

"I represent me": Identity Construction in a Teenage Rap Crew*

Michael Newman
Queens College/CUNY

This ethnography explores how members of a rap 'crew' of inner-city teenagers use language to construct their various ethnic and local identities and their common identities as hip-hoppers and males. Crew members combine open-minded discourses on ethnicity, national origin, and neighborhood as potential sources of pride but not exclusiveness with unapologetically sexist views. I argue that rather than analyzing these discourses as contradictory, they are better understood as outgrowths of a single coherent meritocratic and individualistic worldview. As such, these teens use traditional American capitalist discourses to respond to the dominant discourses of dehumanization they face as minority youth.

1. Literacy Theory, Social Identity, and Hip-hop

Much as with recent sociolinguistic studies of youthful communities of practice (e.g., Bucholtz, 1999; Kiesling, 1999; Eckert, 2000; Pujolar, 2000), literacy researchers have explored how generic practices comprise a significant factor in identity construction (e.g.,

* I would like to thank all the crew members, including the teachers, for their comments and feedback. I would like to express my appreciation especially to Koran Campbell and Mike Ciulla for their help in transcribing and interpreting.

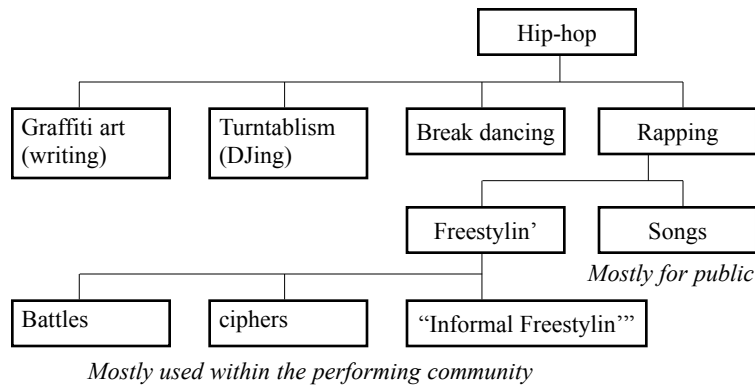
Scollon, 1995; Hanauer, 1998; Ramanathan and Atkinson, 1999). Such use of literacy is significant because it extends the notion of identity construction from communities based on macrosocial characteristics (e.g., gender, ethnicity) to those constituted by shared generic practices, known as "discourse communities" (Swales, 1990). If anything, literacy-understood not as referring only to writing, but as encompassing all genres of "socially made forms of representing and communicating" (Kress, 2000:157)-is particularly significant for the construction and extension of identities. As Hanauer (1998:9) puts it, "genres are . . . dynamic entities which develop in response to changing social situations." The mappings from specific features to values are not necessarily ultimately arbitrary as with, say, sound changes. They may directly respond to those values, as, for instance, an individualistic construction of the writer as owner of words inheres in the notion of plagiarism (Scollon, 1995).

The present research examines how members of one "crew" of inner-city adolescent rappers in Queens, New York use generic practices to construct their identities. The crew constitutes a local community of practice within a world-wide vernacular artistic discourse community, sometimes called the Hip-Hop Nation. Hip-hop is best understood as a peer culture and aesthetic sensibility, comparable to the classic European-based movements of romanticism, modernism, and so on. Like these movements, hip-hop is seen as a pervasive influence on followers' lives, including their identity, and is believed by members and observers alike to embody certain values, although these are often contested, as will be shown later.

Structurally, rap consists of spoken rhymes usually, although not always, set over a repeated musical loop called a *beat* (Foytlin, Nelson, Rahman, and Streeck, 1999; Yasin, 1999). It is said to be one of four genres of artistic expression, called *elements*, that compose hip-hop, the others being *graffiti art*, *turntablism*, and *break dancing* (see e.g., Norfleet, 1997). Rap can be further broken down into several subgenres. *Freestylin'* refers to improvised rapping, while *songs* are written and performed in shows or recorded on CDs (Foytlin et. al., 1999). There are various forms of freestylin'. These include *battles*, which consist of rhyming duels, and *ciphers*, which are round-robin sessions in which each rapper is expected to *spit*, as rhyming is often called. A third form, what I call *informal freestylin'*, involves one or

more MCs or rappers extemporaneously rapping for fun or practice.¹ Whereas songs are often designed for public distribution, the freestylin' forms are used mainly within the creative community. These relations are shown in (1):

(1) Generic breakdown of hip-hop



2. Participants and Methods

The research participants consist of a “crew” of teenage MCs called Squad Innumerable,² who perform in their school, at each other’s houses, and at (usually small) public venues within the underground rap scene. The crew is housed and sponsored by a public alternative secondary school in Queens, New York, particularly through two weekly rap classes in production and poetry. Squad Innumerable produces an annual CD—originally guided by their teachers, two underground professional rappers called David Star and Limitless. Individually, they also aspire to professional success in the music industry as performers or, if that dream is not realized, in another capacity. They are surprisingly realistic for adolescents about their possibilities of achieving their professional goals.

¹ Participants claim that the two terms are not synonymous, in that an MC emphasizes the ability to work a crowd in performance. Norfleet’s (1997) informants saw rappers as more commercial than MCs.

² All crew and rap names are pseudonyms. I have had to make minor alterations to some of the rhymes to accommodate these changes. I apologize to the MCs for any distortions.

Data gathering began during Spring 2000, through (passive) participant observation in the school and at the occasional show, as well as in interviews with all core and most peripheral members. In addition, one participant, Kareem, was hired as a research assistant upon matriculation to college, and he transcribed and recorded interviews, conversations, and rapping. He also functioned as a key informant. I gained access to the group through the cooperation of the school where I was a former teacher. Kareem was my student as a 9th grader in the school. The members have their own crews that overlap with Squad Innumerable. Ethnically, membership of the core group is evenly divided between Blacks and Latinos. The Blacks are then split between Anglo-Caribbeans and African Americans, and the Latinos are of various national origins. All this information is listed in (2):

(2) Squad Innumerable members involved in study

Pseudo rap name	Ethnicity	Other crews
Kareem	Jamaican-American	Mad Latino
Sega	Puerto Rican-American	Mad Latino
I-mation	Puerto Rican-American	Mad Latino
Hilarrius	Colombian-American	Rego Venom / Mad Latino
Topdog-G	Guatemalan-American	Rego Venom
Cherub	Jamaican/Afr.-American	Team
Delphee	African-American	Team
Tropics	Dominican-American	Team

3. Hip-hop Values and Identity

One striking fact evident in the list is how the crew affiliations cross ethnic lines.³ In fact, while ethnicity is highly salient in crew members’ descriptions of each other, they reject ethnic exclusivity. This inclusiveness extends to ethnic groups not represented in the crew. All members insist that a European American or Asian American student would find no barriers to joining. Such assertions are creditable for several reasons. The first is the response given to the

³ Although Mad Latino has an obvious ethnic identity focus, it has only recently and accidentally become a “crew.” Previously, it was a hybrid affiliation-group/production company. As such, it pooled recording equipment. It became a crew because of an association between Sega and Kaliph, who were told that to participate in a showcase, they needed a name, although both want to be signed as solo artists. Since Sega was wearing a “Mad Latino” t-shirt, that name was adopted, despite the fact that, as Kaliph put it, “I don’t fit in.”

teachers. Limitless is one quarter African-American, but appears European American and is largely considered to be so, while David is Jewish. Yet race has never been an issue. Their talents, first as rappers and then as teachers, are what matter. In fact, as when any popular teachers are replaced, their successors the following year were met with considerable skepticism, and that they were African-American appeared to have no impact. In fact, the return of David, who had been away on tour, was received with considerable enthusiasm. Similarly, crew members have friends of other ethnic groups. Cross-ethnic friendships are not unusual in the school, but they are not universal either, and so it might be said that this group is socially more heterogeneous than most.

In generic practices, the crew members' inclusiveness is manifested in their characteristic style of *sampling*. Sampling involves the use of portions of pre-existing recordings as a beat. Squad members have used an eclectic assortment of sources, including medieval choral pieces, opera, jazz, and '60s rock. Importantly, as is common in hip-hop production, the music is not usually left as is but is *flipped*, meaning that it is appropriated by creatively altering the original sound, in this case by using a computer (Rose, 1994). In this way, different musical genres are seen as possible resources for musical expression rather than competition, and wide knowledge of musical styles is part of a producer's skills. Accordingly, these rappers manifest an openness to other musical genres that is largely absent from other teens, even the other musicians in the school. Whereas rock and rollers, metal heads, and so on, generally express a dislike of other styles, the hip-hoppers inevitably say they like "all music."

The final way crew members' cultural openness can be seen is through their assertions of their own ethnic identities. Hip-hop culture provides convenient access to attitudes toward identity through the notion of *representin'*, which refers to a specific display of identity (Morgan, 1997; Haugen, 1999). When I asked members of this group about what they represented, only one, Kareem, spontaneously volunteered an ethnic affiliation by saying both "Black" and "Jamaican." When I directly inquired whether they represented their ethnicities, the answers varied widely. Cherub and Topdog-G both felt that ethnic membership was more trouble than it was worth because it served to separate people. Sega and Delphee, by contrast, emphasized their her-

itage. Sega was interested in being a Latino rapper because there were so few, while Delphee wanted to be a black businessman. The remainder acknowledged that they represented their ethnic affiliations, but with some ambivalence, as if other elements were more important.

The lack of consistency on ethnic representation was repeated in the case of neighborhood. Topdog-G and Hilarrius use their neighborhood, Rego Park, in their crew name, and mentions of that community appear in their rhymes. By contrast, Kareem and Tropics feel their neighborhood, East Elmhurst, is "fake," because, while it has relatively little crime, people put on a "thug" image. Curiously, Rego Park is, if anything, more middle class and whiter than East Elmhurst. There were only two identities all participants agreed on. One is pride in New York in general, and Queens in particular. Crew members often wear clothes emblazoned with "Queens," "New York," or "Number 7," a subway line that runs through much of the borough and often stands in for the neighborhoods it links. Two, they all claim to represent the Hip-Hop Nation in general, and underground or non-commercial rap in particular.

The primacy of locating identity in hip-hop, particularly the underground scene, implies subscribing to what are perceived as hip-hop values. The idea is that being a hip-hopper is more than just producing a certain kind of art. Rather, it is achieved by living the hip-hop ethos (Morgan, 1997). The role of hip-hop mores can be seen in Kareem's and Tropics's criticism of their neighborhood as "fake," since there is a considerable concern with credibility and realism within the community. The notion of "keeping it real" (Morgan, 1997; 2001) means that boasts must be grounded in actual behavior, and crew members frequently criticize commercial rappers for not being as tough as the "thug" images they try to project. While one of the replacement teachers claimed that the youths confuse realism with ghetto hardness and violence, in fact, crew members have flipped the notion. Cherub, Kareem, and Tropics all claimed that they were "gangsta" because they did not rap about a violent life they did not lead. *Gangsta* has come to mean simply "authentic."

Other principles that these rappers believe are appropriate to hip-hop involve normative forms of music-making and dealing with conflict. Both came together last spring when it was noticed that I-mation

had been *spitting* (rapping) some rhymes created by Tropics. In doing this, he violated an important prohibition against what is called *biting rhymes*, which is essentially plagiarism. The biting was taken not so much as stealing as a challenge, to which Tropics felt he had to respond in a fashion appropriate to hip-hop. He put it this way:

- (3) To bite rhymes is to slap an MC in the face 'cause if you take someone else's rhyme, you're basically sayin' "I could say what you say better" to an MC. An MC takes that real harsh. "You can say my word better than me?" You know a rapper really takes that to the heart. You gotta point the issue out, like alotta people, most people, they're like, "oh, oh, I'ma duff him out. I'ma fight him." I'm like, "It's hip-hop. Like if he woulda stole like my shirt or... that's my personal business. This is hip-hop. I gotta handle it the way a MC should, so I battled him instead of tryin' to take it to somethin' personal.

The battle effectively channeled what could have been a violent confrontation into the verbal arena. Even though I-mation was humiliated in the battle, he felt that the outcome had been for the good, in large part because of the avoidance of violence.

- (4) We talk like we used to before. I'm sayin' it's cool now, but I'm sayin' that'sone thing battlin' is good. It relieves stress first of all even though it puts a lot on you sometimes, and then also it never goes to fists, understand? And it all settles after a battle.

This taboo against violence was reaffirmed after an incident in which Kareem was ambushed on the way to the subway by a peripheral member after a dispute over the use of the studio space. In response, Limitless and David organized a cipher about violence. In fact, the use of ciphers and battles as a response to violence is deeply embedded in hip-hop, and is commonly associated with one of the founders, Afrika Bambaata (Norfleet, 1997). In this short segment, Limitless asks Topdog-G about the origin of violence:

- (5) L: Where does it come from?/ From your own mental slums? /Economic slums?/ Where does it come from?/Tell me about it, son.

TD: It comes from the street/but I still will defeat/ I don't have to use a gun /I use my lyrical tongue./yeah comin' through from Rego Park /Topdog's sharks./I don't freestyle that good/but I write some acid/Ya'll niggaz come through/I bite your head off with my lyrical skills/like that alligator in Lake Placid.

Again, as in discussions about the battle, rap is seen as a way of channeling violence into a verbal form. Yet what I think is most interesting here is a disconnect between the question and answer, which reflects a subtle but profound disagreement between teacher and student. Limitless's question implies a view of violence as pathology, specifically arising from negative social or mental factors, and her focus is then naturally placed on the causes. However, Topdog-G gives only a cursory response to her question, one that implicitly challenges her assumptions by giving a fatalistic view that sees violence as arising from the urban environment, iconically represented by "the street." Then, he presents himself as a potential antagonist in conflict, but one who uses verbal rather than physical weapons (for a more detailed analysis, see Newman, in press). He closes his turn with a pop cultural reference to a movie-- "The Alligator in Lake Placid." A similar perspective can be seen in Cherub's contribution to an informal freestyle that took place a semester later. Here there are no adults present, and no actual conflicts were being addressed:

- (6) I am the MC of perfection,/ boom for this rap profession./ I'm here to teach you all a lesson,/ how to use nouns and adjectives and verbs as weapons. /You've heard MCs at your own discretion. /I'm representin' without any question /according to my recollection /this style was manifested and perfected through a stomach infection./ So when I say this style is nasty, /that's exactly /what you're gettin' /I spit a style heartily, /the competence is sweatin' /Cherub survive /one time./ ... Yo, yo I spit vicious lines /that violently erupt like volcanoes, /transmit tongue twisters that twist your tales like tornadoes /so that you don't have no say so/ cause I spit violence... Cherub spit like we know no angel/ fight like NATO/and we flow fast and slow/ 'cause niggaz never know. /I must have been into a free style, /'cuz you know Cherub gets wild,/ that lyrical child... Cherub just rhymin' on and off any subject,

/yo. Lookin' at the world from a different aspect,/ a different perspective/, Cherub crush MCs as a school elective

In this excerpt, the MC's aggressive stance is taken to an even more comic level and shows an intellectual bent, both of which are typical of this rapper. It also shows little compromise with the audience in terms of speed of verbalizations. By the same token, Kareem, when specifically asked about the relation between violence and hip-hop, downplayed the ethical side completely. For him, physical violence in a hip-hop context simply shows that the aggressor is admitting verbal defeat, that is, that he lacks the ability to respond in kind. For Kareem, far from being a social pathology, violence is a sign of personal weakness.

There is a clear gender component to these playful displays of strength and aggression; they reflect what Pujolar (2000) refers to as "simplified masculinity." The MCs show themselves as fulfilling traditional male roles of strength, competitiveness, and valor. This ethos pervades the group, much to the frustration of Limitless, who is a feminist rapper. It also is not limited to creative acts. Challenges to others, sometimes jocular, sometimes not, are constant, frequently in the form of a variety of insults that describe others as incompetent or subject to victimization. These slurs include *punk*, meaning weak; *faggot*, combining homosexuality with softness; *herb*, someone who is dominated by another; and *bitch*, someone, either boy or girl, who assumes a female/subservient role. In the same freestyle, for example, Tropics, describes himself as having raped the Devil, who is "really a bitch."

The challenges serve to maintain what Kareem describes as a "prison" pecking order, in the sense that someone who does not defend themselves receives no mercy, only more overt humiliation and lower prestige. Thus, one rapper who had great problems freestylin' was subject to continual public degradation for over a year. He ended up doing the bidding of two other crew members to the point of supplying equipment that ended up at different MCs' houses. He was also sent to do various tasks and was referred to as another rapper's bitch to his face. Another MC also became the butt of negative attention, and was publicly disrespected for his lack of growth in freestylin', as well as and for being thin-skinned and difficult to get along with. This treatment is justified (or rationalized) as a form of tough love, in that, by being ver-

bally bullied and taken advantage of, the victims will be forced to defend themselves, and so will learn to rap better. Ultimately, the idea seems to be that if you cannot carry your weight as an MC, you should find something else to do. If you persist, you get what you deserve.

Similarly, the rappers cast femininity as softness and weakness. They overtly express differing degrees of homophobia, running the gamut from assurances of tolerance to expressions of disgust on the subject of male-male sex. However, it should be noted that some know that I am gay and treat it as a non-issue, and none of the rappers has ever harassed any of the five openly gay male students in the school. None of the gay students, however, participate in or are friends with members of Squad Innumerable, and only one listens to rap at all. Girls, however, have been victims of verbal attacks. One rapper composed a song called "She's a ho," that repeats over and over a sample of the eponymous lyric by the popular rapper Ludacris, as the MC narrates his version of a one-night stand with a local girl. In fact, "She's a ho" was well received by the group, in part because of the originality and punch of the clever sampling. The ethics ended up taking a backseat to the daring aesthetic concerns, and the generally quiet-spoken youth ended up appearing like the villain of a nineteenth century Russian novel, assuming artistic self-expression justifies all. "She's a ho" also enforced the traditional double standard between male and female promiscuity and was seen as revenge for the fact that the rapper felt ignored and disrespected after his encounter with the girl.

As discussed by Rose (1994) this kind of misogyny and homophobia have long been problematic for scholars and others who would like to promote the progressive potential of hip-hop (e.g., Garafalo, 1994; Boyd, 1994). Morgan (2001) has argued that the emergence of female rappers has diminished this sexist element in underground rap. She holds out hope that authentic hip-hop can overcome a machismo that responds to the powerlessness and dehumanization of black males in US society and to commercialization.

I have no doubt that progressive consciousness characterizes the construction of hip-hop in the groups Morgan has worked with. It is also clearly the way that the teachers construct rap. However, although they have tried to inculcate this more political sensibility with Squad Innumerable, their efforts have had at best an uneven effect. Hilarious

has shown receptivity to attacks on commercialism and maintaining the purity of rap—an important element of political rap (McLeod, 1999). However, Topdog-G was not the only one to disconnect from Limitless's pathological understanding of violence; Sega declined to rap about it much, while the others expressed images similar to Topdog-G's. More overtly, Kareem, after transcribing some of his former teachers' consciousness-raising contributions to the cipher asked, "What are they so angry at the government about?" Far from engaging in political awareness in their lyrics, the MCs resist efforts to critique their "unenlightened messages" in general and their use of *ho*, *bitch*, and *faggot* in particular. They argue that to do so inhibits their creativity. Furthermore, a number have expressed incomprehension of their teachers' unwillingness to capitalize on the commercial potential of their talent and to continue to live an economically marginal life.

4. Ayn Rand meets Malcolm X

It is possible to see misogyny, homophobia, materialism, and aestheticism as lingering elements of unenlightened ideology or responses to music business pressures. However, such a view misses the way that the (attractive) pluralism and the (less palatable) sexism and ruthless competitiveness form integral parts of one coherent system of identity values. Both make sense as reflexes of an individualistic worldview. In this view, group identities, such as ethnicity, are subsumed as a quality in the person's individual identity. The individual hip-hoppers then can pick and choose among those elements of their identity that they find attractive and represent those features. Importantly, group-based loyalties—such as, say, a hypothetical Afrocentrism that rejects European music—would interfere with the free market of musical ideas. It would thus diminish resources available to a clever MC or producer for appropriation (Rose, 1994).

Even the misogyny is subordinated to these artistic criteria. Most of the rappers express respect for Eve and other commercially successful female rappers when they are talented. It is not, thus, that *women* are excluded, but that *femininity* is not valued, because it is conflated with both weakness and nurturing. Eve herself is quite assertive, and her fearlessness garners respect to the same extent that the fearlessness of a man does, although such fearlessness may not be considered attractive in a female romantic interest. If anything, the fact that Eve has overcome the "disadvantage" of her female status

only increases her credibility. This is precisely the reason given by Kareem for boasting about the toughness of one's neighborhood; survival there gives a person more credibility, or "creds," than does coming up in a safe community. In all cases, an MC is judged on (usually his) merits and ability to defend himself and his interests. The rapper as an individual must embody the strength and power to be a winner in a gritty and competitive world. As the rapper DMX put it, "Do you," meaning look out for your self and your interests, because, "I'm gonna do me." It is an almost Ayn Randian view of the primacy of the individual combined with the anti-racism of the later Malcolm X.

Given a progressive or identity-political perspective, this entire construction of identity appears to be an error, since the left has long emphasized community and class membership over individual protagonism. Interestingly, a number of authors on hip-hop have argued against the imposing of these kinds of schemes on the Hip-Hop Nation (Rose, 1994; Keyes, 1996; Norfleet, 1997). Whatever else may be said about this individualism, it is complex, sophisticated, and internally consistent. What is most remarkable, however, is how it fits into a long tradition of American political thought, from Jefferson on down. In fact, it is arguably a sampling of this libertarian tradition, which had met its greatest practical and internal contradiction in the enslavement and other forms of exclusion of so many rappers' ancestors. In good rap style, these young hip-hoppers appropriate this tradition by flipping it to include those it had historically excluded.

References

- Boyd, Todd. 1994. Check yo self before you wreck yo self: Variations on a political theme in rap music and popular culture. *Public Culture* 7: 289-312.
- Bucholtz, Mary. 1999. Why be normal?: Language and identity practices in a community of nerd girls. *Language in Society* 28, 2. 203-223.
- Eckert, Penelope. 2000. *Linguistic Variation as Social Practice*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Froytlin, Matt A., Clarice A. Nelson, Wali Rahman, and Jürgen Streeck. 1999. Casualties of lyrical combat. In *Proceedings of the 6th Annual Symposium about Language and Society—Austin*, Michal Brody, Grit Liefischer, and Holly Hari Kanta Ogren (eds.) Austin: University of Texas at Austin, Department of Linguistics.
- Garofalo, Reebe. 1994. Culture versus commerce: The marketing of black popular music. *Public Culture* 7: 275-287.
- Hanauer, David. 1998. A genre approach to graffiti at the site of Prime Minister Rabin's assassination. In *Present and Future: Jewish Culture, Identity, and Language*, David Zisenwine and David Schers (eds.) Tel Aviv: School of Education Tel Aviv University.

- Haugen, Jason D. 1999. Some sociocultural functions of deixis in gangsta rap discourse. In *Proceedings of the 6th Annual Symposium about Language and Society—Austin*, Michal Brody, Grit Liefscher, and Holly Hari Kanta Ogren (eds.) Austin: University of Texas at Austin, Department of Linguistics.
- Keyes, Cheryl. 1996. At the crossroads: Rap music and its African nexus. *Ethnomusicology* 40, 2., 223-248.
- Kiesling, Scott. 1998. Men's identities and sociolinguistic variation: The case of fraternity men. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 2,1. 69-99.
- Kress, Gunther. 2000. "Design and transformation: new theories of meaning." In *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (eds.) London and NY: Routledge. 153-161.
- McLeod, Kembrow. 1999. Authenticity within hip-hop and other cultures threatened with assimilation. *Journal of Communication* 49, 4. 134-150.
- Morgan, Marcyliena. 1997. Redefining language in the inner-city: Adolescents, media, and urban space. In *Proceedings of the 4th Annual Symposium about Language and Society—Austin*, Alice Chu, Ann-Marie Guerra, and Chantal Tetreault (eds.) Austin: University of Texas at Austin, Department of Linguistics.
- Morgan, Marcyliena. 2001. Reading dialect and grammatical shout-outs in hip-hop. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Dialect Society. Washington DC, January 5.
- Newman, Michael. In press. "Not dogmatically; it's about me": Ideological conflict in a high school rap crew. *Taboo: A Journal of Culture and Education*.
- Norfleet, Dawn Michaelle. 1997. Hip-hop culture in New York City: The role of verbal musical performance in defining a community. PhD Dissertation, Columbia University.
- Ramanathan, Vai and Dwight Atkinson. 1999. Individualism, academic writing, and ESL writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8, 1. 45-75.
- Rose, Tricia. 1994. *Black Noise, Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press.
- Scollon, Ronald. 1995. Plagiarism and ideology: Identity in intercultural discourse. *Language in Society* 24, 1. 1-28.
- Swales, John. M.. 1990. *Genre Analysis: English in Academic Research Settings*. NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Yasin, Jon. 1999. Rap in the African-American music tradition: Cultural assertion and continuity. In *Race and Ideology*, Arthur Spears (ed.) Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Department of Linguistics
and Communication Disorders
Queens College
CUNY
Flushing, NY 11367
mnewman@qc.edu