Cultural Studies and Rap:
The Poetry of an Urban Lyricist

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If I say stop the violence
I won't chart
Maybe I should write some songs like Mozart
Cause many people don't believe rap is an art.
("House Nigga's," *Edutainment*, Jive Records, 1990)

—Boogie Down Productions

Cultural studies is an inter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary, and counter-disciplinary approach often associated with the study of popular culture (Kincheloe, Slattery, & Steinberg, 2000; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Giroux, 1988). However, cultural studies is not limited to just studying popular culture and/ 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, 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 (Kincheloe et al.; Giroux, 1996; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). This approach views culture as pluralistic, shifting, and hybrid, which places value on the culture of lower classes (Kincheloe, Slattery, et al.; Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Hinchey, 1999; Giroux, 1996; Aronowitz & Giroux). 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, then, provides the theoretical basis to analyze postmodern texts such as rap lyrics. In addition, cultural studies is negotiable, transformative, and empowering, as well as political. Thus, it can be seen as a form of social and cultural critique and a medium of social transformation.

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).

Incorporating cultural studies into the language of pedagogy and schooling requires educators to challenge institutional practices that are at odds with democratic practices and provide space for "culture" to be read, viewed, and analyzed as "text." 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.

Critical Literacies

An empowering, liberatory curriculum incorporates more than the back-to-basics literacies, including critical literacies that empower students and that meet the ever-evolving changes and demands of society. Critical literacies may include, but are not limited to, computer literacy, critical media literacy, multimedia literacies, social, political, and economic literacies and cultural literacies (Kellner, 2000; Semali & Pailliotet, 1999). It is important to first differentiate between the terms "literacy" and "critical literacy" in order to provide a better understanding of the term "critical literacy."

According to Lankshear and Lawler (1987), literacy can emerge in different forms for different students. Literacy can be as simple as a person's having adequate reading and writing skills to be able to complete basic forms, whereas critical literacy enables persons to draw their own conclusions about something by learning to think creatively and critically. These are two very distinct forms of literacy, where one is clearly empowering and the other is simply functional.

Reading and writing with the goal of simply functioning and surviving in today's society creates passive, robot-like members of society. Mastering and memorizing grammatical rules or being able to complete required reports, accounts, journals, letters, and forms are all evidence of functional literacy. Yet, do functionally literate people have the necessary skills to develop independent and critical thought?

Critical literacy helps students gain the knowledge and power to raise questions and make informed decisions about the society in which they live. Critical literacy 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 (Semali, 2000; Semali & Pailliotett, 1999). Critical literacy encourages students to identify their own positions

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 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).

A critical analysis of rap lyrics could open the door for educators to teach students how to deconstruct the role of mainstream media since 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 literacy 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).

The Critical Literacy of Rap

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. By critically examining and deconstructing the lyrical content of rap, 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 empowering, 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 (Kincheloe, Slattery, et al., 2000).

In my own education, rap lyrics had never been discussed in the classroom,

probably because of the "negative" associations with it. Rap lyrics that tend to be over-publicized by the media include lyrics that expresses misogynist, homophobic, and sexually explicit viewpoints. In this article, however, I explore the many other faces of rap that do not get the media exposure, which they rightfully deserve. Conscientious or political MC's such as KRS-One and others (Public Enemy, Mos Def, Common, and The Roots) are merely dismissed as being too controversial, simply because the Black cultural politics they articulate in their lyrics describe the harsh realities of social and economic suffering never before told from their perspective. These MC's are viewed as controversial essentially because they are the voice of social critique and criticism, which is precisely why the media and distribution centers have chosen not to focus much attention on them (Ross & Rose, 1994).

In regard to these controversial types of MC's, Ross and Rose (1994) classified militant rappers as what Antonio Gramsci refers to as "organic cultural intellectuals." These "hip hop nationalists" represent the voice of the urban poor, exposing the everyday struggles of working-class Blacks through lyrical expressions. Hip hop culture and rap music have thus become the cultural emblem for America's young Black urban youth (Ross & Rose). In this article, I will use legendary hip hop MC, KRS-One's lyrics to analyze, critique, and interpret his message to demonstrate how socially and politically-driven rap lyrics sets itself up as a postmodern text and as a form of musical poetry that goes against the grain of a hegemonic national discourse. Through both its lyrical and musical foregrounding of "blackness," and its aesthetic heterogeneity, rap confronts the unquestioned logic of a master narrative, thus making outsiders uncomfortable with many of the messages produced (Ross & Rose).

Students from all racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds can benefit from rap music by using a cultural studies approach (Kincheloe, Slattery, 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 Black culture, hence helping students understand the struggles of everyday life for working-class Blacks. 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, technocratically-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 (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993).

As this article will attempt to reveal, rap music, as a form of cultural pedagogy and critical literacy, is only one way to achieve the goals of a "critical education" (Best & Kellner, 1999; Ross & Rose, 1994; Rose, 1991). Rap lyrics can also be used as a tool to help the dominant class understand its position compared to others who are different. Many rap songs make this difference painfully clear and problematize this system of racial difference whereby Blacks (and other minority groups) are

marginalized, silenced, and excluded from the cultural dialogue, and where "whiteness" is assumed to be the norm (Best & Kellner; Ross & Rose; Rose). A critique of the modernist, positivist view of education suggests that subjugated or indigenous knowledge are marginalized or excluded from the curriculum (Kincheloe, Slattery, et al., 2000; Semali, 2000; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). The overwhelming representation and study of white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon males in traditional, mainstream education tends to privilege members of this group, and to devalue or denigrate the knowledge, histories, and experiences of other groups (Kincheloe et al.; Semali).

Rap lyrics, studied from a critical, postmodern perspective, counters the modernist, positivist view of education by challenging students to question and to expose dominant ideological discourses and hegemonic practices. Rap lyrics studied in such a fashion creates the need for teachers and students to engage in critical literacies.

KRS-One as Teacher and/or Philosopher

I chose to analyze and deconstruct the lyrics of legendary MC, KRS-One, due to the libertaory, revolutionary-style lyrics that he has consistently written and performed over the last 19 years. His self-proclaimed role as "The Teacher" and the consistency in his lyrics have consequently earned him the distinguished titles of *teacher*, *instructor*, and even *philosopher*, as many now refer to him.

"Ask most rappers whom they admire," wrote *Newsday* reporter Elena Oumano (1992), "and the name KRS-One (a.k.a. Kris Parker) invariable 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 stated 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 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)

Comments made by fans also reveal the designation "heroic myth" that KRS-One has often been given. "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.).

KRS-One, in his song "R.E.A.L.I.T.Y.," describes his style and the reason he

chose rap as a career. In the lyrics of this song, 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 song begins 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 aint 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.
("R.E.A.L.I.T.Y.," *KRS-One*, Jive Records, 1995).

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.

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 Teacher* is for the audience to develop a critical-consciousness and self-consciousness so that they become aware of the conditions surrounding poverty-stricken and ghetto areas. More importantly, KRS-One's "pedagogy" encourages the oppressed to take social action against the (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 material wealth rather than participate in destructive activities (i.e., violence, gangs, drugs, etc.) that undermine the goals of beginning a "revolution." He describes his role as a "revolutionary" in several songs, as illustrated 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 MC's, asserting that they help with the destruction of their own people and culture, glamorizing material wealth and power through money instead of educating 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 through using their brains rather than through collecting material possessions (money).

KRS-One reiterates his point in "I'm Still #1" by what may first appear to be boastful rhymes as he claims his style of rap to be "number one." However, a critical examination of the content makes listeners aware that the purpose and style of his rap is strictly for the people, as he is the voice of empowerment, the transcendence 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'
not 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, as a teacher, again 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 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, 1994).

In "Edutainment," KRS-One continues to try to empower his listeners, despite criticism of his blatant use of words and his "reality-style" rapping:

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)

The message in "Edutainment" is for listeners to use their minds to empower themselves, and to question whether or not they agree with the rapper's message. The lyrics in this rap are a prime example of a critical, media literacy pedagogy because they plead for listeners to critically analyze and question media messages and texts.

The kind of knowledge that KRS-One articulates in his rap resonates with a system of literacies that move beyond the traditional forms of literacy taught in today's schools. KRS-One's rap can be viewed as a kind of literacy that could be a significant means of social change. His rap is a literacy that encompasses cultural literacy, social literacy, political literacy, and economic literacy.

Similarly, Paulo Freire (cited in Macedo, 1994) 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" (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 critical literacies, such as rap lyrics, 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.

KRS-One's rap urges youth to critically analyze, interpret, and question education, government, police, and media messages, as well as to search for and create their own identity and positionality, by asking them how and where they see themselves fitting into the picture. Critical media literacy studies raise this notion as well, asking students how they themselves contribute, consume, and invest in the four power institutions critiqued in this study (McLaren et al., 1995).

Conclusion

Incorporating critical literacies that use a critical theoretical approach can transform the traditional, modernist classroom into a democratic, liberatory, postmodern classroom, where reflective, empowering pedagogies are practiced. To illustrate this kind of transformation through a cultural pedagogy, KRS-One's lyrics were deconstructed and analyzed as a form of poetry and critical literacy text through the following means: (a) by analyzing, critiquing, and interpreting the complex relationships among power, knowledge, identity, and politics; (b) by examining ways in which identity and knowledge are produced; (c) by validating and empowering subjugated and/or indigenous bodies of knowledge, and, finally, (d) by creating critical-consciousness and self-consciousness by challenging hegemonic practices, which, ultimately, helps one recognize his or her "position" in the world.

The traditional teacher-oriented, Western dominated ideology, which has been practiced in U.S. schools since their beginning, continues to dominate the educational system. Although some progressive change has occurred, educational reform, specifically, a critical and emancipatory reform that empowers both students and teachers, ultimately takes time. However, an empowering education is readily attainable in individual classrooms if students can challenge, critique, and question the syllabus, texts, and materials given to them. Like any reform movement, change occurs in small, gradual steps. Thus, students who develop critical thinking and inquiry skills as described in the field of cultural studies and critical pedagogy, students are ultimately engaged in a democratic process of education that includes social activism.

Ultimately, for students to truly become empowered, the concept of empowerment must be seen as a *philosophy* of education and not just as a strategy to increase academic success. One of KRS-One's objectives in his lyrics is for youth to realize the potential power they already possess. He conveys his message convincingly and strategically in the conclusion of his album *Edutainment* with "Exhibit F."

When you realize you have this army,
or one concept, one thought, one movement, one action;
you have what is called a revolution.
But the more we stay separated,
and the more we don't understand the concept of the EYE,
that is within all of us,
then we will constantly,

constantly lose every single battle from day one to day forever.
Thank you.
(clapping, applause, and shouting in the background).
("Exhibit F," *Edutainment*, Jive Records, 1990).

Regardless of one's pedagogical beliefs, the schools' primary goal is to aid in the construction of knowledge. Students, teachers, and parents living in today's postmodern society must learn to interact within the many dimensions of social reality. Consequently, we must accept the diverse forms of literacy that consume and make up the lives of youth, learning to adapt to this change and transform it into our own pedagogy. In doing so, we must teach critical literacies and inquiry skills that enable students to create strong, empowering identities and to form relationships with persons and communities different from them.

I close with a quote that I found while researching my topic, which clearly exemplifies the overall message of my own pedagogy as well as the messages embedded in KRS-One's lyrics:

> If you teach dignity to the people, the people will become dignified. If the people become dignified then they will open their eyes. Dignified people are a threat to those who would like to oppress us because they won't be lulled to sleep and allow you to pull a fast one on them. (Author unknown)

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