

## Relandscaping the Rhetorical Tradition through Hip Hop

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### **ABSTRACT**

The field of rhetorical studies is rich and complex but has, in many ways, ignored or marginalized the study of rap music and hip hop culture. This article analyzes ways in which hip hop rhetoric adds to the terrain of rhetorical studies and posits ways that it can shift perspectives, subjects of study, practice, and theoretical frameworks within the discipline. There are also reasons hypothesized for why hip hop has been marginalized in pedagogy and academic writing within the rhetorical tradition and why it should not be ignored.

**Keywords:** rhetoric, discourse, rap, hip hop, rhetorical tradition

In “Disciplinary Landscaping, or Contemporary Challenges in the History of Rhetoric,” Jacqueline Jones Royster writes:

What we choose to showcase depends materially on where on the landscape we stand and what we have in mind. The imperative is to recognize that the process of showcasing space is an interpretive one, one that acknowledges a view and often re-scopes that view in light of aesthetic sensibilities—values, preferences, beliefs. We landscape. (148)

Royster sees the field of rhetoric as a “richly textured” epistemological terrain, constantly being shaped and shifted by new voices, new realities, and new rhetorics. But in many ways, for many years, the soil has been stagnant with historically dominant voices. Royster’s call for a fresh and rebellious approach to rhetorical historiography is heeded in the study of Hip Hop Rhetoric.

This notion of “landscaping,” or what I like to call “relandscaping,” because it more succinctly points to the inherent revisionary component, is a central theme in rhetoric, as the field has evolved from initially focusing only on historically elite voices (Western, White, privileged, males), to historically ignored and disenfranchised voices, such as those of women and racial minorities. Echoing Royster’s call for a more dynamic and inclusive rhetorical tradition is Michael Leff, who states, “tradition...is a living force that requires constant change and adaptation...” (144) and Patricia Bizzell, who believes, “...we must hear from rhetoricians who have struggled with culturally complex venues in which they were marginalized, if we are to live and work and function as responsible citizens in the American multicultural democracy” (117), among others (Charland 2003; Glenn qtd. in Portnoy 2003; Berlin 1994; Jarratt 1991). Attitudes such as these, and the implementation of such attitudes, have begun to have a diversifying effect on the field.

“Rhetorical history” is now commonly approached as the “histories of rhetorics,” an approach that has enriched the field and, in some ways, made more legitimate the lives, experiences, and discourses of a growing number of peoples. This approach is a catalyst for uncovering/highlighting “new” discourse communities. Hip Hop Rhetoric, as a relatively new terrain in rhetoric, is a meaningful, useful, and instructive lens from which to approach the ever-expanding realms of the field. My aim is to be a voice in that process of relandscaping—a voice that helps Hip Hop Rhetoric come alive in the discipline, in its historiography and in pedagogical circles. I hope to join the conversation in the rhetorical parlor, while luring some to the back alley to discuss a dynamic, but marginalized, rhetoric—Hip Hop Rhetoric.

## SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES

The work of relandscaping the rhetorical tradition involves shifting and reshifting its terrain. This occurs when our perspective on what we do in rhetorical studies and how we do it changes. In Royster’s words, we must shift where we stand, shift rhetorical subjects, shift the circle of practice, and shift the theoretical frame. All are integral parts in the important changes that continue to influence the field. In **shifting where we stand**, we change our point of view and begin to notice the plethora of and substantive existence of discourses—oral, written, visual, and technological—outside of the historical norm. This can mean looking at “new” groups, such as African American women, which Royster has done much of, or looking at non-traditional modes of discourse, such as “anonymous songs, poetry, folktales, griot histories, and so on” (151). A rather new and often ignored place to “stand” is with Hip Hop Rhetoric, a strong catalyst in shifting the rhetorical terrain and opening new possibilities for research.

In **shifting rhetorical subjects**, we continue to uncover, recover, and recognize traditionally silenced voices. Our perspective on whose rhetoric matters evolves and diversifies. While much of the focus in changes to the rhetorical tradition has been on women’s discourse (i.e. Aspasia, Enheduanna, Pan Chao, Sor Juana, Ida B. Wells, Gloria Anzaldúa, etc.), there are a plethora of voices left uncovered and ignored in rhetoric, one

of which is the dynamic voice of Hip Hop. While some serious work has been done by a handful of scholars (*The Hip Hop Reader* 2008; Richardson 2006; Campbell 2005), there is much more that can, and should, be done, considering the impact of Hip Hop Rhetoric on American and global culture, and its direct illustration of traditional *and* modern definitions of rhetoric.

In **shifting the circle of practice**, scholars must reconsider “what constitutes rhetorical action or participation,” moving beyond the traditional arenas of “the courts, the pulpit, [and] the arenas of politics and public service” (Royster 157). For those outside the field, it is common to associate rhetoric only with political discourse, and inside the field, it continues to be the norm to focus mostly on the rhetorical spheres mentioned above, and nothing else (though this is rapidly beginning to change). With Hip Hop Rhetoric, we are forced to turn our gaze towards non-traditional textual/visual/special avenues such as song lyrics, musical beats, music videos, “mixtapes,” “underground” videos, video games, graffiti, popular magazines, and websites, which request our close attention to minority-produced poetry, and racialized, gendered and sexualized discourse (both private and public)—all of which constitute a paradigmatic shift in what constitutes the rhetoric’s circle of practice.

Finally, in **shifting the theoretical frame**, we shy away from constraining non-traditional viewpoints and theory. In order to highlight new features of the rhetorical terrain, we should allow for new perspectives and new lenses from which to view rhetoric and allow new paradigms to affect our analysis of the multi-faceted rhetorics which exist in our world. This includes not only adding “new” voices to the landscape but challenging the very paradigmatic foundations which have placed “traditionally traditional” (Bizzell 110) rhetorics at the apex of a socially constructed rhetorical hierarchy. Hip Hop Rhetoric provides one venue from which to shift the normative theoretical frame as it originated from a very different world-view than that of traditional rhetorics, one of marginalization.

Thus, the rhetoric of Hip Hop provides an avenue from which to do this shifting work, a shift that is meaningful and important if relandscaping is truly a central component of the field of rhetoric. As Royster notes critically, we must not only work at uncovering and analyzing these catalysts for change, but also be involved in “knowledge-using,” that is, in persuading those inside and outside of the discipline that “new” rhetorics, such as that of Hip Hop, are “valuable...in the re-envisioning of what constitutes knowledge” (161). Thus, my work in this area is a call for the critical use of Hip Hop Rhetoric in our ever-evolving creation of what constitutes important rhetoric, rhetorical historiography, and rhetorical tradition. By intellectually spotlighting and analyzing different rhetorical and cultural aspects, the landscape of Hip Hop Rhetoric, and rhetorical studies in general, will grow and become more kaleidoscopic in its makeup—a positive change if we are interested in avoiding a narrow and elitist tradition.

## DEFINING HIP HOP AND HIP HOP RHETORIC

Hip Hop is a musical genre as well as a cultural movement. Its beginnings are from African American communities in New York in the early 1970s, but its roots trace back to Jamaica and, according to Kermit Campbell (“gettin”), West African griots (traveling poets/historians/singers). DJing, the playing and mixing of music, was central to early Hip Hop but quickly incorporated a verbal component as DJs became MCs and shouted out impromptu poetry and sayings while the music played.

This verbal component developed into longer and more complex rhythmic speaking and became what we know as “rapping” today. Thus, rapping and Hip Hop are intricately connected and even used as synonyms by many. But, Hip Hop encompasses other components beyond both the music and the rapping. Dancing and graffiti are also central pieces to the culture of Hip Hop and have continued to evolve since the 1970s. These four components, DJing (music), MCing (lyrics), dancing, and graffiti, are seen as the four central elements

of Hip Hop.

Hip Hop has been historically connected to marginalization and struggle. Throughout the short history of the movement, Hip Hop lyrics have focused on issues central to racial minorities, the poor, the oppressed, and those attempting to break from cultural norms. From Melle Mel's "The Message" (1982) to Jay Z's "Minority Report" (2007), and countless others, counter-hegemonic rhetoric has been central to much of Hip Hop. This counter-message has also manifested itself in a highly sexual, violent, and materialistic discourse, which has been at the center of opposition to Hip Hop music and culture (from Bill O'Reilly to Bill Cosby). But it must also be stated that rap music, which emphasizes violence and sexuality, is only one part of the Hip Hop rhetoric and does not represent its entirety. Hip Hop is continually diversifying and incorporating any number of themes and messages.

From its humble beginnings on the streets of the Bronx, Hip Hop has catapulted onto the national and international scene. Regional Hip Hop, such as East Coast, West Coast, Third Coast, and Midwest styles, have developed with their unique beats, rhyming, and dress and "just about every country on the planet seems to have developed its own local rap scene" (Pryor). The influence of Hip Hop culture has been enormous and continues to grow, as does its rhetorical output which includes music lyrics, videos, movies, popular publications, video games, and internet content.

Hip Hop as a whole is not easily defined, but "Hip Hop" will be used here to represent both the general cultural movement and the music itself. The term "rap" will be used mainly to represent specifically the musical and lyrical output of Hip Hop, and "rappers" as those who deliver the lyrics. Though it blurs strict definitions between the two, "rap" and "Hip Hop," at times, will be used interchangeably, a common occurrence among those familiar with the culture of Hip Hop.

The designation Hip Hop Rhetoric succinctly joins Hip Hop and the academic field of rhetoric. Rhetoricians interested in Hip Hop Rhetoric engage in the critical analysis of the rhetorical output and/or culture of Hip Hop through the lens of rhetorical studies, and vice versa. More generally, Hip Hop Rhetoric is also the rhetorical output of Hip Hop culture. The output may be in the form of lyrics (written and performed), musical beats, websites, magazines, interviews, and the visual rhetoric of music videos, dress, and even vehicular alterations. Thus, as with the rhetorical analysis of any group or culture, any rhetoric (oral, textual, visual, etc.) produced by the group can be a launching point for understanding and analysis. In this case, the analysis comes through the academic lens of rhetoric.

## **THE (SHIFTING) RHETORICAL TRADITION**

Despite the enormous influence of Hip Hop culture, Hip Hop's voice has been and, to a very large degree, continues to lie on the margins of formal academic rhetorical study. This fact is highlighted in a discussion of the rhetorical tradition, *The Rhetorical Tradition*, which melds the concepts of relandscaping through Hip Hop and important aspects of rhetorical studies

The words "rhetorical tradition" take on a double meaning for rhetoric scholars. They represent both the history of the field of rhetoric and, more specifically, the anthology *The Rhetorical Tradition*, edited by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. On the face of it, the former seems the more important of the two, but one ought to realize that the former is in many ways constructed, packaged, and maintained by anthologies, such as the latter is. As in history, psychology, physics, literature, and all other disciplines, the anthologized texts and knowledge are what shape the field and give it its disciplinary boundaries. Obviously, an endless number of discourse communities and rhetorics have existed throughout human history, but by choosing specific texts and deeming them important/essential/foundational, we construct disciplines and foundations for knowledge-building. In this way, we create a landscape of/for the field of rhetoric.

The problem within the Western rhetorical tradition (as in many other fields), is the fact that the epistemic foundations have been laid by the historically powerful—White, privileged, male. While these foundations should not be erased, they should, nonetheless, not be continually held as the venerated norm. In Western culture, the roots of rhetoric have always been traced to Ancient Greece, namely Plato and Aristotle, while the voices of the socially marginalized have been ignored and silenced. The landscape of traditional rhetorical studies and historiography has focused on figures such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Augustine, Erasmus, Bacon, Blair, and Burke, . what Bizzell labels as a stock-exchange metaphor the prized and highly stable “blue chip stocks” of the tradition (112), while leaving out women, racial minorities, and other historically subjugated groups. Traditional rhetorical historiography has also focused on those that have textually theorized the nature of rhetoric, on those that use Greek, Latin, or Standard English, and on those that speak from an economically and culturally privileged position. Fortunately, this has begun to change.

As Bizzell discusses in “Editing the Rhetorical Tradition,” “the rhetorical tradition is always being edited” and it has begun to embrace more voices and experiences (109). This editing includes the actual text, *The Rhetorical Tradition*, the preeminent and highly influential anthology that is now in its second edition. Bizzell goes on to state that while changes are taking place, they are quite slow, as traditional rhetoricians/ rhetorics remain resilient in a field where even up to the mid-1980s, elite discourses still dominated). And even when Bizzell and Herzberg were editing the first volume of the anthology to produce the second in the late 1990s, there were no calls by reviewers to have fewer of the “traditional” rhetoricians (111), which would have created more space for the non-traditional. Luckily, Bizzell and Herzberg included a greater diversity of voices.

Early in the twenty-first century, significant changes have taken root as women, racial minorities, bilingual, and non-traditional theorizers of rhetoric, have made their way into the rhetorical tradition and *The Rhetorical Tradition*. The addition of rhetoricians such as Aspasia, Sor Juana Inés De La Cruz, Francis Willard, Fredrick Douglas, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Gloria Anzaldúa illustrate some of the relandscaping that has taken place. These additions are promising, but there remain countless voices that still remain sidelined in rhetorical studies. One such voice is that of Hip Hop, an influential genre and culture which encompasses a vast number of voices and experiences—some of which will be highlighted throughout my work.

And while some work has been done on Hip Hop in the field of rhetoric, the closest Hip Hop Rhetoric gets to achieving a valued and sustained post in the rhetorical tradition/*The Rhetorical Tradition* is through Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s discussion of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a topic closely related to Hip Hop discourse (see *The Rhetorical Tradition*, 2nd Ed.). But this is not sufficient because Hip Hop Rhetoric moves beyond linguistics to examine the entire rhetorical output of Hip Hop culture. This output is vast but constitutes one of the main reasons Hip Hop Rhetoric should be a component of the academic rhetorical tradition. I term it “academic rhetorical tradition” because Hip Hop Rhetoric is already a living and complex rhetorical phenomenon, yet one that has been largely ignored in the academic field of rhetoric. And why should Hip Hop Rhetoric not be ignored by the rhetorical tradition and *The Rhetorical Tradition*? Some reasons are:

- Hip Hop Rhetors are directly involved in the critical use of language to persuade and entertain.
- Hip Hop Rhetors show a “metacritical awareness of how language can be used to do things in the world [including] persuading [people] to make important political change” (Bizzell 115)/
- Hip Hop Rhetoric is rhetoric born of the margins and is an illustration of a counter-hegemonic textual and visual discourse (i.e. language, social commentary, dress, etc..)
- Hip Hop Rhetoric illustrates hegemony at work (dominance, appropriation, and consent).
- Hip Hop Rhetoric forces us to look beyond traditional rhetorical texts.

- Hip Hop Rhetoric can be used to teach traditionally Western aspects of rhetoric (i.e. invention, memory, delivery, pathos, ethos, etc.).
- Hip Hop Rhetoric forces us to discuss central themes in contemporary rhetoric (i.e. race, gender, power, sexuality, etc.).
- Hip Hop Rhetoric forces us to look at the continued dominance of the male voice in many discourse communities.
- Hip Hop Rhetoric allows us to jump international and cultural borders as it continues to spread throughout the world to places like Europe, Asia, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, etc.
- Hip Hop Rhetoric asks us to look at issues of technology and rhetoric, including the use of technology to produce and disseminate rhetoric, and issues of technological access.

All of these are reasons why Hip Hop Rhetoric should hold an important place in contemporary rhetorical studies and why adding Hip Hop to the landscape that is the rhetorical tradition is a valuable endeavor.

Ultimately, we must consider and reconsider what counts in rhetoric, especially because, since the 1970s, rhetoricians have taken a critical look at the rhetorical tradition, but we have a long way to go and many more voices to consider when discussing rhetorical historiography. In her discussion of feminist rhetoric in “Telling Evidence: Rethinking What Counts in Rhetoric,” Carol Mattingly states, “We have barely begun to explore the broad range of texts that can contribute a vibrant understanding and appreciation of women’s role in rhetoric” (100). The same can be said of Hip Hop Rhetoric, as it is a multi-vocal discourse, which, as the points above illustrate, can become an important voice in rhetorical studies. Hip Hop Rhetoric can contribute a vibrant understanding and appreciation of a marginalized culture’s role in rhetoric.

Hip Hop is a major part of contemporary American (and to a growing degree, Western and international) culture, but remains only a niche discourse in the field of rhetoric. Why is such a dynamic and influential discourse largely ignored in the academic discipline of rhetoric? Some possible answers include the following:

- Hip Hop Rhetoric is not critically understood by many (most?) academics in the field.
- Hip Hop Rhetoric is strongly associated with violence and misogyny.
- Hip Hop Rhetoric asks us to look at very non-traditional “texts” (i.e. music lyrics, “battling,” music videos, websites, blogs, underground “mixtapes,” videos, social media, etc.).
- Hip Hop Rhetoric is strongly associated with AAVE and “street slang”.
- Hip Hop Rhetoric is frequently laced with profanities.
- Much of Hip Hop Rhetoric thrives on popular culture (i.e. references to TV shows, popular movies, popular magazines, sports figures, social media, etc.) as opposed to traditional reference points such as literature, the Bible, and “historical” figures and events.
- Hip Hop Rhetoric involves music.
- Hip Hop Rhetoric’s roots are not in Ancient Greece but mainly in Africa (i.e. griots).
- Hip Hop Rhetoric is seen as a purely negative force by many conservative *and* sometimes liberal academics.
- Those most influenced by Hip Hop culture are not in positions to affect change in the academic sphere of the rhetorical tradition.
- Many of the most influential Hip Hop rhetors in the United States are/were from poor racial minorities.

Thus, there are reasons, both simple and complex, why Hip Hop Rhetoric is still a marginalized rhetoric in rhetorical studies and why it can serve as a rhetorical mechanism in the process of re-landscaping. While inroads have been made with conference presentations, a handful of published articles, a few book-length discussions, and little pedagogical work, there remains a vast and fruitful terrain to be unearthed.

## THE ALLEY BEHIND THE PARLOR: BURKE, HOOKS, AND HIP HOP RHETORICIANS

Relandscaping, adding diversity to the “terrain” of the rhetorical tradition, is not a new idea, but it is still confronted by centuries of hegemonic rule. The adding of new voices, new experiences, new rhetorical acts, and new rhetoricians to the rhetorical tradition, is both important and arduous. Kenneth Burke and bell hooks shed some understanding on the importance and reality of this relandscaping.

One of Burke’s central metaphors in describing rhetorical acts is “the parlor” (*The Philosophy of Literary Form*). He sees discourse as taking place in specific situations/communities with each of us entering those situations/parlors with no explanation from those already present, hearing the conversation, and ultimately entering and affecting the conversation (“put[ting] in your oar”). The conversation was going on long before we arrived and even when we leave, as individual agents, the conversation/parlor continues (110-111). Different rhetorical situations exist around us—the academic journal, the political debate, a meeting among new coworkers, a conversation about the best football team, a discussion over what new car to buy, among others. All are “parlors” we enter as speakers, hoping to know or learn the dynamics of the situation in order to intelligently take part in the conversation.

The rhetorical tradition is a parlor. To enter its doors, to understand the conversation, and to take part in the ongoing discussion, one would have needed to know about the rhetoric which has been labeled as elitist for centuries—namely that of White, Western, privileged, males. However, this rhetorical parlor, including its texts, discourse, and participants, has transformed over time, with its most major shifts beginning in the mid-1900s with the addition of nontraditional voices such as those of females and racial minorities. In many ways, the parlor of the early 21st century would be unrecognizable to classical and Enlightenment rhetoricians. New paradigms have now come into play.

Many who are in the field of rhetoric no longer want to fit into the traditional rhetorical parlor or impress those that see traditional rhetoric as pristine and didactically unproblematic. And many, like Ernest Stromberg, emphasize the fact that the rhetorical parlor has not, and does not automatically imply “equal access...and equal opportunity” (4). New paradigms are being created and a new landscape is being produced where traditional voices are giving way to historically ignored and marginalized voices. Subcultures and countercultures are slowly and steadily gaining a stronghold in rhetorical historiography and, as bell hooks writes, these counter-voices are “central locations[s] for the production of counter-hegemonic discourse” (149).

Like Royster, hooks is interested in shifting the landscape of rhetoric and claims that those “who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice [must] identify spaces where we begin the process of re-vision” (145). Hip Hop Rhetoric is one of those spaces. The culture and discourse of Hip Hop is very popular, but, paradoxically, it is also still the “exotic Other” in many ways because it points to something different than what has been displayed and theorized in traditional rhetorical historiography. Despite its historical roots, it remains counter-traditional and in the alley/margins of the rhetorical tradition.

But, importantly, hooks reminds us that the margin is not simply a site of deprivation but a place of productive resistance and a site of “radical possibility” (149). In simpler terms, it is a fresh and counter-traditional lens from which to view rhetoric and society. The voices of Hip Hop Rhetoric are not only voices of pain, hurt, and hate. Though they include these, they are much more than that.. Among a plethora of other characteristics, they also include struggle, hope, healing, family, race, and religion, and employ rhetorical tactics that would make both Aristotle and bell hooks appreciative.

Hip Hop does not fit comfortably in contemporary rhetorical studies, though it is a relevant and influential rhetoric. It resides in a place near but outside the parlor of the rhetorical tradition. It is a place with an edge and a dark side, a place that opens a channel to new and unknown regions, and a place of marginality but with proud roots—Hip Hop Rhetoric is the intricate alley behind the rhetorical parlor. This alley is host to the important work of relandscaping and hook’s notion of re-visioning the margin. Despite the

growing diversification of the rhetorical parlor, Hip Hop has remained in its shadows. Though socially and historically relevant enough to deserve a place in discussions of the rhetorical tradition, Hip Hop Rhetoric remains and continues to evolve in the margins of such discussions. Nevertheless, exclusion has not weakened or diminished what is a vibrant discourse.

Hip Hop Rhetoric may be looking into the parlor of the rhetorical tradition from the back alley, but it also functions and prospers without its inclusion. It is both self-sustaining *and* important enough to be included in academic discussion of the rhetorical tradition. After all, this alley is full of colorful and intriguing voices—sad, joyful, hopeful, proud, angry, resisting, hurtful, and hurting voices—all complex voices, some of which need to be part of the Rhetorical Parlor.

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