Rock and Hip-Hop in the English Arena: Reading and Resistance

Larry Juchartz

They say I got to learn, but nobody's here to teach me—
If they can't understand it, how can they reach me?
—Coolio

When we were young and went to school
There were certain teachers who would hurt the children in any way they could
By pouring their derision upon anything we did
And exposing every weakness, however carefully hidden by the kids.
—Pink Floyd

They schools ain't teachin' us what we need to know to survive
They schools don't educate; all they teach the people is lies.
—Dead Prez

I teach rock and hip-hop. I also teach composition and literature. And after a decade of lugging my various boomboxes around various campuses, I think I've lost the ability to see where the music ends and the thinking-into-writing begins. For students in an advanced course on writing and style, I spin two versions of "Summer Breeze"—the original by Seals and Crofts and a death-metal remake by Type O Negative—and the students quickly launch into animated discussion of the stylistic changes that can transform words of a happy celebration of love and home into a terrifying prophecy of loss and despair. (You can guess which version is which.)

A young woman in an African-American literature course reads David Walker's Appeal on Thursday, listens to Ras Kass' "Nature of the
Threat” rap the following Tuesday, then passionately holds forth on the precise connections between each writer’s ideas, although these ideas have been published centuries apart. From this she finds evidence to counter her white classmates’ steadily increasing protests, over past weeks, that racial problems in the United States have long been erased and the state of the union is sound.

I just listen—and learn.

Edward Said writes in *Musical Elaborations* that a particular feature “about cultural canons and their consequences in general (or specifically musicological) analyses of music is that they tend to set limits and priorities too rigidly and too hierarchically,” and through this habit “the canon’s eminence is associated with a sort of . . . inevitability, its laboriously constructed social authority either discounted or forgotten altogether” (60). This, at one time in my life, was exactly the case for me. The discourses of popular music, through all of their various rhetoricities and ideologies, presented to me and my peers their canonical song texts, performers, and acceptable/required manifestations as things that came wholly formed and ready for our admiration and subscription, but never for our questioning analyses. This wasn’t a case of our not wanting to interrogate the music so much as it was one of the music’s not needing our interrogation. Yet, it is precisely this analytical lack that, for Said, creates “an unappealingly barren setting presided over by approved masterpieces and venerated authorities” (60). Rather than remain focused solely or primarily on textual utterances in rock and hip-hop, their author/practitioners, and their forms—on the contents of the discourses and their practices—teachers in music-enhanced classrooms can choose instead to follow Said’s suggestion to look into the contexts that produce “masters” but ignore all others who are deemed lesser, and to examine the particular histories that allow for the constructions of “mastery” to occur in the first place. In first- and second-year composition courses especially, making meaning from student papers can be a difficult and sometimes frustrating endeavor for many of us, and Deborah Brandt adds an examination of context to the task by arguing that “no matter what their ostensible topic, written texts are primarily about the writing and reading of them. What they refer to is not an explicit message but the implicit process by which intersubjective understanding is getting accomplished” (4). To this George Steiner adds that the “silences that punctuate” discourse are “not empty”; they have “the echo of things unspoken” (15). As with the reading of student papers, examinations of the contextual to coincide with a close look at the textual in music become equally and vitally important
with discursive practices such as rock and hip-hop, whose multi-decade histories in some ways have provided no more than loud and noisome soundtracks to accompany—indeed, at times to provoke—an ongoing legacy of harmful practices that the larger society has been struggling to change, if not end.

But first, we as teachers have to acknowledge that we do not occupy the same precise spaces within musical discourses that our students do. While teachers in music-enhanced classrooms at one point in our lives have been music consumers in the same ways that our students are now, once we make the switch from consumer to theorist/observer, many key similarities end. Further differences in education levels, socioeconomic status, and especially age combine to create a power discrepancy that immediately springs forward to erect a wall of resistance between the performer and the audience in a concert venue shaped like a classroom. And this resistance becomes especially problematic if the teacher/performer is one who fits Lawrence Grossberg’s observation that many individuals who choose to “hold on” to popular music will “rarely renounce their youth” (182). If the music becomes merely a facade to mask a teacher’s fading youth, then that educator will, Grossberg writes, transform the struggle over who “owns” [the music] into a struggle over who “owns” youth. . . . I have often heard teachers complain that their students are not young, that they can’t be [young] because they are so straight and boring. Implicitly, the teachers are congratulating themselves for their continued loyalty to their own youthfulness. (182–83)

By their position in the culture, students are more effective than their teachers in enacting necessary changes in the discourses and practices being examined. And because the “idea of music as a rhetorical art rests on the metaphor of music as a language” (Bonds 61), that language functions as the cornerstone for a dialectical pedagogy aimed at identifying the many “policies of truth,” to cite a Depeche Mode songtext, that exist in popular music’s discourses and histories.

Joining in the call for contextual analyses beyond solely textual ones, Charles Keil and Steven Feld have argued that “whatever historical change in language, music, dance, or culture is about, we can study it best, at its very point of creation, if we attend closely to the discrepancies that enhance participation and the contexts that generate these discrepancies” (107). But the primary point of resistance, for teachers and students alike, comes in the authors’ next statement: “We really have to get down to the
recording studio or dance floor to groove a while and to ask people about what has been happening" (107). In one way, implied here is a suggestion that only "hands-on" practitioners—better yet, producers—of music or its celebratory dance are equipped with all of the necessary experiences and knowledges from which incisive articulations of a discursive practice's history can be formed. But in another way, Keil and Feld offer what may be the most practical observation for teachers to note: We have to be willing to get "down" to where the action is if we want to be able to talk true with our students about the action itself.

This is easy to say but much harder to do. As Michael Bérubé has written in a discussion of the pitfalls in teaching popular textforms, "whereas the subject is often quite worthy of serious study, it's getting harder for an aging body to keep up with it every year" (B5). Obviously, there are an infinite number of practical reasons in any teacher's life that will impede the ability to truly get down into the action in the same way that students can and do, but knowledge sufficient to talk with those students about where they go can still be gathered by relatively minor lifestyle alterations less imposing than weekly concert attendance or fortnightly dance jams at the local hip-hop club before crossing the street to the metal bar for a couple of watery Buds and a case of temporary hearing loss. A copy of The Source and another of Rolling Stone to coincide with Lingua Franca and Z is a start; NPR can share equal time with local rock- and rap-format radio stations during the teacher's drive and office times; Biography and Nightline can cede screen time on our televisions to music videos on MTV2 and BET. And—this may be the hardest part—dollars can part ways with wallets as the music library of the teacher's youth expands to include the music of the student's.

Did I say a minor adjustment? Taken as a whole, these things more likely indicate a major change to many teacherly private-life practices and even preferences. Yet, they are necessary for avoiding what Bérubé calls the "Elvis Costello Problem," defined as "the difficulty of communicating to students by means of the touchstones of popular culture" when students either don't remember those touchstones or never knew about them at all (B5). Costello, a British musician labeled as an early "punk" in the late 1970s with his breakthrough songtext "Watching the Detectives," went on to perform less spare, more standard-rock pieces such as "What's So Funny 'bout Peace, Love, and Understanding" before fading away during the 1980s and reappearing in the 1990s to record an album
of duets with Burt Bacharach. And Bérubé’s point in invoking Costello is that the music figures who may have loomed large in a teacher’s earlier life will often have zero significance for students. The breakneck pace of an average music figure’s rise to cultural prominence and the subsequent dive into obscurity that typically follows the rise makes keeping up a daunting enough prospect, and as Dennis Miller’s “rant” performances on HBO can attest, the same is true about any type of referent in popular discourse. Miller, best known for both a cutting wit and an endless capacity for dropping pop-cult references drawn from centuries past or just this morning, will many times encounter puzzled silence during much of his standup banter. “My wife and I had a son, and we named him Holden,” Miller tells the audience, and then comes the punch line: “After the famous literary character in that great work from the 1950s—William Holden in Sunset Boulevard.” A handful of people in the audience laugh; hundreds of others wonder what he’s talking about. Miller moves on to the next reference, the next joke. While those of us who encounter the “Elvis Costello Problem” when our music references fail to connect with students can certainly follow Miller’s lead by simply moving on to another example and hoping it fares better, an ongoing pattern of more misses than hits ultimately results in a failed pedagogy. For this reason alone, whatever lifestyle alterations we can make to become “well read” not only in the discourse of the academy but also in the discourses of the academy’s students will be well rewarded. Contexts cannot be viewed or examined completely if knowledge itself is incomplete, and a great deal of musical knowledge should be transmitted by students, rather than to them.

Radical Pedagogy and the Teacher’s Speaking Position
Henry Giroux has argued that pedagogy should be “a configuration of textual, verbal, and visual practices that seek to engage the processes through which people understand themselves and the ways in which they engage others and their environment,” and both songtexts and videotexts surely fit within the scope of the “verbal and visual practices” he mentions (Border 3). But a relatively difficult shift, away from claiming a superior ability to interpret them and toward recognizing instead the various distances that we as teachers may have from our students’ own relationship with them, is important if both students and teachers are to believe that the point in studying these textual forms is to locate the many possible meanings contained there and to gain some understanding of not only the texts, but also of each other. I have often heard students say that they enjoy
working in peer-critique groups, for instance, because those groups offer an opportunity to “know where people are coming from” with their ideas and writing strategies. The colloquial phrase, I know where you’re coming from, is shorthand to indicate one’s knowledge of the history of another, to understand the other’s origins and experiences and thus the reasons for the other’s attitudes and beliefs. To know where others come from is to have a full, rich context for the thoughts and desires conveyed when, through writing or discussion, we share with one another what novelist Tom Spanbauer calls “our human-being stories.”

For Giroux, pedagogy is “a form of cultural production . . . implicated in the construction and organization of knowledge, desires, values, and social practices,” and teachers and students together can create a “democratic public philosophy” through a mutual respect for “the notion of difference as part of a common struggle to extend the quality of life” (Border 3). But such a dynamic can only take place in a radicalized site where two crucial ingredients are present: first, the teacher’s desire to listen and learn from students, and, second, the student’s clear understanding that the teacher has this desire and may therefore be challenged and questioned safely within the classroom arena. For Andrew Wiget, “To be is to be heard, to speak into the silence of ignorance or oblivion, or to anticipate, even interrupt the utterance of falsehood” (qtd. in Yancey xviii), and in order to be heard, “In some classes, students’ immediate needs may be to find the voice to counter [the teacher’s] agenda” (Brunner 151). To these bell hooks adds, “‘Coming to voice’ is not just the act of telling one’s experience. It is using that telling strategically—to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects. What many professors are frightened of is precisely that” (148). Teachers in a music-enhanced writing classroom cannot share in this fear if we want to generate a truly mutual understanding of fully contextualized musical discourses and their practices. We have our knowledge of songtextes from one particular point in history; students have theirs of another, more current point. All of the less precisely known and understood spaces between these two perspectives form an opportunity to reinforce and promote a kind of collaborative critical inquiry that, while fed by insights that are “always interpretive, critical, and partial,” can result in “the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position” (Haraway 589).
"Way Rad"—Image and Substance

The word *radical* has a number of different connotations. For many post-secondary students and even for younger children, it means excellent, awesome, great; one can even hear it at times being pronounced as "radi-cool." For others it indicates a threat, a danger; in post-9/11 America, *radical* may immediately connote a companion term, *terrorist.* And for still others, *radical* indicates an opposition to *traditional,* as in liberal versus conservative, a position on the left and a counterposition on the right. But for teachers, to be truly "radical" by the word's primary denotative value is to practice the *root* of pedagogical practice, to provide an opportunity for learning—and for the critique and questioning of learning—by any and all means possible. As evidenced by both Giroux's and hooks' turn in recent publications toward cultural analyses of popular music in addition to filmtexts and television shows, all of these electronic mediums have become major spheres of influence for radical teachers in the early twenty first century. Students consume the mediums not only as cultural artifacts, but also as indispensable aids in forging their identities in the world. Every publicly funded campus has at least a handful of Goth figures walking about in Marilyn Manson death's-head makeup and head-to-toe black garb; even more conspicuous are the thousands of cotton billboards decorating classrooms in the form of T-shirts announcing Creed, Nine Inch Nails, Dead Prez, DMX, and hundreds of other bands or solo artists as the wearer's cultural/political affinity. With the classroom, by this phenomenon of artifactual omnipresence, always already made into a consumer mall for popular culture, teachers can—with all of the caution and care required when moving into the territory of material manifestations of a lived practice not entirely parallel to our own—introduce students to the joys and terrors of critically interrogating these primary and defining texts. But as Grossberg has only implied in his observation of "straight" students who earn the disdain of self-described "hip" teachers, the surprise and dismay in many teachers' negative experiences with music songtexts in the classroom arena comes from the intense resistance that students can show in response to the textform's appearance in class—and especially to any interrogations of the material. "When you analyze, you paralyze," is a favored defense/attack I have heard uttered by many students who would prefer that their entertainment go unexamined; after all, the protest continues, "it's just a song." Yet, as Rage Against the Machine has pointed out in its own songtext, "No Shelter," popular culture presents to its consumers a "thin line between entertainment and war." This phrase alone can function as the rationale...
to justify the pedagogical value of rock and hip-hop music as classroom textforms, since rarely does any songtext prove to be “just” a simple thing.

Elisabeth Chiseri-Strater has pointed out that education ideally takes place in a context where “students themselves have helped to construct the reading of [a text]; they have received this understanding not from or through [teachers] but with [them] and the peers that support the dialogue” (73). For instance, my classroom use of Metallica’s songtext, “One,” and its accompanying long-form videotext—each of these in turn based on Dalton Trumbo’s censored antiwar novel *Johnny Got His Gun*—might function as aids in both extending and complementing students’ understanding of warfare, resistance, and the sometimes moral obscenity of military paradoxes (the song/story’s narrator, horribly maimed, would like to die, but the military doctors reply that killing soldiers is “against regulations”). That is, the materials might function as aids until a student along the far wall, who proudly served in the UN operations over Kosovo, raises a hand and offers a viewpoint to counter the teacherly reading of these texts and is then joined by another student telling of a family member who also found military service a noble profession and has convincingly articulated the moral *necessity* for armed conflict. It is at this point that dialectic, and thus a collaborative form of reading—not of Metallica or even Trumbo, but of the historical, political, and psychological contexts surrounding the human capacity to wage war against itself—begins for all of us in the classroom arena.

What teachers can perhaps do best is to model for students the “critical professional readings [that] can provide a lens” for their own critical interrogations and ideological unpackings (Brunner 71), and Sut Jhally of the Media Education Foundation, in his extremely damning videotext *DreamWorlds II*, offers students a step-by-step methodology for reading music videotexts in such a critical way. After offering a long stream of similar clips in which the form’s favored tropes (young, nubile women ready and willing to have sex any time, anywhere, in any way) become painfully clear, Jhally interposes excerpts from the late Sam Kinison’s video for the songtext “Wild Thing” (a remake of the ancient 1960s classic by the Troggs) with a horrifying scene from the filmtext *The Accused* in which Jodie Foster’s character is gang-raped in a bar full of drunken men. Thus, viewers see members of Aerosmith, Ratt, and Guns ‘n Roses, among other rock groups and solo performers, standing around a wrestling arena and cheering wildly as Kinison and a nearly-naked Jessica Hahn roll around in center ring—and likewise cheering as Jodie Foster’s barmaid character is raped again and again. The response of
many of my own students to Jhally's videotext has been consistently twofold: initial silence when it ends, followed by a report, after a few days or a few weeks, that they can no longer read music videotexts in the same way they once did—which is to say, uncritically. They have become empowered with a new kind of social literacy by having been offered a tool for the interrogation of visual stimuli that they have been asked for so long to accept as "just a thing" to sell more musical product. But a colleague of mine tells a more troubling story arising from his own use of the Jhally videotext: several women in one of his graduate seminars stood and left the room to protest what they perceived as the teacher's condoning the sexual violence being portrayed on screen. To say that these women missed the point is surely not the approach required by such a response, and so the teacher correctly avoided it. Rather, he asked the women, when they returned the following week, to explain how Jhally might have made his point about videotextual misogyny without committing the same serious affront to members of his audience.

Praxis, Praxis, Praxis
And this is where an emphasis on praxis, to go beyond simple practice, comes into play. Any teaching professional, in a variety of disciplines, can easily find dozens of compelling reasons to validate the use of Jhally's videotext as a pedagogical tool—students might be asked to write a response to it, to create their own counter-narrative to it in similar videotext form, to emulate it by performing a critique of another cultural practice, and so forth. That is what justifies the videotext's inclusion in the course and its appearance in the classroom, and thus it answers questions of practice. But questions of praxis go on to ask why the justified material is being used—and to what intended ends, whether stated or not. Has the teacher taken into consideration any unintended harm that might befall the student(s) as a result of the material's presentation in class? Even if all goes well, is the pedagogical bottom line that the students "need" to subscribe to Jhally's, and the teacher's, view of rock videotexts? Is it to work against the steady consumption of these texts as merely a pleasurable leisure activity, which the teacher finds aesthetically offensive and socially unproductive? Is it to inform students, in a subtle fashion, that their relationship with videotexts has been not only wrong, but also harmful—and that they are therefore complicit in the same crimes against women that Jhally has explicated? Or is it simply to share with students the kind of critical professional reading and lens that Diane Brunner defines, a tool that will allow them to see for
themselves all of the many contexts surrounding both the production and consumption of videotexts—the good, the bad, and the unspeakably ugly—as and when they choose to employ it?

David Shumway has cautioned that the goal behind bringing textforms from popular culture into the classroom should never be to forcibly alter the responses students have to those texts, but rather to help them learn to support their own critical interpretations (229). And this kind of self-actuation of power and ability can manifest itself in all kinds of surprising ways. A student once wrote to me at the end of a semester in writing about music: "We all had the same choices as you, and the same resources. You could guide us, but you could never force us. We weren't here to please you; you were here to keep up with us. Hmm. I wonder, who was really in charge?" Here the teacher stands, by the rhetoric of the whole message, within the group as an equal, but by the rhetoric of the message's smaller parts—its constant oppositional structures of we versus you and you in contrast to us—at the same time stands outside the group as a lesser equal because any authority is met with a fierce resistance that immediately works to cancel it out. This student’s reading of the course falls, ideologically, firmly in line with the course’s content and verifies Shumway’s observation that students will “tend to resist all imposition by the teacher upon that part of their world they have not previously ceded to the school” (229). The insights and perceptions generated by student resistance can help to bring to light all of the ethical issues that confront pedagogical praxis, and these issues can, in turn, assist teachers in identifying potentially harmful ideological agendas that may underlie our presentations and applications of popular music in the classroom arena.

While even very practical classroom uses of still “nontraditional” music textforms can, where necessary, easily be used for testing and certainly for any required writing as a display of the student’s understanding of a vast range of subjects in which music has served as a significant context for social and historical proceedings, Jay Mechling has warned that too often, instructors “avoid risk-taking behavior, more often censoring themselves than facing the imagined consequences of experimenting and failing” (160). Such avoidance is not without basis; reading a songtext or videotext from an instructional or “scholarly” perspective and then lecturing about the results of that reading to students who have dozens of valid reasons and ways to make the teacher’s perspective appear at once desperate, groundless, and comical, is “risky” practice indeed. (I think here of a colleague who in the late 1980s tried to persuade students that Walt Whitman was “America’s original rap artist” because
he "invented new words and bragged of having a 'barbaric yawp.'" The teacher was a kind, gentle, and supremely decent human being. And there were many overhead slides, made over several months, to support the argument. But the lecture still bombed.) Because even an introduction of the most meticulously researched and cross-referenced contemporary-musical topic still has no guarantee of success, we can console ourselves by recognizing that when teachers do fail in risk-taking classroom practices, great opportunities exist for "teachable moments" when students are invited to become full partners in an analysis of that failure. Such an invitation can lead, in a best-case scenario, to the collaborative making of new kinds of critical theory and a realization that proponents of radicalism like Giroux believe should live squarely in the center of education's heart:

If teachers are to move beyond the role of being agents of cultural reproduction to that of being agents of cultural mobilization, they will have to critically engage the nature of their own self-formation and participation in the dominant society, including their role as intellectuals and mediators of the dominant culture. (Theory 68)

But from a student perspective, an invitation to join the teacher in identifying his or her role in mediating popular-music culture, from the standpoint of academic culture, runs severely contrary to the student's basic academic-survival skills. When teachers step into any classroom, we're automatically cloaked in a mantle of authority (conferred by students as much as ourselves) and looked upon as both eminently superior interpreters of course materials and authoritative judges of student displays of comprehension and mastery of those materials. In teaching rock and hip-hop, this tacit assumption can be a damaging tool in the hands of instructors who "know better" than their students what the students' relationship with music's discursive practices "means," since this knowledge has the effect of silencing individual voices and shutting off the dialogue so indispensable in any liberatory and transformational pedagogy:

Teacher: What's wrong with Led Zeppelin, a group of British white men, becoming millionaires and rock icons by recycling the blues songtext of black musicians?

Student: Nothing. After I got into Zeppelin, I went and bought every blues album I could find by the songwriters listed on the Zep albums. Most of
the originals are a lot better than Zeppelin’s versions; sometimes that’s all I listen to now. But, umm, not everything Led Zeppelin did was blues covers. They wrote a lot of their own stuff, too.

Teacher: Nothing? Really? All of those blues artists have been dead for years, and many of them died broke. They won’t see a nickel of the profits from your purchases. They won’t know you bought their music. So Led Zeppelin still gets all the credit for “updating” the blues. And, ummm, I’m well aware that the band wrote its own material, too. (Smiles.) I used to be a huge Zeppelin fan myself. But that’s not really the point I’m trying to make here.

Student: I see what you’re saying. Will this be on the midterm?

This exchange is not fictional. The teacher was I, early in my career, operating as Sir English Knight, Slayer of Weak Student Ideas. We had been talking in an introductory literature course about James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues,” riffing and freestyling on the general topic of music as triggered by the story. I am heartily sorry for my words now, and I sincerely repent of them. As Pink Floyd bassist Roger Waters has put it, “we don’t need no thought control” of this type, nor do we need its manifestation of “dark sarcasm in the classroom” that only results, as Waters sees it, in a massive wall of resistance—and protection—against education in general and teachers in particular. No one benefits, and so it becomes necessary to create a space in which no one is silenced and all voices are respected.

Ultimately, teachers engaged with musical discourses in the classroom arena become at once historians and historical artifacts, storytellers and stories. Before students can put aside their prejudices and fears and agree to work with us in filling our own knowledge gaps, we must admit our musical biases and preferences, deconstruct our personal readings of music-oriented cultural events in history, and actively invite students to offer their own counter-readings in a dialectical quest for shared understanding. Because the “rebellion” of a teacher’s music-oriented self-identity may, as Grossberg has indicated, generate a perception of “conformity” in the students’ own such identities, the nature of the terms rebellion and conformity themselves—their definitions and their cultural weights—can become a way to find common ground amid a sea of difference. Building on Clifford Geertz’s notion of shared experience as “local knowledge,” Ann Hill Duin and Craig Hansen define such center-remaking as “actively collaborating with others to build culture out of
agreements that are as complex as codified law and as simple as common sense” (91). This is in many ways a useful definition for both rock and hip-hop discourses themselves, and the still “experimental” and definitely risky setting of a music-enhanced writing or literature classroom provides a context for teachers to subvert our multiple strata of social and instructional authority when all within the community share a primary goal of collaborative learning.

Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan

Works Cited


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