

CHAPTER 1

“The Whig Party Don’t Exist in My Hood”

Knowledge, Reality, and Education in the Hip Hop Nation

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(Dedicated to Bankie Santana)

The Ebonics community has a rich oral heritage. It is characterized by fondness for and agility in verbal play, as evidenced in today’s Hip Hop Culture and Rap music. Twenty-first century language and literacy lessons should not only address the totality of language in life but should also allow for edu-tainment.

—Geneva Smitherman,
“Language Policy and Classroom Practices”

Right now, it is almost IMPOSSIBLE for you not to see how strong rap has gotten, you know what I’m sayin? It’s like our brothers and sisters, our youths, and some of our adults their ear is PINNED to rap music right now. And if you really wanna get our message out and really wanna start teachin, we need to start doin that. We really need to start usin our methods, you know what I’m sayin? The Last Poets did it with poetry. And even in our history from ancient African civilizations, poets went from village to village and that’s how stories and messages and lessons were taught, you know what I’m sayin? And so like you say, history repeats itself. And so it was obvious for us to pick it up, you know? Being the race that we are, being the strong race that we are, we picked it up, we picked up those positive vibes and we started rappin and so I think it is, it’s a very good medium.

—Tupac Shakur,
The Rose That Grew from Concrete



You can hear the urgency in the brotha's voice. The Late Great Tupac Shakur was as stressed as the stressed syllables in his raps. Tupac saw, as the Rza of the Mighty Wu-Tang Clan did, that "there's no room for ignorance no more" (Spady, Dupres, & Lee, 1995). What these cats is fightin for is the right to be educated. As I write this, the public school system continues to fail students of color. In particular, educational systems continue to struggle with ways to develop language and literacy skills in diverse populations. Educators and researchers note that for many linguistic- and cultural-minority students, the primary discourses in the communicative spaces of their homes, peer groups, and community settings differ from the academic discourse operative in schools (Ball, 1995; Gee, 1996). In an effort to bridge this gap, much research has been conducted on speakers of Black Language (BL), in particular, yet the educational standing of Black students has not improved, in relative terms. In fact, social psychologist Claude Steele (1992, cited in Rickford, 1999) notes that Black students fall further and further behind their White counterparts with each successive year they stay in school. Both linguists and educators believe language is a crucial factor (Adger, Christian, & Taylor, 1999).

Many scholars, using an ethnography-of-communication framework, have attempted to drive home the main message that students on the margins of school success often possess "different, not deficient," language and literacy practices in their home communities. This "mismatch," they argue, is one cause of schools' failure to reach these pupils. Most notable in this area is Heath's (1983) classic, decade-long study of how families from Black and White working-class communities socialized their children into different "ways with words," or varying language and literacy practices, some of which were closer to school norms than others. Subsequently, scholars have taken on research agendas that aim to "bridge" the out-of-school language and literacy practices of Black students with classroom practice (Ball, 2000; Dyson, 2003; Foster, 2001; Lee, 1993), while others have examined the inventive and innovative language and literacy events of Black youth involved in Hip Hop Culture (Alim, 2004b, 2004c), spoken-word poetry (Fisher, 2003), and other verbal activities (Mahiri & Sutton, 1996; Richardson, 2003, 2006), as well as the relationship between literacy and popular culture, more generally (Duncan-Andrade, 2005).

Recognizing the linguistic discrimination and linguistic profiling (Baugh, 2000a) practiced by American institutions (educational, occupational, and legal), researchers consider their primary concern to be the development of "academic" discourse, or "standard" English skills, in students who speak language varieties that vary from "mainstream" norms. If we are to make a noteworthy educational

contribution, we also need an approach that considers the sociocultural contexts within which BL is spoken. Such an approach would foreground issues of cultural and personal identity, educational and linguistic ideologies, and diverse language practices.

This chapter is intended as a resource—a written teacher workshop, if you will—for all teachers of students whose linguistic and cultural experiences have yet to be validated in the school setting. *Teachers* here refers to traditional teachers in the classroom, as well as those who teach in the homes, mosques, churches, streets, and other community sites of learning. What will Smitherman's "twenty-first century language and literacy lessons" look like? As evidenced by the Ebonics controversy, most attempts at using BL in the classroom have met with resistance from all parties (Baugh, 2000a; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Simpkins & Simpkins, 1981; Smitherman, 1981), with one notable exception—the *students*. The language and literacy lessons of the 21st century must begin with the students, and they must be implemented both inside and outside the classroom.

KNOWLEDGE AS A CONSTRUCT

In order to provide a more student-centered approach to language and literacy development, we must first ask, What is *knowledge*? When, where, and how is knowledge (de)valued? Who are the producers and consumers of knowledge, and what types of knowledge do we produce and consume? What are the relationships between language, culture, reality, power, and knowledge? From the perspective of the Hip Hop Nation Speech Community (HHNSC), what does it mean to "know the ledge," or to "do the knowledge," to understand that "knowledge reigns supreme"? It is notable that the HHNSC's constructions of knowledge all beg the question, Knowledge for what, to what end, for what purpose? By interrogating the construct of knowledge, we are attempting to uncover and understand the educational ideologies of the present generation of Hip Hop youth.

A growing body of research on the relationship between Hip Hop Culture and language and literacy education indicates that scholars are beginning to investigate this area in new and exciting ways (Meacham & Anderson, 2003; Morrell, 2002).¹ As a teacher-researcher at the middle school and high school level, I have frequently drawn upon Hip Hop Culture in educational practice, but I have also developed ways of using Hip Hop Culture itself *as* educational practice. It is one thing to view the culture of our students as a resource for teaching about other subjects, and it is quite another to see our students as the *sources*, *investigators*, and *archivers* of varied and rich bodies of knowledge rooted in their cultural-linguistic reality.

KNOWLEDGE, REALITY, AND EDUCATION

It is essential for us to hear the voices of the Hip Hop Nation in order to understand Hip Hop Culture's educational ideologies. To that end, I'd like to share an excerpt of a conversation between me and the American C.R.E.A.M. Team's Bankie Santana, a Hip Hop artist comin up outta Harlem and protégé of the Wu-Tang Clan's Raekwon. In this conversation, Santana moves from his personal experiences with school and his desire to learn to a Marxist critique of American public education as a means of control exercised by the ruling class, to his vision of a school of his own—the *School of Reality*. We enter the dialogue at the point when Santana is describing himself as having an “old man's mind”:

Bankie: All my life. My grandfathers was telling me that. Everybody around me would say that, because I'm a deep thinker. As far as school go, I went through 12th grade and all of that. I understand the purpose of learning about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. I understand that, because you cannot be in America and don't know how this country was founded and all that. You can't function right without knowing that. I understand that. But I knew that would be good for me academically. But when I walk out of the doors of the school that I was in, I knew that it was a whole nother world. The Whig Party don't exist in my hood, you know what I mean? So, I got to know. . . . The reason why a lot of minorities drop out of school, you know what I mean, because the board of education, they *plan* it that way.

Alim: What do you mean by that?

Bankie: They planned it that way because they statistically know that it's nothing there to keep your interest. And European Americans, let's just say that, they learn European history, you know what I mean? Other ethnic groups, they don't learn about themselves, you know what I mean? So, you learn about this other group of people so much and they don't give you nothing about yourself so you will stay in it and stay in it and stay in it, until you veer off from it, you know what I mean? And that's just how they know it. They know! Yeah, you know, it's like, with me, like I said, I was a street entrepreneur driving a 190 Benz to junior high school. And to come to school and pass my SATs and do all of that. So, I knew that it was a no-brainer. Academically, I probably was academically a genius, but I just never really focused in. I wanted to be an anthropologist. . . . But I just didn't continue the process of schooling to be that.

Alim: You seem like the anthropologist type, too. You be thinkin about that shit.

Bankie: C'mon, man, you know.

Alim: Let's take it one step further and say if you had to design your own school so this type of shit wouldn't be the norm, how would you design your own school?

Bankie: What I would do, I think the world need to know one thing. I'ma give you something right here, and I *want* you to write this, man. I'ma give you something. And this for White people, this for Chinese, this for everybody to take this. And you can feel how you wanna feel. Alright. And I want you to quote Bankie on this. The reason why the forefathers of this country went to Africa and tricked the Africans into comin here, was because they seen the paradise that they built for theyselves in Africa. These people, the forefathers of this country, they went to so-called Africa . . . I know we Asiatic people. But they went to Africa, as the story is told, and they tricked people into believing that we would receive more gold for our labor in *this* country. They seen the palaces and the pyramids and they seen the technology that we had. They brung us back here. Captured us. Tricked us into gettin here. You wouldn't bring a uncivilized person to build a new country for you. You'd bring a person that you seen build a world for theselves to build you a new world. So, in these history books when they say that people were uncivilized, these people, *they biased to realities of life*. You can't get blinded. Look at the picture. And it worked. The forefathers of this country, they had a plan, and it worked. They said, "Let's get the scientists in Africa and have them build us a world in America." And through that, Louis Lattimere was the person who invented the filament inside the light bulb, you know what I mean? Charles Drew did open heart surgery [*sic*] Daniel Hale Williams, blood plasma. George Washington Carver invented the peanut to get plastic from, you know what I mean? Madame C. J. Walker did the straightening comb, you know. They reinvented a world for them. And this is what they planned on. So, my master school, my school would be—of course, you need European education. What the world need to respect is the Black Man that's trapped in America's education and history. That's what the *world* need to respect . . .

Alim: So, that's your academy.

Bankie: Basically.

Alim: What would you call it?

Bankie: I'll call it Reality. *School of Reality*. (unpublished interview, 2000)

What we witness in this conversation is a serious critique of the American public education system as being out of touch with both contemporary reality and the historical reality of Black Americans. Bankie's comments raise a critical point: As educators charged with educating the Hip Hop generation(s), it is essential that we have an accurate assessment of what our students *know*, as well as their attitudes toward what is required to be *known*. Examining the educational ideologies of our students is fundamental to an approach that *keeps it real* (Carter, 2005). As Bankie's comments demonstrate, the concepts of *knowledge* and *education* are often interpreted differently in many White and Black American communities, as

they sometimes reflect strikingly different historical, cultural, and linguistic realities. So how can these differing ideologies be brought together into a single vision of education that takes into account the educational welfare of all students?

DA BOMB SQUAD COMPREHENSIVE LITERACY PROGRAM

Harnessing the pedagogical power of Hip Hop Culture in the classroom is not entirely new. It is merely the most recent manifestation of what language and education scholars have been advocating as good pedagogy for the past 2 decades. Hip Hop Culture has been used to develop a wide range of skills from general preschool learning (Hicks, 1987); reading (Morrow-Pretlow, 1994); writing and literary analysis (Milford, 1992); English grammar (Macklis, 1989); history, philosophy, politics and multiculturalism (Anderson, 1993; Brown 1995); Afrocentric curriculum (Honeman, 1990); and academic writing in college courses (Frisk, 1992; Strother, 1994). By encouraging the use of Hip Hop Culture in the classroom, I am advocating the need for educators to build upon the cultural-linguistic realities of Black students for academic success in the language arts classroom and beyond.

Da Bomb Squad Comprehensive Literacy Development Program employs the cultural-linguistic practices of contemporary Hip Hop Culture to motivate and assist students in developing their oral, written, and computer literacy skills. The program began in 1997 at Turner Middle School in Southwest Philly. Around that time, I had come to the realization that while academics had been studying the language of Black Americans for quite some time (more than 3 decades), their work had yielded small benefits for the speakers of BL, while yielding huge gains for the “experts” (Rickford, 1997). I felt it was time that scholars, educators, and linguists put this research to work for the communities and the youth, who had long been the objects of study but were still struggling.

During my studies at the University of Pennsylvania, I had the opportunity to collaborate with top scholars in urban education and linguistics, including William Labov and Ira Harkavy. It was our belief that decades of accumulated linguistic knowledge ought to be combined with a new and creative pedagogy in order to reverse the failure of our urban schools to properly educate Black Americans. One main question guided my thinking: How can we, as educators, linguists and scholars, use the cultural-linguistic practices and experiences of our students as the impetus for creative and effective educational praxis?

Upon entering Turner Middle School, I was told by more than one teacher that “these students can’t write,” and “you won’t get them to write.” And indeed, I soon recognized that many students were not motivated to learn. As is often the case, *curriculum* was disconnected from *community* and *culture*. From my

own experience, I knew that Hip Hop Culture had a firm grasp on most Black American students. In fact, various studies (MME Productions, 1993) conclude that 97 to 98% of Black American students are influenced by Hip Hop Culture. Da Bomb Squad Comprehensive Literacy Development Program was therefore developed to use Hip Hop Culture in educational practice.

Da Bomb! (students chose the title) is a student magazine produced by the sixth graders at Turner Middle School. Some of the goals highlighted in the initial proposal for the magazine were the following:

- To develop skills in desktop publishing and computer literacy
- To develop skills in writing in several forms and styles: raps, poetry, letters, reviews, short stories, essays, fiction, editorials
- To encourage originality and creativity among students
- To expose students to multimedia and Internet resources with the aim of developing research skills
- To obtain formal skills in "standard English" writing, speaking, and communicating
- To use the culture and language of the students to learn various school and life skills

The students, of course, wanted to sell their magazines rather than distribute them for free. (These young kids was *straight paper-chasin!*) This exercise in magazine production also contributed to the development of reading skills, since student-produced magazines are an excellent way to motivate other students to read. In producing the magazine, students engaged in a wide range of literacy activities: hiphopological grammar lessons, oral interviews with peers and members of the Hip Hop community in Philly, polls of the student body about favorite topics in Hip Hop Culture, writing of raps and poems, comparative analysis and message analysis of Hip Hop song lyrics, and written autobiographies and biographies of their favorite Hip Hop artists. I'd like to focus on three classroom exercises in particular that highlight the relationship between knowledge, reality, and education in this discussion. These exercises build on Bankie's comments about the disconnect between the content of his schooling and the reality of his hood. The first exercise is *rappin*:

Rappin

Why

Why, Why, Why?
Did they have to die?

Why did they have to die today?
 I hope, I hope, I hope
 They fly away.
 Why did they become part of the ground?
 All they wanted is to just be down.
 Biggie, Biggie, Biggie, what did you do?
 2pac, 2pac, 2pac, what's wrong with you?
 People are crying
 Cause we're all dying
 Please stop violence Peace.

This rap was written by a sixth grader. Its subject—untimely death—is one that is all too familiar to young Bloods in Southwest Philly. The passion and the urgent seeking for an answer to life's unanswerable questions (“Why did they have to die today?”) can be heard in the student’s voice and frequent use of repetition (“Why, Why, Why?”). In the end, the tragic deaths of Biggie and 2pac, two rappers beloved by their community of fans, are related to the larger problem of violence in American society. The last line, “Please stop violence Peace,” is deceptively simple. By juxtaposing “violence” and “Peace” in such a manner, the student rapper has illustrated the choice we must make as a society, lest we are forced to write more poems in the shapes of monuments to our young brothers and sisters.

On a literary level, the student is allowed to experiment with spoken language (“Cause” and “All they wanted is to just be down,” for example) while creating a powerfully written rap. The next task for the student is to perform the rap in front of the class and to convey the same depth of feeling as in the written form. This is the bridge to oral literacy. The poem is then brought into a word-processing program and is formatted in the shape of a monument to the slain rappers, which promotes computer literacy.

Message Analysis

This exercise deals with a familiar topic for young females—notions of “prettiness” and “ugliness” in society. The student examines the message and the lyrics of TLC’s song “Unpretty” and ends up giving advice to other young girls. (Rest in peace to young Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes of TLC, who was killed in a car crash in Honduras in April 2002.) The student’s analysis follows

UNPRETTY

The song, “Unpretty” is saying that you should not do what you do not want to do. If you listen to this song you would know what it is about. And if

you're insecure because of a man, you should get rid of him and "then get back to you." Just read this part of the song:

Never insecure until I met you
Now I'm in stupid
I used to be so cute to me
Just a little bit skinny
Why do I look to all these things
To keep me happy
Maybe get rid of you and then I'll get back to me

The song "Unpretty" was written as a poem by T-Boz while TLC was making their latest album, *Fanmail*. The song means to me that some people in reality are doing something they do not want to do, but they are doing it because they think it's right, or because their partners want them to do it. If you saw the video, Chili was getting breast implants because her boyfriend wanted her to get them. He thought her breasts were too small. When she got to the hospital she saw a lady getting her breast implants removed. She saw how the other lady was going through a lot of pain, and crying. Chili decided not to get the breast implants because she didn't feel like she needed them. She went home and kicked her boyfriend out, because he wanted her to do something that she did not want to do. If I were in that situation, I would have done the same thing. I hope you would do the same thing, too.

This type of message analysis deals with issues that are not well addressed by American society as a whole. While popular culture sometimes critiques society, Hip Hop Culture has the reputation of being uncompromisingly critical. These songs are an excellent way for students to begin analyzing and interpreting texts and to "put their writing to work" by sending out positive messages to the larger community. In this piece, the student analyzed not only the lyrics, but also the video for the song. Her conclusion is just as clear as her opening statement, in which she declares that "you should not do what you do not want to do."

In the course of this assignment, the student engaged in written literacy and computer literacy. Internet research was required, to dig up facts about the origin of the song. The student also gained valuable interpretive and analytical skills. By writing about a song she loves, she was motivated to do excellent work.

Review

The final example is an excerpt from a song review for Eve's "Love Is Blind." Eve, a rapper from Philly, was the most popular rapper at the time this review was written.

EVE'S "LOVE IS BLIND"

When I hear the song "Love Is Blind," I think Eve's friend was really blinded by love. I think that Eve was trying to get her friend out of a bad relationship that really wasn't working out. It made me feel very upset that she would stay in an abusive relationship and Eve was being a great friend. And, NO, I wouldn't be in that relationship because I would never let any man put his hands on me.

This review, along with the message analysis above, allows students to make their own moral judgments. By doing this, the teacher is confronting issues with which these students—young as they are—are already familiar. Since these are songs that the students hear every day, we must take the approach that it is better to discuss them intelligently than to bemoan the situation or just hope that it will "go away." If our students come to class discussing issues that are pertinent to their realities, we gotta handle the situation. While we may not be comfortable introducing these topics, we must be prepared to deal with them when they arise.

HIPHOGRAPHY: THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF HIP HOP CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION

When I began teaching high school, I wanted to go beyond using Hip Hop Culture as a motivational strategy for educating students in other subjects. I wanted to introduce Hip Hop Culture as the *subject* of scholarly investigation. This requires a shift in the way we view our students as learners. The present situation in most schools, despite volumes of educational research on the subject, is that teachers don't even recognize that their Black students *bring something* to class. Those who do recognize that fact move quickly towards an eradicationist philosophy, condemning and wiping out any signs of "Blackness" in the name of preparing their students for college and "the real world." Of course, what is cast as "the language of the real world" is the language of the dominating group—let's call it what it is—the variety of English that's consistent with the speech patterns and norms of use of educated, middle-class, White men. As scholars, sometimes we (myself included) allow ourselves to believe that the eradicationist view is a thing of the past and that the additive bidialectical view (adding "standard English" to the language variety that students possess) is the accepted norm. Judging from my own experience in schools, I must say that while the names have changed, the game has remained the same. As educators and scholars, we continue to view the language of Black students only in relation to that *other* variety (the one we call

"standard"), rather than treating BL on its own terms. Thus we are reinforcing the same ideology that has stifled and suffocated the language and learning of our students since desegregation.

What would shock most teachers (and most Americans in general) is that when it comes to language, the most studied language variety in the sociolinguistic literature is BL, including its rich and diverse linguistic practices. From the work of sociolinguists, we know that Black discursive practices and modes of discourse are among the most inventive of all languages spoken in the United States (Mitchell-Kernan, 1972; Smitherman, 1977). My own writings examine how the language and linguistic practices of the HHNSC both build upon and expand the African American Oral Tradition. The discursive practices and cultural modes of discourse of the HHNSC—*call and response*, *multilayered totalizing expression*, *signifyin* and *bustin (bussin)*, *tonal semantics* and *poetics*, *narrative sequencing* and *flow*, *battlin*, and *entering the cipher*—are as creative as they are complex (Alim, 2004a, 2006). With this in mind, I designed and taught a course called "Hiphopography: The Ethnography of Hip Hop Culture and Communication." The class trained students in ethnographic research methods so that they could actively participate in the study of their contemporary culture. Throughout the course, the students and I collected hundreds of hours of audiotaped and videotaped data in order to study the most recent instantiation of Black expressive culture. I'm talkin about Hip Hop Culture. Students cataloged their own lexical items, interviewed their peers and members of the local community, and produced a video documentary presenting a hiphopography of their school and community.

I'd like to share three examples of the students' research findings. These are part of a volume dedicated to the rich description of the language and linguistic practices of their localized HHNSC.

BATTLIN (NOUN)(VERB) AND FLOW (NOUN)(VERB)

Battlin involves more than one person. A **FREESTYLE** rapping contest when a group of people take turns rapping lyrics. They don't write the lyrics; they say them as they think of them off the top of their heads. As they take turns rapping back and forth, they're actually competing. In the end, the judges or the people watching the competition vote who won the competition and who had the better lyrics. Sometimes it is just obvious to the contenders who won by who **DISSED/CLOWNED** the other better.

*Also judged by who had the better meaning behind his/her words.

Example: JT and T-Reezy were battlin in the grass last week; they got on each other. JT got on T-Reezy's braids and face and T-Reezy got on JT about his height and women/girls.

The term comes from the idea of fighting with words. A battle is set up like a fight. One contender takes one side and the other takes the other. They rap at each other (in turn, though) until one *gives up* or a specific winner is announced. Usually done by males—those who tend to be street affiliated. Males talk about guns, women, and **SETS** (areas of affiliation) and other topics. Done at clubs, social events, on street corners, etc. Takes the place of actual fights at parties where people **FLOW**—to have a smooth current of rap lyrics. If a person messes up their rap lyrics while saying them, then they ain't flowin. Flowin does not necessarily have to rhyme, as long as your words go good together.

HUSH MODE AND SCRATCH THAT GREEN OFF YO NECK (PHRASE)

Hush mode is when you get **CLOWNED** (to get talked about rudely) and do not have a remark or comeback for that person. To be dumbfounded. Usually used when instigating or talking about a fight or argument.

Example 1:

AISHA: Shut up, Tee!

TEE: [doesn't say anything]

TEREESE: She got you on hush mode!

When somebody get **CAPPED ON**, and that person don't have anything to come back with, then the person who capped on them would say, "I got you on hush mode."

Example 2:

For example, say Shahira and Bibi are capping on each other and Shahira says to Bibi, "Yo mamma so old she used to gang bang with the Hebrews." If Bibi can't come back with something, then Shahira would say to her, "I got you on hush mode."

While we were defining the word, Jamal got on Tereese nerves and she said she was gon hit him . . .

Example 3:

TEREESE: I'mma bust you in yo mouth.

JAMAL: [silent]

AISHA: Oooh, Jamal, she got you on hush mode.

JAMAL: She ain't got me on hush mode.

TEREESE: I'mma hit you in yo mouth.

JAMAL: I WISH YOU WOULD.

Females use this phrase a lot because they tend to instigate more than males. Males sometimes use it when they want to start something. Someone might tell you to "scratch that green off yo neck" after you been hush moded.

Not sure of the origin of this phrase, but it's used after someone has been proven wrong.

Example 4:

For example, say two people are arguing and one of them got proven wrong, then someone would say to them, "Oooh, scratch that green off yo neck."

ROGUE (NOUN)

A word that people use as a substitute for another person's name. Originated in Sunnyside, California, and mainly used in Sunnyside. JT uses it a lot to say hi to people. "What's up rogue?"

Example 1: Waz up rogue?

Example 2: Dang, rogue, what you doing?!

See **DOGG, HOMIE, PATNA**

Males use it more, but females do often use it. Used by all races in Sunnyside. Used mainly with the younger generation.

Example 3:

Aisha was **CONVERSATIN** with Shahira on the phone and at the end she said, "alright, rogue." Then her mom asked her why they call each other rogue.

HIP HOP CULTURE AS EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

As hiphopographers, the students create new categories of knowledge and original descriptions, which they gather from the field and from their own life experiences. None of these terms and descriptions have been fully described (most not even discussed) in the scholarly literature. The potential to make a real contribution to the study of Black culture and language lies in the production of new knowledge. Again, this type of learning experience requires that the curriculum be based in the cultural-linguistic reality of the students.

I would like to conclude by making an ideological distinction between a curriculum that is based in the cultural-linguistic reality of the students, and one that is *culturally appropriate, culturally responsive, culturally relevant*, or whatever other term we have produced to describe classroom practices that use the language and culture of the students to teach them part of the "acceptable" curricular canon. As

education scholars of color, we often say that we value the linguistic and cultural resources our students bring to school, yet we are only willing to use that wealth of resources to fill them up with “standard English,” literary interpretation of some acceptable canon, or some other prescribed academic skill (Jackson, 2006). We gotta go beyond that. Our students are bright enough to know when they bein played. The most state-of-the-art research on the education of linguistically and culturally diverse students may actually be sellin our students short. Why must their language and culture always be used to “take them somewhere else”? *Right here* look good to me. I challenge us to go beyond the clichéd “taking them from where they’re at and leading them somewhere else” approach, lest we offer a strawberry-flavored, culturally sensitive pill for our children to swallow, the result of which would ultimately be the same sickness—the devaluation of their language and culture. Such a pill may be easier on the stomach, administered in language that is more palatable, but if real healing is to take place, we must shift the paradigm and turn to our students’ abilities and experiences as the sources of knowledge and learning. Like Hip Hop pioneer KRS-One’s Temple of Hip-hop Kulture is doing with “Refinitions,” and like Harvard’s Hiphop Archive (now at Stanford) is doing with the Hiphop Community Activism and Education Roundtable, our students can shine as producers and preservers of their own cultural and linguistic knowledge.

An example of this type of linguistic knowledge is found in my analysis of Hip Hop poetics (Alim, 2003), which reveals that Hip Hop artists are not only using the conventional poetic constructions (feminine rhyme, masculine rhyme, end rhyme, and so on), but they are rhyme-travelin far beyond that, using innovative rhyming techniques such as *chain rhymes*, *back-to-back chain rhymes*, *compound internal rhymes*, *primary and secondary internal rhymes*, and polysyllabic rhyme strings of *octuple rhymes* and creating a *multirhyme matrix* unparalleled in American poetics. Rather than using Hip Hop Culture only as a means to cultivate an appreciation for poets such as Chaucer and Shakespeare (or even Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez), why not turn our attention to the study of some of contemporary America’s most innovative and inventive poets like Pharoahe Monch, Talib Kweli, Mos Def, Common, and Kanye West, among others? I am not suggesting that conventional bodies of knowledge be dropped from curricula in favor of these new approaches. What I am suggesting is that we need to take the language and culture of the HHNSC seriously enough to offer it as an area of knowledge that is worthy of study in schools. Further, we need to raise our expectations and provide opportunities for our students to be the producers of knowledge rooted in their cultural-linguistic realities.

NOTES

General Note: This chapter is dedicated to Bankie Santana, a good brother who was tryina do right, but like many young Black males, he fell victim to the streets. In 2000, Bankie was shot to death at 7:40 A.M. on the corner of 129th Street and Fifth Avenue in Harlem—only about two weeks after this interview was recorded. (Rest in peace, young homie.) Much respect to the American C.R.E.A.M. Team and the Mighty Wu-Tang Clan. Wu Forever. I'd like to acknowledge my students for their incredible work. Y'all have truly been an inspiration and are the driving force behind my research on teaching. Much respect to the young writers and hiphopographers. I am indebted to the Spencer Foundation for funding portions of this research. Also, thanks to Harvard University's W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research and the Ford Foundation for sponsoring the historic Hiphop Community Activism and Education Roundtable. Thanks to Marcyliena Morgan, James Peterson, Josef Sorett, Dawn-Elissa Fischer Banks, Lauren Ferguson, Nicole Hodges, Dan McClure, and Kissie Morales.

1. Hip Hop Culture is sometimes defined as having four major elements: MC'ing (rappin), DJ'ing (spinnin records), breakdancing (sometimes known as "streetdancing"), and graffiti art (also known as "writing" or "tagging"). To these four elements, pioneering Hip Hop artist KRS-One adds a fifth—knowledge—and Afrika Bambaataa, founder of the Hip Hop Cultural Movement, would add a sixth, which he calls *overstanding*. Overstanding can be thought of as the ability to read between the lines and arrive at deeper, sometimes hidden meanings. It is a concept frequently used by Rastafarians. It is useful to distinguish between the terms *Hip Hop* and *rap*. Rappin, which is one aspect of Hip Hop Culture, consists of the aesthetic placement of verbal rhymes over musical beats. Hip Hop Culture refers not only to the various elements listed above, but also to the entire range of cultural activity and modes of being that encompass the Hip Hop Culture world. This is why Bloods be sayin, "Hip Hop ain't just music, it's a whole way of life!"