



## CHAPTER 25\*

# Fresh Techniques

## Hip Hop and Library Research

*Dave Ellenwood and Alyssa Berger*

### Introduction

Integrating background and primary sources is often an important component of lower division research. Through engaging with these accessible sources, there is the potential for students to make connections between academic knowledge and their previous knowledge or lived experience. But we found that, more often than not, our students were struggling to make connections with the sources they were finding; they were not able to link sources like encyclopedia and historical newspaper articles to their own research, viewpoints, and lives. Instead of trying to explain why they should be connecting with these documents, we created activities that draw on students' current frame of reference by engaging with a nontraditional resource: hip hop.

Placing hip hop in conversation with scholarly sources has several benefits. One central tenet of critical pedagogy espoused by seminal critical pedagogue Paulo Freire is that transformative education starts from students' frame of reference and builds dialogically from there.<sup>1</sup> Hip hop is an important frame of reference for many college students because it is such a popular music genre, and for some it is one of their most important sites of identity development.<sup>2</sup> Using examples from hip hop and framing these sources as appropriate for scholarly inquiry allows students to begin exploring their own scholarly interests and encourages them to bring their own expertise into the classroom.<sup>3</sup>

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Additionally, and importantly, hip hop centers the knowledge, experience, and aesthetics of oppressed and marginalized communities: groups that are often left out of the scholarly conversation.<sup>4</sup> Hip hop can be used as a tool to introduce and discuss the concept that information is assigned value based on how and by whom it was created. Using hip hop in this way calls attention to the types of knowledge that academia privileges, as well as those it excludes.

The following activities illustrate two ways to incorporate hip hop into lower division research writing or other introductory courses. They can be used as stand-alone activities to introduce students to background or primary sources or during one-shot or multisession information literacy instruction workshops.

The first variation asks students to use an encyclopedia entry to evaluate and strengthen their understanding of hip hop song lyrics. Inspired by the rapper Jay-Z's book *Decoded*, in which he annotates his own lyrics,<sup>5</sup> this activity is an opportunity for students to interpret one of their favorite hip hop songs with the aid of an encyclopedia article. The assignment requires students to identify a concept in a lyric of one of their favorite hip hop songs, interpret the artist's use of that concept with the aid of an encyclopedia article in a short annotation on the lyric annotation website Rap Genius (RG), and cite the encyclopedia article used at the end of the annotation.

The second variation uses a hip hop song as a primary source. The activity presents students with an encyclopedia entry and a hip hop song to examine a historical event. During the activity, students compare the information presented in the sources, examining the differences and considering how each might add to their research. Finally, students find and analyze their own primary source. This activity was conceived as an online module but can be used in an in-person session as well.

But before incorporating hip hop in your class, it will be helpful to reflect on your positionality in relation to hip hop. If you would like some guidance around this process, take a look at Danielle Rowland's workbook activity, "Fresh Techniques: Getting Ready to Use Hip Hop in the Classroom," (chapter 27 in volume 1 of this publication). When we, the authors, use hip hop in the classroom, we acknowledge our relationship with hip hop and make our intentions clear. We are fans of the genre and engage in it for purposes of enjoyment and to deepen our understanding of rappers' perspectives. As white, middle-class people, we do not have any claim to this genre or culture. It is important to communicate to students that incorporating hip hop is not an attempt to make a library session seem cool or to pander to students, but instead to include and examine diverse perspectives within academic discourse.

# Variation 1: Rap Genius Background

## Source Activity

### *Learning Outcomes*

During this activity, students will

- Identify a theme or concept in their favorite hip hop song in order to create an annotation that will help interpret the song
- Locate an encyclopedia article in a reference source database on the concept they identified

### *Materials*

- Pre-workshop assignment. This includes providing detailed instructions for setting up a Rap Genius (RG) account.

### *Preparation*

- Create an account in RG. Play around with the site and learn the functions and limitations. Create an annotation that can serve as a good example for students and find other good examples to share. Find a weak annotation example or two to share with students.
- Assign RG prep activity as pre-workshop homework.
- Create discussion board in LMS where students will post links to their annotations.

### *Session Instructions*

1. Begin by briefly explaining the concept of annotations, how they are used in academia as a way to summarize and evaluate sources, and that annotations are used in hip hop as well, e.g., Jay-Z's *Decoded* and RG.
2. Show students an example of an annotation that you created for one of your favorite songs. Play part of the song, provide some general analysis of what it is about, and talk about why you find it appealing (the sound, depth of the lyrics, etc.). We used "Tons O Guns" by Gangstarr, in which we annotated the Malcolm X speech sample in the beginning of the song. Talk about the reasons you think it is a good annotation, such as providing valuable context and a citation to further reading. Identify several concepts in the lyrics that one could interpret with the aid of an encyclopedia article. For example, the samples and lyrics of "Tons O Guns" are filled with concepts of imperialism, black radicalism, gun violence, and so on—

all concepts and topics discussed in several encyclopedia articles. You can also show students an example of a bad RG citation, of which there is no shortage. Take the opportunity here to have a brief critical discussion of RG. RG has been embroiled in several controversies since its debut. The rapper Kool A.D. even dismissed the site as “white devil sophistry,” purportedly because of the site’s inclusion of many weak interpretations and the presumed whiteness of majority of RG users.<sup>6</sup> Although there are some criticisms of the site, there are still affordances, such as the potential to share thoughtful interpretations of lyrics.

3. Explain the assignment to students. They are expected to use one encyclopedia source to create an annotation in which they interpret a concept in the lyrics of one of their favorite songs. They will search in a reference source database. They will use the specific concepts they have identified in the lyric as their keywords, and this is a good point to demonstrate a search in the reference database. Students will also provide a citation for the encyclopedia article they use at the end of their annotation, so show them how to locate the citation generator in the database. Talk here about how some encyclopedia articles may demonstrate racism or bias against hip hop. For example, one entry on Christopher Wallace (Notorious B.I.G.) states that he was “articulate yet streetwise.” As if these are opposing qualities! Ask students why this might be biased and offensive.
4. Let students work on their own annotations, and walk around the class to provide help.

## *Assessment*

Go through student posts in the LMS discussion board. Have students (1) identified a concept in from their song, (2) interpreted it with the aid of an encyclopedia article, and (3) cited the encyclopedia article at the end of their annotation? As this is meant to be an introductory activity, this is a yes/no, pass/fail assessment.

## Variation 2: Primary Source Activity

### *Learning Outcomes*

During this activity, students will

- Find and critically examine primary sources
- Identify their own experiences and expertise as they relate to their research
- Examine privilege and exclusion in academic sources

## Materials

- A hip hop song that describes experience with racism, poverty, or other social justice issues
- In addition to the song, it is helpful to provide students with song lyrics, which can usually be found online
- An excerpt from an academic source, such an encyclopedia entry or scholarly article that relates in some way to the song's lyrics

## Preparation

- Create an online module (see directions below and appendix 25A for examples)
- The online format is ideal for this activity. Allowing students to work through the module at their own pace gives them the time to unpack, contextualize, and reflect on the sources in a meaningful way. Even if you are incorporating this activity into an in-person instruction session, we would recommend a flipped classroom approach where the students read the secondary source and listen to the song, with some guiding questions, before coming to class.

## Session Instructions

1. Determine what song you will be using for the activity and then pair it with a related secondary source. For this exercise, we selected Tupac's "I Wonder If Heaven Got a Ghetto," which was recorded around the time of the Los Angeles riots in 1992. In the song, Tupac speaks candidly about systemic racism, police brutality, and the realities of living as a person of color in this time and place. For the secondary source, we found a short excerpt from the *Encyclopedia of Race and Crime* that gives an overview of the riots.
2. Create an activity in your LMS that walks students through the process of analyzing your primary and secondary source examples. Give some context for the activity, providing a brief description or explanatory video on primary sources. Provide a link or excerpt of the secondary source and embed the song. Then, ask students some guiding questions that will encourage them to compare the two sources. See appendix 25A for suggested questions.
3. In the second section of the activity, ask students to find and analyze a primary source for their own topic. Provide directions or tutorials on finding primary sources within library databases, but also encourage them to search the Web. Be clear that this source does not have to be a hip hop

song, or a song at all, if it does not fit their topic. Ask the students to submit citation information for one primary source that they could use for their assignment and to provide some analysis of the source such as who created the source, as well as how, why, and for whom was it created. Push students to think more deeply about this source and the other sources they've gathered with questions like these: How does the information you found in this primary sources differ from information you've gathered from your secondary sources? Briefly explain how this primary source will contribute to your research.

## *Assessment*

Review student work, using responses to determine students' grasp of the concepts. Are they able to articulate the difference between primary and secondary sources? Can they describe how and why they would use a primary source in their work? If possible, review the completed course assignment. Check bibliographies for primary sources.

## Reflections

After implementing these activities, we immediately saw a difference in student comprehension and engagement. Students were able to effectively use reference databases to find and connect the knowledge in an encyclopedia article to a topic of their own interest. They were also able to articulate the differences between primary and tertiary sources in much more detail than when using more traditional primary source examples. In their work, we could see many students beginning to think about how these sources are created, how they are framed, and the types of information that could be garnered from each.

We found that using hip hop also introduces concepts of authority and privilege in academia and scholarship at an accessible level. With minimal guidance, many students picked up on and began to discuss issues around exclusionary practices in knowledge production. Some students also began to examine their own experiences in relation to the hip hop sources and recognized that sources like these could be used to fill in gaps in their own knowledge. For example, in response to a question about how the perspective of the Tupac song added to their understanding of the topic, one student wrote, "I remember when this happened, but I've only seen it from secondary sources. I was just a white kid in the Midwest who was completely unaffected by it when it happened, but the song makes it seem so much more real."<sup>7</sup>

Most importantly, we saw that including hip hop helped to illustrate that students can be scholars in any area that interests them. These activities allow

students to think broadly about their interests and experience and apply that to their scholarship. We saw this reflected in their work. In students' bibliographies they chose more diverse primary sources than in other classes: songs from many different genres, lyrics, album art, and concert videos. In the RG annotation activity, students engaged with sociological, political, biological, and philosophical concepts.

Both in and outside the classroom, hip hop can be a way for students to take in, think critically about, and engage with social justice issues from within their own knowledge base. Scholars tend to use a very specific rhetoric when we discuss these problems, and it can be challenging and intimidating for newcomers to enter into this conversation. Because hip hop often relies on experiential knowledge and evocative emotional language, it is much more accessible to students, and it can serve as an entry point into the broader conversation.

## Final Question

Think about non-academic sources in your life that speak to your lived experience, particularly voices or viewpoints that are underrepresented in academic texts. How might you bring these into the classroom? How might you encourage students to do the same?

## Appendix 25A: Sample Primary Source Activity Questions

When asking students to compare a traditional secondary source with a hip hop song, it is helpful to pose guiding questions that push students to think about differences in perspective, tone, and authorship, as well as how these differences influence the information provided by each source.

Possible questions include

- How did the perspective of the secondary source (the encyclopedia source) differ from that of the primary source (the Tupac song)?
- What information were you able to gather from the encyclopedia article? What about the Tupac song? How was the information similar? How was it different? Hint: It might help to read the lyrics of Tupac’s song.
- How did listening to the song inform or change your understanding of the encyclopedia article?
- How might using a primary source, like a Tupac song, strengthen your research?
- What do you think are some of the benefits of using a primary source, like a Tupac song, that portrays a first-person perspective, emotion, or argument related to your topic?

## Notes

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2000).
2. Emery Petchauer, *Hip-Hop Culture in College Students’ Lives* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
3. Dave Ellenwood, “Hip-Hop and Information Literacy: Critically Incorporating Hip-Hop in Information Literacy Instruction,” in *Information Literacy and Social Justice*, ed. Shana Higgins and Lua Gregory (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2013), 163–84.
4. Marcelo Diversi, and Claudio Moreira, *Between Talk* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009).
5. Jay-Z, *Decoded* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011).
6. Das Racist, “Middle of the Cake,” *Relax*, Greedhead Music, 2011.
7. Anonymous student, “Finding Primary Sources” (online class activity, English 102: The Intersections of Music and Culture, Cascadia College, Bothell, WA, February 2014).

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