

DIGITAL
GRIOTS

AFRICAN AMERICAN RHETORIC
IN A MULTIMEDIA AGE

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Scratch: Two Turntables and a Storytelling Tradition

Djing is Writing/Writing is Djing. . . . But there's something about the labor of writing and the sense of being part of the continuum of writing that goes back thousands of years. It is an ancient form, and in some ways it doesn't quite fit what is happening. The challenge then is to describe or characterize what it feels like to be alive now in the midst of it, but using this form of communication. . . . Saying that people are literate means that they have read widely enough to reference texts, to put them in a conceptual framework. They are capable of creating an overview. This kind of literacy exists in the musical arena, too. The more you have heard, the easier it is to find links and to recognize quotations. . . . Writing becomes your own temple and you just move in and make sure everything flows and the right divinities are in effect. It's a puzzle you set for yourself. Being at a crossroads and questioning how far to push writing, or music, or art, uncertain which direction to move, is actually a good thing, because it forces me to go back to the basic issues: Why do I want to write?

—Paul D. Miller, Rhythm Science

THE SCRATCH IS AN INTERRUPTION. It breaks the linearity of the text, the progressive circularity of the song. It takes the listener or reader back and forth through the song, underneath the apparatus that plays it, either to insert some other song or for the sheer pleasure of the sound of the scratch itself. What was noise, what was seen as the sign of a broken record or stylus, an unwelcome interruption in the continual march of text, groove, history, became a purposeful interruption, became pleasurable, became a way to insert other voices

in a text, to redirect one's attention. It is difficult to overstate just how much the scratch changed music, how crucial it was to the brash announcement that Hip Hop did indeed come to change the game and even attempt to change the world. This book looks to scratch, to interrupt, to play a while in the grooves of two records—disciplinary conversations about African American rhetoric and those about multimedia writing—to begin to blend and loop them while posing one question: how can African American rhetorical traditions and practices inform composition's current endeavors to define, theorize, and practice multimedia writing? To put it differently, in a moment when many compositionists have identified the mix and remix as tropes for digital writing practices—to the point of arguing, as Johnndan Johnson-Eliola and Stuart Selber have, that we live and write in a “remix culture”—what might we learn from the rhetorical practices and traditions of the culture that gave us the remix? The short answer that this book proposes is that DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and legions and lineages of other DJs, including Beth Coleman, DJ Spooky, Kid Capri, Grand Wizard Theodore, Biz Markie, Grandmaster Flash, Juan Atkins, Spindarella, and thousands more, are responsible for the conceptual framework that forms our response to the challenges of digital, multimedia writing. For all of our academic affection for citing major theorists to remind us that everyday practices by everyday people construct the cultures that we come later to study, the African American DJ in the Hip Hop tradition (a tradition that was nurtured by a long history of the black radio DJ, with figures like Al Benson, Jack Cooper, Cathy Hughes, and Peter Greene as well as Lady Skill and Jeffrey Charles in my hometown of Cleveland) lived theory and created writing practices that helped make postmodern conceptions of writing possible.

Beyond charting the early 1970s parties in the Bronx where Clive Campbell, aka DJ Kool Herc, looped copies of the same song together on two turntables in order to isolate and stretch out the “break” as an originary moment for our current understandings of writing in a multimedia age and calling for more scholarly attention to the black discursive and rhetorical traditions and practices surrounding the work of the DJ, I also argue that the DJ provides the figure

through whom African American rhetoric can be reimagined in a new century. Understanding the DJ as a current manifestation of the griot—as a digital griot—and linking the practices of the DJ to other griots throughout the tradition (the storytellers, the preachers, the standup comics, the spoken word poets, and others) will allow an approach to African American rhetoric that is fluid and forward looking yet firmly rooted in African traditions. The exemplary DJ is a model of rhetorical excellence, and even the everyday DJ is often a model of real rhetorical agility. A canon maker. A time binder. A model of the Gramscian organic intellectual at work, the intellectual who is nurtured and sustained by local communities rather than professionalized in universities or think tanks or foundations. Building a context for theorizing digital, multimedia writing and literacies from the everyday practices of African Americans in this way allows us to extend Antonio Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual beyond the individual figure into collective organic intellectual work. But let me cut to how I might put it in a different context, a less academic description of the DJ as digital griot and what this figure offers our conceptions of writing and rhetoric:

standing between tradition and future, holding the power to shape how both are seen/heard/felt/know. exhibiting mastery of techniques, but always knowing that techniques carry stories, arguments, ways of viewing the world, that the techniques arrange the texts, that every text carries even more stories, arguments, epistemologies.

analyzing audiences their wants their needs their knowledge their attitudes joys pains fears—in any given situation—at a moment's notice, holding the crowd in the palm of one's hands, on the tips of her fingers. always on some new ish technology cut song line break but always understanding the importance of knowing traditions, always searching always questioning always researching digging in the crates looking for that cut that break that connection nobody else has found, nobody else has used quite that way. practicing her craft constantly.

bearer of history, memory, and rememory, able to turn on the planetary or intergalactic time space transporter within seconds. interpreting a world, implicitly and explicitly telling us how to manage the madness of it all, how to live in it but still escape with our souls. always in conversation with too many audiences, but always with an answer, as temporary as it must be, always layering the multiple responses to them all at all times. personality. voice. flow. being expected to have your own style, your own flow, your own technique(s), even as you're expected to know the conversation, know the tradition, shape and reshape them. disrupting the line/text/narrative/argument/worldview/world to recreate all through the arrangement. the ultimate individual artist, but every bit as much owned by the community. the producer. shaping relationships helping the lover fighter organizer grassroots worker politician rapper MC say what they can't quite reach/feel. translating bigger movements working the code to make sure your peoples understand it but the overseers. the panopticon, don't.

blowing someone's mind—oh my damn he didn't just put that on top of that! bring that bear back! bearer of ritual. master of ceremonies. remixing more than songs, more than narratives—repurposing old technologies and new and remixing social economic political intimate relationships. recreating a world again. again old, again, new. always with a plan but always improvising, in the moment. be the entrepreneur, or work the club, the station, or both/all! what do my peoples need from me? the first rapper before there were rappers. what do i have to say? holding sequencing shaping individual and collective memory. constantly juggling not just beats but ethical questions and commitments and responsibilities—am i satisfied with freakin a short playlist that i know will move the crowd, get me some applause, get me that grade? do i use my craft to get the most money possible—is it really CREAM? or do i keep pushing, looking for boundaries to break, continually searching for something new to connect with the old, for

that old/new way to create another world, another universe, another text?

cut break mix scratch bootleg remix layer mixtape loop fade call and response signify in pastiche move the crowd enter the conversation change the game own your own take them *there*.

Between tradition and future. The ways in which racial inequalities are calcified in twenty-first-century America, hardened in the veins of our society, even as there is less and less room in public discourse and policy work for either redress or even honest dialogue, call us to a repositioning, a different way of seeing the relationships between tradition and future in the shaping of new approaches to present challenges and possibilities. In the pursuit of greater equality in our education system, from K to PhD, technology access, print literacies, and verbal skill all collide as requirements for even basic participation in an information-based, technology-dependent economy and society. The health of cities and regions still reeling from forty years of deindustrialization demands such a repositioning. The exorbitant expense of a narrow strategy of importing technical talent from abroad while refusing to invest in it at home demands it. The continued inequality in our education system demands it. The growing role of an evolving digital divide in shaping young people's educational futures demands it. Technology and education collide with and exacerbate long-standing inequalities to such an extent that we must rethink old narratives to have any chance at addressing either our old problems or the new ones that will compound them. Any attempt to foster meaningful access to communication technologies or to a working education system must include theoretical frameworks or conceptual models that build from the traditions and truths of a people and assume their agency and ability. Black people must see themselves in the digital story.

Just as black communities are lining up new tracks to match our current realities, African American rhetoric as an area of study and composition as a discipline are also in great need of repositioning or, as Alondra Nelson would describe it, synchronizing of traditional

narratives and futuristic visions. When it comes to discussions of race, ethnicity, and culture in multimedia writing, both the lack of scholars of color in the discussion and the paucity of attention to the actual practices and conceptual frameworks that African American, Latino/a, Indigenous, and Chicano/a traditions could bring to the discussion demonstrate that we are still writing in the spaces jacked as well as writing in the spaces left. And while scholarship in African American rhetoric has grown tremendously from contributions by a generation 2.0, those of us in that 2.0 need that same synchronizing Nelson calls for. The group I identify as generation 2.0 of African American scholars in the discipline includes a wide range of early- and mid-career scholars like Gwendolyn Pough, Vershawn Young, David Holmes, Aesha Adams, David Kirkland, Yorris Nunley, and many more who entered the academy after Bill Cook's classic 1993 article "Writing in the Spaces Left" and who built their work on that of groundbreaking figures like Cook, Geneva Smitherman, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and Keith Gilyard. For all of the important work this crew has placed in the disciplinary conversation, collectively we are still woefully short of engagements with technology, with Elaine Richardson, Carmen Kynard, and Samantha Blackmon being the main scholars stepping up to this major issue of our time. Generation 2.0 in the African American rhetoric game needs an old school/new school mixtape, a new, repositioned conception of the field and our work within it that continues the trajectories charted by the generation that brought us from Students' Right to Spaces Left. While I will outline in the conclusion what an African American rhetoric 2.0 might look like, let me just say here that such a remix, or re-vision, of the field would lead us to a new theoretical approach that remains just as firmly grounded in the contributions of the scholars who opened up space for us to have a chance to be valued in the writing classroom, to get into PhD programs and into the academy and scholarly conversation, while committing itself equally to addressing the problems and possibilities of writing in a multimedia age.

In some ways, I'm issuing a similar call to the one that defined my initial study of African American rhetoric in *Rate, Rhetoric, and*

Technology: Searching for Hyber Ground. In this case, however, I have shifted from using James Brown and Parliament-Funkadelic's concept of "The One"—as the embodiment of a theoretical approach to African American rhetoric to allow for both unity and diversity and a focus on both black communities and dialogue with all members of our society—to one that examines the figure who has kept funk alive through the cut, break, scratch, sample, mix, remix, and mixtape in order to read those rhetorical practices and their attendant traditions more closely so that they might better inform future composition and African American rhetoric theory, teaching, and practice. Of course, funk and the DJ do not make up an either/or choice: P-Funk, James Brown, and the DJ are merely different instantiations of the "groove" that allows Alexander G. Weheliye to link writing, orality, and technology: "Instead of emphasizing either the technological or the cultural, the grooves of sonic Afro-modernity integrate both" (16).

I should be clear here that this project is not a history of the DJ, not an analysis of important DJs in the tradition or classic sets, mixes, remixes, or mixtapes. And while this work is grounded in a concern for rhetoric in what, following Weheliye and Joel Dinerstein in what might be termed a black techno-dialogic tradition, it is not a project on persuasion in digital spaces like one might find from Barbara Warnick's influential book *Rhetoric Online* or from Johnson-Eilola's *Datcloud* or my colleague Collin Brooke's *Lingua Franca*. Instead, I use the theoretical or conceptual work that the mix, remix, and mixtape do as lenses or ways to contextualize my study of a wide range of black multimedia rhetorical practices. So the chapters here cohere and yet they don't; they flow and yet they cut to other tracks, other conversations, looping in other voices in what might seem to be idiosyncratic ways. Some quotes get looped repeatedly to serve a function like that of the sample—foundational ideas I borrow and build on that are too important for a single reference. And the prose itself spins, develops in circular ways at times, working through layering and repetition as well as through linear argument. In those ways, I hope this book models the mix and remix and becomes a kind of mixtape of its own, taking me

back to the days of recording slow jams from Jeffrey Charles and WZAK 93.1's "For Lovers Only" and bomb Hip Hop tracks from Johnny O and Cochise on WDMT 107.9's "Club Style," trying to get all of the song without cutting it off or inadvertently picking up a commercial or conversation, and takes composition and African American rhetoric forward for readers to create their own tracks, mixes, and mixtapes in the conversation.

The chapters that follow continue to make the case for an approach to African American rhetoric that synchronizes oral traditions, print, and digital writing as well as the dialectic tensions running throughout black rhetorical traditions. After establishing in the first chapter the case for the DJ as digital griot and the digital griot as a model for multimedia writing instruction and for a new conception of the scholar activist working to build community, I use the ubiquitous practices of mix, remix, and mixtape as tropes for examining various texts and spaces to weave together oral, print, and digital manifestations of African American rhetoric in order to examine problems and possibilities, practices and processes, with technologies and digital writing firmly grounded in black rhetorical traditions, both for the benefit of black students and scholars and for all students and the entire discipline.

Chapter 2 begins with the rhetorical practice of the mix in order to think about the complex layerings that have redefined—for me at least—what it means to do intellectual work and what it means to teach composition, not only in the university but in community spaces as well. Chapter 3 considers the remix not only as revision but as central to African American collective memory in the everyday storytelling genre of the "back in the day" narrative. Chapter 4 presents Black Theology as a "mixtape movement," as the only movement in the history of the African American freedom struggle built explicitly as an intentional synthesis of the radical democratic (integrationist) and nationalist traditions in that struggle. The final chapter offers a reflection on what the work of building an African American rhetoric 2.0 that blends traditions and futures might look like. Finally, similar to the DJ's bringing together of a community of listeners and texts through the roll call and shoutout, I intersperse

brief shoutouts to various digital griot projects created by people throughout the country to at least briefly point to the many possibilities that exist for people interested in this model.

cut break mix scratch boodleg remix layer mixtape loop fade call
and response signify in pastiche move the crowd enter the con-
versation change the game own your own take them ***here***.



Groove: Synchronizing African American Rhetoric and Multimedia Writing through the Digital Griot

It is important that people understand the roles and power that the griot has been endowed with since the beginning. One of the roles that the griot in African society had before the Europeans came was maintaining a cultural and historical past with that of the present.

—D’Jimo Kouyate, “The Role of the Griot”

If, in Ellison, history appears in the form of a groove, then the mixing tactics of Dubois and DJs provide ways to noisily bring together competing and complementary bears without sublimating their tensions.

—Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Sonic Grooves in Afro-Modernity*

AS COMPOSITION THEORY AND TEACHING undergo a repositioning that values cultural diversity and interrogates more deeply the social contexts in which writing occurs and as they place more importance on multiliteracies and multimedia writing, certain questions persist: What relationships exist between digital communication and other forms, other genres, other traditions? How do we understand the connections that will endure between text and screen, between image and voice, between the oral and the textual? In the case of African Americans and other people of color working for more equal access to technologies, the challenge to connect histories of technology with cultural histories becomes even more pressing. That challenge, as Bruce Sinclair argues in *Technology and the African-American*

Experience: Needs and Opportunities for Study, is to “bring together two subjects strongly connected but long segregated from each other” (1). Strengthening these connections demands much historical work, Sinclair notes, not only to develop solid understandings about the ways cultures and technologies—and race and technology—are intertwined but also to influence the production, consumption, and uses of technology in the present: asking “how race and technology reconstruct each other in radio and other media” can lead to greater participation and even structural change, though such change does not emerge as a given from such knowledge (11).

That composition and African American rhetoric are in a new age and in need of the same integration work Sinclair calls for is beyond doubt. Despite the major gaps that exist in cross-talk between work in multimedia writing and African American rhetoric and other American ethnic rhetorics, there is also good news in that even in the midst of these silences, there is much room for the links, connections, and overlap between these multiple areas that can make synchronizing them possible as well as a few key works that point the way to a more thorough remix, re-vision, of our disciplinary narrative. Scholarship in computers and writing is now nearly three decades old, and even scholars once perceived as Aristotelians focused exclusively on print like Andrea Lunsford are making the case for multimedia writing as central to how we reimagine composition as a field. In her 2005 *Computers and Writing* Conference keynote address, she argues that digital writing and our immersion in multiple media forms and spaces demands a return to performance as an important area in writing instruction:

Crescending in the last two decades, the arts and crafts associated with the fifth canon have moved to the center of our discipline. To view writing as an active performance—that is as an act always involving the body and performance—enriches I. A. Richards’ notion of the “interanimation of words”: it is not only that individual words shift meaning given their context within a sentence, but also that words shift meaning given their embodied context and their physical location in the world. (170)

Our immersion in so many media and technologies becomes a central element of what writing has become, with Lunsford calling for a “secondary literacy . . . both highly inflected by oral forms; structures and rhythms and highly aware of itself as writing understood as variously organized and mediated systems of communication” (170).

Annette Harris Powell’s study of a technology camp she and others developed for middle school students helps us understand the work we have left to do in equalizing access and challenges us to rethink exactly what we mean by access; her rethinking of access leads us to understand that everyday performances, rhetorical practices, and acts of writing lie at its (grass)roots. Borrowing from James Paul Gee’s and Deborah Brandt’s understanding of literacy as social practice and Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*, she challenges us to understand access not as a thing to be acquired or achieved but as a complex “practice,” a continual process of being socialized into the attitudes, behaviors, and engagements of a communicative space. By pulling back from individual examples of technologies to be used or learned and engaging a broader network of cultural practices, her study provides a context within and against which the situated technology and discursive practices of individuals and collectives, like some of the students in her project, can be read. It also points the way to some of the Afrofuturistic synchronizing that our discipline needs by explicitly linking black rhetorical practices to both multicultural writing instruction and technology in ways very similar to Lunsford’s call for us to reinsert the fifth canon into writing instruction. Oral, print, and digital work become woven in much the same way that Columbus (Ted) Grace linked oral and print literacy instruction.

Perhaps the most powerful example yet in our extant literature of this synchronizing—of the ways that black rhetorical traditions can form crucial links between oral, print, and digital communication and digitized, rhetoricized conceptions of access for African American users and for everyone—is Carmen Kynard’s work documenting black students’ use of Blackboard in her writing classes. In this study, she shows how one of the core tropes and rhetorical practices of the African American oral tradition, *signifyin*, was a definitive feature of her students’ writing practices on Bb. In fact, their heavy use of

signifyin, or what she identifies as “Blackboard Flava Flavin” (heavy *signifyin* on scholarly texts, writing assignments, peers’ Bb entries, the instructor, and themselves), becomes a crucial element of her students’ process of claiming agency as writers in digital spaces. This ability to link technology use and practice to their own traditions helps the students claim a powerful rhetorical agency that is both critical and functional, allowing them to therefore become what Kynard calls “Afrodigitized.”

Kynard’s study shows us the foolishness of trying to scratch or sample the practices of the DJ, MC, or hype-woman in Hip Hop and drop them into our scholarship without thorough, searching attention to the discursive and rhetorical traditions from which they emerge. Such isolated sampling or ripping has some explanatory power, as Jeff Rice argues persuasively in his book *Rhetoric of Cool* (and before that in the influential *CCC* article “The 1963 Hip Hop Machine”) and as work from people like Stuart Selber, Johnndan Johnson-Eliola, and Geoffrey Sirc attests, but it also risks becoming yet another in the long line of those who have “taken our blues and gone,” as Langston Hughes would call it, if we somehow build our theorizing on individual practices without full recognition of the people, networks, and traditions that have made these practices their gift to the broader culture. The recent video game *DJ Hero* and its appropriation of the DJ provide the perfect example of the danger of such isolated ripping. The game reduces the practices of the DJ to a mere cross-fader and turntable. While I’m not one to have a problem with a creative video game, I’m interested in far more than simply the isolated techniques of scratching on a turntable or hitting a cross-fader—for me, it is the wide range of cultural practices, multiple literacies, rhetorical mastery, and knowledge of traditions that DJs in black traditions represent that make them griots, link them to other griotic figures, and offer a model for writing that thoroughly weaves together oral performance, print literacy, mastery and interrogation of technologies, and technologies that can lead to a renewed vision for both composition and African American rhetoric. In *Digital Griots*, I attempt to bring those blues back, bring that beat back, so we can build theories, pedagogies, and practices

of multimedia writing that honor the traditions and thus the people who are still too often not present in our classrooms, on our faculties, in our scholarship.

By linking the DJ to other griotic figures and the broader network of rhetorical practices and traditions from which these figures emerge, I want to ask a broader question. Instead of focusing exclusively on the writing practices of students or the practices we want them to develop or the rhetorical practices that take place in a remix culture, I'm interested in the rhetorical possibilities that emerge from the culture that gave us the remix. The preacher, storyteller, standup comic, everyday black people in conversation, and the DJ can help black students see themselves reflected more genuinely in writing classrooms and theory and can benefit all students looking for a greater appreciation of the multiple connected and diverging cultural influences on writing in a society that is (very slowly) becoming more genuinely inclusive and multicultural.

Because technology use, production, and design (and the role each plays in the public imagination) are all so thoroughly embedded in rhetorical acts, one could argue that technologies themselves are rhetorical in nature. This rhetorical nature extends from the first imaginings that lead to invention and design to decisions about which designs to pursue; marketing to convince users that particular designs will be beneficial; the writing of content; the design of interfaces; the social and cultural understandings that lead people to adopt or avoid particular artifacts and processes; the writing of and debates about policies governing technology use, design, production, and marketing; budgetary decisions in governments, schools, businesses, and homes; instruction to develop skills and make a software package or tool or piece of hardware relevant to users—all of these rhetorical acts and more shape our relationships with technologies. An important place to start to examine the ways African American culture and technologies are intertwined, therefore, is with African American rhetorical practices and traditions. In this book, I hope to build on the growing calls from scholars in several disciplines for more depth and range of study at the intersections of race and technology by asking two related questions: How can sustained

inquiry into African American rhetoric help to develop models of meaningful engaged technology access and use? And how can such models contribute to culturally relevant, culturally responsible instruction for all students, and especially African American students, when the rapid shifts in technologies result in exponentially greater expectations of teachers of writing at all levels?

It is my contention that any answer to those two questions must thoroughly weave together print, oral, and digital traditions and must offer models of black discursive and rhetorical excellence in order to move both public discourse and scholarly conversations beyond the continuous loops of polarizing *Ebonics* debates that are often rooted in scorn for the very students we want to serve and assumptions that black students can't do or won't do. In fact, let me just say this now for the record: at this moment in 2011, anyone still attempting to argue that *Ebonics* is a problem for black students or that it is somehow connected to a lack of intelligence or lack of desire to achieve is about as useful as a Betamax video cassette player, and it's time for those folks to be retired, be they teachers, administrators, or community leaders, so the rest of us can try to do some real work in the service of equal access for black students and all students. The linguistic case is settled, the scholarly case is clear, and there is too much pedagogical and practical work out there demonstrating the richness, beauty, and rhetorical power to be found in *Ebonics* for anyone to still be trying to dismiss black students' abilities based on these (sometimes intentionally) ignorant positions. The griot helps move us beyond these tired debates and toward a model of rhetorical excellence rooted in black language use.

In her search for an archetype for engaging questions about African American relationships to technologies that moved beyond the utopian/dystopian polemic present in many technology narratives, Alondra Nelson based her concept of Afrofuturism on the neo-rmancy of Ishmael Reed's Hoodoo protagonist Papa LaBas and his combination of futuristic vision and commitment to grounding that vision in a deep, searching knowledge of the past. This combination and the committed, constant search that undergirds it helps to create conditions where

the next generation will be successful in creating a text that can codify Black culture: past, present, and future. Rather than a "Western" image of the future that is increasingly detached from the past, or equally problematic, a future-primitive perspective that fantasizes an uncomplicated return to ancient culture, LaBas foresees the distillation of African diasporic experience, rooted in the past but not weighed down by it, contiguous yet continually transformed. (8)

Reed's use of LaBas as protagonist and Nelson's adoption of LaBas as a kind of ultimate protagonist and model for blackfolk in the United States and worldwide engaging technology issues is fascinating because of LaBas's role in the oral tradition. Papa LaBas is also referred to as Papa Legba and is the ultimate linguist in the Afrodiasporic oral tradition from Yoruba culture in Nigeria to Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and, thanks in large part to Reed's novels, the United States as well. Legba links the spirit world with the physical, material world as the gatekeeper to both and is often portrayed as speaking all languages. In many ways, LaBas, especially as Nelson interprets him as a model for linking technologies and black identity, is the ultimate DJ and griot: an archivist, a canon maker, time binder; someone with an encyclopedic knowledge of traditions, a searing and searching awareness of contemporary realities, and the beat-matching, text-blending abilities to synchronize traditions, present realities, and future visions in that future text.

In devising ways to connect ancient rivers to the oceans of new realities and to confront the tragic ironies of watching young people who love language and who exhibit amazing linguistic and discursive skill in vernacular spaces yet find themselves struggling inside an Achievement Gap discourse within the education system, the late Ted Grace, storyteller and educator, developed a method he termed Oral Narrative Engagement (ONE) to connect instruction in print literacies to black oral traditions in tales that affirmed his students and showed them that there was beauty in their language, such as in the Anansi and Brer Rabbit stories. The folktales offered Grace's students (1) continual practice with language, (2) a view

of language as living and dynamic, which reflects the love black people worldwide have for it and show outside the academy, (3) the chance to come to voice in developing their own versions of stories, (4) a model of rhetorical excellence developed through an awareness of audience, (5) a commitment to craft in shaping one's own style and delivery, and most important, (6) a body of texts that reflects African American communal values to be honored and celebrated in school settings. Through the exploits and trials of tricksters like Brer Rabbit, the Signifyin Monkey, Shine, Stagolee, and others, students were able to see epistemologies and ontologies that prized the wide range of ideological stances between the maintenance of healthy black communities, participation in the larger society, and resistance to domination and exclusion.

Both Nelson, in her exploration of black relationships to technologies in a digital age, and Grace, in his search for more effective, more inclusive literacy pedagogy for black students, turn to the storytelling tradition as a central component in the search. The importance of the story, of narrative in African American rhetorical traditions, to efforts at both participation in American society and resistance to oppression, to documenting the horrors and celebrating the joys, makes the griots the figures who are entrusted to tell the story and, through the practices they employ in recording, preserving, sharing, and even masking the knowledge of those stories, useful figures on which to base an African American rhetoric for a multimedia age that might ensure that new realities do not erase those "ancient rivers" that Langston Hughes reminds us connect young people to elders and ancestors and the Mississippi to the Euphrates, Nile, and Congo.

The black oral tradition that forms the basis, or the initial bridge, in Grace's model and Nelson's theoretical approach to engagements with technology, whether maintained in storytelling, sermons, song, poetry, standup comedy, or other forms, is so important to considerations of literacy for many reasons. Musicologist Joel Dinerstein, in his study of jazz, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars*, develops Albert Murray's phrase "survival technology" by defining it this way: "Survival

technology consists of public rituals of music, dance, storytelling, and sermonizing that create a forum for existential affirmation through physicality, spirituality, joy, and sexuality—"somebodiness"—as some African American preachers call it—against the dominant society's attempts to eviscerate one's individuality and cultural heritage" (22). In expanding his readers' ways of viewing technology, he makes the argument that during the industrial age, European Americans "created the nation's technology while African Americans created the nation's *survival technology*" (22). Examples of this "survival technology" and some of the links in this tradition are in order here. While John Henry is often the folk tale most cited as an example of what Dinerstein and Alexander G. Weheliye call the black techno-dialogic at work in its folk tradition, it seems to me that "Shine and the Titanic" (along with John Jasper's classic sermon "De Sun Do Move") best illustrates the richness of black engagements with technology, from reflections on what it means to be human in relationship to technologies to critique and resistance and the ways those engagements are woven thoroughly into the griot tradition from past centuries to the present. Both texts, and especially the Shine tale, highlight African American skepticism of white, Western reverence—even worship—of technology and the fierce determination that black people have always had to be free, to assert their own individual and collective humanity in relationship with technologies and in resistance to systems of domination. The Shine narrative lives to this day in the name of a Hip Hop MC and in the same Steve Harvey (in *The Original Kings of Comedy*) performance I cite in chapter 3. Shine, a derogatory term for black people throughout the early twentieth century, becomes the name of a laborer on the *Titanic*, the ship everyone knows by now was symbolic of Western technological innovation, expertise, and domination. As a laborer—and the only black person on the ship—Shine participated in that technological system and its assumptions, if you will, in order to have a job but also knew when it was time to be out, when it was time to challenge those assumptions. When the ship started to sink, Shine jumped overboard and decided to make his own way home, preferring to duel with sharks than with white

supremacy. In the kind of flipping of the script of power relations that often happens in the folk tale tradition, bankers, captains of industry, and women offer all the money and loving he can imagine while begging Shine to help them out of the liquid jam that the ship's sinking was quickly becoming. But the refrain says it all: and Shine swam on. Whether sharks were at his heels or people were pleading with him to rescue them, Shine swam on. Despite every request, despite every challenge, despite every offer, Shine swam on. By the time it took the information networks of the day to transmit the news that the ship had sunk, Shine "was in Harlem on 125th Street, damn near drunk," home, among his people, living his life, having survived because he had the psychological armor that the tradition, wisely read and applied, offers and that Kamau Da'ood tells his people we all need. In some ways, the refrain tells the real story, even more than the punchline of his successful return to Harlem: and Shine swam on. Its persistent repetition throughout the tale tells of dogged determination, confidence in his choice.

Black folktales receive significant scholarly attention as a central component of black culture, even through today, although those tales are not often read as examples of a black techno-dialogic tradition. The storyteller and preacher are oft-studied griot figures in African American culture. The DJ as a griot figure has received much less attention. The DJ has taken up many of these roles and has been grounded in many of these oral and folklore traditions for decades, sometimes completely under the radar. Before the separation of the DJ and the MC that marked the coming of age of mainstream success for Hip Hop, the DJ began as someone far more rooted in the oral tradition than he or she appears to be now. Early DJs (and many current ones) often announced records and artists in slick raps on the radio, creating personae rooted in characters like Shine and Stragolee, speaking in code to tell listeners details about mass meetings in the civil rights movement and initiating call and response chants in parties. While DJs have always been important rhetorical figures and have always been grounded in black oral traditions, their technological mastery and innovation have been just as significant to African American culture, opening doors to opportunity in past eras

and ushering in an art form in Hip Hop that transformed American music and our notions of how narrative works in the process.

The technical proficiency of the DJ in Hip Hop has begun to attract the attention of some compositionists who value the ways Hip Hop has disrupted the notion of a linear text and the ways the art form has placed a focus on the recycling, reuse, and repurposing of language and tools old and new. In an attempt to escape the closed feedback loop guaranteed by a focus on the individual author working alone to create some kind of original product, and possibly in a bearnik kind of gesture toward resisting oppressive structures, policies, and practices, compositionists have settled on some of the practices of the DJ in the search for conceptual metaphors for the new work we must imagine and do. In this search, references to practices like the sample, mix, remix, and bootleg have become common in our disciplinary language. Despite this recent scholarly attention, the brilliance of the African American DJ is still often a thoroughly unappreciated phenomenon and, when noticed, is often noticed in ways that completely remove that brilliance from the cultural traditions and histories that led to the emergence of the DJ as a rhetorical figure every bit as important as the preachers, teachers, poets, and political activists we usually study within rhetoric. Selber, Johnson-Eliola, Rice, Sirc, and others in the discipline have attended carefully to the practices of the DJ as offering potential to help us rethink writing instruction. Johnson-Eliola and Selber, in a *Computers and Composition* article, "Plagiarism, Originality, Assemblage," build significantly on Rebecca Moore Howard's longstanding calls for new approaches to punitive plagiarism policies and outdated notions of authorial originality and have also extended their discussion of the compositional practices of the DJ by asserting that we live and write in a remix culture. Their assertion, made through references to DJ Danger Mouse, Jay Z's *The Black Album*, and DJ Spooky, compels us to move beyond merely acknowledging or respecting the remix as rhetorical practice. Johnson-Eliola and Selber want us to consider new writing practices like pastiche, boilerplate, and assemblage as "equally valued" practices as the standard essay for the writing classroom (384). Further, they look to the remix to

push further on conversations launched by James Porter and others calling for greater latitude for teachers and students in determining "fair use" of copyrighted materials.

Alex Reid and Daniel Anderson invoke music and what might be considered part of the progeny of the DJ's party set—the playlist—in order to inform both institutional practices and pedagogical practice. Reid documents the State University of New York at Cortland's implementation of iTunes University as a platform for delivering course content. He argues that technology convergence (the convergence of many different functions onto one tool like the iPhone or other smart phones and the convergence of media strategies and networks—individual companies delivering content across film, TV, YouTube, books, and radio, for example) and social networking among technology users creates a sea change in the writing practices of our students that we *must* respond to: "The ability to compose media and contribute it to a mobile network that includes a constellation of participatory sites indicates a permanent shift in the compositional practices and rhetorical relationships that have structured higher education to this point" ("Portable Composition" 66).

Teachers and scholars are hampered in their attempts to respond to these shifts, however, because of the necessarily slow bureaucratic processes of institutional curricular design and implementation—processes that are in place to ensure a needed critical, evaluative perspective instead of a whimsical response to whatever the need of the day might seem to be. Despite the challenges institutional structures might place in the way of teachers, however, "the contradictory, overlapping, open, closed, and fluctuating systems of exchanges that networks create" and in which our students participate in their everyday lives pose an even more important challenge to our thoughts about disciplinary identity and our individual identities as teachers and scholars. Reid cosigns Johnson-Eliola and Selber's call for a rethinking of authorship and an embrace of practices like assemblage, but he pushes further to argue that if we want to understand student writing practices and processes, we have to move beyond the student as individual writer and into a cultural understanding of the networks they inhabit (and in which they do the great majority

of their writing). This call, of course, is very similar to that made by Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher in their search to understand the “cultural ecologies” of technology literacy.

Anderson uses the playlist and collage to a different end—one of considering student motivation and building bridges between familiar literacies and those prized in the classroom, a tech-inflected version of Grace’s linking of oral traditions and print literacy. His essay “The Low Bridge to High Benefits: Entry Level Multimedia, Literacies, and Motivation” also calls for a focus on the networks in which students live, play, work, and write, and he echoes Powell’s understanding of access and literacy as activities and processes rather than things. He hopes to use familiar, even fun activities like writing with video, collage, playlists, and video games in order to develop “critiques as they look at design cultures . . . [and] use contexts, institutional forces, and popular representations of technology” (46), a goal similar to Stephanie Vie’s in her article “Digital Divide 2.0: ‘Generation M’ and Online Social Networking Sites in the Composition Classroom.” Anderson goes so far as to say that thinking of student motivation and connecting with the genres and practices they use in their everyday lives might lead us to teaching that could even “hold the potential for delivering body and soul realizations, engagement, educational magic” (46).

Aside from rich verbal play on the microphone, aside from the “remix” what makes the DJ worth more than a mention regarding the practices compositionists reference and sample? What makes this figure a griot? Many people are familiar with the figure of the griot, the storyteller found in many West African cultures. There is far more to the griot than storytelling, however, and this figure is alive on this side of the Atlantic in various forms. The griot is often a master of both words and music who is a storyteller, praise singer, and historian in many of those West African cultures. The griot is sometimes an entertainer, sometimes a counselor to chiefs and leaders, but regardless of the range between playful and serious, the griot is absolutely central to the life of his or her society, according to Djimo Kouyate. Beverly Robinson notes the importance of the trust the audience or community places in the griot, seeing his or

her craft as “instrumental in holding a community of people of African heritage together when so many opposing elements challenged their physical, spiritual, and intellectual survival” (216). For Ivan Van Sertima, the role of folktales in African American culture, and especially the central figure of the trickster, is revolutionary—and not only in the sense of the powerful “longing of a powerless group, class, or race for social or political change, for transcendence over an oppressive order of relationships”:

I speak also of the revolutionary role of the trickster in a more radical and complex sense, a role Trickster played among aboriginal Africans and Americans, a role related to the profound and often obscure longing of the human psyche for freedom from fixed ways of seeing, feeling, thinking, acting; a revolt against a whole complex of “givens” coded into a society, a revolt which may affect not only an oppressed group, class, or race, but a whole order—the settled institutions and repetitive rituals of a whole civilization. (103)

Tom Hale, in his book *Griots and Griottes*, suggests that the role is even more than a combination of these elements and calls the griot a “time binder.” Binding time, linking past, present, and future, the griot is keeper of history, master of its oral tradition, and rhetor extraordinaire, able to produce or perform on demand for whatever segment of the tribe requires it and whatever the situation demands—celebration, critique, preservation, connection. The griot and the tradition of stories that makes up the griot’s craft reflect both participation in and resistance to the larger order and link past, present, and future, even in the midst of physical and psychic dislocation.

Both Paul D. Miller and Gilbert Williams, coming from very different places in examining the role of the DJ—Miller in the tradition of “turntablism” and Williams focused on the DJ as radio personality—make the case for the DJ as a griot. In Miller’s book *Rhythm Science*, he identifies the DJ as storyteller and keeper of the culture. The DJ’s craft, rhythm science, “uses an endless recontextualizing as a core compositional strategy” (21), and Miller notes that

"the best DJs are griots, and whether their stories are conscious or unconscious, narratives are implicit in the sampling idea" (21). In other words, DJs are not mere ventriloquists, playing or telling other people's stories for us; rather, their arranging, layering, sampling, and remixing are inventions too, keeping the culture, telling their stories and ours, binding time as they move the crowd and create and maintain community. Williams, on the other hand, uses his book to make explicit the linguistic connection between the DJ and past griots, identifying them as crucial keepers of African American folk and oral traditions: through their rich verbal play used in every possible function, from introducing songs to selling products, promoting events, and even preaching sermons to rapping, rhyming, and signifyin, they "promote ideas and values their communities need to hear. As griots or storytellers they help shape the moral character of their listeners . . . as ministers, teachers, and jesters, they have become cultural heroes" (ix, x). From early DJs like Jack Cooper and Al Benson to Jazzy Joyce on the radio and Beth Coleman and DJ Spooky as turntablists and lecturers, oral traditions, print literacies, and technological mastery have been linked to make the griot truly a digital figure.

In linking traditional griotic figures like the preacher and storyteller with the more contemporary example of the DJ, positing the digital griot as a model for multimedia writing calls for a focus on the interconnectedness of print, oral, and digital media, a thorough knowledge of and grounding in African American discursive and rhetorical practices, and an ethos of commitment to community, in all of the rich ways writers might understand that term. The DJ, from the beginnings of black radio through Hip Hop and to the present, may be the most powerful example of how all of these qualities emerge in one figure's rhetorical practices. Long before Chuck D made his declaration that Hip Hop was black people's CNN, the black radio DJ fulfilled the griotic function of delivering and interpreting the news for African Americans. William Barlow's *Voice Over* and Timothy Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie* both attest to how radio was a central space for African American storytelling, identity formation, and community building. One might even argue that black radio

was the home of an African American public sphere, a semipublic and a counterpublic space of engagement with and resistance to mainstream narratives, policies, and actions. Before 2007's movie, *Talk to Me* about D.C. griot, poet, and isht talker extraordinaire Pety Greene, Spike Lee's warm, loving, and layered fictional portrayal in 1989's *Do the Right Thing* of Mister Señor Love Daddy, record spinner at W-E-L-O-V-E FM, stands as both celebration and lament of the centrality of the griotic black radio DJ and his or her demise at the hands of increasing corporate control of local radio stations and programming. Even before the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) eviscerated the powerful communal role of the local radio DJ that Barlow documents in his study, Lee clearly positions Love Daddy as a central community figure, even the moral voice of the film. He comments on and interprets the actions of the film through his own words and the soundtrack he spins, knows all the characters and their individual stories, and bears the larger communal history. The omnipresence of radio (Radio Raheem!) and this station in everyone's lives throughout the film's Brooklyn neighborhood continually underscore this positioning. In his care to leave no rhetorical stone unturned, Lee literally and explicitly makes Love Daddy the bearer of communal truth—"that's the *triple* truth, Ruth!" Love Daddy tells the stories, carries the history, interprets the news, mediates the disputes, and helps shape the community's collective identity.

The griot has survived the middle passage, slavery, and centuries of American apartheid and has been diffused into many different spaces and figures: storytellers, preachers, poets, standup comics, DJs, and even everyday people all carry elements of the griot's role in African American culture. As historians and archivists, they interpret current events, raise societal critique, entertain, and pass down communal values. The spirit of the griot survives in all of these figures and in the centrality of oral traditions to African American communities, even as the nation as a whole has moved into a print-based and then a digital, multimedia culture. The "digital griot," an amalgamation of all of these figures, offers a useful model for conceptualizing black rhetorical excellence bridging print, oral, and digital communication, demonstrating

- knowledge of the traditions and cultures of his or her community (is grounded deeply in those traditions, and can “tell it”);
- the technological skills and abilities to produce in multiple modalities;
- the ability to employ those skills for the purposes of building community and/or serving communities with which he or she is aligned;
- awareness of the layered ethical commitments and questions involved in serving any community;
- the ability to “move the crowd”—that is, use those traditions and practices and technologies for the purposes of persuasion.

On perhaps their most basic level, the practices of the DJ offer us important conceptual metaphors for writing practices we already teach and value:

- the shoutout as the use of references, calling the roll, and identifying and declaring one’s relationships, allegiances, and influences as tools for building community and locating oneself in it
- crate-digging as continual research—not merely for the songs, hooks, breakbeats, riffs, texts, arguments, and quotes for a particular set or paper but as a crucial part of one’s long-term work, of learning, knowing, and interpreting a tradition
- mixing as the art of the transition and as revision in the Adrienne Rich sense of writing as re-vision
- remix as critical interpretation of a text, repurposing it for a different rhetorical situation as 2010 Conference on College Composition and Communication chair Gwen Pough challenges the field to “remix: revisit, rethink, revise, renew” in the conference call
- mixtape as anthology, as everyday act of canon formation, interpretation, and reinterpretation
- sample as those quotes, those texts, those ideas used enough, important enough to our conceptions of what we are doing in a text (or even in our lifelong work) to be looped and continually repeated rather than merely quoted or referenced

More than these specific practices and abilities, however, the larger implications of the rhetorical practices in my sampled list above is the kind of theoretical orientation that not only can thoroughly weave together oral traditions, print literacies, and digital writing but can do so in the pursuit of both access and transformation, to give writers the tools for both participation in society and for revolt against the codes, or the complex of givens in a society, as Van Serima notes above. Through these practices we can indeed answer Tricia Rose’s challenge to “imagine these Hip Hop principles as a blueprint for social resistance and affirmation: create sustaining narratives, accumulate them, layer, embellish, and transform them” (*Black Noise* 39) and through this affirmation and transformation develop an approach to African American rhetorical study and to composition theory and practice that no longer consigns black students, writers, or scholars to token, “colored day at the carnival” status nor consigns digital theory, rhetoric, and writing as white by default because those areas and our American technology sector still appear to be so homogeneous. My argument in this book is that African Americans should take this griotic tradition to their engagements with technology, becoming digital griots, bearers of this tradition in digital spaces. I also suggest that the digital griot has much to offer teacher-scholars in literacy and composition looking for relevant models of multimodal literacies for their work and that of their students.

What are the skills, abilities, and understandings that this culture bearer brings to his or her work that can form the basis of multimodal writing? The wide range of genres and spaces of production for the DJ begins to answer this question: the on-air radio show; the mixtape; the sample; the bootleg; the flyers and posters used to promote artists, parties, and events; the studio session as producer for singers and MCs; the MC himself or herself as host and controller of the event or party. What skills and abilities allow the DJ to perform all of these roles and produce “texts” in all of these spaces? First, and perhaps most important, the DJ—especially a good or great one—knows an entire tradition of music and is a historian/rapher

and up-to-the-minute improviser at the same time. He or she can tell you what was made when, who made it, who else was on the record, and what styles are present at different times. More than just knowing a tradition of music, however, the DJ can make seamless connections between the beats, styles, forms, harmonies, and ideas of various points in those traditions and the present. Second, the DJ must master a range of different techniques and technologies: layering, blending, sampling, mixing, collaging, altering elements like bass lines or melodies or vocals, as well as the ever-changing tools and technologies of the radio or production studio. More and more, the DJ must master these skills across many different platforms and tools—cutting edge, trailing edge, and everything in between. Third, the role of the DJ is richly rhetorical because playing records or reciting rhymes or mastering technologies alone is never enough. The DJ has to know his or her audience enough to know what to say and what to play at all times in real time: what to play to get people to stop standing on the walls and get out on the dance floor; to get them from just dancing and posing on the floor to really enjoying themselves, to break the ice between people who might be glancing at each other, to take the crowd “there” to that ecstatic place where even people who are not on the floor tap into memories, playing in the tensions between familiar associations and new connections, new contexts, and experience the kind of release that sends them home drenched in sweat and the sensory. The DJ creates and recreates community with every performance, be it in the club, in the studio, or on the radio, and thus must understand the commonplaces, must know and share in their experiences even when he or she takes on the role of challenging the crowd or community to go to new texts, new places. When the DJ takes on the role of producer, it is his or her job to place an artist’s voice, style, and approach into conversation with others in a genre and/or to stake out new and innovative space for that artist. In the space of the radio show, the DJ also fulfills the role of interpreter for the community, reporting events, interviewing guests, and providing both context and worldview. These community connections demand the fourth element of that rhetorical, griotic role: in order to perform these

multiple acts of community-building, DJs must be intimately connected with their community, no matter what other communities they might have access to.

Again, moving beyond skills and abilities, beyond specific practices to a broader sense of why the DJ is a digital griot, it is the DJ who is the model of the kinds of synchronizing of traditions and future texts and can allow for deeper, more meaningful links between black rhetorical traditions and technologies, between African American rhetoric and multimedia writing. Through the cut, break, sample, mix, remix, mixtape, and a continual, crate-digging search through past, present, and future texts, the DJ maintains the groove that allows narrative, text, and history to continue while allowing for new voices, new arguments. Alexander Weheliye, in *Phonographies*, examines the ways that black traditions have linked orality, writings, and technology so that “instead of emphasizing either the technological or the cultural, the grooves of Afro-modernity integrate both” (16). In articulating this twin focus and identifying the DJ as the figure who helps us with this synchronizing, Weheliye argues that without such synchronizing, none of us has a theoretical leg to stand on: discourses of culture and technology “are neither erased nor suspended; rather, they are significantly recreated in their encounter with auditory Blackness, which also undergoes substantial shifts in this assemblage. In this way, neither of these energies can materialize without its spectral doppelganger: no western modernity without (sonic) Blackness and no Blackness in the absence of modernity” (45). Weheliye develops this point in more direct reference to the DJ in the introduction to his book:

One of the major currents of sonic Afro-modernity is “the mix” as it appears in Souls [W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk*] and DJing, for it offers an aesthetic that realigns the temporalities (grooves) of Western modernity in its insistence on rupture and repetition. If, in [Ralph] Ellison, history appears in the form of a groove, then the mixing tactics of DuBois and DJs provide ways to noisily bring together competing and complementary beats without sublimating their tensions. (13)

Speaking of finding value in the “noise,” Rose’s classic *Black Noise* examines what the DJ offers rhetors and asks what the mix and remix give us:

What is the significance of flow, layering, and rupture as demonstrated on the body and in Hip Hop’s lyrical, musical, and visual works? Interpreting these concepts theoretically, one can argue that they create and sustain rhythmic motion, continuity, and circularity via flow; accumulate, reinforce, and embellish this continuity through layering; and manage threats to these narratives by building in ruptures that highlight the continuity as it momentarily challenges it. These effects at the level of style and aesthetics suggest affirmative ways in which profound social dislocation and rupture can be managed and perhaps contested in the cultural arena. Let us imagine these Hip Hop principles as a blueprint for social resistance and affirmation: create sustaining narratives, accumulate them, layer, embellish, and transform them. However, be also prepared for rupture, find pleasure in it, in fact, *plan on social rupture*. When these ruptures occur, use them in creative ways that will prepare you for a future in which survival will demand a sudden shift in ground tactics. (39)

So, in theoretical terms, the combination of the DJ’s practices with his or her mastery of cutting, leading, bleeding, and trailing edge technologies and constant searching of traditions in the attempt to create the future text helps us to imagine both social resistance and affirmation, helps us to link divergent and sometimes competing narratives without flattening their differences, and helps us to keep cultures and technologies linked. Beyond this general orientation toward technological engagement and textual creation, though, the DJ is also an ideal rhetorical model for multimedia writing. One reason why the DJ as a digital griot provides such a model is because this figure is an example of the intense commitment to craft that rhetorical excellence requires. Those people who become DJs are willing to spend the hundreds and thousands of hours it takes to become proficient in this craft because it is learned in a space where

the learners’ identities are not under constant threat or outright attack; instead, the space is one where their humanity and ability are taken for granted, even while the expectations of rhetorical excellence and agility are always high. Furthermore, there is room for a balance between individual identity and participation in broader communities; room for the voices, styles, and personae the learners actually want to develop even as they must learn to participate in many different discursive spaces. If learners spent the many required hours on the tables in the studio or bedroom or basement (Grandmaster Flash learned in his mother’s kitchen, documented in the 1982 movie *Wild Style*), they can do it and still be who they want to be, without having to check their identity at the door as the cost of success.

One assumption present in my list of reasons for arguing that writers see themselves as digital griots is a focus on African American students writing for their own communities, as well as on all students writing for multiple communities. There are several reasons for inserting this assumption at the outset, a primary one being that of all the audiences composition classrooms imagine for their students, rarely is the home community included. Usually phrases like “academic discourse,” “civic writing,” or “professional writing” guide our theorizing and pedagogy, whether individually or in combination, all implying that the main—or even the only—goal is to prepare students to move away from the home community and its discursive practices. For African American students, this division can lead to two particular dangers. The first is the continued “miseducation of the Negro,” the well-known phrase Carter G. Woodson used to identify the heightened alienation many African Americans felt from their communities the more education they pursued. The second danger is that instruction that disconnects students from their home communities and the discursive practices and traditions of those communities risks denying students powerful examples and sources of knowledge to be used in academic, civic, professional, and other kinds of discourse. Ted Grace, referenced above, studied black student performance in English/language arts classes when African American oral traditions were used as a basis for learning

print-based literacies and found that this approach resulted in both greater student interest in a curriculum they saw as relevant and greater performance on print literacy standards in mainstream curricula. Geneva Smitherman found similar results in a different study: in her article “The Blacker the Berry, the Sweeter the Juice,” she notes that African American students whose twelfth grade National Assessment of Educational Progress test essays demonstrated familiarity with black discursive patterns scored higher than students who weren’t as familiar with such patterns, showing that students grow more in standardized English use and mainstream discourses when they are at home in their own language traditions.

The combination of Dinerstein’s notion of the oral tradition and the concept of DJ as important bearer of black survival technology presents the wide range of African American humanity and knowledge present in the vernacular spaces of the culture, or as Daryl Cumber Dance notes in her collection of African American folklore, *From My People*, in the lives of everyday, “drylongso” blackfolk. The deeply ingrained stereotypes that still operate in much public discourse and mainstream media prevent many people from having any contact with or knowledge of the breadth of this range. Another reason African American oral traditions should be central in any kind of literacy instruction, and especially in multimodal literacy instruction, is that they provide a wealth of content reflecting black epistemologies and ontologies, ways of knowing and being in the world that begin with the assumption of black humanity, and provide examples of the wide continuum from access to, participation in, and resistance of broader narratives and structures. A third reason for a focus on the depth and complexity in African American oral traditions through the figure of the griot and forms like folktales, toasts, double-dutch thymes, blues, Hip Hop, and more is that it can provide a familiar bridge to other forms of literacy that offer relevance and begin with the premise of black mastery and celebration of language, of work and play in language, of the individual performer’s and the audience’s or community’s expectations, and of the importance of both skills and critical consciousness. Finally, an approach to literacy grounded in the figure of the griot and

in oral traditions allows discussion of the discursive practices that take place in all communities from a descriptive perspective rather than a prescriptive one. Signifyin, call and response, woofin, toasting, masking, the blues, testifyin, the shoutout, freestyle, and the battle rhyme—rather than merely scratching the polemic surface of linguistic disrespect that attends most public discourse and much teacher lore about Ebonics and African American students, these practices offer incredible fields to mine. The tradition links the experiences and histories of U.S. blacks with those in the Caribbean, South and Central America, Africa, and the rest of the diaspora. The figure of storyteller as griot in the black tradition also helps establish connections to storytelling traditions in all cultures. Exploration of the innovative practices and conceptual frameworks fostered by black DJs in the Hip Hop tradition opens up space for connection with everyone and every culture as well, as Hip Hop DJing has influenced the entire society—just as Robert Johnson and B. B. King influenced guitar playing through and beyond rock and other cultures and musical genres worldwide. Theory rooted in and celebrating black culture and its contributions while opening up space for intersectional analysis, intergenerational inquiry, intercultural connection—that’s some of what the digital griot offers us: a new groove, mixed, remixed, and mixtaped to “noisily bring together competing and complementary beats without sublimating their tensions.”

Shoutout: digNubia (www.dignubia.org)

This digital griot project, developed by Ronald Bailey, uses ancient Nubia as a site of inquiry to help young people connect the sciences and humanities. Through an interactive Web site, documentary films, workshops, traveling exhibitions, and resource materials created for parents and educators, digNubia uses archaeology as an interdisciplinary way to introduce students to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. By connecting young people to black culture, digNubia works to “strengthen SMET [science, mathematics, engineering, technology] literacy in underserved communities

by delivering materials and activities that meet the demands of national standards; to strengthen the capacity of community based educators and organizations to create additional opportunities for SMET education; and to spark an interest in young people in career opportunities in the sciences.” The key here is that Bailey and his team link inquiry in science and technology to African American and African history and culture, helping young people see themselves in the story to “resonate with African American audiences and find new ways to reach young people in African American communities.”

2

Mix: Roles, Relationships, and Rhetorical Strategies in Community Engagement

My interest is not merely in the ways Black students can learn, I am also concerned about the psychic costs they pay. A pedagogy is only successful if it makes knowledge or skill achievable while at the same time allowing students to maintain their own sense of identity.

—Keith Gilyard, *Voices of the Self*

AS FUNK ARTIST ROGER TROUTMAN declared in 1984, it’s in the mix. What? Music is in the mix; writing is in the mix. In the constantly new and renewing possibilities that are emergent in the many complex practices of the DJ providing the mix: selection, arrangement, layering, sampling, beat-matching, blending. In the thought that anything—any sample, any sound, any tradition, any clip—is available to be used in any text. The idea that layering different voices and grooves, mining all of a musical tradition, and hacking, jacking loops, chords, melodies, riffs, and any kind of other sound from all kinds of other musical traditions, is a valued musical—and writing—practice. It’s in the idea that a writer’s particular mix and the view of music, language, and tradition it espouses might be as important as a linear vocal or instrumental performance; that it *is* the performance, that it is the point, the thesis, the argument. For a scholar pursuing community work as an important part of his or her overall scholarly agenda, it’s all in the mix, too, rather than in the power of any thesis I might spout or any argument I might make. How does one come up with the right blend of intellectual