional assignment planning. In his book, Hill examines how hip-hop can be used in the classroom to create meaningful learning experiences for students. An important part of this work and other works that champion hip-hop in the classroom is the willingness to try new methods and



to engage a genre in the classroom that is both an obvious and often overlooked site of inquiry. In *Schooling Hip-hop: Expanding Hip-Hop Based Education Across the Curriculum*, Eve L. Ewing writes, “given the tremendous force of hip-hop as a global phenomenon, in greater and greater numbers students at all levels are denizens of a hip-hop universe” (Ewing 2014, 127). As hip-hop has such a powerful reach, globally many students have grown up immersed in the culture. This positions hip-hop not only as a rich site of study, but also as a necessary one.

Here, I highlight the inclusion of hip-hop as a tool to advance key objectives of my themed first-year writing class on race and ethnicity. In this class, I assign students to read a variety of texts on our theme, and they are encouraged to think critically about matters of identity, culture, and social justice. In the class, students spend a few weeks during the semester researching and writing about strategies in communication within the genre of hip-hop as it relates to the aforementioned topics.

Students are encouraged to consider how meaning and persuasion are produced through symbolic forms that influence how audiences perceive and interpret messages. This offers students an opportunity to examine popular audio and visual texts with a focus on different ways of imparting messages, accommodating both traditional and innovative spaces. Some of the goals I identify for the class are helping students to become more astute in their research capabilities through strengthening their reading of audio, written, and visual texts. In this undergraduate classroom, some key common interests are: critical analysis, argument, revision, collaboration, meta-cognition, and research. Hip-hop as a form in the writing classroom has the potential to help students build skills in each of these areas since it offers varied cultural texts that communicate relevant social perspectives.

In past versions of this class, students analyzed an artist's Instagram rhetoric with attention to how digital storytelling can shape perceptions of hip-hop artists' identities. Students are also advised to think about how digital platforms can change the way we understand messaging and audience. Engagement with hip-hop audio and visual texts invites them to do innovative work that requires research and draws inspiration from the artist(s) to build something new, akin to a hip-hop remix. It opens the door for important reflection and meta-cognitive work.

The shape a student project can take includes traditionally written work as well as multimedia work, bringing together written text and media formats such as audio, photography, memes, screengrabs, and video. A multimedia approach gives students the chance to try out basic media production using their own tools or making use of relevant resources on campus. Adam Banks speaks to the call to embrace new technologies, stating “even scholars once perceived as Aristotelians...are making the case for multimedia writing as central to how we reimagine composition as a field” (Banks 2011, 11). Banks points to the need to “reimagine” the field, a position put forward in 2011 that remains relevant as our world has become even more digital.

I frame the potential of students' writing on hip-hop as deeply valuing the history and conventions of the genre as well as its evolving nature. I encourage focus on the variety of ways hip-hop invites audiences to think about the contexts it emerges in and the development of the genre, not only the music, but as a cultural movement and influential lifestyle. I see the inclusion of hip-hop in my first-year writing classroom as a productive way to teach communication strategy through a contemporary lens, identifying how audio, written, and visual language is used and to what effect. Students are asked to locate specific areas of interest within the genre to write about and/or create responses to. Students' assignments for assessment also include written and audio submissions.



Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz makes the argument in the *English Education* themed issue titled “Why Black Girls’ Literacies Matter: New Literacies for a New Era” that “...instruction must be urgent and purposeful in responding to and anticipating the social context of our times” (Sealey-Ruiz 2016, 295). Sealey-Ruiz prompts educators to think about what “urgent” and “purposeful” instruction might look like in our classrooms. The question emerges of how we meet the new technologies in ways that can help us to empower our students to feel equipped to better engage and think critically about the rhetorical situations they encounter. I draw a connection here to scholar Keith Gilyard who states in *Voices of the Self* that, “A pedagogy is only successful if it makes knowledge or skill achievable while at the same time allowing students to maintain their own sense of identity” (Gilyard 1991, 11–12). Gilyard underscores the significance of fostering classroom environments that not only support learning, but also enable students to express their individual identities. The dynamic force and impact of hip-hop invite students to consider rhetorical strategy and components of construction while also considering autonomy in art and the importance of representation. Students are given the opportunity to conceptualize research projects, taking into account not only the music the artists put out into the world, but also artist engagement with the audience by other means through digital spaces. The reality of digital spaces as an important aspect of how hip-hop culture is currently experienced and discussed has become an essential matter of consideration that also invites inventive projects as students further develop multimedia literacies.

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