Knowledge Reigns Supreme: The Critical Pedagogy of Hip-hop Artist KRS-ONE

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Knowledge Reigns Supreme: The Critical Pedagogy of Hip-hop Artist KRS-ONE argues for the inclusionary practice of studying and interpreting postmodern texts in today's school curriculum using a (Hip-hop) cultural studies and critical theory approach, thus creating a transformative curriculum. Based on the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, the text argues that the implementation of teaching strategies and techniques derived from Hip-hop culture and specifically the rap lyrics of legendary Hip-hop pioneer and activist, Lawrence Parker, aka KRS-ONE (Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone) is an empowering, liberating pedagogy for educators, prospective educators and students of diverse backgrounds. The purpose of Knowledge Reigns Supreme ... is to analyze and critique KRS-ONE's rap lyrics as a postmodern text and as one concrete example of critical literacy, particularly because of the emancipatory potential it has for educating all youth, regardless of race, class or ethnicity. KRS-ONE's lyrical career began in 1986 and continues today with the inclusion of lecture tours and performances at universities nationally and internationally. He is one of the most sought after collegiate speakers in the country, visiting over 200 universities, including: Clark, Yale, Moorehouse, Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, Temple, Howard, Spellman, and UCLA. Knowledge Reigns Supreme ... also provides educators with pedagogical strategies that can be implemented in the classroom. Educators teaching courses in pedagogy, language arts, social studies, research and methodology at the high school (9-12), undergraduate and graduate levels will find the contents of this text useful.
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Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses on a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positonality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy’s (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity—youth identity in particular—the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant. But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfulfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
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In Loving Memory of Joe L. Kincheloe
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INTRODUCTION

My Personal Story

My experiences as a female person of color growing up in a predominantly White town in central Pennsylvania inspired me to embark upon this research addressing the need to provide an inclusive, empowering, and equitable education for today’s diverse student population. One strategy to meet this goal is to include alternative texts with multiple perspectives into traditional, standardized curricula. Alternative texts that present multiple perspectives provide unlimited opportunities for students to truly engage and participate in the development and success of their education due to the liberatory potential of the content of such texts. In the work presented here, I will argue for the inclusion of an alternative text that arguably presents a different perspective from mainstream, dominant ideologies – rap lyrics. Rap lyrics, among other genres of music, have provided me with the strength to confront personal struggles I have had with self-identification, cultural and ethnic pride, and marginalization. Music was my therapy in the sense that it provided strength in the face of adversity. It was also one of the factors that eventually enabled me to express my inner-most feelings and thoughts. Rap, or traditionally known as the emceeing (MCing) element of Hip Hop culture, is one of four original elements that comprise the culture known as Hip Hop. I begin by providing background on why and how this culture resonated so deeply within me.

My personal experiences as a student in the classroom have affected me in a profound manner that, unbeknownst to me at the time, would ultimately create an inner passion to one day educate pre– and in–service educators on the importance of providing an empowering, inclusive, and social justice education reflective of critical pedagogy and multiple literacies. In retrospect, experiencing racial tension in the classroom at a very young age, I realized the key role it played in my childhood development. As I mentioned earlier, I was raised in a small, predominantly White town in central Pennsylvania. My family was one of approximately four minority families of color in the entire town. My being “different” from my peers was not addressed nor even mentioned in the classroom. Individual teachers would occasionally engage in private conversations with me, showing interest in my culture and ethnicity, but these conversations were never brought to the attention of the entire class or addressed in the curriculum in a critical or just manner. I now realize that because my teachers failed to address issues of race, ethnicity, and culture in any way on a regular basis, their oversight or failure was a disservice not only to me but to others as well.

Elementary school was a piece of cake. I excelled in all the core subjects and enjoyed attending school on a daily basis. I fondly remember most of my elementary teachers and reminisce about the days in which I was eager and willing to participate in class discussions and activities. I took on many leadership roles inside and outside the classroom and was unafraid to challenge authority, but always in a respectful manner.
By the time I graduated to junior high school, in the 6th grade, I remember being unusually tall for my age, reaching heights well beyond many of my female and male counterparts. I recall having a huge crush on Matthew, a fellow classmate and friend, whom I felt, genuinely liked me, but ironically, constantly called me out of my name. On a daily basis, Matthew would address me by calling out my cultural origin: [East] Indian. But rather intentionally, he failed to pronounce the word, Indian, correctly. Instead, he placed emphasis on the first letter “I” using a long sounding “i” rather than the correct short “i” sound. Phonetically, it sounded like, “Ayn-dee-in”. Sometimes he would repeat the “Ayn” syllable several times before saying the word in its entirety. As I previously stated, I felt that Matthew genuinely cared for me, as a friend, despite addressing me by a racial epithet. I did not feel it was mean-spirited because of the way in which he said the word; it was expressed in a non-malicious, fun-natured, friendly manner. I do not believe he intended any harm or disrespect (although it was indeed disrespectful), but more importantly, I do not think he was fully aware or understood the effects of what such name calling entailed. Although he reminded me that I was “different,” I still felt like I belonged. However, I started to feel slightly self-conscious and even a little embarrassed for being so noticeably and awkwardly different (physically tall and lean). I’m not certain whether my 6th grade teachers were aware of Matthew’s innocent name-calling; if they were, they did not address it. Nor did I address it to my teachers … or parents.

My “difference” was made painstakingly clear by fellow classmates during my 7th grade year, particularly by three White male students who were repeating the 7th grade … twice. As in most junior high schools, my 7th grade cohort changed classrooms and teachers depending on the core subject being studied. My math, science, and health teachers were strict and somewhat authoritarian in their teaching style. They demanded, and were granted, respect from their students; therefore, it was rare to see any disruptions or classroom management problems in their classes. My social studies, English, and home economics classes, on the other hand, were taught by teachers who had virtually little or no control of their students. It was in these three classes, but mostly in social studies and home economics, that I was relentlessly ostracized and openly teased and taunted by the three White males mentioned above. I was called damn near every racial slur known to African Americans, Native Americans, and Eskimo-Americans. Any racial or ethnic references to Asian Americans or South Asians (East Indians) in particular were never revealed simply due to the boy’s ignorance of my cultural and ethnic background. The students may have had an excuse for being ignorant or uneducated about my ethnic background, but the ignorance displayed by certain teachers was not so easily excusable. The teachers were, I believe, guilty of failing to include thoughtful discussions on race, ethnicity and other multicultural issues. My physical features, besides being unusually tall, certainly identified me as being East Indian – or so I thought. Rather than using the strength and courage I once had when challenging authority in my elementary school years, or using my height as a weapon of defense, I sheepishly cowered to the boys intolerable behavior, remaining silent, often times staring at the ground while the hurling of insults continued day after day. I regret being so weak and fearful of defending myself. On
the other hand, I refused to break down and cry in front of the boys or the rest of
the class. I felt strong in the sense that, by restraining myself from showing any
ears or emotions, I was prohibiting the boys from gaining satisfaction or pleasure
in witnessing a break down. I remember wholeheartedly resenting White people . .
but at the same time wishing so badly to be White! I also remember blaming those
students who teased me and not the real culprits, the teachers, for condoning racist
and hateful treatment of their students.

The verbal abuse continued religiously for nearly seven months in the three
classes mentioned above but never in the hallway or cafeteria during lunch.
Ironically, the teasing occurred only when there were teachers present. And the
teachers said nothing, allowing for a divisive and unsafe environment. Not one
disciplinary action was taken when racial slurs were maliciously spouted from the
hateful mouths of my classmates. Instead, the teachers addressed the act of
disrupting the lecture by simply asking the boys to get back to work or requesting
they pay attention to the lecture, thus outright ignoring the content and
maliciousness of the remarks. The teasing was not innocent like that of Matthew. I
could feel the hatred and viciousness of the words once they left their lips. I could
see in their eyes the detestation and disgust they had for me. They loathed me
simply for my outward, physical appearance – for being me. Their words were
meant to penetrate and to hurt. And they were successful.

I refused to inform my parents of the abuse I was subjected to for fear of them
getting involved (in fact, my parents would not be privy to my school experience
until I was in my early 30s). I was raised in an extremely loving and caring home
but I was deathly afraid that once my parents were made aware of the teasing, they
would immediately contact the school and if the boys were reprimanded, the
teasing would somehow become worse, extending to the unguarded hallways and
cafeteria lunchroom. I felt the verbal abuse may lead to physical harm within the
isolated confines of the hallway. I remained silent for the duration of the abuse and
was actually very good at hiding any signs of emotion. At home, I acted “normal”
revealing no hint of trouble in school. As I reflect back though, I was
embarrassingly passive, simply sitting in class taking it, ignoring the remarks,
unable to find the strength and courage to fight back. My personality – my being –
that had changed. I was no longer confident, outspoken, or willing to engage in
classroom discussions as I had in the past. Instead, I felt vulnerable, insecure, and
extremely self-conscious of my very existence. I was ashamed of my ethnic
background, so much so that I wanted to be White. To be White meant you were
accepted and “normal.” After all, my environment ranging from school to
community population was White. The school curriculum and mainstream media
appeared to revere Western European leaders, figures, and heroes. The disregard
and degradation of my culture was made strikingly evident by the fact that the
entire sub-continent of India was studied for precisely two 45 minute class periods
in my social studies class. The two days we covered my home country, I intentionally
faked an illness to my parents so I would not have to attend school. I was afraid the
boys would finally learn of my ethnic background when pictures of “my people”
were revealed to them in the social studies textbook we were assigned to read.
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I was convinced that the long list of racial slurs would be never-ending and the torture would continue more than ever.

Apparently, the constant disruptions in class were unbearable to some of my other classmates as well. A female student, who happened to be friends with the boys, was the only student with enough courage to report the misbehavior to the school’s guidance counselor, a gentle and kind elderly White woman. I remember that day like it was yesterday. The guidance counselor called me into the main lobby area of the guidance office. In the lobby, not in her office, she informed me that she was made aware of the disruptive behavior and name calling from the three boys. She continued to explain that she spoke to the boys and reassured me that the teasing will cease to continue. Apparently she threatened them with some sort of disciplinary action if their taunting continued, so ultimately only a warning was given as a means of discipline. The counselor asked if I knew why the boys teased me. I deliberately stood silent. She picked up on my cue and explained that the reason the boys teased me was simply because they liked me; it was their way of expressing their affection towards me. She explained that young males, in general, due to their inability to communicate feelings and emotions with kind, caring words, resort to name calling and teasing in order to attract the attention and affection of the female they were infatuated with. I stared at her in disbelief, thinking to myself, “Do you think I’m some kind of fool?? You expect me to believe they desired me and wanted my affection?? No, they despised and hated me with a passion!!” While nodding my head in agreement like the naïve little girl she must have thought I was, the only words that came pouring out of my mouth was “okay, thank you” only because I was so anxious to get the hell out of there! The “explanation” took no more than five minutes.

I left the guidance office and rushed to the girl’s restroom. The female student from my class happened to be in the restroom as I entered. She told me she had had enough of the teasing and since our teachers lacked any sort of integrity or agency to discipline the boys, she was compelled to report them to the guidance counselor. I thanked her and proceeded to the privacy of one of the restroom stalls. Once safely inside, I finally, for the first time throughout this torturous ordeal, shed what felt like endless mounds of tears – tears that were deeply buried and locked away for months. I was filled with enormous gratitude to my fellow classmate who put an end to months of persecution. I was also grateful to the guidance counselor for forcing the boys to stop, regardless of the rationale given to me for their actions. I felt such an overwhelming sense of ease and relief, as if the weight (of stress and loneliness) I was carrying on my shoulders were at last lifted! I felt like a new person, but one that allowed the teasing to penetrate so deeply that it left scars and fears that would take months and years to overcome.

The remainder of my time in the public school system was relatively (and thankfully) free of drama – and trauma. I did not experience any more incidents of public humiliation or persecution. However, the seven months of ridicule played a tremendous role in shaping who I was to become and how I felt about myself. I continued to feel vulnerable when any attention was given to me in a public forum. I remained silent during class discussions simply because I felt I had nothing important to contribute. It was “safe” to remain voiceless and undetected.
Essentially, I felt my opinions would seem worthless and valueless. I was timid and shy, reluctant to take on leadership roles – a far cry from my childhood experiences in elementary school.

As I am continuously reflecting on my educational experiences, I realize now that I utilized other forms of coping mechanisms when dealing with marginalization and exclusion. I credit much of my strength for coping with my treatment at school to the music I listened to. I used music as an outlet and as a safe haven into which I could escape to feel safe and powerful. I realize now that this escape into music helped me release all of the built-up, negative anger that was brewing inside. The lyrics of the songs I listened to were empowering and liberating; the beats were energizing, giving me strength to stay calm and sane in the face of cruelty and ignorance. I immersed myself into listening to songs that resonated with my experiences. I found so much solace and comfort in music that it was enough to hide my pain from my friends and family.

It must be noted that I found refuge in all types of music, including rock-n-roll, mainstream pop, R&B and soul, and some country songs. I was first exposed to Hip Hop culture and rap music during the summer of 1984. As I described earlier, my family was one of about four minority families in my hometown. There were two other East Indian families and one African American family that I was aware of. I remember the African American family moving to town when I graduated from 8th grade. It was the summer before beginning my 9th grade year in high school. I distinctly remember befriending the only son from the African American family at the local Armory near my neighborhood where I frequently played “tennis” alone against the large brick building. His name was Dewayne and he would be a senior in my high school. Dewayne shared many stories with me about his upbringing in Brooklyn, New York and how his move to rural Pennsylvania was the greatest culture shock he had ever experienced. At about the same time, the local YMCA began offering break-dancing classes in which I was enrolled. Dewayne was one of the instructors (or bboys – Hip Hop name for the mainstream term of “break-dancing”). He introduced me to some of the “old school” lyrics that were popular in New York at the time, mainly “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang released in 1979 and Grand Master Flash & The Furious Five’s album, “The Message” in 1982. I remember appreciating the content of the song “The Message”, recognizing that although I could not understand emotionally or psychologically the struggles embedded in poverty and urban life, I could understand the marginalization and oppression one could experience due to cultural (mis)identity.

It was at this time that my love for the culture began (and as I will explain later during my college years, it grew). To my dismay, Dewayne only remained in town for a little over a year. After he graduated high school, he moved back to New York and so my only avenue to Hip Hop and rap was through mainstream media. Mainstream media capitalized on the culture soon thereafter with the crossover hit single, “Walk This Way,” by MC’s from Queens, NY, Run-D MC and rock group, Aerosmith in 1986. Also receiving heavy rotation on mainstream airwaves was the all-White rap group, Beastie Boys’ album, “License to Ill” in that same year. It wasn’t until 1988-89, upon enrollment in college and exposure to a new diverse
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circle of friends mainly from Philadelphia and New York, that I had access to hit-
lists played on urban radio stations, and CDs from underground- and socially and
politically-conscious artists, including Boogie Down Productions and KRS-ONE.

Beginning in the fall 1990, while attending The Pennsylvania State University,
University Park main campus located in the suburban town of State College, PA., I
was pleased with the large class sizes. Many of the introductory-level general
education courses required of all Penn State students easily enrolled up to 200
students. I felt safe and invisible in these lecture-style classes that often met in
huge auditoriums. Fear of being called upon had nearly diminished, until I was
forced to take classes in my major, elementary education, which were smaller in
size. I successfully conquered my fear of public speaking but it did not come easy.
In fact, it was a long, difficult struggle complete with sleepless, anxiety-filled
nights prior to major presentation dates. I felt distressingly self-conscious in the
presence of large groups; my nervous and shaky voice was one indicator of such
anxiety. The trembling of my hands was another.

The social experiences and friendships I cultivated at Penn State helped me
regain cultural and ethnic pride I so desperately needed. Student population at
University Park main campus was large in size (approximately 40,000 students
enrolled at the time), but small, and segregated, in terms of minority population. I
had a diverse circle of friends, but strangely enough found myself connecting more
to African Americans and Latinos, rather than my fellow East Indians. In fact, I
was quickly embraced by many members of the African American community
more so than by members of my own culture. I had the feeling that East Indians
felt uncomfortable approaching me either because I looked “too American” or
conversely because I was “not Indian enough”, that somehow I was being untrue to
my Indian roots. I also realize my own responsibility in not taking initiative to
approach them for reasons of my own. Another assumption I made for the lack of
friendships I had with my fellow people was because I associated with other
minority groups, mainly African Americans and Latinos. I base these feelings on
the many ignorant, and at times racist, remarks I heard from some East Indians
about the company I kept when they actually did approach me, as well as the
countless stares I received when I was with my African American and Latino
friends. I want to emphasize that my feelings are founded on assumptions I made
based from my own personal experiences and are not meant to be reflective of all
East Indian people.

My friends and I shared stories about our cultures, families, and experiences
growing up. We shared similar stories about being marginalized or experiencing
some form of racial or prejudicial treatment. I was finally able to reveal my
personal story to people who could relate to the pain and suffering I had
experienced as a youngster in school. I was also able to relate in some ways to the
pain and suffering they had experienced as a result of prejudicial treatment. As a
result, my self-esteem and cultural pride slowly resurrected within me due to the
friendships, and particularly, strong women of color I surrounded myself with.
Leading by example, my girlfriends exhibited pride and confidence and as a result,
they taught me to challenge and resist dominant standards when it conflicted with
my own standards.

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My college friends were deeply embedded in Hip Hop culture, in other words, most of them were Hip Hop – it was their identity, their being, their lifestyle. With my relatively light exposure to the culture, mainly the rap and break-dancing elements from Dewayne, my experiences during my college years introduced me to the other elements of the culture not so often recognized in mainstream society. The entire lifestyle and culture that permeated the Hip Hop world resonated with me to the point that I embraced Hip Hop just as easily and quickly as my friends embraced me. The more I learned about the culture and the more I listened to the music, the more I was fascinated by it. My deep appreciation of rap music in particular and its personal meaning for me were my rationale for exploring its texts in this book.
CHAPTER 1

THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

Schooling or Education?

Upon enrolling in the Cultural Studies Program at the graduate level (Master’s and Doctoral Programs) at The Pennsylvania State University, I was given the opportunity to study, reflect, and share the effects my K-12 schooling experiences had on me. I realized that I could use Hip Hop culture and any of its elements, as an educational tool to empower others. Partly, I discovered the potential of the rap element as an educational tool when I took several courses from prominent professors in the field of Cultural Studies who opened my eyes to how media, power, control, representation, and production affect nearly every facet of our social, political, and economic life. It was very disappointing but enlightening in graduate school to learn about, and to be exposed to, the harsh realities and hidden truths about these and other Cultural Studies issues that had not been previously presented to me in my academic career. I understood how hegemony operated within society and education and how it contributed to my own sense of self. Ultimately, I developed a consciousness that made me painfully aware of the social, cultural, and political structures that valued the dominant culture at the expense of marginalized ones. I began to question the purpose of education. Was it to truly educate students and produce active citizens or was it to school students on knowing their place in society? Or were certain demographics of students educated while others were simply schooled? Sadly enough, I felt my real education had just begun in graduate school, with the realization that my K-12 schooling was just that — I was schooled by a technocratic, hegemonic system that produced passive and complying citizens that furthered the interests of the dominant culture. I was indoctrinated to act in prescribed manners, instructed in a way that discouraged me from asking questions or challenging textbooks; in fact, the textbooks were used as tools to sell so-called truths, as the final authority on what was right and wrong, what was centralized and marginalized, or excluded altogether, and ultimately, what was valued and devalued. It must be emphasized that I do not place sole blame or responsibility of the crisis I experienced on the educational system alone. There were many contributing factors that assisted in my struggle with identity, including my own sense of responsibility and that of my family; however, I do contend that the public schools I attended played an influential role in shaping my identity as well as my perception of others. I venture to say that my experiences are not isolated ones and that many students across the nation have experienced similar feelings of marginalization, exclusion, and denigration as a result of being schooled.

The introduction of Cultural Studies, Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy – as well as the open-mindedness of my professors – allowed me the opportunity to use
and connect my personal interests in Hip Hop culture and rap music with my goal of arguing for an inclusive, social justice education that is empowering for all. These factors led me to study and argue here for the inclusion of multiple, critical literacies including the incorporation of media literacy as a way to include rap music into the school curriculum. In this sense, media can be used as alternative, educational texts analyzed and deconstructed from a critical perspective. This includes print and non-print forms of media, ranging from newspapers, magazines, comic books, and advertisements to television, films, music, MP3 files, video games, and the Internet. Media representations of race, class, culture (and subcultures), gender and sexuality should also be studied and analyzed. It must be emphasized that these alternative texts produce multiple perspectives, meanings, and interpretations depending on a variety of factors including social, economic, cultural, and political affiliations. For the purpose of this text, mainstream media representation of Hip Hop culture and rap music will be analyzed. Rap music, in particular, will also be argued as an alternative text to supplement the traditional school curricula.

Rap music that tends to be over-publicized by the media includes rap that expresses violent, homophobic, and sexually explicit viewpoints. In this book, however, I will explore the many other faces of rap that do not garner the media attention and exposure that they rightfully deserve. Conscious or political MCs such as KRS-ONE and others (Lupe Fiasco, Common, Talib Kweli, Jurassic Five, Paris, Public Enemy, Dead Prez, Sista Souljah, Mos Def, Rakim, Immortal Technique, Sage Francis, and The Roots) are/were merely dismissed as being too controversial, simply because the cultural politics they articulate in their lyrics describe the harsh realities of social and economic suffering never before told from their perspective. One rarely witnesses the talents of these artists on a consistent basis on mainstream airwaves. These MCs are viewed as controversial essentially because they are the voice of social critique and criticism, which is precisely why mainstream media has chosen not to focus much attention on them (Ross & Rose, 1994). These “controversial” MCs are sometimes classified as “militant rappers” or “Hip Hop nationalists” (Ross and Rose, 1994) and what I argue as “organic intellectuals” in the spirit of Italian revolutionary, Antonio Gramsci. Some would argue that these “Hip Hop nationalists” represent the voice of the urban poor, exposing the everyday struggles of working-class African Americans through lyrical expressions. As a result, Hip Hop culture and rap music have become the cultural emblem for America’s young Black urban youth (Ross & Rose).

The main purpose of this book is to explore further the lyrics of an artist whom I consider to be a “Hip Hop nationalist” or “organic intellectual”: KRS-ONE. My goal of analyzing, critiquing, and interpreting KRS-ONE’s lyrics is to demonstrate how rap music sets itself up as an alternative text, and as a form of poetry, that educators and students can use to challenge hegemony, enhance literacy skills, and invoke student agency.

Critics of Hip Hop and rap music may find absolutely no educational value in the incorporation of such alternative texts arguing that they only serve to dumb down the curriculum and more importantly, our youth. For this reason, it is important to fully understand the theoretical framework that guides my argument in
order to understand why I chose this particular genre of music (rap) as an educational tool and one type of alternative text. I chose to approach the inclusion of socially – and politically – oriented rap from a critical pedagogical perspective which has the potential of transforming the school curricula into contextual, meaningful, liberating lessons that connect traditional and contemporary texts together. Teaching a critical pedagogy is empowering for students as well. It transforms the role of students from one of passivity and silence to one that is socially and politically aware and active, inspiring students to question and challenge injustices and more importantly, fight for more equitable conditions. This is education! I assert that examining rap music in relation to the construction of racial and cultural identity, as an alternative text to challenge dominant ideologies, and as a form of non-traditional therapy, can become an integral part of the transformative curriculum.

Part of this curriculum includes the incorporation of alternative texts (or multiple literacies). Analyzing and critiquing KRS-ONE’s lyrics (and other similar artists) as an alternative text to traditional curricula have liberatory potential for educating all youth, regardless of race, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic background, about African American culture, urban realities, marginalization and oppression. In addition, this book examines how rap as alternative, liberatory texts exposes power relations between oppressed groups in nearly all aspects of society. As stated earlier, I specifically chose lyrics from MC (Master of Ceremony, or using mainstream’s terminology, “rap artist”), KRS-ONE, formerly from the rap group Boogie Down Productions, because his lyrics articulate the harsh realities of urban and social life for African American youth, particularly surrounding the themes of race, power, and identity. This book analyzes and critiques how KRS-ONE attempts to take his message one step further by attempting to politicize education, media, and other institutions of power that contribute to poor economic conditions in urban areas. He also critiques and challenges other Hip Hop artists to “step up their game” by creating a more diverse view of Hip Hop rather than limiting it to commercialized and sensationalized representations as currently portrayed in mainstream media. To this end, I will show how KRS-ONE’s lyrics, from specific albums, attempts to deconstruct four major institutions of power – media, government, police, and educational institutions – that help maintain and perpetuate mainstream or dominant ideologies.

In order for the transformative curriculum to be successful, teachers must take some risks! Because I work with many teachers in New York City, I understand some of the challenges and pressures they face from administrators and the system itself (e.g. – mandates of NCLB, standardized testing and pressure of teaching-to-the-test, and probationary or untenured positions that place these teachers as virtually powerless and/or helpless). These concerns will be addressed in more depth as we progress through the chapter. The risks, albeit calculated ones, involves teachers teaching in a manner that is critical and inclusive of cultural background and knowledge, known as critical pedagogy and cultural pedagogy, respectively. A critical pedagogy includes the implementation of critical and multiple literacies that educators in all disciplines can incorporate into their already existing curricula. Teaching from a critical perspective transforms the classroom to
one where students feel valued, respected, and included. They learn to question information or so-called “facts” or “truths” that they may have thought to be normal or fixed; the “it is what it is” attitude slowly disintegrates and in its place, students develop a critical consciousness that hopefully inspires agency (activism). To provide a better understanding of my position I continue this introduction by discussing and clarifying these terms and theories that have grounded my argument for a transformative curriculum. I begin by explaining the importance of Cultural Studies and then provide background information on Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy. A critical education that I am proposing will ultimately lead to the inclusion of a cultural pedagogy and multiple and critical literacies that transcend current, technocratic practices to ones that are transformative and empowering for teachers, students, and their communities.

CULTURAL STUDIES

We live in a society that is continually evolving, and yet somehow it has become generally accepted that schooling should not change. Many still hold the expectation that what “used to work” remains appropriate. Some educators even hold this view. I work with educators who feel that the best approach to teaching is the one that worked for them while attending school 20 – 25 years ago! Realistically though, the world is different and continuously changing, and we change with it. Cultural Studies and Critical Theory are based on this premise of constant change.

Cultural Studies is an inter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary, and counter-disciplinary approach to reality, the world, and knowledge itself and is often associated with the study of popular culture and youth culture (Kincheloe, Slattery, & Steinberg, 2000; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998). However, Cultural Studies is not limited to just studying popular culture or youth culture. This field of study has emerged to challenge the Western canon and to move beyond traditional disciplines by incorporating “other” discourses, including those by women, African-American, Third World peoples, and gay and lesbian scholars and practitioners in order to analyze and evaluate the hierarchy that separates the culture of “others” and so-called “high” culture. This approach views culture as pluralistic, shifting, and hybrid, equalizing the culture of the so-called lower classes (Kincheloe et al. 2000; Giroux, 1996; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). Cultural Studies analyzes the relationship among culture, knowledge, and power from historical, social, and theoretical contexts, and is concerned with how knowledge, texts, and representations are produced and appropriated in relation to power structures (Steinberg, 1997; Giroux, 1996). Cultural Studies recognizes and acknowledges oppressed voices and oppressed experiences at the hands of the oppressors. It can be seen as a form of social and cultural critique and a medium for social transformation. In addition, Cultural Studies is negotiable and encourages readers to read its theories rigorously with a critical eye. It is political in the sense that it requires citizens to view social, economic, cultural, historical, and all theoretical constructs from a political perspective.
Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) argue that only a small number of educational theorists connect the possibilities of Cultural Studies to pedagogy and schooling. These researchers contend that traditional educators at all levels, elementary to higher education, might view schools from a “narrow technocratic” perspective, which commonly advocates mainstream reform efforts (pp. 45–46). The technocratic model often views schools as places to manage, rather than places to further understand education as a democratic public sphere. Under such a model, regulation and standardization of teacher behavior is stressed so that teachers cannot assume the political and ethical role of “transformative intellectuals” who selectively produce and legitimize particular forms of knowledge and authority (Giroux & McLaren, 1994; Aronowitz & Giroux, pp. 45–46). An example of a technocratic reform effort that attempts to regulate and standardize is former President George W. Bush’ federal No Child Left Behind Act with its constant testing of students and rigid accountability standards of teachers. As a result of increased pressure to perform well on standardized exams as the sole determining factor to measure success, teachers have been reduced to technicians, teaching to the test rather than addressing the real problems that plague the American educational system (e.g. – smaller classroom size, contextualized teaching strategies, multi-inter-trans-counter-cultural approaches to curriculum and instruction, multiple assessment strategies, teacher expectations (or lack thereof), administration-teacher-parent relationship, physical structure of school building, resources of all kinds distributed in an equitable manner, and many more factors inside and outside the educational context too complex to address here).

Incorporating Cultural Studies into the language of pedagogy and education requires all educators to take risks and challenge institutional practices that are at odds with democratic practices and provide space for “culture” to be read, viewed, and analyzed as “text.” To be clear, the term “culture” goes far beyond the study of human civilizations, societies, or ethnic groups. Culture, in this context, also includes the study of mainstream dominant culture, youth culture, popular culture and all of its sub-cultures (Hip Hop, Goth, Rave, Punk, etc.). In other words, educators whose work is shaped by Cultural Studies view teachers and students as active participants in the construction of knowledge and social change.

The study of rap music using an inter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary, and counter-disciplinary approach such as Cultural Studies allows educators and students to challenge and move beyond traditional mainstream ideologies such as technocratic reform efforts. By critically examining and deconstructing the lyrical content of KRS-ONE for example, educators and students open the doors for a transformative dialogue to occur, and confront the most neglected text: “culture.” This form of pedagogy views students as active and critical agents of social change (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). Students who engage in this active, critical approach can use rap music as an alternative, liberatory text that they can analyze, interpret, and challenge, based on their own knowledge and cultural experience.

Approaching the study of rap in such a fashion allows students to appropriate their own experiences, voices, and histories into the classroom, thus making knowledge more meaningful and critical (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). Due to the
invalidation that many marginalized youth experience in school, the validation and legitimization of students’ personal experiences, voices, and histories through the critical examination of rap music ultimately empowers and emancipates them. As a result, attendance rates, academic performance, and participation improve, while classroom management concerns decrease. Students feel a sense of ownership over their learning because they are now the “experts” on cultural texts that they live, experience, and value in their every day lives.

The inclusion of rap music as a cultural text is not only limited to those youth who live and breathe it. Students from all racial, ethnic and class backgrounds can benefit from rap music by using a Cultural Studies approach (Kincheloe, et al., 2000; Best & Kellner, 1999; Ross & Rose, 1994). For the students whose only exposure to Black urban life is through mass media representations, rap music can be used as a tool to help dispel stereotypes and false perceptions of African American culture, hence helping students understand the struggles of everyday life for working-class African Americans. As a result, the unfamiliar becomes familiar. For students who actually live the experiences described in rap lyrics, the examination of rap in itself is an empowering, meaningful, and legitimizing form of pedagogy. In a traditional, technocratic-operated classroom, such knowledge, experiences, and voices are marginalized and remain virtually silenced. On the other hand, in a critical, transformative, democratic classroom, individuals’ knowledge, experiences, and voices are celebrated and validated, thus creating an inclusionary environment where all voices and perspectives are heard (Delpit, 1995; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993).

In situating my argument within the theoretical framework of Cultural Studies, I analyzed, critiqued, and interpreted KRS-ONE’s lyrics from a critical perspective, to determine whether or not his music operated within this framework, as opposed to approaching it from a traditional technocratic, or modernist (defined below), approach to education which would consider such alternative texts as worthless and of no real educational value, as if it were “dumbing down” education. Approaching the study of any culture from a Cultural Studies approach opens the doors to transformative pedagogy permeating in the classroom. Educators who practice transformative pedagogy are also practicing what is known as critical pedagogy. To better understand critical pedagogy, it is first necessary to provide a brief history of critical theory.

CRITICAL THEORY

Critical theory emerged from a distinct historical context between World War I and World War II. This theory is usually associated with members of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, founded in 1923 in Frankfurt, Germany, and typically referred to today as the “Frankfurt School.” Max Horkheimer, who coined the term “critical theory,” became the school’s director in 1930. Other members included Leo Lowenthal, Theodor W. Adorno, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin. During Hitler’s reign in Europe, members of the Frankfurt School took up residence in the United States.
These theorists criticized economism, materialism, and the mass media, hoping to undermine them by focusing on their ideological components. Marcuse, in particular, became the philosopher of the U.S. student movement of the 1960s, the thinker who has been credited as introducing critical theory to America. Marcuse was a harsh critic of mass media since he ascribed an ideological dominance to media and the culture industry – a dominance that had the potential to eliminate individualism and the revolutionary potential of the working class. Other influential theorists contributing to the development of critical theory are Antonio Gramsci, Michael Foucault, and Jurgen Habermas.

Critical theory is concerned with hegemonic domination and power relations and with the effect of these relations on oppressed groups in all areas of society, school, workplace, etc. I argue that Hip Hop culture and specifically, political or socially conscious rap lyrics are concerned with exposing social injustices and power relations. Ross and Rose (1994) argue that political or consciousness-raising rap that articulates the knowledge, experiences, and voices of the oppressed, serves as a vehicle of hope and promise for working-class Blacks, especially as this kind of rap tends to counter hegemonic practices and ideologies. As Steinberg (1997) explained, the goal of critical theory is to help one develop self-consciousness. In doing so a person “begins to understand how and why his or her political opinions, socio-economic class, religious beliefs, gender role, and racial self-image are shaped by dominant perspectives” (p. 16). Critical theory will ultimately promote self-reflection, which results in the formation of new perspectives (Steinberg; Kincheloe, 1993).

Emphasizing the need for political awareness, critical theory is extremely important for developing a theoretical framework that historically and socially situates the deeply embedded roots of racism, discrimination, violence, and disempowerment in this country. Instead of perpetuating the assumption that such realities are inevitable, critical theory (and critical pedagogy) invites the reader to further explore the relationship between these larger historic, economic, and social constructs and their inextricable connection to ideology and power. Examining rap music from a critical theoretical framework allows students to explore these larger constructs since politically and socially conscious rap explores historical, political, economic, and social implications (Kellner, 2000; Best & Kellner, 1999; Rose, 1994a; Ross & Rose, 1994).

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical pedagogy represents the reaction of progressive educators to longstanding institutionalized functions. Some noted scholars that have been credited for inspiring, developing, and sustaining critical pedagogy since the 20th century is John Dewey, Myles Horton, Henry Giroux, Joe L. Kincheloe, Shirley Steinberg, Peter McLaren, Ira Shor, Christine Sleeter, Donald Macedo, Sonia Nieto, Maxine Greene, and Michael Apple to name only a few. Probably one of the most influential in its development is Brazilian educator, philosopher, and activist, Paulo Freire.
Freire advocated for liberatory or revolutionary education, one that was transformative and empowering, redressing social and educational injustices. Refraining from using terms such as “disenfranchised” or “at-risk”, which are really just coded language that rationalizes deficit theories, Freire encouraged naming those involved in oppression. If one is oppressed, then who is the one oppressing? Who are the oppressors? The critical analysis and understanding of culture, production, power, and oppression is essential for students and teachers to self-actualize or engage in social and political activism, or agency. The determining factor that leads to student or teacher agency is the development of a critical consciousness, or conscientização, as Freire termed it (Darder, et al, 2003; Freire, 2000).

A critical consciousness is unlikely to flourish within technocratic schooling practices that often reflect bank-like transactions. Known as the “banking” concept of education, Freire argued that teachers, as fact-givers, deposit information into empty receptacles [read: students] that result in the regurgitation of that information in the form of testing. The end product is compliant, oppressed teachers and passive, uncritical students who readily and unknowingly accept policies, attitudes, values, and beliefs as common sense or natural. To accept such notions best serve the interests of the dominant culture, or otherwise known as what Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, termed as hegemony. I have used the term hegemony earlier in my introduction and feel it is necessary to provide a clear definition of its meaning here before proceeding any further. The following definition is cited from an on-line website highlighting the work of Gramsci:

By hegemony, Gramsci meant the permeation throughout society of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs and morality that has the effect of supporting the status quo in power relations. Hegemony in this sense might be defined as an ‘organizing principle’ that is diffused by the process of socialization into every area of daily life. To the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalized by the population, it becomes part of what is generally called ‘common sense’ so that the philosophy, culture and morality of the ruling elite comes to appear as the natural order of things.2

From a traditional, hegemonic context, as consumers, workers, winners, or losers in the marketplace of employment, citizens in a capitalist society need both to know their “rightful” place in the order of things and to be reconciled to that destiny. Systems of education are among the institutions that foster and reinforce such beliefs through the rhetoric of meritocracy, testing, tracking, vocational training or college preparatory curricula (Popkewitz, 1991; Apple, 1979; Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Critical pedagogy is an effort to work within educational institutions and other media to challenge hegemony and raise questions that address inequalities of power and false myths of opportunity and merit for many students, and to examine the way belief systems become internalized to the point where individuals and groups abandon the very aspiration to question or change their lot in life
THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION


Critical pedagogy invites students to look at “what is” to determine “what could be,” and to find a way to move from “where we are” to “where we want to be.” Critical pedagogy also means taking a close look at schooling and society, and employing a historical perspective to determine how we came to be where we are. Critical pedagogues often refer to this kind of critique as historical materialism. Within this context, we are forced to ask questions such as these: How is it that the material conditions we are currently experiencing are the result of the progress of history? What actions can we then take to effect change? What are the obstacles to change? Why are they there? How can they be overcome? The obstacles to freedom cannot be overcome until one is aware that they exist. This questioning and coming to awareness is what Paulo Freire called conscientização. Marcuse termed consciousness-raising. Foucault referred to as deconstruction of discourse, and John Dewey called awareness of social conditions. Thus, critical pedagogy enables members of an oppressed group to develop an awareness or critical consciousness of their situation as a beginning point of social and intellectual emancipation. As stated earlier, this liberating practice requires reflection and action, as well as interpretation and change (Freire, 1970, 1973, 1985, 2000; McLaren & Lankshear, 1993).

In order for students to study rap music and answer the previous questions, a critical pedagogy would emphasize that we must first explore the history of rap by introducing students to the culture and history of Hip Hop. After studying the history, educators and students must explore the progression, or demise, of the culture since its inception. Hip Hop culture has grown to become a multi-billion dollar industry due largely to the popularization of certain elements of the culture, mainly the rap element. A critical pedagogy encourages students to raise questions about the systems in place that have contributed to the success and globalization of the culture. This includes a critical examination at the micro- and macro-levels of the industry itself, including artist’s role, as well as corporate America’s role in the appropriation, commercialization, and capitalization of the culture. Freire believed that freedom begins with the recognition of a system of oppressive relations and with the realization of one’s own place in that system. Students equipped with historical knowledge of the culture will ultimately understand how oppressive economic conditions in urban areas, specifically in the South Bronx, NY, contributed to the birth of Hip Hop. Exploring the progression and transformation of the culture to the mainstream forces us to examine if, and how, certain systems contribute to the cultivation or oppression of the culture as it is represented today through mainstream media. Just as important is to explore the role, responsibility, and consciousness, or lack thereof, of the consumer.

In the context of critical pedagogy, I am focusing my analysis on the politically- and socially-oriented rap lyrics of KRS-ONE, to determine whether his rhymed words could be considered liberating means for legitimizing students’ knowledge, students’ voices, and students’ agency, thus allowing them to interpret and reflect on the texts (lyrics) being examined. More importantly, however, a critical pedagogy of rap lyrics allows both educators and students the possibility of
demonstrating a critical consciousness that recognizes the effects of power in relation to society, notably how that power is created, who has it, and who benefits from it (Kellner, 2000; Best & Kellner, 1999; Rose, 1994a; Ross & Rose, 1994). Students are then able to question and connect their experiences to those of the world around them. Freire and other critical scholars argue that such critiquing, questioning, and connecting results in a critical consciousness that ultimately leads to transformation and social change.

As stated earlier, critical consciousness is the initial step in generating transformation and social change (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Freire, 1973). For an educator to motivate students to engage in social change, Freire suggests using a “problem-posing” approach which directs attention towards power relations at all levels of society from the classroom to the school to the community to the larger society. Problem-posing teachers take a multi-cultural, multi-perspective approach to education. They use students’ thoughts, ideas, and experiences to develop a critical democratic or transformative pedagogy. A result of using such pedagogy is that students learn about all subjects in a critical context, question the required texts, and relate the received knowledge to their personal experiences and to conditions in society.

Questioning the legitimacy of certain materials as well as examining, analyzing, and interrogating the “hidden curriculum” are necessary steps for students to resist hegemonic domination. Most educational institutions have a formal curriculum comprising the areas of academic knowledge which students are expected to acquire (e.g., mathematics, science, language arts, social studies, etc.). Besides this academic and explicitly taught curriculum, however, there is a set of values, attitudes or principles, namely, a “hidden curriculum” that is implicitly conveyed to students by teachers. The hidden curriculum is believed to promote social control at school and in society at large by training students to conform to and obey authority, teaching them to regard social inequalities as natural. Consequently, the hidden curriculum ensures cultural reproduction and social regulation.

The incorporation of rap music as an alternative and empowering text situated from a critical pedagogical framework attempts to counter the agendas of the hidden curriculum. Critical pedagogy “regards specific beliefs not primarily as propositions to be assessed for their truth content but as parts of systems of belief and action that aggregate the effects of the power structures of society. Critical pedagogy first asks of these systems of belief and action, who benefits? The primary preoccupation of critical pedagogy is with social injustice, namely, how to transform inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations” (Burbules & Berk, 1999, pg 47). Not only is the critical person adept at recognizing injustice, but s/he is also inspired to change it.

Critical pedagogues question the status quo by having students take a critical stance, challenging traditional Western cultural ideologies, questioning undemocratic practices, and co-developing and negotiating the curriculum with their teachers (Darder, et al, 2003; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Giroux & McLaren, 1994; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). It is important to note that critical pedagogy also entails rigorous critique and questioning of non-dominant or marginalized ideologies as well. The critical teacher promotes democracy in the classroom by
insisting that knowledge is not fixed but is constantly changing and transformable. This approach places the role of the student and teacher in an entirely new educational realm, one that is liberating, empowering, and transformative.

Educators and cultural theorists (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997, 1998; Giroux & McLaren, 1994; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Giroux, 1988), whose works have been influenced by Paulo Freire and critical theory, are attempting to make education political. Giroux and McLaren (1994) define political education as follows:

[To teach] students how to think in ways that cultivate the capacity for judgment essential for the exercise of power and responsibility by a democratic citizenry . . . a political, as distinct from a politicizing education would encourage students to become better citizens to challenge those with political and cultural power as well as to honor the critical traditions within the dominant culture that make such a critique possible and intelligible. (p. 43)

This decentralization of power helps to eliminate the marginalization and indoctrination of particular groups of students, thus opening the doors for critical dialogue to take place.

Based on conversations I have had with critical educators, as well as from my own experiences of teaching critical pedagogy to my college students, I have found that some students resist the pedagogies of critical theory because of its binary position in relationship to mainstream, traditional Western European ideologies. Including a discourse of rap lyrics in today’s school curriculum might intensify the resistance of some students because socio-political rap lyrics directly confront mainstream, traditional ideologies and the power institutions that support these ideologies. Students’ resistance to, or fearful of, critical theory may be better understood by examining how mainstream, traditional ideologies came about. This way of thinking, or what is academically referred to as one-truth epistemology, centers itself in what is termed as modernism (Kellner, 2000; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997, 1998).

MODERNISM

Cultural theorists argue that an understanding of modernism is essential to anyone dealing with cultural interpretation and knowledge production, particularly when examining and analyzing any context from a critical perspective. The need for this understanding seems even more evident for those who analyze popular culture. The term “modernism” originated in Western history beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As a result of the devastating effects of the bubonic plague or Black Death in the fourteenth century, Western society began to view things in a new way. Because the use of prayer, magic, and mysticism failed to “cure” and/or control the Plague, Western society began to develop new ways to solve such problems and meet challenges as the Plague, which threatened the very existence of society (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Kincheloe, 1995). This new way of seeing or making sense of the world (Western modernism) resulted in the scientific
method known as reasoning or reductionism (Kincheloe, et al., 2000). Rene
Descartes, who is often credited for coining the term reductionism, explained that it
occurs when all aspects of complex phenomena are broken down or reduced to
their constituent parts and then pieced together according to the laws of cause and
effect (Kincheloe, et al.). Sir Isaac Newton (cited in Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997)
further expanded on Descartes’ theory that space and time are absolute regardless
of context:

Any aspect of a system could be predicted with absolute certainty if its
condition was understood in precise detail and the appropriate tools of
measurement were employed. Thus, the Cartesian-Newtonian concept of
scientific modernism was established, with its centralization, concentration,
accumulation, efficiency, and fragmentation. (p. 36)

The modernist view of knowledge can be equated with traditional ways of thinking
and, in education, this is known as the one-truth epistemology of teaching.
Teachers using this approach view students as objects who learn through rote
memorization and teacher-directed activities by which learning is reduced to
specialized, fragmented parts. Therefore, students’ knowledge is measured and
assessed by standard, objective, and quantified methods. As a result, much of the
teacher’s role is reduced to routine and mechanical work, a role that may even be
considered as having low status. The traditional modernist approach encourages
teachers to see themselves as “teachers-as-technicians,” whose main function is to
pass down the “wisdom of the ages” (Giroux, 1988). This approach values the
coverage of content through the use of basal textbooks or prepackaged curricula,
which ultimately leads to passiveness and adherence among both students and
teachers.

According to critical educators, teachers who resist change and follow traditional
teaching practices are known as “positivist” educators (Kincheloe, 2008; Kincheloe
School, who were early critics of positivism, felt that it tended to stop at producing
quantified facts and failed to delve deeper toward genuine sociological interpretation.
According to Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998):

To the positivist educator there is only one correct way to teach and one
correct body of subject matter. The context in which education takes place is
irrelevant and the role of the teacher involves merely passing the correct
subject matter to students using the correct pedagogical method. (p. 4)

Basal readers, textbooks, and prepackaged curricula that simply require teachers’
implementation are a form of control, thus de-skilling teachers even further
(Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). Many times teachers may not even agree with the
content and context of these prepackaged programs but due to strict administrative
guidelines and bureaucratic constraints, or their own position as a novice or
 untenured teacher, they must adhere to the dictates of those positioned above them
on the hierarchical ladder (Aronowitz & Giroux).
Critical scholars who argue against the universalization of Western European male-influenced ideologies have challenged the one-truth epistemology or the modernist view of education (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998, 1997). The modernist view does not allow students to develop a critical consciousness, nor does it allow them to challenge or question the Western canons. Rather, modernists view knowledge as fixed, operating under a banking or technocratic view of education. Within a modernist context, the possibility of exploring and analyzing any medium of popular culture is nearly nonexistent. As I will suggest in this book, rap music can be used to create a new consciousness that helps people become aware of social justice, particularly through the racial, economic, political, moral, and ethical issues inscribed in the lyrics of many rap songs especially those created and produced by KRS-ONE (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997, 1993; Kincheloe, 1995).

DEFINING EMPOWERMENT

According to Cultural Studies and Critical Theory, an empowering education is one that is reflective of critical pedagogy. All students’ voices, cultures, backgrounds, and experiences are legitimized in the curriculum and classroom. An empowering curriculum is transformative in that it creates students who are social critics and critical citizens who are able to reflect and implement their knowledge, values, and skills through action on all levels – personal, social, political, and economic. However, in order to promote student agency, teachers must feel empowered themselves willing to fight against dominant oppressive forces that prevent them from educating their students as opposed to schooling them. But even before this can occur, teachers must be willing to challenge themselves to critically self-reflect on how their own position, experiences, and beliefs helped shape their philosophy of education. And, yes, this can be extremely difficult as some teachers may feel uneasy and uncomfortable of the possibility of their foundation being “rocked”.

Although I believe wholeheartedly in, and practice, a critical pedagogy, I am a realist too. I work closely with New York City administrators and teachers from all grade levels in hopes of understanding their position working in a highly oppressive, restricting, bureaucratic system that does not always treat them as valued contributors to the profession. Teachers cannot challenge dominant paradigms alone. They must be willing to take risks – strategic risks.

The hierarchal nature of schools is another factor that is detrimental to teachers and their students. On top of bureaucratic constraints, there is, sadly, contention at all levels: administrators versus teachers, teachers versus teachers, teachers versus parents, teachers versus students. I have witnessed egregious treatment in which probationary or untenured teachers are completely denigrated in their schools by virtue of their position alone. There appears to be a hierarchy in place in which respect is earned as a teacher acquires time in the system. The notion that experience is a signifier for “good” teaching is debatable. I argue that experienced teachers have the advantage of (hopefully) understanding the bureaucracy of the system more so than the novice or untenured teacher, but they may not necessarily be “good” teachers. I have witnessed and heard many stories of experienced teachers demeaning and belittling their students and fellow colleagues! I have also
witnessed strong, caring, respectful, collaborative, and collegial relationships between teachers, and their administrators, in which the culture of the school is truly reflective of community. To be clear, I am not anti-administration; rather my position is pro-educator: administration and teachers working collaboratively and respectfully together, reaching out to students, parents, and the community to provide quality education for all. This does not preclude higher education faculty from building collaborative relationships either. Academia must collaborate, and listen, to concerns of the community and schools in which we serve. We cannot dictate or indoctrinate our philosophies and theories onto the schools, administrators, or teachers we work with. The division that exists between – and within – public education ranging from pre-K to university level must cease if we truly desire a democratic education system.

Critical pedagogy advocates for empowering of educators. To accomplish this, teachers must show collegiality and respect to their fellow colleagues, regardless of rank and position. Maintaining division and competition among experienced versus less experienced, or tenured versus untenured teachers, only serves the interests of top officials and administrators whose intentions are to promote divisive school cultures in which faculty “know their place.” As a result, teaching can be an isolating profession, where one easily seeks comfort in the sanctuary of his/her own classroom. Teachers must resist this temptation and unite, collaborate, and take calculated risks that serve to empower not only themselves but their students. There is actually some truth in the old adage: “there is power (and strength) in numbers”.

On the other hand, if looking at empowerment from a modernist, positivistic perspective, the term “empowerment” may be referred to as giving power to someone in order to empower him or her. Specifically, *Webster’s New World Dictionary* defines “empower” as follows: “1. to give power or authority to; authorize [Congress is empowered to levy taxes]. 2. to give ability to; enable; permit.” Who is giving, authorizing, enabling, or permitting the Congress to levy taxes? These definitions suggest that a higher order of some sort must be delegating power to his/her/its “subordinates.” Paulo Freire (2000) has argued, “Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects that must be saved from a burning building” (p. 65).

A critical pedagogy would question hierarchical power and define empowerment from a critical perspective. Simon (1987) defines empowerment as enabling those who have been silenced, to speak. Ashcroft (1987) defines empowerment as “bringing into a state of belief one’s ability to act effectively . . . thus an empowered person . . . would be someone who believed in his or her ability/capability to act, and this belief would be accompanied by able/capable action” (p. 47). From a broader perspective, Freire claims empowerment or liberation is attainable if all oppressed parties recognize how hegemony operates. He writes:

I interpret the revolutionary process as dialogical cultural action which is prolonged in ‘cultural revolution’ once power is taken. In both stages a serious and profound effort at conscientização—I by means of which the people, through a
true praxis, leave behind the status of objects to assume the status of historical Subjects—is necessary. (Freire, p. 160, 2000)

Finally, McLaren (1989) refers to empowerment as:

... the process through which students learn to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside their immediate experiences in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live. It [empowerment] also refers to the process by which students learn to question and selectively appropriate those aspects of the dominant culture that will provide them with the basis for defining and transforming, rather than merely serving the wider social order. (p. 49)

I find McLaren’s definition persuasive and compelling in that he refers to empowerment as a process in which the students themselves appropriate power, thus defining empowerment based on their understanding of the term. The goal in terms of empowerment for students is to increase their awareness, enable them to question hegemonic practices, and seek action toward social change, social justice, and social equality, even without the assistance of their teachers. Of course, if teachers freed themselves of status of “objects” and engaged students in critical dialogue, viewing each other as “subjects”, the empowerment of students and teachers together constitute a powerful force to be reckoned with!

From this perspective, teachers are the “experts” who understand that the classroom dynamics and teaching conditions are constantly changing. The critical teacher then transforms the role of teacher into that of “teacher-as-researcher.” This change in role results in teachers’ questioning the nature of their own thinking, while simultaneously teaching students higher-order thinking skills (Kincheloe, 1993). Teachers who seriously take on this role reconstruct not only the role of the teacher but reconstruct their own perceptions of the world. The teacher-as-researcher’s role creates an awareness through which teachers can question what was once thought of as expert or fixed knowledge (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998).

In addition, teachers conduct themselves as researchers by taking on qualitative kinds of research, asking, “What really counts as knowledge?” This includes student’s knowledge. In other words, teachers should simply listen to their students. Teachers who listen and attempt to understand and include the knowledge and voices students bring into the classroom move themselves into unknown territory, “on to new frontiers of thinking” (p. 267). Teachers are then more apt to consider the study of popular culture as valid and valuable knowledge because of its direct correlation to students’ lives. The study of popular culture is empowering because students’ personal lives and histories become the primary sources of their learning (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998, 1997; Giroux, 1996).

In addition, Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998) argue that teachers should take a critical or counter-positivist approach. This “new” approach, which is significantly different than the “old,” includes the following characteristics: (a) all subjects are interconnected and interrelated with one another; (b) there is no “real” truth or no
one correct method of doing or explaining things; (c) learning involves creating knowledge and learning through our own lived experiences; (d) the curriculum is not fixed, but rather it is seen as a “context-specific process changing with the evolving needs of society and individuals” (p. 4), and finally, (e) the new approach stresses the importance of focusing on the whole rather than on the parts (e.g., administrative and bureaucratic constraints, classroom setup, etc.).

Empowerment makes it possible for students to develop the critical skills necessary to work for a more democratic system, which would ensure equality, justice, freedom, and respect for the rights of self and others. In addition, feeling and acting empowered has the potential to increase one’s self-confidence and self-esteem, which ultimately gives an individual the strength and ability to act on his or her thoughts and beliefs (Irwin, 1996; Shor, 1992). Empowerment also provides opportunities for active engagement with diverse groups of people, opportunities for constructing knowledge, as well as for gaining a sense of autonomy, ownership, and responsibility when making choices and decisions that affect and improve one’s own life as well as the lives of others. When we can respect others and ourselves and believe that every human being is equal and of value and, more importantly, view each other as “subjects” rather than “objects”, then we can truly feel empowered both internally and externally (Shor; Simon, 1987).

The various definitions of empowerment given above are best summarized by Irwin (1996). Her definition relevant to educators can also be applied to students:

Empowered educators are persons who believe in themselves and their capacity to act. They understand systems of domination and work to transform oppressive practices in society. They respect the dignity and humanness of others and manifest their power as the power to actualize their own unique humanity. They are strong, practical and compassionate as they work individually and with others to support the self-realization of all persons in their classrooms, schools and communities. (p. 44)

THE TRANSFORMATIVE CURRICULUM

We live in a society that is undoubtedly becoming more multicultural by the moment, yet individuals and groups experience social inequalities, structural exclusion, and anti-democratic practices. Such experiences and practices pose a significant challenge for educators as to how to create a culturally pluralistic society that allows citizens to maintain their ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic identities, while creating a society that is cohesive and democratic (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). This is precisely why a critical approach to education is crucial because it empowers students, enabling them to stand up for themselves and others. Educators who empower students by practicing a critical pedagogy are ultimately teaching within a paradigm that employs a transformative curriculum. Our society has much to gain by restructuring institutions in ways that include all citizens. People who now feel oppressed will become more effective and productive
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A critical education for all students, especially for those from the lower classes as well as for women and minorities, is extremely important because these groups tend to be tracked or “trained” not to question authority (Sleeter & Grant, 1994; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Sleeter, 1991). These groups are programmed to act and behave in prescribed ways in predetermined situations, thereby reinforcing the notion that schools are, however covertly, producing students for vocational/labor-related/working-class careers, as opposed to providing opportunities for students from all classes to receive an academic or specialized education that upper or ruling class students traditionally receive (Kincheleoe & Steinberg, 1997; Sleeter & Grant; Aronowitz & Giroux; Shor, 1992; Sleeter). In addition, schools have failed to empower students to think critically and to question power relations in order to develop the literacy skills necessary to make informed and effective choices about the worlds of work, politics, culture, personal relationships, and the economy (Aronowitz & Giroux; Sleeter & Grant; Shor).

Modernist, positivistic approaches to learning, such as rote learning, memorization, and the simple transference of facts and skills, create passive, bored students since meaningful connections to their personal lives and experiences are omitted from classroom instruction. This modernist, positivist practice inhibits democracy, perpetuates authoritarianism, and is based partly on the assumption that students come to school curious and eager to learn. If this is the case, then what has happened to make schools become places where many students dread to go? Although there are many possible explanations for this change in attitude, a critical perspective suggests that many traditional or conservative educators tend to homogenize individual children to meet the dominant culture’s view of what society should be and how schools should function (Kincheleoe & Steinberg, 1997, 1998; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993).

A critique of the traditional, modernist approach to education suggests that students are expected to be trained to behave according to a set of rules and standards, teachers are expected to teach the skills and information necessary to keep people in their “proper” place, and teachers are to achieve these goals as efficiently as possible in order to save tax money and time. The NCLB Act is an example of a modernist, positivist reform effort. NCLB forces an extreme structured system of schooling that relies on standardized (and often excessive) testing to ensure that all have been trained in the same way (within their designated “tracks”). The main purpose of such a static system is to have students conform and get the “right answers,” not to allow them to engage in critical thinking skills (Kincheleoe, et al., 2000; Kincheleoe & Steinberg, 1997, 1998; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Irwin, 1985).

A closer examination of the tracking system in schools is necessary to understand how students in low-tracks fare against students placed in upper-tracks. Studies have shown how the effects of tracking can be beneficial to upper-track = middle/upper-class students and detrimental to lower track = lower-class students. Upper-track students generally receive more culturally valued content, are encouraged to engage in critical thinking skills, take part in active student-centered...
activities, and receive more opportunities to ask questions. Consequently, students in upper-tracks perform higher academically. Lower-track students, on the other hand, are generally taught to memorize facts and figures; given less opportunity to think critically, question, and problematize materials, and, overall, are rarely exposed to culturally valued content (Irwin, 1985; Oakes, 1985).

In a transformative curriculum, all students, regardless of track placement, would receive culturally relevant, meaningful content, as well as participate in student-centered activities. The absence of a transformative curriculum results in schools that tend to confirm or value certain cultures and disavow, devalue, and marginalize others. Particular forms of knowledge, language, and experience familiar only to certain (privileged) students are legitimized, thereby reproducing what critical theorists often refer to as “cultural capital.” Students from the lower or working-classes are not familiar with, nor do they experience, the same cultural capital that mainstream-class students often experience. Bourdieu (cited in Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993) explained the notion of cultural capital:

> The culture of the elite is so near that of the school that children from the lower middle class[es] . . . can acquire only with great effort something which is given to the children of the cultivated classes – style, taste, wit – in short, those aptitudes which seem natural in members of the cultivated classes and naturally expected of them precisely because (in the ethnological sense) they are the culture of that class. (p. 76)

In other words, students’ success in the educational system is largely dictated by the extent to which individuals have absorbed the dominant culture or by how much cultural capital they have been given. Similarly, the lyrical style of KRS-ONE works to restructure this paradigmatic formulation of cultural capital. Bourdieu has argued that those in power control the form that culture takes and are thus able to sustain their position of power.

Legitimizing certain cultures and devaluing others tends to silence certain students, their families, and communities because their personal histories and experiences are generally not valued or affirmed. Research has shown that if given the opportunity to do creative and critical thinking activities, lower-tracked classes are capable of achieving the same success as upper-tracked students (Irwin, 1985; Oakes, 1985). For students to achieve this kind of success, the teacher’s task is to transform the curriculum by helping students map their relation to the social worlds around them, by comprehending the connection between “personal” and social problems and by realizing the complex ways in which they [the students] are connected to people both like themselves and radically different from themselves (Giroux & McLaren, 1994; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). Thus, a critical, postmodern education serves to empower not only the self but others as well. In addition, a critical, postmodern, transformative curriculum welcomes and respects all opinions, thoughts, and ideas from all students, thereby creating a classroom where truly democratic, critical learning takes place.

Additionally, critical teachers create an “inclusive classroom” where the voices of all students are legitimized, whereas in a traditional, positivist, teacher-centered
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classroom, student participation is very limited. By the traditional approach, students are viewed as objects rather than as subjects, listening passively to lectures and direct instruction and learning to agree with whatever knowledge is given to them (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Shor; Irwin). Obviously, teachers need to speak directly to students to some extent to explain assignments and projects, which can be done in a democratic fashion. For example, teachers can ask open-ended questions that require thought-provoking answers, ask for examples of students’ personal experience when explaining an answer, ask students to respond and comment on other students’ answers and explanations, make the subject matter culturally diverse to legitimize all students in regard to which texts and subject areas they would like to explore, allow enough time for students to respond to questions asked of them, and arrange seats in a circular fashion so that students are not in rows with the teacher’s desk in the front and center of the classroom (Shor).

Another aspect of the transformative curriculum includes the concepts of “voice” and “liberation” as the underlying principles that permeate the classroom. Shor (1992) explains that “voice” promotes free speech, enabling students to speak, feel, and think about the subject, which ultimately is the starting point for a critical study of themselves, their society, and their academic subjects.

Along with the concepts of voice and liberation, the transformative curriculum is democratic in that it is negotiable to change if both students and teachers agree to it. The subject or context of the curriculum is based on the students’ own lives, histories, language, and culture. Students’ histories are connected and compared to the larger social context, encouraging them to question and analyze power relations, inequality, and social justice issues in society; issues such as racism, sexism, and discrimination are frequently explored and discussed in a “safe” learning environment where different perspectives are valued, respected, and understood (Shor, 1992; Irwin, 1985).

An integral part of empowering students is to change the structure, assumptions, and perspectives of the curriculum so that subject matter viewed from the perspectives and experiences of a wide range of groups is validated and legitimized. This transformative approach brings content about currently marginalized groups to the center of the curriculum and helps students understand that how people construct knowledge depends on their experiences, values, and perspectives. For example, KRS-ONE, born Lawrence Krisna Parker, tagged himself “KRS-ONE” – Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone – after learning and reflecting on toilsome experiences during his teen years including living in poverty and in a homeless shelter in the South Bronx. This approach also helps students to learn how to construct knowledge themselves and to grasp the complex group interactions that have produced American culture and civilization (Sleeter & Grant, 1994).

Educators must strive to empower all of their students, in particular those from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds as well as working class backgrounds, by ensuring that they develop both a strong self-identity and a proud and knowledgeable group identity to withstand the attacks of racism. Additionally, it is equally important to empower White students to “develop positive identity without White ethnocentrism and superiority” (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Simon (1987) sums
up the importance of empowering students best by stating, “If we do not give youth a sense of how to make it within existing realities, all too often we doom them to social marginality . . . perpetuating the structural inequalities in society” (p. 375). Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) provide a definition of how they think schools should operate, coinciding with the goals of a transformative curriculum. They state that the primary goals of schools should be to “serve as places of critical education in order to create a public sphere of citizens who are able to exercise power over their own lives and especially over the conditions of knowledge acquisition” (p. 42).

MULTIPLE AND CRITICAL LITERACIES

I’ve introduced critical pedagogy as a key component of the transformative curriculum, but now I turn my attention to include specific literacy strategies to enhance the curriculum and student learning. Reading and writing, or literacy, rates are shamefully low considering the fact that the United States is a highly industrialized super-power, first world nation. According to educational research studies conducted by the Children’s Defense Fund, about two-thirds of the public school children in the fourth grade cannot read at grade level. Even more alarming is that “more than 80 percent of Black and Hispanic 4th graders in public school cannot read at grade level, compared with 58 percent of their White peers.” The data for eighth graders have not shown much progress. According the same report, “seven out of 10 public school 8th graders cannot read or do math at grade level. More than 4 out of 5 Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native 8th graders cannot read or do math at grade level, compared to 3 out of 5 of their White peers. Three out of 5 Asian/Pacific Islander 8th graders cannot read at grade level.”

As a result of such staggering figures, there have been movements across nation’s schools to improve or “ramp up” literacy skills to “appropriate” developmental levels. One such movement in public schools (middle and high schools and college-level) is known as “writing across the curriculum” (WAC) to encourage the integration of writing in all content areas with the outcome of developing proficient readers and writers. The idea is that there is a strong interconnected relationship that exists between the process of writing and thinking. Another notion is that if students can think critically, write thoughtfully, and clearly comprehend subject matter – not simply circle the correct answer from four multiple choice questions, or check off a true or false, or plug in numbers to solve a mathematical problem – s/he truly understands a concept. After all, comprehension is the educational goal for all content area teachers when teaching their subject matter. To this extent, WAC programs have dispelled the myth that English teachers are solely responsible for teaching reading and writing when in fact, their primary role is to teach literature! Ideally, students should be functionally literate by the time they enter high school in order to delve deeper into specific content matter, but as the statistics show, this certainly is not the case. As dismal as scores may be, it has (un)fortunately (depending on your perspective) become the responsibility of all content teachers to integrate reading and writing in their
subjects. As a scholar in language and literacy education, I introduce my pre- and in-service teachers to the concept of “Literacy Across the Curriculum” encouraging them to consider critical literacy as one approach to reach remedial readers.

Critical literacy incorporates more than the back-to-basics literacies, including multiple literacies that empower students and that meet the ever-evolving changes and demands of society. Multiple literacies may include, but are not limited to, computer literacy, multimedia literacies, emotional literacies, social and cultural literacies, and critical literacies. For the purpose of this book, I argue for implementation of critical media literacy as a form of critical literacy in the transformative curriculum. However, it is important to first differentiate between the terms “literacy” and “critical literacy” in order to provide a better understanding of the subsequent term “critical media literacy,” which will be used throughout these pages.

Literacy can emerge in different forms for different students. It is also highly politicized when dominant ideologies favor or prefer certain literacies over others. For many decades, literacy has been defined as simply the “ability to read and write” one’s name with the final goal of simply functioning and surviving in today’s society. Literacy can be as simple as a person’s having adequate reading and writing skills to comprehend and render basic forms, whereas critical literacy enables persons to draw their own conclusions about something by learning to think creatively and critically (Lankshear and Lawler, 1987). These are two very distinct forms of literacy, where one is clearly empowering and the other is simply functional.

Critical scholars argue that functional literacy creates passive, robot-like members of society. The basic goal of technocratic, modernist, positivist approaches to teaching is to create functionally literate students. Mastering and memorizing grammatical rules or being able to complete required reports, accounts, journals, letters, and forms are all evidence of functional literacy. It has been argued that students who receive quality education should be functionally literate by the time they reach eighth grade.

Critical literacy reaches far beyond functional literacy. Critical literacy stems from critical pedagogy in that it enables students to make connections between their lives and the lives of others culturally different from their own, therefore helping them take a critical look at whose economic, political, and social interests are served and why. Critical literacy encourages students to identify their own position and cultural capital within the school context. Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) explain the need for critical literacy and how it relates to cultural capital as follows:

Critical literacy responds to the cultural capital of a specific group or class and looks at the way in which it can be confirmed, and also at the ways in which the dominant society disconfirms students by either ignoring or denigrating the knowledge and experiences that characterize their everyday lives . . . the key concern is not with individual interests but with individual and collective empowerment. (p. 128)
Educators who help students develop critical literacy skills enable them to explore and understand different ways of looking at written, visual, and spoken texts. Students are then able to question the attitudes, values, and beliefs (or cultural capital of a specific group or class) that lie beneath the surface of texts. Addressing the notion of cultural capital in the transformative curriculum provides students with ways of thinking that uncover social inequalities and injustices, enabling them to become agents of social change (Semali, 2000; Semali & Pailliotett, 1999; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). One approach to helping students develop these critical thinking skills is to have them study and deconstruct various mass media; take for example the lyrics of rap music, as demonstrated later in this book.

“In the 19th century, the knowledge inside the classroom was higher than the knowledge outside. Today it is reversed. The child knows that by going to school he is in a sense, interrupting his education” (McLuhan, 1960). This author’s statement implies that youth are receiving an informal, more advanced education through watching television. According to Sizer (1992), the “television has become the biggest school system, the principal shaper of culture, powerfully influencing the young on what it is to be American” (p. 26). And more recently, projections from a U.S. Census Bureau’s *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2007* report, American citizens (adults and teens) will be consumed by nearly five months, or 3,518 hours, of television viewing, listening to electronic music devices (i.e. – iPods and iPhones), surfing through the Internet, and reading local newspapers.

Moreover, media productions, presentations, and/or texts provide information and insight into societal and/or cultural attitudes, values, behaviors, myths, assumptions, ideology, power structures, privilege constructions, etc. However, these social and contextual clues are not always obvious. Such clues are often subtle, insidious, and almost invisible, creating a situation in which a viewer or consumer, not familiar with the media, or, in other words, a virtually media-illiterate person, has no chance to read beyond what is presented to him or her on the surface, or to discover the hidden meanings and interpretive techniques inherent in almost every media text.

The predominance of television in the lives of youngsters, as indicated by McLuhan (1960), Sizer (1992), and the U.S. Census Bureau’s report (2007) as reported above, begs for the necessity of a transformative curriculum that includes critical media literacy. This kind of critical literacy allows for open discussion to help students express their thoughts and opinions on media messages that are often given from a biased, stereotypical, and traditional viewpoint. Students are provided with the deconstructive skills, as well as the basic knowledge, of media ownership that they need in order to recognize, question, and critically analyze the historical, cultural, social, political, and economic implications of the media. An emphasis on critical media literacy within education will also allow students to be as adept as cultural readers as they are as literary readers (Semali & Pailliotet, 1999).

Media texts come in a variety of forms, including television, film, advertisements, magazines, newspapers, popular music, and radio (Potter, 2005, Semali & Pailliotett, 1999). These forms of media texts subliminally affect children and adolescents every day regardless of their literacy skills, thus allowing media to construct their reality and shape their ideas, values, and beliefs about themselves and others. Critical
media literacy empowers students to distinguish between reality and false perceptions as well as among the stereotypes, values, and ideologies of people who are different from themselves, as commonly seen in the media (Semali, 2000).

Many critical media educators have come to a common definition of critical media literacy, agreeing that it is the ability to access, decode, analyze, evaluate, and produce communication in a variety of forms, including print and non-print (Potter, 2005; Semali & Pailliotett, 1999; Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; McLaren, Hammer, Sholle, & Reilly, 1995). Issues addressed by critical media literacy may question who produces media, whose interests the media serves, how form relates to content, which codes and conventions are used to cue people on how to respond, how meaning is created, to what extent people can accept media as harmless entertainment, and when they should begin to question media as being unrealistic and problematic (Potter, 2005; Semali; Semali & Pailliotett; Alvermann et al.; Considine, 1995; McLaren et al.).

Teachers play an important role in implementing a critical media literacy program. They must be engaged in reflective teaching in order to emancipate their students and enable them to think critically. This approach changes the entire relationship between teacher and student in that teachers are now seen as facilitating and collaborating with their students rather than constantly monitoring, directing, and supervising their learning. Considine (1995) further claims:

Teachers who take on the role and responsibility of promoting media literacy are implicitly engaged in something much larger than helping students understand media messages. They are engaged in creating young people who are capable and confident enough to think, question, and challenge. (p. 41)

In summary, a critical media literacy program includes examining, interrogating, and analyzing the different forms of media, and focusing on reconstructing the meaning of text and society. As students do so, they become “teachers” of their own histories, experiences, background knowledge, and worldviews. Once these connections are made to the current social structure, schools will help create responsible students who are critical citizens, capable of transformative practices and social change. The purpose of this book project is to demonstrate through the lyrics of KRS-ONE how alternative texts, especially the lyrics in rap music, when used as an integral part of a critical and cultural pedagogy can help students make connections to the current social structure, aiding in the healthy construction of their own racial and cultural identities.

RAP AS CULTURAL PEDAGOGY

The study of rap music as a cultural pedagogy within a Cultural Studies framework requires the careful attention of critical scholars to various issues concerning power, knowledge, identity, and politics. Furthermore, critical scholars must be able to identify ways in which these constructs are inter-related (Kinchester & Steinberg, 1997, 1998; Giroux & McLaren, 1994). As a result, the transformative curriculum becomes in a sense a cultural curriculum, where all students receive
CHAPTER 1

culturally valued, meaningful content. As previously explained, culture must be viewed as a text that should be included, analyzed, deconstructed, and questioned. Culture as text, currently absent from traditional, mainstream curricula, would include a cultural pedagogy that validates marginalized voices, histories, and experiences. The inclusion of a cultural pedagogy in the transformative curriculum helps students map their relation to the social worlds around them. They do this by realizing the complex ways in which they are connected to both people like themselves and those radically different from them (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997, 1998).

Multiple, critical literacies, such as critical media literacy, are necessary components of the transformative curriculum. Issues of cultural pedagogy within the context of rap that are investigated in this text include: analyzing, critiquing, and interpreting the complex relationships between power, knowledge, identity, and politics; examining ways in which identity and knowledge are produced; validating and empowering subjugated and/or indigenous bodies of knowledge, creating critical consciousness and self-consciousness by challenging hegemonic practices, which ultimately helps one recognize his or her “position” in the world; and finally, encouraging teacher and student agency (activism, praxis).

A critical analysis of rap lyrics, using a Cultural Studies approach, could open the door for educators to teach students how to deconstruct the role of mainstream media through critical media literacy. This is especially important in light of the fact that media representations are becoming more recognized as shaping and constructing our identities, images, and understanding of the world around us. Furthermore, the agenda of critical media literacy studies is to sensitize students, teachers, parents, and the general public “to the inequities and injustices of a society based on gender, race, and class inequalities and discrimination” (Kellner, 2000, p. 198).

OVERVIEW

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an understanding of the theoretical framework that grounds the research, ideas, and conversations in this book. This framework is based on Cultural Studies, centering on critical theory and critical and cultural pedagogy in the context of education. In order to clearly understand the need for reform efforts such as critical pedagogy, it was necessary to provide a brief historical background of the influence of technocratic, modernist, positivist influences on education. I concluded with a brief explanation of multiple and critical literacies, focusing on the inclusion of critical media literacy as part of a transformative curriculum that respects and values culture as text (or the cultural pedagogy of rap).

Chapter 2 provides a historical account of Hip Hop culture and rap music and suggests how to include rap music in the transformative curriculum. I believe that a historical analysis of the culture educates students of the importance and relevancy Hip Hop has contributed to society. This will also lead to self-consciousness and awareness of social conditions (past and present), especially among marginalized groups. Chapter 2 also offers a brief analysis of the fear or “moral panic” with
which rap music is often associated. Finally, the chapter concludes with a brief biography of KRS-ONE that includes excerpts from a personal interview I conducted with him after the book was nearly completed. I end by delving deeper into why I feel KRS-ONE is a critical intellectual and how his lyrics are representative of subjugated knowledge that should be centralized and considered as educationally valuable and legitimate.

Chapter 3 focuses on the interpretation of themes emerging from my analysis of sample tracks from KRS-ONE’s musical corpus throughout parts of his career. In chapter 4, I return to the transformative curriculum, discussing how to incorporate media texts into the existing curriculum, using rap lyrics as the primary example. I also discuss the implications and benefits of using such a curriculum in the academic arena for all those directly involved with teaching and learning: teachers, students and parents. Chapter 5 comprises of personal interviews I had with KRS-ONE after I had already completed my own interpretations of his lyrics. The purpose of including excerpts of my interview with KRS-ONE is to provide readers his personal insights to the different themes I found that emerged from the selected albums I chose for critique. I was particularly interested in his views of using Hip Hop culture and particularly rap music as an educational tool to enhance literacy.

In the final chapter, I discuss the methodology I used to explore this topic. I also explain my rationale for using select albums (not all albums were critiqued) and limitations and biases on my part. I employed several methods, or a methodological bricolage, as the primary basis for examining rap music as a transformative curriculum (Kincheloe, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Levi-Strauss, 1966). Using a bricolage of methods was suitable for this book because it allowed me to critically analyze, interpret, and re-interpret texts, leading to the construction and production, rather than the re-construction and re-production of dominant ideological forces that shape identity formation. I include this chapter to show readers, especially students and researchers attempting to combine several methodologies together, how one may pursue … and legitimize … such a study. It is important to realize that my experiences, values, and beliefs played a major role in the construction of my interpretations and analysis of the lyrics, resulting in the inclusion of the methodological approach known as hermeneutics. As a critical pedagogue, I understand that my interpretations of the lyrics are just that – my own. Some may disagree with my analysis and that, too, is expected and welcomed.
Numerous discussions with friends, students, and professionals in education regarding the “definition” of rap music and what differentiates it from Hip Hop, have made it necessary and appropriate to include a historical analysis of Hip Hop. However, it is first important to explore why music, in general, has such a great impact or effect on one’s psyche.

In my biographical sketch in Chapter 1, I shared how I used music as a source of strength to help me deal with my personal suffering and the invalidation of my identity in junior high school. Music has many facets and many uses, but it is generally acknowledged that its primary appeal is to the emotions or it is used as a form of therapy (Storey, 1994). For example, when I was growing up, I would turn to music as a kind of therapy to relieve the personal suffering I was experiencing while being teased and ostracized by other students in school.

Communication comes in many forms with music being one of the most popular, universal, and common appeal across cultures. Music is not only heard on the radio or in the form of tapes or CDs, but it can also be heard and used as an attractor to market or sell products as found when watching commercials, television programs and big screen films. Moreover, music has permeated the public sphere and can be heard in bars and restaurants, supermarkets, waiting rooms, restrooms, and offices. Since the 1950s music has played a central role in the processes of identity construction for young people. This process includes not only elements of personal identity but also important aspects of national, regional, cultural, ethnic, and gender identity (Storey, 1994; Frith, 1978).

Theodor Adorno, a prominent and influential theorist of the Frankfurt School, in an essay in 1941 entitled “On Popular Music” explained the effects music has on its consumers (cited in Storey, 1994). Adorno claimed that popular music creates passive, uninformed listeners and is commonly used as a means of therapy or escape from the “real” world and work of a capitalist society. Adorno further explained that music creates a craving or becomes a “stimulant” which people must satisfy since they are not receiving this satisfaction in the workplace. He used office and factory settings as examples of work environments that create boredom and stress. I would add schools to his list of sites that are dissatisfying because it can be argued that the traditional, modernist approach to education resembles
factory-like conditions that ultimately produce similar outcomes (i.e., tracking system) (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). Adorno, however, argued that “serious” music such as that of Beethoven could act as a stimulant to one’s imagination, thus resulting in active engagement with the world. My research examines and legitimizes how political and conscientious rap, should be placed in the same category as “serious” music. In addition, this book analyzes whether political rap has the ability to stimulate the mind and create active, participatory engagement.

Popular music, including rap, has been part of a virtual explosion in media culture, which makes it necessary for educators to teach critical media literacy, as defined in Chapter 1, at all levels (K-12 through college). The flood of media representations and media technology, often labeled hyper-reality, has motivated progressive educators to take a critical Cultural Studies approach to help students develop critical media literacy skills in order to deconstruct media texts (Kellner, 2000; Semali, 2000). Media culture can be a tool of cultural pedagogy by which media industries “teach” dominant ideas, values, and beliefs through programs and artifacts, a process that promotes targeted cultural (re)production among youth. Whereas modernist, positivist pedagogy focuses on fragmented, specialized print culture – a critical pedagogy involves developing multiple literacies and critical literacy skills that help students decode, analyze, evaluate, and produce different forms of cultural texts, such as rap music (Kellner; Semali; McLaren, et al., 1995). Contemporary Hip Hop culture has been a significant part of this media explosion in recent years.

ORIGINS OF HIP HOP

Hip Hop historians have traced the origins of the culture to the poverty-stricken area of the South Bronx, New York in the early 1970s (Tate, n.d.; Sexton, 1995; Hebdige, 1987; Hagar, 1984). This borough experienced radical changes in the 1960s because of poor urban planning, which included construction of an expressway through the heart of the Bronx and a huge apartment complex, which later was sold to slumlords because of its high vacancy rates. Thus, the neighborhood deteriorated, leaving many rundown and vacant buildings. When middle class families of Italian, German, Irish, and Jewish descent moved out of the Bronx because of the diminishing quality of life, poor African-American and Hispanic families soon replaced them (Change, 2005; George, 1999; Sexton, 1995; Hebdige, 1987; Hagar, 1984).

The South Bronx became a site in which crime, drug addiction, and unemployment was on the rise. Eventually, these poor living conditions and economic disparities created an environment or culture where young people began to engage in graffiti painting, DJing, rhyming, and breaking (break-dancing) as their central means of cultural expression and entertainment. These four major or foundational elements that defined this newfound culture became known as Hip Hop. Many people predicted Hip Hop would be a passing fad or trend, but this “fad” endured and became a way of life for young people all over the world. Hip Hop is the culture; rap is the music. As KRS-ONE asserts, “Rap is something you do, Hip Hop is something we live.”
These four foundational elements of Hip Hop culture are referred to by many names. They are as follows: (a) graffiti art/painting, also known as “graf,” “tags/taggin’” or “writing;” (b) DJing (“deejaying”) also referred to as “turntablism;” (c) MCing (“emceeing”) also referred to as “rhyming” or “rapping;” and (d) b-woying, a gendered reference to the style of Hip Hop dance, commonly referred to as “breakin” and “break-dancing,” which was also popularized by “b-girls” from its inception (Sexton, 1995; Hebdige, 1987; Hagar, 1984). Hip Hop culture also includes a style of dress, language, music, and a lifestyle that is continuously evolving. The terms “rap” and “Hip Hop” have been incorrectly used synonymously, partly due to the lack of recognition and/or popularity of graffiti art and break-dancing. However, all four elements of Hip Hop culture exist simultaneously. The following sections attempts to explain the evolution of Hip Hop, describing how the four main elements have contributed to the development of the culture. Keep in mind this is not meant to be an exhaustive account of the culture; it serves only as an introduction to a culture that is undeniably complex, multi-faceted, and rich in history.

GRAFFITI ART/Taggin’

Graffiti or taggin’ is considered to be an art by the Hip Hop community and an educational text by critical educators because of its constantly changing and creative means of expression that can be read, analyzed, and interpreted. Graffiti art is one form of non-mainstream art. Gang members, in general, use graffiti as a means of expression. Gangs in the fifties used graffiti for self-promotion, marking territorial boundaries, and as a method of intimidation. According to Hager (1984), street gangs emerged in the southeast Bronx in 1968 and grew rapidly, reaching their peak in 1973. Their behavior stemmed primarily from normal adolescent concerns: the need for peer respect and approval, security and protection, group support and acceptance, and age and sex role identification. Street gangs in the 1950s differed slightly from gangs in the late 1960s. While gangs in the late sixties had similar characteristics, in 1969 gangs in New York City used graffiti as a means to communicate in code the language, behavior, and meeting places for its members (Hagar, 1984).

In 1968, seven teenagers calling themselves the Savage Seven laid the groundwork for the domination of street gangs in the Bronx for the next five to six years. Within a short time, gangs appeared on every street corner, and names like Black Spades, Savage Skulls, Seven Crowns, Latin Kings, and Young Lords, just to name a few, could be seen in graffiti everywhere. According to Hagar (1984), gang activities reached their peak in 1973, and then slowly died out one after the other for several reasons. Rival gang members wiped out many gangs. Some gangs got too heavily involved in the drug scene, and others grew to be so large that their members did not want to be involved anymore. Times were also changing as people in the 1970s became more interested in frequenting parties and club scenes to dance to the rhythm of the music (i.e. Hip Hop ended some of these gangs). In addition, the number of gangs decreased because an increasing number of people and former gang members were becoming interested in the new activities of Hip
Hop culture. The basic idea of Hip Hop culture is to compete, not with violence, but through one of the four elements of Hip Hop culture. The driving force behind all of these activities was the impetus to break out of anonymity, to be heard and seen, and to spread one’s name (Sexton, 1995; Hebdige, 1987; Hagar, 1984).

This shift led to a watershed moment in the graffiti movement in the early 1970s lead by a young Greek-American teenager by the name of Demetrius who resided in the Washington Heights area of New York City (Jenkins, 1999; Hagar, 1984). Demetrius signed or “tagged” his name TAKI 183 (“TAKI” being Demetrius’ nickname and “183” being the street number where he lived) whenever and wherever possible, but mainly on the walls throughout the New York City subway system. This trend soon spread rapidly, as many artists began “tagging” their names not only throughout the subway system but also in New York neighborhoods and on city buses when they stopped to pick up passengers. Other famous tag names found in the city at that time were PHASE 2, TRACY 168, and LEE 163d (Hagar) and SAMO shit (aka – “same ‘ole shit”) by popular artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Graffiti art became so popular by 1975-1976 that it spread to the other New York City boroughs including Brooklyn, Queens, and other sections of the Bronx. Youth used old buildings, vacant lots, and sides of subway cars as their canvas to tag their names or spray paint portraits of their deceased loved ones, particularly those who lost their lives to gang-related violence. Other popular images that could be seen were from “underground comics and television, and even Andy Warhol-style art” (i.e., paintings of Campbell’s soup cans) (Tate, n.d.).

Although graffiti art was initially associated with inner city youth, “artists” from all economic backgrounds began displaying their “work.” Whether it was created by upper-class White kids from the Upper West Side or by middle-class Black kids, graffiti art had embedded itself in the lives of many New York City youths. This colorful art form gradually evolved into art works with a wide array of images, ranging from block letters to figures, signs, and symbols (stars and flags), to full-size cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse and Popeye, which could be seen virtually everywhere, inside and outside of subway cars, often even obscuring commercial maps and billboard advertisements (Jenkins, 1999).

Graffiti art, however, was not perceived as an art form from many, including local authorities. The Metropolitan Transit Authority in New York City recognized this public display of art as vandalism and took preventative measures (installing barb-wired fences, use of police dogs, paint-removal, and undercover policemen (Tate, n.d.)) to curtail “vandals” from doing further damage to public property. As a result of the Transit Authority’s attempt to clean up the city, Lee Quinones, a graffiti artist well known for his subway murals, resorted to painting on handball courts. Quinones’ court murals synthesized cartoon images with strong moral and political messages (i.e., one mural pleaded for the end to the arms race). Quinones’ passion and obvious talent for drawing soon caught the attention of Fred Brathwaite, another local graffiti artist, who later became known as Fab Five Freddy, the host of the television show, Yo! MTV Raps. Brathwaite approached Quinones about painting murals for pay. Quinones agreed, so together they formed
a graffiti mural painting group known as the Fab 5. The other members of the
group were Lee, Doc, and Slave (Hagar, 1984).

At this time, the Fab 5 graffiti artists painted for personal pleasure rather than
for monetary reward. Later, however, the Fab 5 placed an advertisement in The
Village Voice, offering to paint murals at a cost of $5.00 per square foot. In an
article in the February 12, 1979, Village Voice, after interviewing Brathwaite,
Harold Smith implied that it was absurd to try to sell graffiti art works when the
city was trying so hard to eradicate graffiti. Brathwaite, however, used his “street
smarts” to respond to Smith’s comment, describing graffiti art as the purest form of
art that New York had ever created, and revealing that his Fab 5 collective was
heavily influenced by New Wave artists such as Warhol, Crumb, and Lichtenstein.
Brathwaite, in fact, knew that graffiti muralists were not influenced by, nor had
they even heard of, these New Wave artists, but he responded in this way in an
effort to link graffiti art to the hip downtown New York art scene (Hebdige, 1987;
Hagar, 1984). Nonetheless, the Village Voice article caught the attention of Claudio
Bruni, an Italian art dealer, who invited the Fab 5 to display five of their canvases
at an art show in Rome. All five paintings sold for a thousand dollars each. Soon
other influential art dealers in the United States, Europe, and Japan were exhibiting
graffiti in major galleries, giving it the kind of recognition and exposure that
allowed this art form to reach mainstream audiences.

The fact that these graffiti artists had three other contacts with the legitimate art
world at this time should be noted. According to author Steven Hager, the first
involved Stephan Eins, owner of the Fashion Moda Gallery, who cultivated a
relationship with local graffiti artists because he was looking for a new artistic
direction, beyond what was socially acceptable at the time. The second contact
involved Sam Esses, a Park Avenue art collector. Taking a cue from Claudio Bruni
(that there was European interest in graffiti art), Esses decided to promote this art
form. Graffiti art’s third contact with the “legitimate” art world was through Henry
Chalfant, a sculptor who had been taking pictures of graffiti during this period.
When Chalfant approached Ivan Karp of O.K. Harris Gallery in New York about
exhibiting his graffiti photographs in his gallery, Karp agreed.

In the 1970s, the United Graffiti Artists (UGA) and the Nation of Graffiti Artists
(NOGA) were formed, aiding in the development of workshops where youngsters
could paint and display their graffiti art in gallery shows. However, at the same
time that graffiti art appeared to be prospering, it was receiving negative press,
with stories and headlines that read, “Subway Graffiti Here Called Epidemic” (The
New York Times, February 11, 1972); “Defacing New York has Become a Real
Art” (The Toronto Star, October 20, 1972); and “Question Plan to Use Dogs to
art had a twofold effect, because it reappeared in the 1980s as the background for
music videos by artists such as Blondie (in her video for the song “Rapture”), in
documentaries (Style Wars by Henry Chalfant), and in books (Subway Art by
Henry Chalfant), as well as in movies (Wild Style and Beat Street).

Among the events that popularized graffiti art in the 1970s and 1980s, Hagar
(1984) contends that one in particular played an instrumental role in connecting
graffiti to Hip Hop culture. An article by Richard Goldstein in The Village Voice in
December 1980 is credited with making this first connection. Goldstein, was also said to be the first to write about the positive value of graffiti art in a New York magazine in 1973, claiming that graffiti artists were not antisocial as they were often portrayed (Hagar). Rather they were bright, intelligent, and artistic people, who used this form of art to express the conditions in which they lived. In his article, Goldstein went on to link graffiti art and rap music, claiming that both originated from the same cultural conditions. His claim and/or assumption was the first of its kind in mainstream print media. It has been argued that Goldstein’s assumption was valid because of the success of some prominent graffiti writers, including PHASE 2 and Fab Five Freddy (Brathwaite), who later became a successful rap artist (Hagar). Graffiti art, viewed as an alternative text in art, English, or social studies classes, expressed the untold story of oppressive social and living conditions, thus installing itself as one of the foundational elements of Hip Hop culture.

**DJING/TURNTABLISM**

*DJing or turntablism* is an expressive, creative, and ever-evolving art employed by the DJ (disc jockey) when playing, mixing, and talking over records played from a turntable. Kool Herc has been credited with being the first major Hip Hop DJ, beginning in 1973 (Fernando, 1999; Nelson, 1999). Herc was born in 1954 as Clive Campbell in Kingston, Jamaica. He moved to the Bronx in 1967, uniting with his mother who had already migrated there in hopes of achieving a better life for her family. While attending high school in 1970, Campbell was given the nickname “Hercules” because of his impressive physique and aggressive style on the basketball court. Hercules was later shortened to Herc and soon after to Kool Herc, the tag name he used when he took an interest in graffiti writing. In addition to his strong passion for sports and graffiti writing, Herc was fascinated with music. Herc’s fascination with music stemmed from his upbringing in his native Jamaica. As a young boy, he frequently sneaked peaks through fences at yard parties. According to Nelson (1999), Here was impressed by the music he heard, saying, “I was passing by and I saw a house shaking. The zinc fence was rattling, and it felt like thunder” (p. 16)! These parties were known as “dancehall culture” or “blue dances.” One definition of “dancehall culture” frequently used today likens it to modern day reggae. However, dancehall was simply a place where dances took place, whether it was in a large hall or in a slum yard in a ghetto of Jamaica. The rising popularity of rhythm ‘n’ blues music introduced by Black American sailors stationed on the island, as well as by Black radio stations in nearby Miami, caused it to be in high demand. Some favorite rhythm ‘n’ blues artists were James Brown, Fats Domino, Amos Melburn, and Roy Brown (Fernando, 1999).

Since local Jamaican bands were unsuccessful at replicating the sounds of American rhythm and blues artists, mobile sound systems with recorded music were created and were the largest, loudest, and most powerful mobile discotheque systems in Jamaica. These systems were comprised of roadies, engineers, and bouncers (Fernando, 1999; Hebdige, 1987). In the spotlight of these sound systems were the DJs, who frequently talked over the music they played, a technique
known as “toasting,” which is considered to be one of the direct forebears of modern rap (Szwed, 1999). “Toasting” is a rhymed monologue, which tells stories in the first person and which often thrived in prisons, street life, and the army. Szwed defined “toasting” as “an African-American (rather than a Jamaican) poetic form that typically recounts the adventures of heroes who often position themselves against society either as so shrewd and powerful as to be superhuman, or so bad and nasty as to be subhuman” (p. 8). Furthermore, Toop (1984) described toasts as lengthy rhymes told mostly by men who are usually “violent, scatological, obscene, misogynist,” and were “used for decades to while away time in situations of enforced boredom, whether prison, armed service, or street corner life” (p. 29).

A DJ would “toast” over the music by screaming short phrases to liven up the crowd and dancers. Examples of simple toasts were “work it, work it” or other popular phrases and slang expressions being used at that time. It was common to hear the DJ acknowledge people who were in attendance at the party as well.

Kool Herc took his knowledge of Jamaican culture, with its mobile sound systems and toasting, to the Bronx with him and began practicing extensively in his parents’ apartment. In 1973, Herc made his first DJ appearance at his sister’s birthday party in a recreation center in the lobby of his apartment building. Soon thereafter, Herc began playing at block parties, parks, and community centers, slowly gaining popularity and a reputation as a skillful and talented DJ. His popularity grew so much that he started playing at famous clubs like The Twilight Zone and the T-Connection (Fernando, 1999).

What set Herc apart, though, from other popular club DJs who played continuous music of the day (then it was disco music) was the revolutionary technique he created to spin the records. Herc rarely played an entire song, only the section that excited people the most, or the “break.” This was the part where the beat was exposed in its clearest percussive form, where just the drums, bass, and rhythm guitars took over to song and the dance floor. Because the breaks of the songs were only a few seconds long, Herc expanded them by using two turntables with two records. He learned to extend the breaks indefinitely by using an audio mixer and two identical records by which he continuously replaced the desired segment or percussion sections of the day’s popular songs (Fernando, 1999). This technique became known as “beats” or “break-beats,” which laid the foundation for “MCing.” The MC or master of ceremonies was the entertainer on the microphone who entertained the audience inspiring them to dance to the rhymes (MC or MCing was later known as “rapping” by mainstream media; the dancers were referred to as bboys or bgirls – discussed later). Break-beats have also been credited with giving rise to much Hip Hop, dance, techno, and jungle or “house” music today (Fernando).

Another feature that set Kool Herc apart from other DJs at the time was that he used various musical genres’ break-beats in addition to disco. He played funk songs such as James Brown’s “Give It Up or Turn It All Loose” and soul and R&B (rhythm and blues) records such as Baby Huey’s “Listen to Me” and Jimmy Castor Bunch’s “It’s Just Begun” to emphasize the loud percussion sounds during the break segment of the songs (Fernando, 1999).

Herc incorporated Jamaican toasting with his DJ style at first by shouting short phrases but soon leaving the “shout outs” and microphone duties or MCing to
others, due to the concentration he required to mix the beats in new and creative ways to move and entertain the crowd. Herc passed the microphone to two of his friends, Coke La Rock and Clark Kent, who subsequently represented the first MC team called Kool Herc and the Herculoids (Hebdige, 1987). Herc’s now legendary status inspired other underprivileged youth to take an active interest in DJing, opening the doors for others to create new styles and techniques of their own, contributing to the development of Hip Hop culture today. Two notable DJs worth mentioning are Afrika Bambaataaa, known as Bam, and Joseph Saddler, known as Grandmaster Flash.

Kool Herc left an especially lasting impression on one particular youngster from the Bronx River Projects on the South Side – Afrika Bambaataa (born Kahyan Aasim in 1957) or Bam for short. The name Afrika Bambaataa originated with a famous nineteenth century Zulu chief and meant “affectionate leader.” Bam became known and respected as the “godfather” or the “grandfather” of Hip Hop culture (George, 2004). He was also the leader of one of the largest and most notorious street gangs in the city called the Black Spades (mentioned earlier).

Bam was an avid record collector and DJ. His interest in Kool Herc’s DJ style inspired him to DJ more frequently, thus perfecting the skills that eventually gave him an opportunity to run a sound system at the Bronx River Community Center. Although Bam was the highly respected leader of the Black Spades, he formed The Organization, a community activist program that educated people about the threat of violence and drugs (Fernando, 1999; Hagar, 1984). Bam was so extremely intelligent and articulate when speaking about his visions of uniting Blacks and Hispanics to work toward positive change that in 1974 he actually inspired many gang members to participate in the projects under The Organization.

That same year, Bam reorganized The Organization and renamed it The Zulu Nation, inspired by his studies in African history and, more specifically, about the Zulus who fought with honor and simple weapons against colonialist Britain. Bam and The Zulu Nation, comprised of DJs, MCs, B-boys/B-girls or break dancers, and graffiti writers, helped sustain and build the tradition of Hip Hop culture.

Bam’s success as a DJ and his work with The Zulu Nation continued well into the late 1970s as he formed a relationship with Tom Silverman from Tommy Boy Records. This association led to the formation of the group Afrika Bambaataaa and the Jazzy 5, who soon released the song “Jazzy Sensation” from the album Tommy Boy 2. In 1982, Bam’s hit “Planet Rock” helped Silverman build Tommy Boy Records into a reputable record company as well as begin the electro-funk revolution, a sound that was later sampled in the works of popular artists such as the Chemical Brothers and Fatboy Slim (Fernando, 1999). The Zulu Nation is known today as the Universal Zulu Nation, “an international Hip Hop movement that upholds such principles as knowledge, wisdom, understanding, freedom, justice, equality, peace, unity, love, and respect in their manifesto” (Fernando, p. 15).

Another important and relevant contributor to Hip Hop culture was another Bronx DJ with Jamaican roots by the name of Grandmaster Flash, born Joseph Saddler (Fernando, 1999; Hagar, 1984). Grandmaster Flash earned his nickname because of his impressive hand-eye coordination when he mixed beats by listening to one record through a set of headphones while the other record continued to play.
Although Theodore Livingston, the brother of Flash’s partner, Mean Gene, invented the art of the “needle-drop,” Flash is often credited with mastering the art, consequently outperforming Herc in talent and popularity. Needle dropping is formally defined as the “prolonged short drum breaks by playing two copies of a record simultaneously and moving the needle on one turntable back to the start of the break while the other played” (Tate, n.d.). The two records did not need to be identical as was the case with Herc’s break-beat style. A technique known as “scratching” was invented around the same time by a DJ named Theodor (Young Theodore Livingston). Scratching is very similar to needle dropping in that the DJ slides the vinyl record back and forth under the needle of the player to create the rhythm (Fernando).

Flash incorporated a drum machine known as the “beat box” into his performances, which gained him even more respect and popularity as a DJ. The beat box was a manually operated machine, which produced an electronic beat with which Flash would drum a part in time with the track (Fernando, 1999; Hagar, 1984). This phenomenon led to later rap groups using their mouths, lips, and throats to produce sounds often referred to as the “human beat box.” DJing serves as an empowering, postmodern text through its oral expressions of toasting, combined with the explosive, sound breaking beats of the music, thus emotionally charging audiences to unite for a common cause.

MCING/RHYMING

MCing (also spelled emceeing) or rhyming first started with the DJs articulating their thoughts and feelings in a creative, expressive, and energizing manner. The terms “rap”, “rapper”, or “rapping” are also common terms used today by mainstream media. Some make a strong distinction between the “rapper” (one definition is mainstream or commercial artist who “sells out” to corporate interests) and the “MC” (one definition is a Hip Hop artist who may have gained commercial appeal but has not sold out to corporate interests). It can also be argued that the artist moves from MC to rapper back to MC or vice versa. KRS-One’s rhymes make a distinction between the two which will be explained later in the book. In chapter 5 while interviewing KRS, he offers his own definition between the two terms. Hip Hop lyrics create a feeling of anticipation and excitement among the audience; it evokes emotional responses.

Along with Herc, Flash has been credited with introducing and popularizing the art form known as MCing as part of Hip Hop culture. As I mentioned earlier when defining the DJing element of Hip Hop culture, MCing occurred when DJs “rapped” or “rhymed” short phrases over their music. According to Tate (n.d.), “among the wider variety of oratorical precedents cited for MCing [besides the Jamaican style of toasting] are the epic histories of the West African griot [the African oral traditionalist or storyteller who recites the history of his/her tribal community], talking blues songs, jailhouse toast (long rhyming poems recounting outlandish deeds and misdeeds), and the dozens (a ritualized word game based on exchanging insults, usually directed toward members of the opponent’s family)” (Tate, n.d.; Burns, 1995; Fernando, 1994). Tate further contends that other
influences on MCing included the “hipster-jive announcing styles of 1950s rhythm ‘n’ blues DJs such as Jocko Henderson, the Black Power poetry of Amiri Baraka, Gil Scott-Heron, and the Last Poets, [as well as] the rapping sections in recordings by Isaac Hayes and George Clinton.”

“Rapping,” although not called that at the time, was heard in America as far back as the 1850s. The trading of tall tales, the rhyming and trading of insults (the dozens), and creatively producing one’s own rhythmic “chest-whacking,” “thigh-slapping” sounds originated in West Africa (Burns, 1995; Toop, 1984). All of these forms have been known to contribute to Hip Hop culture and rap music in one way or another. Many of these traditional African tales or toasts celebrated mythical bad men boasting about how “bad” and/or powerful they were. Toasting with style and clever rhymes gave one status and power among one’s peers.

While it is acknowledged today that rap music had its roots in a variety of sources, including those mentioned above, Jamaican reggae music contributed just as much to rap’s development. Fernando (1994) describes the connection and similarities found between both genres of music, claiming that both emerged from oppressive environments that “reflect the culture, attitude, and sensibilities of the ghetto” (p. 32); both are rhythmic forms of music emphasizing the sounds of the bass more so than any other chord, and both found their roots in African griots and Jamaican toasting (Sexton, 1995).

As the lyrical art form of toasting or rhyming evolved, it offered creative outlets for many. There were no set rules, except to be original and to rhyme on time to the beat of the music. This art form was accessible to anyone – rich, poor, or the inexperienced (no lessons were needed). One simply needed to practice and perfect his/her verbal skills in order to rhyme freely. The content of the rhymes could be about anything, allowing for the imagination to run freely. The ultimate goal was to be perceived by peers as being artistically skilled and original in your rhymes; in other words the goal was to seem as skillful lyricist.

In 1977, Grandmaster Flash used his DJing skills once again to impact Hip Hop culture by popularizing and implementing the use of MCs in his performances. He formed a five-member group of his own known as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (similar to Afrika Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation). Members of the Furious Five included Cowboy (Keith Wiggins), Melle Mel (Melvin Glover), Kid Creole (Danny Glover), Scorpio (Eddie Morris), and Rahiem (Guy Williams). Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five have been credited with pushing MCing to an entirely different level because of their complicated routines such as back-to-back rhyming, in-tandem flows, and choreographed moves (Fernando, 1999). The Furious Five were unique in their ability to split lyrical phrases amongst themselves so that, their lyrical delivery often sounded as if only one person was actually doing the rhyming. They were synchronizing in perfect lyrical harmony with one another.

By 1978, MCs became even more popular than DJs since they interacted more directly with the crowd, evoking unlimited surges of energy, excitement, and liveliness when dancing to the recorded sounds of music. Other famous MCs following in the Furious Five’s footsteps were Grand Wizard Theodore and the Fantastic Five, and the Treacherous Three.
Tracing the historical influence and evolution of rhyming from the 1850s to the present, now referred to as “rapping” by mainstream media provides an empowering alternative text because of the potential liberatory and empowering messages embedded in the lyrics.

BREAK-DANCING/BREAKIN’

Hip Hop’s “dance” is often referred to as break-dancing in mainstream media or breakin’ in the Hip Hop community. Breaker’s are referred to as either b-boys or b-girls. The word “b-boy” is derived from “break-boy” (“b-girl” meaning “break-girl”), a term DJ Kool Herc often used when describing the person(s) who stepped out and danced during the instrumental break in the music (break on the breaks). Breaking emphasizes various forms of body movement that create a unique style of dance and expression. Breaking involved dance moves that incorporated many different dance styles, reminiscent of every period from the Lindy hop or the jitterbug era to the African-rooted Brazilian martial art of capoeira. Many also claim that the “b” in “b-boying” originated from the African word “boioing,” which meant to “hop” or “jump” (Holman, 2004; Fernando, 1994; Hebdige, 1984). All of these styles of dance can be seen in some shape or form in break-dancing known today as the “old school” style of dancing. The “old school” style included breaking, locking, and popping, whereas the present-day term “new school” style of dance incorporates all of the “old school” dance styles, but with more creative and futuristic moves. Nelson George (cited in Rose, 1994) provides a rich and detailed description of this dance:

Each person’s turn in the ring was very brief—ten to thirty seconds—but packed with action and meaning. It began with an entry, a hesitating walk that allowed him to get in step with the music for several beats and take his place “on stage.” Next the dancer “got down” to the floor to do footwork, a rapid, slashing, circular scan of the floor by sneakered feet, in which the hands support the body’s weight while the head and torso revolve at a slower speed, a kind of syncopated sunken pirouette, also known as the helicopter. Acrobatic transitions such as head spins, hand spins, shoulder spins, flips and the swipe—a flip of the weight from hands to feet that also involves a twist in the body’s direction—served as bridges between the footwork and the freeze. The final element was the exit, a spring back to verticality or a special movement that returned the dancer to the outside of the circle. (p. 47)

DJ Kool Herc started using the term “b-boy” in the ghettoes of New York in the early 1970s. The term gained popularity and was used when describing true, devoted Hip Hop males or females (“b-girls”) from both Black and Latino backgrounds who understood the history of the culture. B-boys emphasized creating their own style and moves. The more difficult and creative a move was, the more likely one was to be given the prestigious label of being a “b-boy/b-girl.” Some popular moves still known and practiced today are the windmill (legs are spread in a v-shape while b-boy spins around from his upper back to his stomach, then returns onto his back, and so forth), the flare (legs spread in v-shape, b-boy supports himself on hands while spinning legs around him), the head spin (spin using the head as the pivot point), the body wave (move where it appears as if an
CHAPTER 2

invisible wave is traveling through the body), and the robot (mimicking robots seen on television in the 1970s), to name a few (Banes, 2004; Hebdige; B-Boy Central, 1999).

As mentioned earlier, real Hip Hop dancing (b-boying) originated in the streets and served, at times, as a substitute for violence (although at times, breaking caused fights to start due to the intense nature of the competitions). Many of the participants (as was the case with graffiti writing, MCing, and DJing) were former gang members who, rather than fighting, competed in breaking competitions to earn respect. Every element of Hip Hop culture described thus far involved earning respect and gaining recognition through competitions. “Breaking battles” involved “breaking crews” (groups of dancers who practiced and performed together) competing against one another to prove who had more creative and imaginative moves and styles (Banes, 2004; Veran, 1999; Hebdige, 1987).

The first known breaking crew was The Nigga Twins, followed by Afrika Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation, The Seven Deadly Sinners, Rockwell Association, Starchild La Rock, and the Rock Steady Crew (Veran, 1999). Breaking battles took place in a variety of places, ranging from the streets to parks, and eventually, to downtown nightclubs. Some argued the most notable b-boy, who brought breaking to national exposure, was Richie “Crazy Legs” Colon, a member of the Rock Steady Crew (Fernando, 1999; Veran). In 1983, representatives from Paramount Pictures approached Crazy Legs after witnessing his dancing skills at a previous show held in the Roxy. He was offered a cameo appearance in the movie Flashdance. He was to fill in for Jennifer Beal’s character during one of the dance scenes involving a backspin. According to Fernando (1994), Flashdance turned millions of kids on to breaking. It was at this point, and to the chagrin of Crazy Legs, that the media coined the term “break-dancing” as an art form. Crazy Legs (cited in Fernando, 1994) explained further:

See, the whole thing when Hip Hop first started was the music was played in the parks and in the jams for the dancers, and those dancers were b-boys. And when those breaks [beats] would come on, it would be like ‘b-boys, are you ready?’ And a b-boy very specifically was a break boy, not a breakdancer; that’s media terminology. So b-boys were the guys that walked around with their bell-bottom Lees rolled up to the side, and the graffiti piece on the other side, with the 69er Pro Keds and yunno, you were a b-boy. (p. 17)

Hollywood capitalized on the new fad of break-dancing as more movies and documentaries attempted to portray Hip Hop culture the way “they” interpreted it to be. For example, in 1984, Harry Belafonte produced Beat Street, a movie portraying the lives of legendary b-boys from the crews Magnificent Force, Rock Steady, and the New York City Breakers. However, the actors in the movie were much older than the real life b-boys, and their feeble attempts to sound as if they had grown up on the streets were ill-received, as they were viewed as being fake and unrealistic (Banes, 2004; Veran, 1999). The barrage of media exposure that breaking received at this time (on David Letterman, 20/20, prime time’s Fame, and in performances for Queen Elizabeth and Prince Charles, to name a few), ironically
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also killed its mainstream popularity by 1984. The 1990s have, however, seen a revival of the art form, as those who are now mature and wise are reintroducing b-boying to the stage as an integral part of Hip Hop culture. The creativity and unique body movements as well as the expressive nature in breaking can lead to many different interpretations and inferences that can be read and analyzed as texts. Students’ interpretations of the moves can lead to critical literacy lessons in which creative, thought-provoking stories are written.

HIP HOP FASHION

As mentioned earlier, Hip Hop culture is continuously growing and expanding as it also includes, among many other elements, its own fashion, language and lifestyle. The baggy style of clothing commonly worn by today’s youth may be considered by some as the “new school” style of Hip Hop, but it should be made clear that this style did not originate from Hip Hop culture. Such common misperceptions are often perpetuated through the media, as well as by youth today who do not fully understand the history and culture of Hip Hop.

The style of clothing that b-boys, graffiti writers, DJs, and MCs wore included affordable Addidas and Puma sneakers, tracksuits, and hooded sweatshirts to hide the writer’s identity and protect their heads from the wire fences at subway yards. There are other theories that deserve mentioning and that have credibility. One explanation that people living in urban communities offer for the baggy clothing was the poverty in which they lived. Many poor families could not afford to buy clothes for all of their children, so once older siblings outgrew their clothes, they would pass them along as “hand-me-downs” to their younger siblings. Another valid argument is that this “style” actually originated from prisons as the outfits worn by prisoners were often too baggy and/or loosely fitting (no belts were allowed for obvious reasons); thus many prisoners walked around with their pants hanging off their hips. Upon release, these prisoners (often, young minority men) brought this style back to their old neighborhoods, thus creating a style of dress that would continue for many years to come (Hebidge, 1987). The current trend seen with today’s youth of Hip Hop is the wearing of “skinny-jeans” – tighter, slimmer-fitting jeans (although still hanging low around the waist) – rather than the overly baggy style reminiscent of the 1990s and early 21st Century years.

All four foundational elements of Hip Hop – graffiti art, DJing, MCing/rhyming, and breaking (b-boys and b-girls) – can be used as literacy texts due to their creative, energetic, and expressive nature, as well as their empowering potential to excite crowds whether it be visually, verbally, kinesthetically, oraurally. All elements can be used in an educational sense because all are texts that can be read and interpreted. Each element allows room for deviation and expansion, thus further supporting the notion that each can be a postmodern text. In addition, KRS-ONE and The Temple of Hip Hop have recognized other elements and principles known as the Hip Hop Declaration of Peace [see Appendix C].
A number of musical “pioneers” whose success and influence opened the doors for present day MCs also contributed to Hip Hop culture. Because the evolution of Hip Hop itself encompasses many years, I could not possibly cover its whole development here, although I provide this cultural context as background for this study of KRS’ lyrics in an educational context. This does not mean, however, that the other three elements of Hip Hop culture (graffiti, DJing, and breaking) could not be studied in an educational setting as well. In fact as stated earlier, all elements can be viewed as literacy texts that if can be used to tell stories.

Although Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five had released the record “Superrappin’” in 1979 through the Enjoy label in Harlem, another group of virtually unknown rappers, the Sugarhill Gang, surpassed them, achieving national stardom and success after recording one of the first commercial rap records to become a chart-topping phenomenon. This hit song, “Rappers Delight,” (1979) was recorded by the three members of the Sugarhill Gang on their independently-owned African-American label, also called Sugar Hill. However, the lyrics of one verse to this song were purported to have been written by Grandmaster Caz, a member of the Bronx’s Cold Crush Brothers, a group many considered to be among the pioneers of rap (Fernando, 1999). Although Grandmaster Caz claimed authorship of the rhymes in “Rappers Delight,” he received neither credit nor compensation when the record was released. Over the years, much controversy has surrounded the question of who the true author and originator of rap was; nonetheless, the Sugarhill Gang received credit for advancing rap to the national level with “Rappers Delight” (Fernando).

In 1981, Grandmaster Flash yet again contributed to rap’s national exposure by releasing “Adventures on the Wheels of Steel,” the first record to bring the sounds of live DJ scratching to the record shelves. Although the previous high-energy singles by Grandmaster Flash, such as “Freedom” (1980) and “Birthday Party” (1981), combined rhyme skills with creative production, it was their depiction of the harsh realities of ghetto life in “The Message” (1982) that gained them recognition as pioneers of socially-conscious rhymes. Grandmaster Flash also inspired Public Enemy’s Chuck D and Boogie Down Production’s KRS-ONE to create provocative social commentary in the manner of Bob Dylan and Bob Marley (Fernando, 1994, 1999).

The 1970s paved the way for the 1980s as Hip Hop emerged with its own style, sounds, and ethos. Hip Hop and rap in particular, gained national exposure with such acts as Run DMC, Big Daddy Kane, Public Enemy, KRS-ONE/Boogie Down Productions, Salt ‘n’ Pepa, and Queen Latifah. From the 1990s to the present, Hip Hop culture, especially the rhyming or rap element, has emerged as a dominant cultural form with worldwide audiences.

Educators embarking on the journey of teaching an empowering, meaningful cultural pedagogy through the exploration of a text such as rap music, must, first and foremost (as teachers-as-researchers), research the history of Hip Hop as I have attempted to do here. I must reiterate once again that due to time, space, and main purpose of this text (focus being on KRS-ONE’s lyrics as an educational tool), I
have only touched the surface of the rich and in depth cultural history of Hip Hop. Studying and examining how all four original elements (as well as other elements and principles) inter-connect to make up Hip Hop culture can provide students with a better understanding and appreciation for youth and minority cultures, social and economic struggles, and other social justice themes resonating within the elements. A historical analysis of Hip Hop culture allows students to critically reflect and make meaning of the past, thus fostering a critical awareness of how the different elements have evolved to its current state. All content areas include this interdisciplinary approach by including historical elements of the subject matter being studied. The transformative curriculum, approaching texts from an inter-, trans-, and counter-disciplinary approach, could include the text of Hip Hop culture across disciplines as well. Teachers must research the culture – historical analysis to present day – even if unfamiliar with it, and when appropriate, connect elements to concepts or themes that must be taught from the traditional curriculum.

The remaining sections of this chapter include (a) a brief analysis along with plausible explanations of the fear or “moral panic” that rap music often evokes from dominant or mainstream society; (b) a brief biography of KRS-ONE to allow readers to familiarize themselves with this MC; and finally, (c) a description and explanation of why I chose KRS-ONE’s musical corpus, as subjugated knowledge using samples of his lyrics to show his role as teacher, instructor, philosopher, and activist. Providing samples of KRS-ONE’s lyrics prior to the critical analysis may help readers understand why his words have the potential to serve as empowering, liberatory texts reflective of a cultural and critical pedagogy that can aid in the construction of racial and cultural identity and challenge traditional paradigms.

RAP MUSIC: MORAL PANIC OR UNIVERSAL APPEAL

Rap music in general embodies a cultural aesthetic in that it reaches a wide range of audiences at national and international levels, regardless of race, class, culture, and ethnicity (Kellner, 2000). In a cultural context, rap is a powerful language, articulating the experiences and marginality that African-American working-class and underclass people experience. Rap provides a voice for these groups in the form of social protest, speaking out against oppressive conditions, from everyday life in the neighborhood and workplace, to institutions of learning (Ross & Rose, 1994; Rose, 1994).

Because certain kinds of rap music challenge the social forces that contribute to the rappers’ living conditions, especially more political and militant rap styles, its creators may be met with what Houston Baker (1993) called “moral panic,” similar to the fear and opposition he found among educators in regard to Black Studies programs. In Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy (1993), Baker explained that the rise of Black Studies programs met with opposing views and incited feelings of moral panic among members of other disciplines in the academy. Stanley Cohen (1987) explains that moral panic exists when “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (p. 9). Cohen argued that a reaction such as moral panic causes a sequence of events that subsequently lead to “demonization” and “surveillance” of
those challenging the system, and in controlled activities that seek to exorcise what is perceived to be the “threat.” Although Baker refers to “moral panic” as a reaction to Black Studies programs, many people have the same reaction to rap music, especially when it is defined or recognized as a tool for empowerment. Rap music causes moral panic in many because of its “threat” to existing values and ideologies held by the dominant [White] middle or upper class.

Although sales figures have declined in recent years, rap is listened to by millions (as record sales seem to suggest) and for a variety of reasons. Some may listen to rap because of its powerful, energizing rhymes and beats, while others may listen to it to experience or relate to an emotion or mood. Still others may listen to rap to learn something or to relate to the hidden voices of the oppressed. Many middle or upper class listeners from all cultural backgrounds may prefer to live vicariously through the exaggerated tales of rappers rather than deal with their own privileged realities in face of the millions of people who live well below the poverty line.

A consumer profile of music buyers issued by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) offers revealing insights into a business buffeted by change from several directions. According to the RIAA, rap’s share of the popular music market doubled from the late eighties to the nineties. Rap and Rhythm ‘n’ Blues together accounted for 23% of sales in 1990, up from 16% in 1989. Estimated rap sales in 1995 reached $1.8 billion. Because the popularity and sales of rap music alone skyrocketed so much in 1998, the RIAA announced that rap was the best-selling musical genre in the United States. In fact, what had traditionally been known as “Black music” had crossed the color and class line.

In recent years, sales of rap albums decreased significantly beginning in 2000. Billboard Magazine reported “rap sales have dropped 44% since 2000 and declined from 13% of all music sales to 10%.” In its year-end report, Nielsen SoundScan reported that in 2007 all genres of music sales declined, but rap sales dropped the most – by 30%.

Cultural critics have argued that statistics can be misleading and inaccurate suggesting that rap consumption may be much higher. They contend that sales figures and statistics do not account for the widely popular practice of selling bootleg copies (an illegal, often lower quality, replica of a tape, movie, or CD) in largely urban areas. Rose (1994) also notes that Black youth have a higher “pass-along rate” (sharing a tape/CD with others), which makes the statistics in these reports a misleading gauge of the music’s popularity. I would argue that advances in computer technology that allow easy and often virtually free or illegal access to songs downloaded from the Internet makes it even more difficult to accurately depict the sales or distribution of any music genre, much less determine the racial, cultural, and/or ethnic makeup of its consumers. Yet others have argued that the public is simply tired of hearing violent, over-sexualized, sensationalized images aired on mainstream media airwaves. Filmmaker Byron Hurt who released the critically acclaimed documentary, Beyond Beats and Rhymes, argued that this criticism comes from “Hiphoppers” themselves and not from older generations or members outside the culture. Perhaps this decline in rap sales will open doors for underground artists or social and political commentary to hit mainstream airwaves?
If not, classroom teachers can certainly include this overlooked sector of Hip Hop artists into their teaching.

Mainstream media and techno-culture capitalize on commercialized rap, as evidenced by the increasing number of advertisements, films, and television and dance programs that use it to attract audiences to buy products or tune in to their programming. Other obvious examples are the selling of clothing lines, especially athletic clothing and footwear, beverages (both alcoholic and non-alcoholic), and beauty/make-up products. Rap and other elements of Hip Hop culture can be seen virtually everywhere in a variety of contexts, making it a highly profitable commodity and a significant portion of today’s advertising and marketing. Rose (1994a) insightfully explains the contradictory role that rap plays in the mainstream media by stating that “it [rap] is at once part of the dominant text and, yet, always on the margins of this text, relying on and commenting on the text’s center and always aware of its proximity to the border” (p. 19).

Underground-, political-, or consciousness-raising rap is a vehicle of promise, hope, and anger (i.e., taking a critical, positive stand as a way to rebel) for the oppressed (Rose, 1994a). Rose continues to argue that rap delivers positive messages of pride in Black culture, style, intelligence, strength, and endurance (1994a). From this perspective, rap can be used as an educational tool, educating people from all ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic levels to better understand Black suffering, oppressive living and working conditions, anger, violence, and revolt (Best & Kellner, 1999). Rap explicitly describes the binary opposites of Black (and other minorities) and White; rich and poor; young and old; straight and gay; police and minority youth; political and apolitical; the powerful and the powerless, and the lies and truths in history, education, government, social justice, media representation, etc. (Best & Kellner; George 1999).

However, mainstream media outlets often use rap music as a scapegoat when attempting to explain why violence occurs among Black youth in urban areas (Rose, 1994a). Rather than attempt to understand the logic and reasoning behind certain rap lyrics, the media often blame rap artists for glorifying violent acts. By blaming rap artists for violence, the media protects the real culprits (e.g., politicians, corporate America), who are viewed as “heroes” by the majority because they are “genuinely” concerned and are doing everything in their power to curtail violent criminal acts (Rose).

Social factors such as poverty, unemployment, family conflict, lack of education, inadequate housing, dehumanizing state aid programs, lack of municipal services and medical coverage and care, and racial and sexual discrimination, are rarely reported and/or discussed when violent acts occur in urban areas (Rose, 1994a, 1994b). What is even more disturbing and interesting to note is how the media provide an overwhelming amount of press coverage on how rap music negatively influences people, yet rarely acknowledge positive rap songs that are released, or provide the more conscious artists with airplay or press coverage.

An example of the media’s hypocrisy in this regard was its coverage of the powerful Stop the Violence Movement, which was formed in direct response to the Nassau Coliseum incident in September 1988 where the stabbing death of a young
concertgoer focused national attention on rap concert-related “violence” (Rose, 1994a). KRS-ONE’s group, Boogie Down Productions was one of the many rap groups performing that night. The correlation between rap and violence is unsubstantiated with critics arguing media bias and racism towards urban communities which were, at the time, most often associated with Hip Hop and rap. Media’s tendency to mislead or under-report violence occurring at other large public venues such as heavy metal concerts and sporting events (e.g. – hockey and soccer games) and failure to link violence to these events (which of course would be unsubstantiated as well) further leads to speculation of media bias or racism towards urban communities. KRS-ONE’s lyrics challenge this bias:

When some get together and think of rap,
they tend to think of violence
But when they are challenged on some rock group,
the result is always silence
Even before the rock and roll era,
violence played a big part in music
It’s all according to your meaning of violence
and how or in which way you use it.
No, it’s not violent to show in movies the destruction of the human body
But yes, indeed it’s violent to protect yourself at a party
And, oh no, it’s not violent
when under the Christmas tree is a look-alike gun
But, yes, of course
It’s violent to have an album like KRS-ONE.
By all means necessary,
It’s time to end the hypocrisy
What I call violence, I can’t do,
but your kind of violence is stopping me.
(“Necessary,” By All Means Necessary, Jive Records, 1988)

The Stop the Violence Movement was started by KRS-ONE, organized by Nelson George, and consisted of Hip Hop artists who came together to produce a single track and video entitled “Self Destruction.” The song’s central message was a plea to curtail “Black-on-Black” crime and to end violence by persuading youth not to join gangs. According to George (cited in Rose), the movement’s goals were to raise public consciousness of street crime and to point out the underlying conditions that promote such criminal activities, to raise funds to deal with the growing illiteracy and crime rates in the inner city, and, finally, to show how rap music can be used as a tool to educate and inspire inner-city youth to read and write. Although well intentioned, the song and movement received very little national press in terms of magazine and newspaper reviews (Rose).

A discourse such as the critical examination of rap lyrics, that analyzes and explains the social factors that foster such behaviors, could help decrease and even eliminate false perceptions and unwarranted fears and stereotypes of people of color, as well as bridge the gap between communities that feel they have nothing in
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common. It’s interesting to note here that according to the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, “serious” and violent crime rates, or street crimes, have dropped considerably since 1993 and have remained that way to present times. Crimes such as domestic violence, embezzlement, corporate scandals, arson, and rape, occur far more frequently than street crimes as reported by the media.

The media’s attack on the few rap lyrics that are indeed homophobic, overly sexualized (objectifying women), and violent (some refer this to be “gangsta” rap) should very well be taken into consideration and critiqued rigorously. However, these attacks should not be over-dramatized or sensationalized, for they tend to suggest that gangsta rap is representative of an entire population (Rose, 1994a). Gangster rap is only part of a much larger and more multifaceted Hip Hop culture, which has become a powerful vehicle for contemporary cultural, political, social, and economic expression. In addition, bell hooks (1994) suggests that fear is another reason for the media’s overrepresentation of negative images relative to rap. She argues that the over-abundance of media coverage of rap induces fear within the dominant (White) culture. As hooks states:

Mainstream white culture is not concerned about Black male sexism and misogyny, particularly when it is unleashed against Black women and children. It is concerned when young white consumers utilize black popular culture to disrupt bourgeois values . . . . It is much easier to attack gangsta rap than to confront the culture that produces that need. (1994, p. 20)

hooks’ analysis of the dominant culture’s interpretation of rap music may lead to negative and dangerous stereotypes and perceptions formed through massive media coverage of rap. Best and Kellner (1999) argue:

Rap is thus at once a formidable form of musical expression, a sub-cultural means of opposition, a cultural idiom of counter-hegemonic anger and rebellion, and an indicator that existing societies are structured according to a system of differences between dominant and subordinate classes, groups, races, and genders. Exploding false homogenization and humanisms, rap music is thus an anthem of postmodern marginality and conflict, a vivid articulation of the extent to which difference and opposition are structuring principles of contemporary society, and a reminder of the growing differences between the haves and the have nots. It is the thorn on the rose of media culture which pricks its audiences into awareness of the shadow-side and underclass of American society. It is a frequently embarrassing reminder that all is not well in the home of the brave and the land of the free. Rap vividly reminds us that the red, white, and blue of the flag are not yet signifiers of a multicultural society where the colors of the rainbow complement each other and harmonize rather than clash. (p. 15)

Some cultural theorists may argue that the nihilism in Hip Hop and the glamorization of Hip Hop “culture” really represent the absence of a national African-centered culture. They may also argue that it promotes the criminal image of African Americans (in particular inner-city, urban males) (Toop, 1994; Rose, 1994a, 1994b). This
glamorization of negative imaging is all the more telling in light of the fact that much of rap, especially the so-called “gangsta” rap, increasingly plays to a White audience and is widely consumed by White youth who find little difficulty accepting the stereotypical criminality of Black youth and the denigration of Black women.

However, many African-American youth are struggling over issues of identity, for which rap and Hip Hop serve a strong purpose. The denial of African-American culture by White supremacist ideologies may produce youth who believe they have no culture. Thus, the African-American community tends to devise one for them. What results is a culture full of youth with definitions of their identity and notions of rites of passage into adulthood as being defined by guns, drug dealing, foreign-made gym shoes, alcohol, sexism, and misguided pronouncements of righteousness (Toop, 1994; Dyson, 1987). Moreover, the glamorization of the killing of other African-Americans is over-publicized. Even so, it has been argued that it is not Hip Hop’s responsibility to change all of this but the responsibility of all artists representing the oppressed to speak meaningfully in their art about the liberation of their people. This study explores one such artist, KRS-ONE, and his lyrics, to determine how his “pedagogy” resonates with a critical approach to education.

KNOWLEDGE REIGNS SUPREME OVER NEARLY EVERYONE:

A Brief Biography of KRS-ONE

KRS-ONE was born Lawrence Parker in Park Slope, Brooklyn, New York, on August 20, 1965 and is the oldest of three children raised by his mother, Jacqueline Parker, born Jacqueline Jones on January 10, 1946. Despite being a truant, a runaway, and homeless during his teen years, Krist (as he currently spells his name) grew up with a strong-willed, spiritual mother who introduced him to metaphysics.

By the time he reached the ninth grade, Krist moved out of his home and dropped out of the New York City public school system. He took up residence at a homeless shelter in the South Bronx, where local residents dubbed him “Krishna” because of his interest in Hare Krishna spirituality and culture. While at the shelter, Krist began writing graffiti and originally tagged himself “KRS1,” which stood for “KRS Number One” but later changed it to “Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone.” Soon thereafter, at the age of 20, KRS-ONE met social worker and part time DJ Scott Sterling (also known as DJ Scott La Rock), and they immediately formed a friendship based on their common musical interests. The duo produced several demo tapes that soon made it onto local Hip Hop radio programs. They were also involved in one of the first rap rivalries, exchanging lyrical rhymes with other MCs of the time, such as Mr. Magic, MC Shan, and Marley Marl.

In 1984, KRS-ONE and Scott La Rock formed a rap group called Scott La Rock and the Celebrity Three, including two other members, Levi 167 and MC Quality. During the summer of 1984, while most rappers rhymed about cars, jewelry, alcohol, and the latest dance trends, Scott La Rock and the
Celebrity Three released a record entitled “Advance,” which rapped about prevention of nuclear war. After legal problems with their record label, the group was released from their contract, which subsequently led to the group’s break up. However, KRS-ONE and Scott La Rock’s friendship remained strong and in the winter of 1984, the pair formed another group called The Boogie Down Crew.

In 1985, Scott La Rock and KRS-ONE were asked to make a record from music that had already been written and produced for Sleeping Bag Records. Upon completion of the project, they learned how politically corrupt the record industry could be; they eventually discovered that they had no rights or claims to any of the tracks they had performed. At this point, they changed the name of their group again, this time to Boogie Down Productions, thus claiming their rights to produce and write all forthcoming tracks.

In 2006, Krist (as he spells his name) and his wife Simone graciously invited me to their home in Burbank, California to sit down and discuss the goals of this book. At that time, I was working closely with another brilliant Hip Hop scholar and intellectual, Dr. James Peterson, an Assistant Professor of English then at Penn State University, currently at Bucknell University. James, an aficionado of KRS-ONE’s lyrics, and an “advisor”, colleague, and friend to me during the writing of this book, was equally excited at the opportunity for me to visit and interview the Hip Hop artist he admired most. After speaking with Krist we both agreed that inviting James along to be part of this interview process would serve us all well. I am especially grateful for James’ critical input and attentiveness to detail in asking questions and deconstructing conversations that I may have missed throughout the three day interviewing process. After personal and professional stories were shared, I ended up with 500 pages of transcripts to sort through! What follows is a snippet of our interview with KRS-ONE extracting parts that were relevant to his childhood and teen years and later in Chapter 6, his views about Hip Hop and education.

More specifically, what follows are select excerpts of my interviews with Krist describing his childhood to the time he met Scott Sterling, aka DJ Scott La Rock, who would eventually become co-founder of their group, Boogie Down Productions.

PRIYA: There’s not much information out there about your mother, Jacquelyn Parker. Can you describe her and your relationship with her?

KRIST: Okay, so let’s start at the beginning. My mother was born in 1946. She was an orphan – her mother died of tuberculosis when she was three. She was the only child of an only child. I have no other family. I was born August 20, 1965 in Brooklyn – a place called Park Slope, Brooklyn. This is before gentrification, when the Brownstone tenement buildings were slums and it was the ghetto.
I was born cripple because I was too big – I was born 9 lbs. 9 oz. My feet were twisted up in the womb, and so when I was born, one foot was completely backwards and the other one was sideways. My mother straightened my feet out with those corrective bars, those shoes you put on the bar, and then each time you turn it you gotta turn the shoe. I remember when I was two years old, we were still living in Brooklyn and a rat had gotten in my crib and ran across my eyes and I was blind for three days! The doctor said, “He’ll never see again, take your child home and live with it.” My mother, of course, was not hearing that. I don’t know what actually happened, I’ll have to ask her, but I was blind, and she restored my sight.

Skip ahead. As I get older, I’m eating all kinds of stuff, but one day I’m eating fish. We’re living in Harlem at that point and I’m eating fish, running my mouth and eating fish when I choke on a fishbone. The fishbone goes down my throat and lodges sideways. I’m gagging [gagging sound] blood spurts out onto the wall, as my mother tells the story. She said every time I coughed, blood would shoot out onto the wall. She panicked, scooped me up, and ran me down to the hospital where they put me to sleep and cut the bone in the throat and I swallowed it. She opened my passage to speak. Those are the three things I remember about my mother that turned out to be metaphysical and symbolic moments for the rest of my life: straightening my feet out, restoring my sight, and helping me to unplug what would become my greatest asset in life. By the way, I only eat fish today. You would think I would be afraid of eating fish after that horrific event, and for many years I didn’t, but as I got older, somehow fish became my main diet and a life-sustaining diet because now I know that fish is very healthy for you. But this is my mother.

Now let’s go back a bit. We moved around a lot. It was the classic story: dad left, single mom, she’s raising two boys [Kenny Parker, one year younger than Krist]. She tried to do everything she can to take care of us. I was born Lawrence Sheffield Brown. It was my father’s name; he was an illegal alien from Barbados. He snuck into the country and somehow hooked up with my mom. They hit it off, had me, and then he got deported. I never met my father by the way, never seen him, never knew him, never met him. I guess when he was given the opportunity to come back to this country, he chose not to, or he chose to go with another woman that could offer him opportunity. It was an opportunity thing. My mother was heartbroken that she couldn’t offer him opportunity. And this other woman could. And so, he went with her and abandoned
my mother, brother, and me. There was an unwritten law in America – back in those days to be unwed was really taboo. You couldn’t go anywhere, you couldn’t do anything. My mother, not wanting to be an unwed mother, would buy wedding rings and put it on her finger just to front like she was married just to get a job.

So from Brooklyn, the three of us moved to Harlem – this was in 1969. My mother was the general manager of Lenox Terrace [residential complex located on West 132-135th Streets between Lenox and Fifth, New York, NY]. Lenox Terrace was like the premier place to live. And she landed this premier job. We had an apartment there at Lenox Terrace. I went to elementary school in Harlem and there we would talk about how Christopher Columbus discovered America and how Black people ain’t shit and these Native American’s never existed and all these other lies. It was like they were telling us what they believed reality was. But I’d go to that woman right there [pointing to a picture of his mother] and say, “Here’s what I learned in school.” She’d rip it all up and say, “No, no, no” and pull out these college books and force us to read them. I couldn’t even understand the words in those books! But my mother would have us sitting there reading this stuff about ancient African kings and Timbuktu and Africans before Native Americans in America. I became who I am partially, or probably most exclusively, because of my mother. She always sheltered us from the White mainstream - intellectually. You know, she’d always question what we learned in school. She’d always give us this other knowledge and this other thing, so I always thought I was this other person.

She had all these pamphlets and books and clippings and all kinds of stuff that I was like, “Damn, Ma, how you get all this stuff?” I never understood scholarship when I was young. I never got it. You know, it’s a lack of understanding that leads our children to leave school. My mom never let me forget that I was born on the anniversary of the so-called 20 Africans coming in – August 20th. I mention that because August 20, 1619 in Jamestown, Virginia, the first 20 Africans were supposed to have come to the United States, as slaves, as property – which is a total lie! In fact, I’m working on a book called Untangling the Web. It’s not even my book. I’m helping a writer – a guy named John R. Tucker, who is a descendant from the Tucker family. Fascinating story about the real African American history – it’s ruthless!

We were the first slave traders and some of the first slave owners. But, the conspiracy is beyond White establishment. They are sort of the guardians for the Black elite. They’re
taking the brunt. For black elites, they were selling Whites, Blacks, Native Americans; they had the Irish and the German and the Dutch in Florida and in New Orleans and Mississippi. The French colonies had Black plantation owners. The way we view America today has nothing, zip, zero, nothing to do with truth. I’m not even exaggerating. I’m saying – nothing to do with truth! This was indoctrination. And my spirit is what felt it, not my intelligence. So, come on back to my mom.

From Harlem, my mother meets this guy named John Parker and married him for his name. And obviously a marriage not made out of love is not gonna last too long. So, she winds up leaving him on Christmas day, 1971. We then moved to 1600 Sedgwick Avenue [Bronx, NY], but now, I’m Lawrence Parker. She kept the name, so you know, we are Parkers now. And so, we’re in the Bronx now by ourselves and I’m there. This is me [pointing to a picture]. This is us in Cedar Park, playing, running around. And we had no idea where we were, what we were doing, we were just kids, running around. In fact, we lived at Cedar Park where Kool Herc lived.

JAMES: Wow. Right at the nexus of the development of the culture.

PRIYA: Kool Herc lived …

KRIST: … at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue. And we lived at 1600 Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx. There are two buildings – 1520’s here, 1600’s here and Cedar Park is in the middle [pointing to a picture]. And Kool Herc would come out and play with the Herculoids along with DJs Coke La Rock and Clark Kent. All these cats would come out and they were like Gods to these little kids. Look at us [pointing to same picture]. I’m seven, my brother is six. Imagine seeing a sound system bigger than this building and you’re hearing James Brown, “Say it loud. I’m black and I’m proud.” Now, let me show you something else. Go back here [referring to same picture of two buildings]. In the back, that tag – the graffiti in the back says “Kool Herc.” This is Kool Herc’s only tag in the back! I showed the picture to Herc to verify that it was his tag. And he wanted to take the picture!

[Laughter]

JAMES: Of course, that’s history!
KRIST: Right! Now he doesn’t even have a copy of his own graffiti writing! He has to keep convincing people he was a graffiti writer first, before a DJ. I happened to be in that area at the time. This – now I’m just telling you the spirit – you cannot calculate this. You cannot – there’s no way to plan this – it just is. My mother didn’t stand in front of a Kool Herc tag because she was a Hiphopper. The word “Hip Hop” didn’t even exist.

JAMES: That’s right. But it was everywhere though.

KRIST: But, it was there. It was there and it was everywhere. But, why didn’t we see it? Because those who determine reality didn’t see it. And this is the argument today with those who claim there’s no basis to teach Hip Hop. Just because you don’t see nor feel it doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. This is proof, documentation! Okay. Boom! Now, my mother’s there, okay? Randomly sitting on a step there. She took pictures of her kids running around Cedar Park, you know, just randomly. You know?

PRIYA: That’s powerful!

KRIST: And you know, it’s funny but before I go further, Kool Herc is a remarkable person for having the vision. I asked Kook Herc, because I needed to get his history. I have taped volumes of Kool Herc’s history. When I finally started documenting Hip Hop, I got into him, like, you know, for real, for real! And, I asked him, “Why did you do it? What motivated you? What caused you to do it?” And he said, “You know, it was our responsibility to take care of the youth in the community. You were a sucker amongst other men. You were a fraud, a lesser man amongst other men if you did not have something to do with the caretaking of young children in the neighborhood.” And so, at the request of his sister, Cindy, he brings his equipment outside in the park. Thank you Kool Herc! Because that’s when we were able to get open – breakin’, poppin’, we called it free-stylin’. We were just able to be us at these block parties. Just wanted to add that part to this story.

There were gangs in the neighborhood too, but nothing like today. There was the Black Spades, who were Black, the Savage Skulls, who were Puerto Rican, and the Tomahawks, who were actually Black. These gangs were our heroes. They were the police. We trusted them more than the police. And to this day, I’ve always felt they were part of my genealogy. I feel more comfortable around them than even the police. And
I take it back to my childhood when the gangs were the ones that told you to go to school. That if they saw you on the street, you was getting your ass kicked. You would front for the cops and the truant officers. You could tell them anything – they didn’t care – but a gang member? You did not want to meet a gang member during school time or on Sunday. It was the gangs that threw the first block parties and jams for those kids, six and seven years old. We would go to gang parties but we weren’t part of the gang. We were too young. We didn’t even know what it was. But we knew they were the outlaws. And in fact there was a gang called the Outlaws. And you’d also see the Black Panther Party and I was one of the kids that they were feeding – the free breakfasts and free lunch. I am a total beneficiary of the Black Panther Party. I’m a beneficiary of gang culture. I don’t know any other way to say it. This leads me to an anti-establishment attitude at that age. I’m hearing James Brown, “Say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud.” That was just in our head. Malcolm X was fresh on our minds, just being killed. I mean he was killed the year I was born, but he wasn’t dead to the 6-7 year old mind. He was still alive. It was just I didn’t see him.

JAMES: Sure. But you heard him.

KRIST: I heard him, but he was alive. You know, it just goes to show about how if you’re never told someone is dead, you assume or you actually approach them as being alive. There’s something to be said about constantly celebrating the death of our leaders – just in terms of academia. But at seven, I never knew Malcolm X was dead. I always felt he was just around the corner and I just didn’t see him, or one day I’d meet him. I didn’t know he was dead at the age of six or seven. Maybe if I was 15 or 16, or I would have watched the news or something like that, but at six, seven, I didn’t know. My mother’s quoting him and so it’s in my environment. So, I grow up with these ideas in my head.

But back to my mom. She knew a lot of men. My mother was a player in today’s sense of the word. She had no problem having multiple male friends or boyfriends. I don’t know if she dated men at the same time, but I know I saw quite a few stepfathers in my day. After John Parker, the next guy I would meet was an African guy. I only remember him being a very fun guy to be around. He used to joke, and laugh, and play ball with us, and do all kinds of stuff, an African man. She went from African to Jamaican, a guy named Charles Headley,
who she had my [half] sister with, Chanelle. Charles Headley was brutal to me and Kenny; he believed in beatings. He was a Rastafarian. One thing we remember about him was he smoked a lot of weed. One day while playing with us, he kicks in my brother’s door and shoots a gun in the room at the wall. My mother freaks out and kicks his ass. And he runs out the house! My mother was very physical. She fought men her whole life, guys beating her up, she’s smacking cats with the frying pan. She even had a shotgun and an attitude of “you ain’t touching my kids and you ain’t touching me” – that kind of woman. She gets rid of him. After that, I kind of leave home and become a runaway and don’t know really what happens to her love life.

I do know that she went to college though and that she held the highest ranking jobs of her day. She also chose to pursue spirituality and fight for Black Revolution. She had books that I still don’t see to this day. She used to take us to a bookstore called The Tree of Life in Harlem, an ancient, mythological bookstore that used to exist in the 1970’s that specialized in Black knowledge. This bookstore was shut down by the FBI and the IRS for obvious reasons, but, nonetheless, shutdown. My mother took me to the Warlock Shop, which was a witch’s bookstore. My mother knew all about Wicca, Satanism, all of that. She would be in these stores reading. Right after we left that shop, we would go over to East West Books, which was a witch’s bookstore. My mother knew all about Wicca, Satanism, all of that. She would be in these stores reading. Right after we left that shop, we would go over to East West Books on Fifth Avenue, still there to this day [78 Fifth Avenue at 14th Street].

As a young child, we used to go to East West Books, and get yoga and meditation books and read about Eastern religions, and all of that. I would sit and read books and she would sit and read books. And I noticed that I was the only one of her children that wanted knowledge. Kenny was disinterested and Chanelle wanted to live with her father.

I was my mom’s best friend, as she’d say. “My little Larry” was what she called me; I was her best friend. And I take that to heart, when your mother says that. I know that’s favoritism in your children, but this is what I heard when I was coming up. My mother was big on psychic ability. She used to hang out with women that were unbelievable. They used to do the Tarot; they’d sit in their séances, and was calling up all kinds of spirits. I remember speaking to her mother when I was really young. I used to speak to my grandmother while playing in my crib. I would talk to the spirits. My mom would hear me and she used to get scared because I used to be talking to a woman. When she said, “Larry, who are you talking to?” I said, “Her.” I was like two or three years old, and I’d say, “Her,” and it would freak her out. So, she had to put some
blessed jewelry on me because one of these other women, a mystic, I guess, told her that was her mother reaching out to me, my grandmother. This woman told my mom that my grandmother is so fond of her grandchild, that if she gets too fond of him she’ll take him. And my mother was like, “well we’re not having that!” And so some ritual was done on me that prevented my grandmother from communicating with me, and I stopped speaking to her.

Another story I remember as I was growing up, I was always finding money on the ground. And every time I’d find money, I would give it to my mother. And my mother got to the point of saying, “Larry, you can’t give your money away. When you find your money, you put it in your pocket.” I used to always find money while walking down the street, sometime I would find $1.00, $5.00, $10.00. And, mind you, this is at a time where my mother was very strapped for money. So sometimes she used to take me with her so that I may find a dollar and sure enough, I’d be walking down the street and I’d just find money. One of the mystics told her that I would be a very rich man in my life, that money would be no option for me in my life. My mother is the one that sat me down and said, “Son, this is called metaphysics.” We studied it like they did in Africa but she told me how it’s studied in Europe and in Asia. She used to sit there and meditate. I wanted to be like my mother in meditation. She would do breathing exercises so I would do breathing exercises. My mother was a yogic master in the ’70s; she could twist her body up in all kinds of positions.

PRIYA: After living in Cedar Park, you moved back to Brooklyn?

KRIST: Right, so now we leave Cedar Park and we’re in Brooklyn again. It’s about 1975. I’m ten years old, I’m in Brooklyn. I remember one night in particular- I went to sleep and got this vision. I used to get these migraine headaches too when I was young. Migraine headaches – I mean it’s ridiculously immense pain. And I remember sleeping and I used to get this ringing in my ears. And it was so funny because, it’s like the movie The Matrix, when Neo or even Trinity is learning something, there’s this RRRRR [makes sound]. And then they know it. And that blew my mind when I watched it because when I was young, I would hear that same ringing in my ear that RRRRR sound – it would frighten me. My eyes would blink like – my eyes would twitch. I’d blink, wake up, and have a migraine headache. I mean like a migraine was
diagnosed as a migraine headache on the side of my face. It was terrible! I’m ten years old and I have this dream and it was real! You know those dreams you have that’s real? Like you’re awake in your dream or something? I had one of these dreams that I was speaking to a sea of people that I could not see the end of them. And it was just all these people and I was handed a mic – a microphone. Here’s the part that caught me in life – the mic was cordless.

[Laughter]

JAMES: Before cordless mics!

KRIST: This is the only reason why I even remember this dream today. This mic had no cord! And I remember at ten being baffled by that one fact!

PRIYA: Now that’s prophesy!

[Laughter]

KRIST: How can you talk in a mic with no cord? And I’m like, “Yo.” And I’m talking into this mic and people are hearing me. And what I notice is that every time I spoke, I’d see parts of the audience light up. It’s like if I said, you know, “My name is KRS-ONE,” which is not what I said, but if I was to say something like that, you’d see all these lights. And as I spoke I just kept seeing these lights, and I remember I didn’t want to stop because I liked the lights!

JAMES: Cool, it was like playing an instrument.

KRIST: It’s like playing an instrument. Right. And the more I talked, the more I made these lights get brighter but I woke up with a migraine headache! I ran to tell my mom, trying to explain to her, “Mom, I had this dream, and it was like, I was talking to all these people and I was doing poetry.” I called it poetry. “Mom, I’m gonna be an MC!” She ran and got a camera and took a picture of me that day in 1975 and called me “Prophet L.” I don’t have the picture with me – it’s in storage in Atlanta. Then like she always used to do, she would brush me off, but she wrote on the back of the picture, “1975, Prophet L.” But that’s when I became an MC and I started writing poetry to her. It was no social commentary, just, “I love you ma,” and you know, “I’m gonna buy you a house when I get
CHAPTER 2

older,” and stuff like that. I remember the dream left me for two years until 1977. God strikes the Consolidated Edison Electric Company in 1977 and the entire New York City goes into a blackout.

JAMES: Right. The summer of the Son of Sam.

PRIYA: Right, there was the citywide blackout in July and the crazed serial killer known as the Son of Sam terrorizing the city for the last couple of years.

KRIST: Right. At this time, my dream comes back. And when the dream came back, I re-established my MCing again. This is two years later now and I’ve been to a couple of more jams, seen a little more now. I’m 12 years old and we’re living in a place on 170 East 35th Street and Church Avenue in Brooklyn. All of a sudden all the lights go out! My mother was away at work so we just stayed in the house dark. I opened a window and looked outside and there was mass looting, robbing, stealing of cars and wallets. The same people that were upstanding, churchgoing, working citizens, this upstanding community deteriorated into barbarism and savagery – I couldn’t believe it! I was baffled, like “That’s Ms. Johnson, or that’s Mr. Frank.” They were running down the street with TVs and groceries and I was like, that’s crazy to me. My mom gets home and asks us, “Is everything all right? Oh my baby. Oooh.” I’m like, “Mom, what’s going on out there?” And I’ll never forget what my mother said, “In the absence of light, man is reduced to beast.” And that’s when the dream came back. Boom! And I was like, “Okay.”

JAMES: Those lights had new meaning now.

KRIST: They had a whole new meaning now. I was like, “Okay. Now, I’m beginning to see.” Soon after, that prompted me to begin to run away from home. So, from age 13 I start running away, staying out, getting caught by the cops and sent back home. Rap music is big now. I’m rapping in the streets so by now I got my rap game down. I’m a truant. The school keeps sending letters home to my mother and she’s upset. My mom would say to me “You can do it son and be a revolutionary at the same time!” She showed me this. But, rebellious, stupid, know-it-all teenager just said, you know, “I don’t need that [school]. I’m going to look into the library.” And I went to the
Brooklyn Public Library at Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn. That’s where I practically lived for like the next two years.

And so after that, it’s maybe 1979, 1980 now, and I guess I’m 14 or 15, and my mother walks in our home with *Rapper’s Delight* [1979 single by Hip Hop group Sugarhill Gang]. Every week when she got her paycheck, my mother would buy another rap record. She’d come home with a 45, throw it on the record player and it was like, “Oh my God!” Most of the records she brought home didn’t really do it for us [*Laughter*]. We were just happy for her because she would always tell us the records were “hot!” And we were like, “Oh, yea, that’s hot mom, yeah, this guy is doing it” [*Laughter*]. But when she came home with the Sugarhill Gang, it was different. It was a confirmation of who we were. That confirmation – those things we were doing in the [Cedar] park is now known by everybody. That was enlightenment. That was it right there and it was not only for me, I guess it was for every kid at that time that was living it. We knew we were becoming Hip Hop. I said, *rhyming* A hip, hop, a hippy, a hippy to the hip –whew! These people came and it was like, guess what America? We love you!

*JAMES:* You might hate us, but we love you. But, yeah that’s a powerful record – very powerful record.

*KRIST:* It’s a prophesy record. They’re talking about *rhyming*, *I got a Lincoln Continental and ...*

*JAMES:* “*A sun-roofed Cadillac.*”

*KRIST:* They didn’t have none of that! [*Laughs*]

*JAMES:* Not at that point.

*KRIST:* Not at that point, but let me tell you something about the spoken word and about prophesy. It’s what they felt. Anyway, so every week my mother would come in with different artists – Grandmaster Flash, The Treacherous Three – and we’re eating it up! Oh man! This music is blasting in our house alongside The Isley Brothers, and the Commodores, Christopher Cross, and Paul McCartney. All of these artists were being played on the radio together. Like I remember there was a station called WABC that played everything, all genres! And my mom would teach us the ‘60s dances over Rapper’s Delight and all the Enjoy Records [Record Label based in Harlem] catalog.
You know the dances like the Monkey and the Lindy Hop – we’re jammin’!

**JAMES:** There were all Black-owned Hip Hop record labels at that time as well.

**KRIST:** Yeah, all Black-owned. Oh, and the mom and pops stores that sold the music was Black-owned also.

**JAMES:** Yeah, there were no Blockbuster, no Tower, none of that.

**KRIST:** None of that! And my mom was dancing with us in the living room with this music and I remember her always saying, “None of this is new. None of this is new. You know, this is the Griots and the Djelis.” And she’d start talking that weird academic language again. We were like, “Oh, mom, come on! Can we just hear the music?” You know, “Stop preachin’ ma!” [Laughter]

**PRIYA:** Okay, so let’s go back a little when you were a truant moving towards the days you were homeless. You dropped out of school during the 9th grade, correct?

**KRIST:** Correct. I was held back twice in the 8th grade due to truancy but somehow I managed to move on to 9th grade at William E. Grady High School in Brooklyn, NY. I dropped out of the ninth grade and spent the next two years studying in the Brooklyn Public Library at Grand Army Plaza.

**JAMES:** Okay, let’s pause for one second here. Now you realize that’s – that’s James Baldwin, that’s Malcolm X, that’s Martin Luther King, that’s, you know, you’re talking about a path that some of the most significant figures in African American culture – in world culture have taken, which is to say – disenfranchised with the educational system, “I’m just going to go to the library and study on my own.”

**KRIST:** Right. Well I leave home in pursuit of philosophy and emceeing. I leave home for good by the age of 16. I would be sleeping on the street and going into the library. It was actually from 13 to 16 that I read all those books in the library, from ages 13 to 16. I had exhausted the library. Sometimes they would let you sleep, like if you have books in front of you, you could catch an hour, two hours sleep in the library. But certain staff members that were working in the library
weren’t having it. You had to be awake and reading. So the library started to play out for me around this time. And I had already read damn near every book in the library, well every book I wanted to read. All their Black history stuff – I had absorbed that. All of their European history and literature: Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, all of them. All of their philosophy: Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Kant, all of them, everybody. And I remember it was so funny because those were the reference books and they wouldn’t let you take them out of the library.

I used to read them right there and I had been through all their books and then the library started getting boring now because there was nothing else for me to read – there was nothing else to know. From age 16 onward, I began reading more religious-orientated stuff, not so philosophical. I started to read their Bibles. And I realized that every Bible’s not the same. I started to notice the translation differences in Bibles. Mind you, I’m 16 and at the time, it was no big deal. It’s just what I was doing. I’m now more into religion and the history of religion. At age 16, I leave home and I don’t see my mother until about age 19, three years go by, and I don’t see her at all until Easter.

You know I admired my mom so much that she became my God. I saw no other Gods worthy of my mother who was right in my face. But, because of my rebelliousness, somehow I leave home. It broke her heart. I leave home, I’m running away from home, and I’m going through my rebellious teenage years. And, really, partly it’s also because I didn’t have a father at home. Had I had a father there, I don’t think none of this would have happened. In fact, I may have gotten further in my life, even as an emcee, as a scholar. I would have probably went to college and got all kind of degrees. I probably would have been out of control in the university system! But I had no father to play ball with, you know, talk sex with, you know. But in the end, I left home to be a philosopher and an MC. I told my mother, I told my brother, I told my friends, it’s documented, you know, with much argument and pain and suffering – I left home. I was a runaway. I was not from an abused family. I love my mother to this day. But I had this burning – you can’t imagine – well, maybe you can – the desire to become yourself. And the self that I saw in society was not me. It was a choice we had to make. Either you were going to be you or you were going to be them – and them, meaning the mainstream. Okay, so let me get into my homelessness then.
I left home and thought, “I’m gonna be an MC.” So let’s see, to recap for accuracy, from age 13 to about 16, I was running away from home – off and on. I would go back and forth from home to the streets and sometimes I’d stay as long as like six months away from home. Then somehow I’d get in trouble and be sent back home. Then somewhere around 1981, I’m 16 years old, I leave home for good. I have a few years experience on the streets. And I’m confident now. And I leave. And, you know, there was this great freedom of being on my own. When I first left I was in Brooklyn, by that time we were in Crown Heights, we had left our home on Flatbush [Brooklyn] and now we’re up in Crown Heights by the Prospect Avenue shuttle. And I remember I hopped the train for free, got onto Prospect Avenue shuttle, rode to the D train, got on the D, went to the Twin Towers and got on the E train and started riding back and forth from Queens [NY] to the E train, back to the Twin Towers to Queens and back. And you know, that was for about a month or two that I went back to the library because …

JAMES: You were riding the trains and thinking?

KRIST: Yep, just writing rhymes.

JAMES: Just writing rhymes. So that train was a muse – was inspirational?

KRIST: Subconsciously it was inspirational. Not consciously. I just had to get out of the street. I’m riding the train and writing rhymes on tissue paper – on that hard brown toilet paper that they have in the public facilities. And the reason I say I was subconsciously influenced by that was because you were witness to the real seventies – police misconduct was ridiculous. It was nothing like today; if people were beat up by the cops, it’s all over the news

JAMES: Right. There was no handheld cameras then.

KRIST: No, there was none of that. But the public approved it. That’s the point. The public approved it. I would witness homeless people get brutally beaten and the public would just be, “Hmm, well, guess he did something. Guess she did something.” But for me, tears would come to my eyes watching people screaming and crying. You know to see someone so helpless, getting beat up, it’s not like they can fight back or anything. I was just like, “Oh man!” I just started writing my rhymes on
the train. I would look at these people and as the train got packed, I’d watch them, and try to study them, thinking to myself, “What’s their life like?” And, “What are they into?” My rhymes were sort of influenced by that social scene.

PRIYA: So in your observations, you acted as an ethnographer, studying your environment, the people. You observed all of your surroundings closely as your family moved around a lot, as you moved around solo; you experience the teaching of lies and indoctrination in the NYC public school system; you witness – and even live – around violence and struggle, experiencing conflict and consciousness at home.

JAMES: You had the book learning and you kind of crammed it in but nonetheless, you had the book learning, and then the natural transition is to become an ethnographer, studying people and studying society. It’s just a very powerful educational development. And with an extraordinary amount of agency there, right? Because everything in your life is showing you, one, your social services don’t come from the government, it comes from the Black Panthers. And two, your education – your mom was ripping up stories about Columbus and challenging you to seek further knowledge. So you had the blueprint – just incredible story. Incredible.

KRIST: This is only in hindsight can I agree with you. When it was going on it was as normal as we are sitting here right now, as normal as the year 2060 when people will say, “As incredible as it was for you and Priya to come here to my house at this time to fight for academia to teach Hip Hop. Hip Hop is now giving PhDs and people have jobs, careers in Hip Hop now – it’s a known normal thing.”

JAMES: Non-artistic careers and non-artistic, non-business careers.

KRIST: Right – careers in Hip Hop, right. Now it’s normal, but right, as normal as it is for us right now is as normal as it was for me to be in the Brooklyn Public Library studying Rene Descartes and sitting there and comparing him to, say, Immanuel Kant or what was the real comparison was Aristotle to Francis Bacon. Francis Bacon was real critical of Aristotle. And I always used to think in school, “Aristotle was the man.” I mean, they never used to talk about how the government hated him. Sir Francis Bacon was like this Parliamentarian, a philosopher and he used to be dissin’ Aristotle and his
writings. I was like, “What do they have going on?” So that conflict made history exciting to me. I just stayed in the books to find out what happened next. I wanted to ask another question, “Well, what happened to these people, and why are we not studying about them today?” This comes from my mother’s inquisitiveness in the back of my head.

PRIYA: How would you characterize your rhymes at this point? Were your mother’s teachings influential in the development of your MC skills?

KRIST: Oh yeah. I was a Griot, an African Djeli. I knew my role. It was clear to me. And it was clear to others, but they didn’t go this route. You know, I say it was clear to others because the Rastafarian community was huge in the seventies in Brooklyn. And …

JAMES: Sure. Still are.

KRIST: Right. What am I talking about? They’re probably bigger now. I say huge because in my little 15 year old mind, their presence was just so overwhelming.

JAMES: And regal at times.

KRIST: And regal, right. I wanted to emulate my ancestors and of course Marcus Garvey was quickly pronounced all day, all night. I was about self-determination. I grew up in that and I can’t say other kids grew up in that. But there were kids with me in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that knew this too. You know, we were all rappin’ and breakin’ and doing graffiti – everybody was doing it. I guess we all just took it to wherever we took it to. [Note: In 1990, KRS-ONE was influenced by the work of Kwame Toure (Stokely Carmichael) and studies under him]

PRIYA: Okay, so you’re 16 years old, riding the subway system, reading, studying in the library. You’re homeless.

KRIST: I went to the Bureau of Child Welfare when I was 16 because I read about them. I was looking to get out of the street. They sent me to the Catholic Guardian Society. I don’t know why they sent me there either because they could havesent me to the Under 21 Covenant House or to a variety of different places. For some reason this social worker, I guess, hearing
me explain my situation, felt that I should be with the Catholic Guardians. Maybe it was my religious overtone – I don’t know what it was. I go to the Catholic Guardian Society and they hook me up with a group home called the Lacombe Avenue Group Home in the Bronx. It may still be there, not sure, but it was on Lacombe Avenue and Soundview. I get there and that’s where my graffiti days start. I meet a Puerto Rican named Zore. His name was Louie but his tag name was Zore, Z-O-R-E, and he was a part of the famous graffiti crew Down to Bomb – DTB.

PRIYA: Is this around the time you tagged yourself as KRS-ONE?

KRIST: Yes, when I get to the group home I started rhyming with other kids in the group home and realized I had skill. And so now I’m honing in on that but big into the graffiti too. I’m starting to be called “Krishna,” after Hari Krishna [explained in detail in chapter 5]. It was turned into KRS, but actually on my meal ticket they used to put Krishna – Krishna Parker. And so I was like, okay, and I started answering to this name. I get to the group home, that’s the only name they know me by, that’s the only records they have on me – Krishna Parker. So I get to the group home, that’s the only name they know me by, that’s the only records they have on me – Krishna Parker. So I get to the group home as Krishna Parker, and I start writing K-R-S with Zore. Zore and I start bombin’ the whole New York City area; it’s called, bombin’, ‘taggin’. I’m really breezing over my graffiti days, which was ridiculous, going to the train yards. So others start writing “K-R,” “K-S,” “K-R-I-S” even. I started writing “KRS1,” which most graffiti artists do. And so I’m one, “KRS 1,” throughout my graffiti days.

PRIYA: Like “Phase 2” or “Stitch 1”.

KRIST: Right. You know I’m thinking back about my time at this group home. They were good to me. I had cleaned myself up. I was getting a weekly allowance, and I was going to school, taking a course to get my G.E.D. on Soundview Avenue [Bronx, NY]. I took the G.E.D. and passed. The Catholic Guardian Society set me up to attend the School of Visual Arts – SVA – in Manhattan. But before I would go to the School of Visual Arts, I went to the Arts Student League on West 57th Street [in Manhattan] where I was training as an artist. All of this was provided and paid for, by the way, from the Catholic Guardian Society. God bless their soul. I didn’t appreciate it when they were doing it though. When I was in the system, I didn’t appreciate it at all. But, in hindsight looking
back, for a homeless kid, they treated me really well, very generous to me.

PRIYA: According to previously published documents, you continue to study, read, and play lots of basketball during this time. You mentioned you didn’t see your mother for three years, until the age of 19?

KRIST: Right. It’s Easter three years later when I go back home to where she was living, to where I ran away from, she was still living in the same place. I’m 19 and go back to check up on her. She’s surprised but happy to see me. So we sit down and talk. She says, “Look, I’m leaving America, I met a man, I’m going to Haiti.” My brother didn’t want to go live in Haiti. By now he’s 18 years old and I remember him complaining about not wanting to move to Haiti. So she said to me, “Look, if I gotta leave him here, I’m leaving him. I’m going to Haiti. You’re welcome to come.” So I left my phone number where I was at – the group home. About two or three weeks later, my mother leaves for Haiti and leaves Kenny right there. This forms a rift between my mother and my brother that is, to this day, still very hot. She went to Haiti to live and Kenny was left in the house by himself. But he’s 18, and he didn’t want to go. I find this to be one of the biggest philosophical debates ever: Your mother leaves you, or you didn’t want to go?

[Laughter]

KRIST: So moving forward, it’s 1985 and I’m 20. I get kicked out of the group home on my birthday, August 20th. They put me on welfare for three months and send me down to the big YMCA in the city, can’t remember the exact address. My New York is gone out of me.

PRIYA: You were kicked out of the group home because you reached the age limit?

KRIST: I reached the age limit. At age 20 you get kicked out. And I was supposed to go to Under 21 Covenant House for that year to transition. Like I said earlier, the group home was wonderful. They wanted me to get a job but I rejected it; they tried to send me to college, but I didn’t want to go. I was a truant. Just an idiot! I just want to kick myself for that but now I’m at the YMCA. So where do I go? Back to the shelter system is what I know. Now I got more knowledge, I’m older now, I’m 20.
I’m going to the Manhattan Public Library. I’m looking at the illegal books; you know the ones you have to sign your name to something so the FBI can know what you’re reading. And I’m reading all these wild books, things about the control of agriculture in the city, city planning – just deep stuff! You wonder why there aren’t any fruit trees in the city, yet they say they want to get rid of poverty and hunger in the city? There are no fruit bearing trees in the city, which would eradicate hunger in an inner-city. I’m reading about all of this. And so my knowledge is expanding. I’m going back to East West Books as well as to Samuel Wiser Books [bookstore on metaphysics and Eastern philosophies located at 132 E. 24th Street, New York, NY]. The Warlock Shop turned into Magical Child so I’m frequenting their bookstore too. I’m all over the place, having a good time walking around Manhattan. I’m hanging out in Washington Square Park, a vibrant park for artists, poets, and comedians.

I’m writing rhymes, I’m toning my skills as an emcee. Now, I’m sure I’m an emcee, which I came back to because I had left emceeing for a short while. Remember, I declared myself an emcee back in 1975. When I left home I wrote rhymes and memorized them. I developed my emcee skill while at the first group home on Lacombe Avenue. After getting kicked out, I wind up in the shelter system again in 1985, and meet a guy named Cutmaster DC. I forgot where I met him at, actually, I don’t even remember how I met him, maybe during my homeless travels, but somehow, I met this guy named Cutmaster DC. I meet this guy who was the best, one of the fastest DJs of the day. I helped him to write a song called “Brooklyn’s in the House” which was a huge record back in the 1980s. [Rapping] Brooklyn’s in the House, da, da, dum. Talk about Brooklyn causes much controversy, simply because we get no mercy. So I helped him write this song. Now, I’m in the studio, I know what a studio looks like, I’m feeling that, I’m like word, this is good. I get out of the studio and go back to the shelter. This is in 1985 and I’m an emcee. When asked what you do, I used to introduce myself as a philosopher. I dropped that and now say, ”I’m an emcee.”

At this time, I’m staying at the 166th Street and Boston Road Men’s Shelter in the Bronx. On the walls of the bathroom, I used to do the beats while this other guy, named Just-Ice, did the lyrics. I met him at Under 21 Covenant House where I eventually started going. He and I then went to the 166th Street Boston Road Men’s Shelter. He’s an emcee, I’m an emcee, and there were two other emceees as well, a guy with the tag name of Levi167, but his emcee name was Jerry
Another guy named Cassius D was another cat; he was a stickup kid. We’re all homeless in the shelter, but what draws us together is, first of all, we’re the youngest in the shelter, we’re the only heterosexuals in the shelter, and we’re Hip Hop. We’re all beatin’ on the bathroom walls in the shelter [to create beats for songs]. The “Bridge is Over” beat was my staple beat. Everyone used to call on me saying, “Yo Kris, hit that beat.”

We beat the walls into submission when finally, a guy named Scott Sterling, walks into the shelter. Wait a minute, now he’s the ultimate nerd: suit, tie, college educated, Vermont State University, four year degree in business. He comes, as a social worker, to the shelter system for a job. We’re like, who is this? He’s insignificant right now. What was significant was one day, I go into the shelter, and he’s the new social worker there! So, I need to meet him one day because my meal ticket ran out. I go in to get a new meal ticket and my tokens and Scott asks the question that you are never supposed to ask me, “Where’s your job? I’m not giving you any tokens until you can produce a job.” Immediately, my philosophical mind says, “how am I supposed to get a job unless you give me the tokens?”

Now, mind you, I had been manipulating social workers, human resources administration with knowledge. I know your whole system, I know your whole card, plus I’m a philosopher that likes to argue, so let’s get it started! I was having a field day with the human resources administration, manipulating the tokens, getting free clothes, having them send me around places – just total manipulation. It stopped with Scott Sterling though, who also had a minor in Philosophy. He wants to argue! Well the argument was, “You ain’t gettin’ tokens ‘til you get a job!” The response was, “How am I supposed to get a job without the tokens?” We went back and forth, back and forth until I finally get frustrated and call him a “house nigger.” I remember saying something like, “You’re just one of these house niggers that’s college educated, thinking you better than everybody else. You got your high school; you have a job, and you just lookin’ down on cats like me. See in the streets, man, you wouldn’t last two minutes!” And he stood up, responding with, “You don’t know who I am! You have no idea who I am! You homeless bums just wanna rape the system, sit on your ass, and smoke weed, and don’t do nothing for yourself. Get outta my office!” Obviously he had the power, so security comes over and throws me out. The security guard that throws me out of the office was a graffiti writer named Funk Master. Now Funk Master is a legend in
graffiti – a legend. He writes with other graffiti writers who have been taggin’ since graffiti started. They’re the ones that when you get to the yards and you see the fence already cut - they were the ones that cut the fence. We knew all about Funk Master and the others – Mr. Mayor and G-Man and more. These graffiti writers are legends, their tag on the streets are legendary. I didn’t know that Funk Master was a security guard in the shelter. So he comes and gets me, and I’m like “Get off me, man! You lucky, you better go get a gun!” See they didn’t have any guns. He was like, “Wait a minute brother, wait a minute man, you’re just mouthin’ off man. You dissin’ him but you ain’t gonna diss me!” Now keep in mind, we have the illest crew with graff writer and MCs, so we’re not takin’ any of this. So I’m like, “We running the shelter system!” He’s like, “Yo, man, you think I’m that much different from you just ‘cause I got this suit on?” So I say, “You damn right! You work for the White man. You’ll never see me workin’ for the White man.” He said, “I heard you a writer, I heard you a writer?” I said, “Yeah, and?” you know all arrogant. He took out a piece of paper and wrote “Funk Master” on it. Ahhh, I was floored! You cannot argue with somebody like that! I’m arguing with a legend! I’m so embarrassed, where like the embarrassment is so brutal, so distinct and direct it is humbling that you would not imagine when your superior, the person you’re trying to be, is disguised as a security guard!

[Laughter]

KRIST: And my prejudice of the uniforms that I saw was shut down in graffiti writing, just like that. When he wrote Funk Master, I was like, “You, you Funk Master?” And then he starts playin’ me saying things like, “Oh, now your mouth ain’t so big now! Now your mouth ain’t so big!” He also said, “Don’t make that mistake again! You don’t know who anybody is, so shut the fuck up!” He said it just like that too! I immediately said, “Okay, thank you big brother can I have another.” Straight up! I was hoping the other people didn’t hear this. I’m hoping people don’t see this because I was talking big shit! I was threatening him, even with physical harm. He shut me down with knowledge. See, be aware of who you are dissin’! I was like, “Oh, shit King Funk Master,” that’s what we called him, King Funk Master. For a graffiti writer to be called king, it means you are a legend, every borough, every train, you’re King Funk Master. Needless to say, I suddenly become humble. [Laughter]
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He actually takes me under his wing. No, I crawl under his wing! I lift his wing up and come under it and shut the wing down. [Laughter] I go bombin’ with Funk Master. Oh, oh, oh, oh, you hear the angels and the harps as we bomb our names together. I’m thinking I’m the man with the illest writer in the Bronx! And now I know a secret to – I know your secret identity because graffiti artists don’t give up each other’s identity. I have power! I know who Funk Master is! Oh! [Laughter] He knows I’m an emcee so he takes me over to meet one of his friends, an upcoming producer over in Webster Projects, where Scott lived, but I didn’t know this at the time.

We go to Webster Projects to the producers place. This producer immediately takes me in. By the way, this is all hindsight now. They know I’m homeless, broke, stinkin,’ I smell like the shelter! I couldn’t shower every day, sometimes not even every week. Despite all that, this producer takes me into his bedroom. I sat on his bed and laid out the illest lyrics. His mother would cook plates of food for me so I’d eat home cooked meals by his mom. To this day he gets the ultimate respect.

PRIYA: What were your lyrics about?

KRIST: You know, everyone would be looking at me because my lyrics were about nuclear war, politics, and Reagan, or the shelter system. But this producer was eating it up. So now I’m frequenting his house on a regular and one day we were having a session and there had to be at least 25 people in his house. And his house was small, it’s a project apartment, it wasn’t a big place. There’s like 25 people everywhere and in walks Scott Sterling, the nerd social worker! I’m thinking what’s he doing here? It’s been about a month since our last encounter. But I remember Funk Master and the scolding. So I hold my composure and remember thinking, “This guy, he threw me outta his office. He wouldn’t give me the tokens. I don’t like him.” The producer goes over to Scott and introduces me as KRS-ONE. We shake hands, reluctantly, you know. But I knew Scott didn’t want anyone to know he was a social worker at a shelter. And I didn’t want anybody to know I was still in the shelter! Even though only Funk Master and the producer knew, their friends that came around didn’t know. I was a regular Joe.

So Scott and I are saying to each other, “I know you, yeah, I know you,” but everybody else doesn’t know us. So to play it
off, we give each other a pound. We were asked by the producer if we knew each other and I told him I knew Scott from the shelter. So everyone goes away and somehow Scott and I start talking. I think he initiated the talk and said something like, “Yo man, I didn’t want it to go down like that, you know what I’m sayin’? It shouldn’t have gone down like that.” I agreed and told him I was out of place, “all out of my mouth”. We never apologized, but the spirit was of apology.

JAMES: Uh-huh, peace.

KRIST: There was this peace, it was really wild. He tells me he’s a DJ who goes by the name, DJ Scott La Rock. And I didn’t really know who he was even at that moment. [Laughter] And as we’re talking, people kept coming up to him going, “Yo Scott, pick up, man”,

PRIYA: Like he was “the man”?

KRIST: Yea and I thought I was the illest! [Laughter] So we’d continue talking, girls come by, “Hi Scott.” I’m thinking, “oh shit, he’s the man! Who is this guy,” you know? And vice versa, people are coming up to me, other emcees, “Yo Kris, yeah man, we’ll see you out there, yo.” We’re constantly interrupted. Finally, he invites me down to Broadway RT on 145th Street and Broadway in Manhattan. It’s called the Broadway Repertory Theater, the old Broadway International. I walk from 166th Street and Boston Road to 145th Street in Manhattan and attend my first club experience. I was on the guest list. Scott invites me down and asks me if I wanted to MC there because he was the DJ at the club. I thought the place would be a little place because that’s all I knew, house parties and out in the park.

First of all, as I get close to the place, I see cars, Mercedes Benz, beautiful women, and I mean, I don’t want to disrespect any of the women today that claim to be Hip Hop or dress like Hiphoppers, but back in the day, women were fly with the matching of the colors, and the hair and the nails, and the door knocker earrings, the bamboo earrings, you know the bigger the better with the gold chain and women with gold teeth! The girls had the gold teeth first. It’s the gold in their mouth and they’re walking in crews. I saw B-girls, MCs, DJs, all in their own right. I’m thinking now this is Hip Hop! These girls are walking in with power, wearing leather bombers with the fur on the collar. And as they’re walking, men are moving to the
side! And these women are steppin’ out of Benz’, limos, nice cars. The guys are fly too, wearing tailor made suits from Dapper Dan, no less! Uptown Harlem, straight up gold on the chest, money everywhere! The scene was like out of control!

If anybody could recreate that scene, it would shock this audience today. Like the way we did the Cotton Club, you see the zoot suits and the big cars, you’d be like, damn, wasn’t that called poor in the ‘30’s?! I get into the club, and Mantronix walks by, who had a huge record out by then, you know with [single] “Fresh is the Word.”

JAMES: Wow!

KRIST: I didn’t even get in the club yet. Here I am bumming, living in a shelter, and I’m on the guest list! They look up my name and I was on the guest list! I walk in, get a drink ticket, and go to the VIP section. In the VIP section, I’m there with the likes of Doug E. Fresh, Slick Rick, Whodini, and all the stars of the Fat Boys. Everybody’s there and I’m in a corner for fear that somebody is gonna find out that I’m homeless and ain’t supposed to be there because they are fly to the T. And you see, back then the premier drink was Moet, and cats were just dumping money on it and the Moet kept coming. I couldn’t believe it!

Suddenly, you hear the MC on stage introducing DJ Scott La Rock and he begins scratchin’, like masterfulness, the dance floor is packed with all cats dancing! He’s the DJ throwing on one after the other and everybody’s all ooooooohhhhhhhhn’ and ahhhhhhhhhhn’. It was too much for me, just too much for me to handle. So I ran out of the building!

JAMES: Wow!

KRIST: I walked all the way back to the shelter completely mind blown. I slept outside that night in the St. Ann’s park in the Bronx, because coming back that late you couldn’t go to the shelter. I didn’t have a late pass and Scott didn’t give me one, so I had to sleep outside. Later on we began forging the passes. But, at that particular moment, I didn’t have a late pass, so I slept outside and really saw myself as an MC, part of that community. And I started trying to hone in on my rhyme with a little less of the political intellectual. I wanted to get more with Doug E. Fresh and Slick Rick who had “Treat her like a Prostitute”. That’s what inspired me to write the piece “Free.”
I’m like this is where I need to fit in. So now I’m clubbin’ at the Roxy, Broadway RT, Danceteria where I saw Madonna dancing. By the way, Madonna was a dope dancer at Danceteria. It was like a group, a crew in Danceteria that you would see every week. And I remember when Madonna put out her first song, “Like a Virgin” and I was thinking that’s the girl from Danceteria! She was a B-girl and it’s like you look at Madonna today and it’s like she got all the breakers in her video, like she’s trying to associate with Hip Hop.

JAMES: She already was though …

KRIST: She was that first. I saw with my own eyes, Madonna rockin’ with Rock Steady crew [legendary break-dancing crew]. So now I’m in the club scene. Scott gets a deal for a record by an independent-owned label called Zakia Records located up in Harlem. They only had two groups signed with them: Eric B & Rakim and Cutmaster DC, and now me. Scott and Eric B were first and foremost friends. They used to buy gold together down on Canal Street.

JAMES: The deal was for a single or for … ?

KRIST: A single. It was a record called “Advance,” [rhyming] because we’ve got to advance, we’ve got to advance … every generation after every generation, the American nation still hit with starvation, the exploitation, the quick sensation can only lead the mind to destructive creation, creation with the mind, destruction with the knife will only lead, will lead to the present way a life. I can’t remember the rest [Laughter]. I’m talking about nuclear war and famine. I wrote the whole song, and I brushed off the three lyrics to Jerry Lee, and a new member of the group called MC Quality [group name was “Scott La Rock and the Celebrity Three”].

PRIYA: So, your first official recorded song was called “Advance”?

KRIST: Yes …

JAMES: And you wrote the whole thing and let two other emcees do the two other verses?
KRIST: Right. This is 1985. This’ll show you how fast things are going. Now, to be honest here, I don’t know if Scott got the money. I don’t know, he could have got money and just chunked us off a hundred and fifty each. But I want to make a specific point here about apprenticeship: we were all clearly under Scott La Rock – me, MC Quality, Jerry Lee.

JAMES: So you guys all acknowledge the fact that you were apprentices.

KRIST: Yes, we were apprentices under Scott. So, I don’t want to make it seem like we got ripped off. Although it’s a good possibility that Scott got the money for the record, put the record together, signed the deal, spoke for the group, took the money, and basically gave us $150.00 each and that was that. I didn’t sign any papers. I spent a hundred on a pair a Jordan’s and ate well that day – that was it. We were happy.

KRIST: Scott gets another deal. Now mind you, he’s the manager, he’s the businessman. He’s in the industry, he knows the labels, he’s a DJ, and he’s out in record pools. He goes and gets another deal with a guy named Kenny Beck who wrote this whole song called “Success is the Word,” [produced by David Kenneth Eng and Kenny Beck] which was off the Gilligan’s Island theme. This was when it was big for rappers to do things with television themes like with I Dream of Genie and Inspector Gadget. When we finished the song it was 12:41 so we named the group 12:41. It was Kenny Beck’s cousin, Scott, and I that made up this group. I performed maybe two shows as the group 12:41, at the Red Parrot back in the days and then that was that. I received no money, just did two shows.

And so we finished the group, it’s the only time, by the way, Scott ever rhymed.

JAMES: Really … the only time?

KRIST: Yea, the only time. So at this point Scott is looking around for a deal and can’t get one. Scott realizes that I’m the ultimate MC, and he wants to form a group and wonders what we should call it. I said we had to represent the Bronx. He was like, “Word.” So in the Bronx, we’re known as the Boogie Down Bronx. All of NYC borough’s had names. It was the Boogie Down Bronx, Bad Ass Brooklyn, Money Makin’ Manhattan, Strong Island. I don’t remember what Queens was. So I named the group “The Boogie Down Crew,” Scott said,
“Boogie Down Productions.” I was like, “word, that works.” And we became a production company because we were convinced that we were not going to be emcees. No one was going to buy my lyrics …

PRIYA: It becomes too political

JAMES: And you knew that too.

KRIST: Too political. So Scott and I were going to be producers. And I would rhyme on the side too. I’d have my political rhyme on the side. So the first record that I wrote was “Elementary.” Scott was trying to shop the song, “Elementary” as well as the song, “Criminal Minded.” These were like demos that we were shopping and everybody rejected it because they said “Criminal Minded” was corny. But they didn’t know that that was a Jamaican style, that you take popular records and put your lyrics into it. I was appealing to a very underground community of music. You know, back then, that’s when Dance Hall was so dope … their Jamaican dances was just sickening. I took that sound into rap.

And so at that time, the way to get into the industry was through battles. There was no other way in. Hopefully you could sign with Russell [Simmons] with Def Jam, but they weren’t signing nobody. Or you could have signed with Mr. Magic and his Juice Crew [founded by DJ Mr. Magic and producer, Marley Marl]. Mr. Magic already had a weekly – he was like God. Mr. Magic was the undisputed, if you wanted to get in the rap music industry; you had to go to him. So somehow we leave our demo with somebody, a guy named Frankie D. But he [Mr. Magic] just rejected us too! This Frankie D comes back to us and says, “Mr. Magic dissed your demo. He said it was corny.” And so we went back up to arrange a meeting with Mr. Magic. He brushed us off. So I went back as the MC and said, “I’m not corny, MC Shan is corny!” [Laughter] And you know, he [Mr. Magic] had “weapons of mass destruction,” so let’s go and start a war! [Laughter] And so, I wrote a record called “South Bronx” answering a very huge hit record called “The Bridge.”

[Laughter]

PRIYA: The famous Bridge Wars between the South Bronx, Boogie Down Productions and Queensbridge, Juice Crew!
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JAMES: “The Bridge” was a big record.

KRIST: Huge record, when that record used to come on in the clubs, it was mayhem! I challenged that. MC Shan was having a battle with L.L. Cool J at the time but L.L. was ignoring him.

JAMES: He couldn’t ignore the South Bronx, though.

KRIST: No. Well, MC Shan was playing according to Hip Hop rules, which was, if you claim to be the dopest MC, each week you had to prove that. So each week, MC Shan, Roxanne Shanté, Big Daddy Kane, and Biz Markie was smackin’ New York City MCs. Big Daddy Kane was brutal! And I already knew of his reputation. Kool G Rap was brutal too as a battle MC. Biz was just ridiculous as a battle MC. And Roxanne Shanté – you didn’t even look her in the face! [Laughter]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Boogie Down Productions debuted in 1987 with the album Criminal Minded (recorded in 1986 under the B-Boy Records label) which told raw tales of the harsh realities of ghetto life. In fact, the album was written when KRS-ONE was still homeless and living in a homeless shelter in the Bronx. The album cover featured KRS-ONE and Scott La Rock with guns and bullets on display and was thought of as having a huge influence on the rise of gangsta rap. In August 1987, during the recording of their sophomore album By All Means Necessary Scott La Rock was shot and killed while attempting to break up a dispute in the Bronx. After serious thought, KRS-ONE decided to continue Boogie Down Productions, adding his DJ brother Kenny Parker and MC/producer D-Nice to the group. They left B-Boy Records and, in 1988, signed with Jive Records, where they completed and released “By All Means Necessary,” which included inspirational and uplifting messages about education and self-improvement; messages that transcended violence and directly influenced other MCs such as the Jungle Brothers and A Tribe Called Quest.

The tragic event that took Scott La Rock’s life, as well as the recent upsurge in violence at Hip Hop concerts at the time inspired KRS-ONE to found the Stop the Violence Movement, under whose rubric he released the 1988 single “Self-Destruction.” In accord with his political, consciousness-raising lyrical style, KRS-ONE adopted the self-proclaimed nickname “The Teacha” and soon became known as an outspoken advocate of self-education amongst the Hip Hop generation, especially first generation Hiphoppers.

In the meantime, Boogie Down Productions released their third album entitled Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip Hop (1989), followed by Edutainment (1990) and Sex and Violence (1992). In 1993, KRS-ONE went
KRS-ONE has also lectured at over 500 educational institutions across all levels (elementary to high schools to prominent universities such as Yale, Harvard, Vassar, Columbia, NYU, and Stanford). He is author of three publications including *The Science of Rap* (1995), *Ruminations* (2003), and *The Gospel of Hip Hop* (2009) and has been honored by the United Nations, Billboard Magazine, BET, and the Riverside Church in New York City to name a few.

Author, journalist, and talk show host, Tavis Smiley describes KRS-ONE as the following: “...you are going to encounter a man who has sincerely sought to develop a relevant, honest and contemporary interpretation of world history, culture, religion, and philosophy. In many ways, his work actually rests in the tradition of great thinkers like W.E.B. DuBois, Carter Woodson, and John Henrik Clarke, men who have sought to develop a cultural veil through which to interpret the seeming insanity of America. Regardless of whether or not you agree with his analysis, you must certainly appreciate that there is a profound mind at work, and a definitive spirit that is searching to discover what is right and exact”. (http://www.templeofhiphop.org).

**THE “PEDAGOGY” OF AN URBAN GRIOT: KRS-ONE**

Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of an independent consciousness in the oppressed can be taken to mean that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000, p. 5)

Collins’ understanding of oppression resonates deeply with KRS-ONE’s pedagogical view that local, indigenous knowledge of oppressed people is overlooked or discounted in nearly every context – political, economic, social, and educational. Similarly, the knowledge, viewpoints, and opinions of the oppressed (e.g., working-class people, people of color, women, and marginalized others) have been trivialized and even excluded from many academic, social, and political settings.
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The knowledge that remains marginalized or untold can be understood as knowledge without language. Foucault (1980) reminds us that the process by which we select the experiences we tell is a power-saturated one. He goes on to define what he calls “subjugated knowledge”:

A whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificty [sic]. It is through the re-emergence of these low-ranking knowledges, these unqualified, even directly disqualified knowledges and which involve what I would call a popular knowledge (le savoir des gens) though it is far from being a general commonsense knowledge, but on the contrary is a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it – that it is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work. (p. 82)

Marginalized knowledge can be understood as subjugated, or indigenous, in that it has been erased or silenced through the colonization of space by a language that “stories” the dominant culture while ignoring the knowledge of others (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). Foucault contends that knowledge that is subjugated, such as the ideas and knowledge of people of color, working-class people, women, and others who are considered “indigenous” or “naïve,” has been written out of history.

KRS-ONE raps against the grain (of culturally dominant knowledge) by spreading and sharing an empowering (subjugated) knowledge that confronts those who believe in dominant ideologies. When the dominant culture is confronted with subjugated knowledge from the voice of KRS-ONE and those of other political rappers, this knowledge is interpreted in a fearful, dangerous, and pathological way (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997), consequently inciting irrational feelings or “moral panic.” Because the dominant class or dominant knowledge systems have the power to define and formulate the world to meet their criteria, they attack subjugated knowledge systems as being “a corruption, a bastardization of dominant discourse” (Macedo, 1994, p. 101).

KRS-ONE’s lyrics reflect a knowledge that is subjugated, but also through rap, he serves as a spokesperson and teacher for the oppressed. KRS-ONE’s role as “The Teachah” (to be further explained in the following section) could be legitimized or classified as Freire’s (1998, 1983, 1970) “cultural worker,” as Gramsci’s “organic intellectual” (Rosengarten, 1994), and Giroux’s (1993, 1988) “public intellectual.” Although some may disagree with these classifications, arguing that KRS-ONE is in fact not a certified or licensed teacher, I would respond with the following questions: What are the qualities that combine to create an excellent, memorable teacher? What specifically qualifies a person to be a “good” teacher? Does certification necessarily deem a person to be a “quality” and/or qualified teacher? From my experience having asked various teachers and
students these questions, I have found that most of the responses include four essential qualities that make an effective teacher: the knowledge or expertise in the specialized area as well as the knowledge of and ability to integrate multiple disciplines (inter- and multi-disciplinary approach), the skills to convey that knowledge, the ability to make the material interesting and relevant, and a genuine respect for the student including an appreciation of his or her background in terms of culture, academic ability, and linguistic proficiency. Having high expectations and standards of each student was also noted as important.

Kellner (1997) argues that the qualities of an effective teacher lie, in part, in their willingness to practice critical approaches. He contends that because we live in such a diverse and multicultural society, schools must move beyond teaching old literacies and incorporate new or multiple literacies (such as critical media literacy, computer literacy, and emotional literacy discussed in Chapter 1), as well as social and cultural literacies “that [appreciate] the cultural heritage, histories, and contributions of a diversity of groups” (p. 10). These new literacies encourage cultural production rather than reproduction, enabling people to tell their own stories about their individual and collective experience.

Macedo (1994) supports this resistance against the common cultural literacy, arguing that it is a form of dominant cultural reproduction that undermines independent and critical thinking skills in favor of indoctrination and specialization. Macedo further contends that cultural literacy should not be restricted to the acquisition of Western European dominant ideologies because they systematically negate the cultural experiences of many oppressed members of society, including the White working class.

KRS-ONE AS TEACHA, INSTRUCTOR, AND PHILOSOPHER

KRS-ONE’s role as “The Teacha” has passed the test of time, for he has proven to not be “just another arrogant rapper” or a “here today, gone tomorrow” MC with a short-lived career like many other artists in the changeable popular music industry. In fact, KRS-ONE’s career has spanned over 20 years, and continues today, earning him the distinguished titles of “The Teacha”, “The Blastmaster”, instructor, and even philosopher, as many now call him.

“Ask most rappers whom they admire,” wrote Newsday reporter Elena Oumano (1992), “and the name KRS-ONE (a.k.a. Kris Parker) invariably comes up . . . his bio is the stuff of urban myth; unlike some on the Hip Hop scene who spin ghetto fables, Parker earned his credentials through seven years on the streets”(p. 17). Wayne Robbins (1991), also a reporter for Newsday, noted that KRS-ONE’s lyrics are not “just music;” rather, they are “the opportunity to provide moral leadership” (p. 13). In an interview with Gordon Chambers (1991), female rapper Sister Souljah expressed the following:

Hip Hop is a blessing because the [Poor] Righteous Teachers, Brand Nubian, and KRS-ONE have actually been the educational system for Black kids, in place of the so-called educational system that is entirely financed by the
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American government. And in the absence of the voice of young people in Hip Hop, we would have even more chaos than we have today. (p. 108)

*Black Beat* magazine describes KRS-ONE as “Hiphop’s primary culture-keeper…Brilliant, thought-provoking, humorous and contradicting…When it comes to this strange animal called Hiphop, KRS-ONE remains its most trusted guardian, preserver and spokesman.” *Rolling Stone* magazine’s online posting on KRS-ONE cites fans as saying, “I just want to say that KRS is one of the greatest MC’s of all time. He’s great” (JG, April 28, 1998, 5:56 p.m.). “I think KRS has contributed a lot to the genre of Hip Hop, as well as to the Hip Hop/African American community. A lot of people learned more about African-American history and culture than they ever did in school. I also believe he possesses one of the ‘great minds’ in Hip Hop. I think the focus of Hip Hop should return to the ‘old school’ days of intelligent discussion, and not ripping on each other!” (Anonymous, April 8, 1999, 5:56 p.m.). And, “educated mentor and role model of rap! U don’t hear no mess about him at all yet Hip Hop/rap want to ignore the goodness of rap and pay attention to its negative side!” (Anonymous, July 14, 2000, 6:16 p.m.).

Even in more recent times, upon release of his 2008 album, *Maximum Strength 2008*, reviews revealed the following commentary about KRS-ONE’s overall style:

One, the legend himself, comes back for his second album of 2008, “Maximum Strength”. … What was left was a solid collection of pure KRS-One. … KRS, as always, diversifies his topics from politics, to battle type rhymes, to intellectual, informational, hip hop, and to party jams (not the typical “party” type jam). … I, personally, have come to expect this from the recent KRS releases … Kris Parker, your music is still being heard, and is still great. Don’t quit anytime soon, sir.9

Another reviewer states:

All I have to say is, conscious rap is NECESSARY!!! KRS is my all time favorite MC, his message is tough to listen to if you’re shrouded, but if you’re truly awake to part or all of it, KRS’s message is altogether positive. I appreciate his consistency in his music. There is nothing bad I can say about this album. How can you diss the truth? I know I can’t. Thanks KRS, I know you’re just a man but you will forever hold a place in my consciousness!!! One love!!!10

KRS-ONE, in his song “R.E.A.L.I.T.Y.,” describes his style and the reason he chose MCing as a career. In the lyrics of this rhyme, he gives his listeners a brief autobiographical sketch as well as educates them on the harsh realities and poor economic and social conditions that exist in the inner city. The lyrics begin with the meaning behind the acronym REALITY (“Rhymes Equal Actual Life, In The Youth”):
I lived in a spot called Millbrooke Projects
The original Criminal Minded rap topic
With twenty cents in my pocket I saw the light
If you’re young gifted and black, you got no rights
Your only true right, is a right to a fight
and not a fair fight, I wake up wonderin’ who died last night
Everyone and everything is at war
Makin my poetic expression hardcore
I ain’t afraid to say it, and many can’t get with it
At times in my life, I was a welfare recipient
I ate the free cheese, while the church said believe
and went to school everyday, like a god damn fool.

The song continues with overlapping themes ranging from the critique of “wack” rappers to an attack on particular power structures: the media, the police, the government, and the educational system. These themes are analyzed in greater detail using other samples of KRS-ONE’s lyrics in Chapter 3.

KRS-ONE’s central theme, regardless of his target audience, is to unveil the “unofficial truths” about the social, political and cultural conditions in urban communities. His goal as “The Teacha” is for the audience to develop a critical-consciousness and self-consciousness so that they become aware of the conditions surrounding poverty-stricken “ghetto” areas. More importantly, KRS-ONE’s “pedagogy” encourages the oppressed to take social action against (power) institutions that may be holding them down. He encourages his audience, and youth in particular, to take control of their destiny in a positive manner if they want to attain success rather than participate in destructive activities (e.g., violence, gangs, drugs) that undermine the goals of beginning a “revolution.” He describes his role as a “revolutionary” in several songs, illustrated particularly well here in “House Nigga”:

Wake up, shake up, hypocrite look alive
Blastmaster KRS-ONE will revive
Four or five million still deprived
When out to survive, wake up and realize
Some people say I am a rap missionary
Some people say I am a walking dictionary
Some people say I am truly legendary
But what I am is simply a Black revolutionary.
(“House Nigga’s,” Edutainment, Jive Records, 1990)

He continues the song by referring to all the “sell-out” rappers who “preoccupy” themselves with showing off their material possessions as “house nigga’s”:
My words are subliminal, sometimes metaphysical
I teach, not preach, you want a challenge? I’ll start dissin’ you
I go philosophical by topical . . .
Only if the universal law is obeyed
Which is “know thyself” for better mental health
Yet so many rappers are preoccupied with wealth
On my shelf I got titles
Other artists want belts and idols . . .
KRS knows, so he just grows
Always sayin’ somethin’ different from the average Joe’s
So I confront them with the biggest chain
but it doesn’t rate albums, I believe it is the brain.
(“House Nigga’s,” Edutainment, Jive Records, 1990)

KRS-ONE challenges the lyrical content of other rappers’ songs, asserting that they help with the destruction of their own people and culture, glamorizing material wealth and power through money instead of educating them about more realistic, achievable goals and dreams. He compares his lyrics to other rappers’, declaring that the aim of his rap is to encourage youth to find empowerment by using their brains rather than through collecting material possessions.

A similar theme is found in the lyrics of “I’m Still #1” in what may first appear to be boastful rhymes as he claims his style of rap to be “number one.” However, the real message of the song makes listeners aware that the purpose and style of his rhyme is strictly for the people, as he is a voice of empowerment, transmitting messages of peace and unity:

And if we oughta sing, then let us begin to teach
Many of you are educated, open your mouth and speak
KRS-ONE is something like a total renegade
except I don’t steal, I rhyme to get paid
Airplanes flyin’, overseas people dyin’
Politicians lyin’, I’m tryin’
ot to escape, but hit the problem head-on
by bringin’ out the truth in a song
So BDP, short for Boogie Down Productions
made a little noise cuz the crew was sayin’ somethin’
People have the nerve to take me for a gangster
An ignorant one, something closer to a prankster
Doin’ petty crimes, goin’ straight to penitentiary
But in a scale of crime that’s really elementary . . .
It’s simple: BDP will teach reality.
(“I’m Still #1,” By All Means Necessary, Jive Records, 1988)

KRS-ONE addresses the lies and “unofficial truths” often told by the media and politicians, and the repercussions of rapping against the grain (i.e., being portrayed
as a “gangster” by media representations). He asks his audience to take a deeper, more critical look at the meaning, and (media) portrayal, of a gangster, insisting that crimes committed by them are usually “petty” compared to white-collar crimes, which largely go unreported and often carry lighter sentences (Rose, 1994a).

In “Edutainment,” KRS-ONE continues to try to empower his listeners, despite criticism of his didactic lyrics and his “reality-style” emceeing:

Nuff respect! And praise to the creator
Over the years it seems that I became a landmark, in the hip-hop field of art
I shed light, yet my skin is dark
I’m not concerned with climbing the chart
Cause why should you pay when it comes from the heart? . . .
I’ll just name it, Edutainment
People sit and they look at my album
like a problem, they try to solve ‘em
They don’t know, it only leads the way
to a bright more positive day
By itself, it’s NOT the bright day
Sit up straight, and hear what I say
Fear and ignorance, I’m down for stoppin’ this
but the bright day is your consciousness
I am a poet, my words will heal you.
(“Edutainment,” Edutainment, Jive Records, 1990)

One of the messages in “Edutainment” is for listeners to develop their consciousness and to question whether or not they agree with dominant forces that help to shape false realities.

The kind of knowledge that KRS-ONE articulates in his lyrics resonate with a system of critical literacies that move beyond the traditional forms of literacy taught in today’s schools. KRS-ONE’s lyrics promote a form of literacy that could be a significant means of social change. His music is a literacy that encompasses cultural literacy, social literacy, political literacy, and eco-literacy.

Similarly, Paulo Freire argues for a cultural literacy that includes, but is not limited to, social class issues, and allows for the voices of the underclass to be heard. In proposing such expression, he states that “all languages are valid, systematic, rule-governed systems, and that the inferiority/superiority distinction is a social phenomenon” (Macedo, 1994, p. 101). KRS-ONE uses a language that is comprehensible and relational to the poor working class, particularly Black male urban youth. However, those who belong to the dominant culture may not accept his language, even if it is relatively comprehensible. Furthermore, KRS-ONE’s pedagogy is, in Freire’s words, one that is “unquiet,” which makes it more critical, radical, and controversial in the eyes of the dominant culture (Macedo). In other
words, the knowledge and message that KRS-ONE sends attempt to enhance the autonomy and control of powerless learners and their communities over their environment. The inclusion of multiple, critical literacies, such as rap music, into the school curriculum produces new forms of social interaction and cultural awareness that are much needed because they result in an appreciation, awareness, and celebration of differences, multiplicity, and diversity.