

Noah Wilson

WGS 673: Hip Hop Feminism

Dr. Pough

Due: 5/26/17

Hip Hop and the University: The ‘Crunkified 105’ Composition Course

Lamenting the commodification of the English language and writing, Bruce Horner comments in the introduction to his *Reworking English in Rhetoric and Composition*, “Further, the ostensible appropriateness of specific forms of English to specific spheres, and the boundaries distinguishing these forms and spheres from one another, fail to hold up to scrutiny” (2). While Horner is speaking directly to standard English in higher education as an assumed static, unchanging, commodity, an important distinction is the fallacy in the assumption that standard English, or a standard academic writing for that matter, is a neutral objective “truth.” Theorizing ways to teach introductory composition courses differently calls for paying closer attention to the situatedness of compositions and their composers in addition to classroom instruction that attends to process over product. As Jody Shipka asserts in her *Toward A Composition Made Whole*, embracing multimodal approaches to composition instruction necessitates a sociocultural framework that “provides us with ways of attending to the social and individual aspects of composing processes without losing sight of the wide variety of genres, sign systems, and technologies that composers routinely employ while creating a text” (40). What Shipka’s project asks for is not wholly different from Hobson and Bartlow’s conception of hip hop studies as a tool for liberation, one that speaks directly to the very same hegemonic power Horner describes as having commodified language and composition instruction (Hobson and Bartlow 1). Bringing hip hop feminism and multimodal composition instruction in conversation with one another, this paper theorizes an approach to the composition classroom that draws from Crunk feminism (a distinct brand of hip hop feminism) as a valuable pedagogical lens that attends to the aforementioned concerns of compositional scholars by incorporating thinkers who

engage with hip hop inside and outside of academia. Suspending disbelief, introductory writing courses may just find their most important ally in their most unexpected of places.

II

Crunk feminism lends a way of speaking to power with a continuity between message and form (what is said and how it is said), or as the Crunk Feminist Collective states in their mission statement:

Crunk(ness) is our mode of resistance that finds its particular expression in the rhetorical, cultural, and intellectual practices of a contemporary generation...Our relationship to feminism and our world is bound up with a proclivity for the percussive, as we divorce ourselves from ‘correct’ or hegemonic ways of being in favor of following the rhythm of our own heartbeats. (xvii)

What the Crunk feminists provide is a useful heuristic for critically examining power relations, cycles of socialization, hegemony, and voice and identity; the same critical literacy we expect students to develop during the course of their higher education studies. Crunk feminism is not only a lens to see the world through, but it also is an identity and a social action that allows people to (un)apologetically speak to power on their terms. Not unlike Soliday’s conception of genre as social actions that hold social groups together (xi), through their critical writing on their blogs the Crunk feminists not only posit their opinions, they assert, support, and maintain a collective identity that does work in the world; their very writing is an important social action that connects people together in a common struggle against oppressive hegemonic order. In her “Genre as Social Action (1984), Revisited 30 Years Later (2014)” Carolyn Miller complicates her description of genre as categories of social action that act as vessels for constructing and perpetuating community knowledge construction (Miller 58-59) and she also asks that we consider genre as emerging from the confluence of sociocultural forces rather than serving as only an anchoring force, a “boundary object” with “different functions and meanings in different theoretical and disciplinary contexts” (Miller 65). Moreover, Miller suggests that we transition our understanding of genre to examine the tensions between, among other things, individuality and

Whenever we contend with knowledge construction and sociocultural forces we would be best served to examine the inevitable power relations. In “Becoming the Third Wave,” Rebecca Walker explains that third wave feminism does not seek anything fundamentally different from second wave feminism – both continue to be very much concerned with identifying power structures, observing how they operate, and then directly challenging the oppression they enact – but third wave feminism does ask that we acknowledge the erosion of past successes in the present. Not unlike what we have previously explored with genre, the sociopolitical landscape has changed with time; it has become more corporate, and the hip hop feminists are the folks who grew up alongside hip hop as it was shaped by this context. As the Crunk Feminists state succinctly in their manifesto: “We are hip hop’s middle children, folks who fell in love with hip hop...came of age during the ‘Modern Era,’ and find ourselves increasingly concerned with the gender and race politics of hip hop in the ‘Industrial Era’” (xx). Hip hop as a cultural movement continues to respond to the systemic violence imposed on those who do not fit hegemony’s touted “ideal”, that being those who will maintain structures beneficial to white patriarchy (namely cisgender, heterosexual, white males with college educations). Formed in the 1970s, hip hop has always been about speaking back to power, speaking back to the imposed “normalcy” that hegemonic culture works to solidify. Considering hip hop’s wide appeal, it comes as no surprise that it built rapid mainstream cultural capital. As with any genre, hip hop transmutes and perpetuates knowledge, in this case cultural knowledge, and as the movement reaches more people, this knowledge is carried with it into the mainstream culture – the systemic concerns reach the public gaze in ways that it never has before, and this important critical critique of hegemonic culture is carried in kind. It is important to remember, however, that mainstream culture is subservient to hegemony, and while the substance and form (figure 1) may shift and even include new ideas, mainstream culture’s project remains to instill fixity under hegemonic ideals.

What hip hop provides in genre terms is a new social action, “fucking with the grays” to such an extent that multiple boundaries are simultaneously pushed and new genres, new knowledge

constructions, are formed. Hip hop does not transfer this knowledge through Enlightenment ideas of objectivity but rather through what Emery Petchauer refers to as “Kinetic consumption” or through “edutainment” - practices where education and entertainment blur – which causes learners to “[experience] a deep, affective resonance with the material” (73). This shared knowledge is embodied in ways that resist commodification because the experience is unique to the learner and requires an engrossment with a community. Commodities, on the other hand, have to be non-person-specific and interchangeable, a shallow consistency that allows cultural artifacts (rap music for instance) to be transferred without ties to a community or its cultural knowledge. Moreover, on the road to commodification, hegemony imprints its values – white supremacy, patriarchy, sexism, etc. - onto the cultural artifact made into commodity. As “hip hops middle children,” the Crunk feminists respond to hegemony’s specific influence on hip hop culture, as the Crunk Feminist Collective states in their manifesto: “...while many of us appreciate the culture and the music, we do not have blind allegiance to it” (xx). The Crunk feminists call out, unapologetically, how the music industry in particular commodifies culture, music in this case, in order to, what Hobson and Bartlow explain in their introduction, “[inculcate] worldwide audiences with dominant ideologies of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality” (Hobson and Bartlow 2). Hegemony does not break hip hop musical genres so much as it shapes its expression and development, it ensures that the genre of hip hop that propagates in the mainstream culture is male-dominated, relegating women, who are truly equally influential and important to hip hop, from “emcees and deejays” toward “hyper-sexualized roles as music video dancers, models, and groupies” (Hobson and Bartlow 3). As insidious as this cultural hijacking of hip hop musical genres may be, hip hop has not lost its essential cultural critiquing function. In observing how the rap genre is gradually shaped from hegemonic resistance into its antithesis, we can see far more clearly how hegemony manipulates and inculcates its own values on the social actions that hip hop represents.

III

As third wave feminists, hip hop feminists bring an important proclivity for critique, albeit not just hip culture but feminism itself. Eisa Davis explains the importance of this seemingly contradictory stance towards feminism in her “Sexism and the Art of Feminist Hip-Hop Maintenance” stating:

I don't want to censor or dismiss my culture, my language, my sense of community regardless of the form in which it comes. Hip hop, after all, is the chosen whipping boy for a misogyny that is fundamental to Western culture. Why should I deny myself hip hop but get a good grounding in Aristotle? I'd rather listen and listen well, and have a conversation with the artist-philosophers who are repeating the sexist ways they have been taught, and then have chosen, to see the world. (132)

The crux of what Davis speaks to is the importance of critique in building sustainable movements, but she also speaks to the contradiction of critiquing hip hop culture out of context as a separate entity from hegemonic culture. Not unlike the Crunk feminists who assert that the dismantlement of patriarchy is the only meaningful action toward sustained progress, Davis calls for a critique of sexism and racism far beyond the confines of hip hop culture and toward mainstream culture writ large. To settle for a critique of misogyny in hip hop is to critique only the surface representations of systemic oppression, the important larger critique of misogyny in dominant culture remains unchecked. For example, you may very well critique the erasure of foundational female figures in hip hop but you never question why the same dead white guys are cited in academia: you accept the illusion that all advances in knowledge were through the efforts of white men alone. Perhaps even more suspect is that mounting a critique means doing so on hegemony's terms, through hegemony's preferred content (what knowledge is accessible) and form (the “civil” respectability that hegemony prefers). While second wave feminists may have found a way to work within the parameters of hegemony's “respectability,” in seeing who is best served by these conventions the Crunk feminists dismiss these notions of “civility” and engage

what Brittany Cooper describes as a *disrespectability politics* that “[urges] Black women to have more agency in their race and gender performances while offering a critique of Whitewashed identity politics” (CFC 213). Put more concisely, the Crunk feminists call for supplanting “respectability” with a “crunk politic,” which works toward “making some invisible things, and people, seen” (134). As we think about compositional practices and genre formation – Miller’s model for genre emerging from sociocultural circumstances – we should ask what invisible things in genre formation a *crunk politic* might unveil. In their introduction to “Politics and Policy: The Personal is Political,” the Crunk feminists provide a useful heuristic for identifying potential blindspots:

A crunk feminist intervention on traditional ways of understanding political issues starts by asking the unasked questions about our laws and policies. Whose interests do they protect? Who do they target? Who do they benefit? Who do they harm? What about our families? Our communities? Our bodies? Where do we, and the people we love, fit in?
(CFC 134)

These important critiquing questions tease out the nuance in genre’s “exigence” and “content” (figure 1). We might look at an academic article as a genre (social action) that responds to a particular exigence, but what the Crunk feminist lens asks us to do is examine the accessibility to knowledge and authority to respond to that exigence in addition to who’s interest that action actually serves – the article may very well work toward knowledge for a better future, but we should be asking who’s betterment that future has in mind, nuance that get more at the “structure” and “action” portions of Miller’s Genre model (figure 1). Put more simply, when it comes to composition, we have to ask whether or not using the established channels of academia, even if to perpetuate knowledge on behalf of a marginalized community, could ever really do so, or if those channels can and will only serve hegemonic interests. Considering these important questions that Crunk feminism raises, a Crunk composition classroom should also ask more nuanced questions about “medium” and “product,” and “material” and “symbolic” (figure 1).

The material conditions of black communities at the formation of hip hop are important to the shaping of hip hop's various genres. As Pough explains of hip hop's important history in "Hip-Hop is More Than Just Music to Me":

At the critical historical moment in which Hip-Hop culture was being created, the South Bronx and the country as a whole were suffering from postindustrialist decline...Budget woes meant that arts programs were being cut from school curriculums, and the youth who created Hip-Hop had to find alternative ways to express their creativity...They found ways to mix, cut, and slide records...Rappers built on African American oral and musical traditions and turned talk into a new art form. (7)

It is not just the systemic violence that inner-city communities of color were subjected to that spurred hip hop's genres, it is also the limitations on expressive mediums and the products that they could produce that shaped what composing in hip hop ultimately looked like. Working with constraints is therefore an important skill that composers in hip hop develop; it is the binding element between the various facets of hip hop genres (i.e. between medium and product in figure 1). Furthermore, we might look at sampling specifically as a hip hop compositional practice that pushes at the expected boundaries of genre, thereby reframing what we understand composing to be. Petchauer posits sampling as an approach to meaning making in which the sampler, or composer in this case, "[transforms] something by taking what is good and useful in it, improving upon it, and simultaneously disregarding that which is not useful" (77). This aligns well with the previous description of DJs crafting beats, building musical forms that work through the dearth of resources at their disposal, but as we observed with the Crunk feminists, hip hop, sampling included, has the potential to disrupt what we understand as knowledge: "Non-canonical knowledge can exist in many different forms within hip-hop" (Petchauer 80). Petchauer continues that in following the intellectual traditions of "Black Freedom," emcees are able to imbue their music with "criticisms of deficit frameworks, emphases of Black agency, affirmations of Black identities, and references to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, Marcus Garvey,

and Malcolm X” (80). By design, the ability to disrupt hegemonic systems of knowledge is difficult for marginalized communities to attain because mainstream culture does not provide the knowledge needed to disrupt its own institutions; however, through hip hop, students find “alternate knowledge sources” that spark a curiosity in “ideological perspectives [that] sparks valuable educational thought, and can be used to challenge power” (80). Put more succinctly, hip hop compositions (music and text) function as “bibliographic source material not unlike a genealogy of ideas that can be traced back through foundational academic works and bibliographic citations” (80) and “A ‘real’ hip-hopper is expected to be on a path of study to know the origins of their culture, and to not be on such a path marks one as suspect” (82). Hip hop and its genres certainly fulfill Miller’s conception of genres as knowledge containers, and in viewing how knowledge is created and stored differently in hip hop compositions, we can have much more involved conversations of the nuances in knowledge construction – what is left out and why, in addition to how this suppressed knowledge is embodied and shared within a community.

In her “Let Me Blow Your Mind: Hip Hop Feminist Futures in Theory and Praxis,” Treva Lindsey offers important theoretical interventions in hip hop studies that can inform future, feminist infused classroom practice. Lindsey’s proposed praxis asks that we contend with tensions and contradictions not as points of weakness but rather as points of critical truth (56). As with the Crunk feminists, Lindsey suggests that we embrace “Morgan’s (1999) assertion of the necessity of a feminist politics and theory that accounts for the messiness and lived contradictions of human experiences” but not as a point of complacency so much as an acknowledgment that individuals can own their contradictions thereby allowing them more fully realized conceptions of themselves (56). Essentially, Lindsey asks that we draw a line in the sand when it comes to the objectivity that those in power hide behind, that we speak to conditions as they are without getting bogged down in tangential minutia that distracts from the important issues at hand. The importance in invoking this hip hop feminist sensibility is that it allows hip hop to continue to be at the forefront of social movements, to not be co-opted by

hegemony, to continue to address the ongoing social, political, cultural, and economic issues facing marginalized communities, “the violation of marginalized bodies of all sorts” (73). While Lindsey offers *Bringing Wreck, Kinetic Orality, and Percussive Resistance* as valuable classroom frameworks and practices, it is in her conception of *Sonic Narrative* that we see an important means to continue complicating genre studies in the “crunkified” composition classroom. Expanded from the work of Bettina Love, Lindsey explains *sonic narrative* as how the “sonic simultaneously functions as an interwoven, but distinct narrative with hip-hop music” (62). The sonic elements are intertwined with the lyrical content and imagery but they do indeed make their own contributions to hip hop music. Thinking in terms of genre (figure 1), we can see that the “form” of hip hop musical compositions is not divorced from “substance” but rather that there are layers within “form” carrying knowledge of their own. This is not unlike Petchauer’s description of how the sampled music from hip hop songs contains as much embedded knowledge as its lyrical content:

the sonic quality of music deals with sampling...in any given song, there are numerous musical elements that may be recognizable in different ways to listeners...lyrically, lead rapper Chuck D makes frequent references to important historical figures and key political moments...All of these qualities make a hip hop text such as a Public Enemy song able to communicate a great deal of information in a very short period of time and be full of clues that one can pursue if they are listening in such a way. (81)

What we see here in the compositional practices of Public Enemy is an attention to “substance” and “form” as different containers of information concerning the same subject matter. Not unlike citing information in-text and then on the works cited page of an academic article, hip hop music places knowledge in different places within its compositions that work together to construct meaning. These distinctions between hip hop and academic genres, genres that could very well address the same subject matter, can facilitate a larger conversation with students about assumptions and expectations that different genres and audiences expect from them as composers, and that in attending to these

differences they might cultivate a greater understanding of compositional praxis's nuances and ways they can push at these boundaries. In attending to the needs and functions of different genres, the composition classroom gets more at the important systemic critiques that the Crunk feminists address in their compositional practice.

IV

In “The Stage Hip Hop Feminism Built,” Durham, Cooper, and Morris call for hip hop infused pedagogical practices that are “less concerned with identifying culturally relevant teaching tools for out-of-touch educators and more concerned with extending the hip-hop feminist tradition of producing democratizing forms of knowledge” (729). As I think of incorporating hip hop feminism into the composition classroom, I see a need for assignments that move beyond simply resonating with students interests (although this is important) and more towards incorporating the critical capabilities of a hip hop feminist lens; I need to engage the important social critiques that hip hop uniquely raises in order to cultivate a “transgressive ethos” in my students (Durham et al 733). In theorizing potential directions for forming composition assignments that go the necessary depths to disrupt hegemonic order and commodification, I will consider the following insights – gleaned from our previous exploration of hip hop – as a pedagogical heuristic: working with and through constraints, sampling and embedding knowledge/narratives, and naming hegemony and *bringing wreck*.

We previously explored constraints as a foundational element of hip hop music, that with being excluded from resources, the early DJs and emcees turned their records and turntables into musical instruments. With digital technologies being commonplace for college students, blogs and youtube for instance, students often underestimate the affordances granted by digital technologies: the ubiquity of self publishing and the instantaneous connectability of the internet downplays the importance and privilege of circulating ideas. Moreover, as we can observe with the commodification of standard written English, students overlook what is lost when other modalities, such as speech, are transferred into text. In assigning students opportunities to remediate texts from one modality to another, I ask that

they pay attention to what is privileged with each compositional form and subsequently this opens a conversation concerning how the “medium” and “product” aspects of genre are utilized by different groups (i.e. the academy vs the mainstream public), what they subsequently prioritize in their compositional practices, and for whom these practices are created. The larger conversation to engage students with concerns socioeconomic resource allocation and the impacts that this has on communities, in addition to how literacy functions within these very same power structures (not to mention how more than print-based literacies are needed to navigate these power relations).

Sampling and embedding knowledge/narratives is related to working with constraints, but, considering how greater access to music resources has not dismantled sampling, it asks students to examine how knowledge is formed, stored, and shared. Assignments formed in line with this lens are concerned with how knowledge circulates and “does work” in the world. For instance, sampling music and lyrically referencing other knowledge in a rap song is a quick and effective way to disseminate important cultural knowledge, knowledge that challenges hegemony and may not be widely accessible or uptaken in educational institutions. Attention paid to how knowledge is embedded in hip hop compositions demonstrates connections between “form” and “substance” that may be otherwise overlooked in academic research. This serves to draw attention to why institutional citation practices exist – that academic articles cite sources the way they do because it keeps certain ideas inaccessible (Durham et al 726). Looking at how these genres, hip hop and hegemonic, function as knowledge receptacles reveals just as much about the communities they were designed to serve, how these communities construct knowledge, and how they operationalize this knowledge to accomplish specific ends.

Bringing Wreck, explains Lindsey as theorized by Gwendolyn Pough, is how the marginalized, Black women specifically, navigate and reshape their situatedness in the public sphere through race and gender performances that speak critically and frankly back to hegemonic power and its shallow discursive expectations (57). *Bringing Wreck* is fully embracing *disrespectability politics* and directly

calling out contradictions for what they are. Part of it is seeing how hegemony creates disparities and then commodifies resistance, imbuing counter-hegemonic culture with its own values. The other important part is identifying and owning your own contradictions – the times when you were a feminist but still downloaded the latest misogynistic single off iTunes or when you are an activist but overlook intersectionality – in order to declare to the hegemonic order that your contradictions don't weaken your argument but rather that this demonstrates how insidious their actions actually are and how visible you have made them. In the composition classroom, *bringing wreck* is “fucking with the grays” of genres because you know how they work and what they do, it is ignoring arbitrary boundaries because you understand the “social action” that genres seek to fulfill – you cross genre lines because you understand how form, substance, medium, and product interconnect but also how power shapes and is shaped by action, structure, intention, and exigence (figure 1). In short, *bringing wreck* to the composition classroom means cultivating a rhetorical awareness for how compositions work and then acting accordingly: it is working with constraints and sampling knowledge to find new, “crunk” compositional practices.

V

The composition classroom is often regarded as an individualized space: students receive the same instruction but complete their own work alone, receive their own grades, and just happen to share a space with others for three hours a week. While composition theorists such as Bruce Horner caution against a static, standard written English, they still conceive of composing as a relationship between an agent and an institution, individuals doing work in the world through genre. What composition practice can learn from the Crunk feminists is a collective sensibility, that not only can composing assert a sense of community identity but that this community itself is a powerful force for collective action, something that is lost in the commodification of composition courses. Miller's conception of genre does call for attention to be paid to the sociocultural influences and structures that establish genres, thereby focusing composition instruction on process over product. Hip Hop's history lends a productive

case study for not only examining the drastically new genres that hip hop culture brings with it but also the ways that hip hop reveals the messy and contradictory nature of power. Both Crunk feminism and genre theory seek to add necessary nuance to our understanding of sociopolitical power and the ways we perceive, comprehend, and enact it. Both Crunk feminism and genre theory contend with the way knowledge forms, what it does in society, and for whom. Regardless, so long as composition classrooms remain open to the “disrespectability” of Crunk feminism, they have an opportunity to become a site for critical conscious raising and potentially meaningful change.

Works Cited

- Cooper, Brittany C., Susana M. Morris, and Robin Boylorn, editors. *The Crunk Feminist Collection*. Feminist Press, 2017.
- Crunk Feminist Collective. "The Crunk Feminist Collective Mission Statement." Cooper, Morris, and Boylorn, pp. xvii.
- Davis, Eisa. "Sexism and the Art of Feminist Hip-Hop Maintenance." *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, edited by Rebecca Walker, Anchor Books, 1995, pp. 127-141
- Durham, Aisha, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris. "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2013. pp. 721-737.
- Hobson, Janell, and R. D. Bartlow. "Introduction: Representin': Women, Hip-Hop, and Popular Music." *Meridians*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1-14.
- Horner, Bruce. "Introduction." *Reworking English in Rhetoric and Composition: Global Interrogations, Local Interventions*, edited by Bruce Horner and Karen Kopelson, Southern Illinois University Press, 2014, pp. 1-10.
- Lindsey, Treva B. "Let Me Blow Your Mind: Hip Hop Feminist Futures in Theory and Praxis." *Urban Education*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2015, pp. 52-77.
- Miller, Carolyn R. "Genre as Social Action (1984), Revisited 30 Years Later (2014)." *Letras & Letras* 31.3 (2015): 56-72.
- Morgan, Joan. *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist*. Simon & Schuster, New York, 1999.
- Petchauer, Emery. "'I Look at Hip-Hop as a Philosophy': Edutainment, Sampling, and Classroom Practices." *Hop-Hop Culture in College Students' Lives: Elements, Embodiment, and Higher Edutainment*, Routledge, 2012, pp. 71-89.
- "Pop Culture: The Rise of Ratchet Introduction." Cooper, Morris, and Boylorn, pp. 211-214.
- "Politics and Policy: The Personal is Political Introduction." Cooper, Morris, and Boylorn, pp. 133-136.
- Pough, Gwen. "Hip-Hop is More Than Just Music to Me: The Potential for a Movement in the Culture." *Check it While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, Northeastern University Press, 2004, pp. 3-15.
- Shipka, Jody. *Toward a Composition made Whole*. University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, Pa, 2011.
- Soliday, Mary. *Everyday Genres: Writing Assignments Across the Disciplines*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011.

Walker, Rebecca. *Becoming the Third Wave*. vol. 2, MacDonald Communications, Arlington, 1992.