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**Tú Sabes Que My Flow So Tight: Translanguaging as Negotiated Participation in Classroom Hip-Hop Media Production**

# Tú Sabes Que My Flow So Tight: Translanguaging as Negotiated Participation in Classroom Hip-Hop Media Production

Catrice Barrett

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Jenkins's (2009) participatory cultures rests within a body of continually emerging work on media literacy that has made key contributions in elucidating the skills, access issues and thus, the pedagogical potential of contemporary media practices. While rich and robust, participatory cultures, as a framework, can only account fractionally for the nature of collaborative learning unless it considers how participatory spaces also function as symbolic sites of struggle. In light of this, I draw on poststructuralist theories of language and identity (Norton & McKinney, 2011) and situated theories of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to discuss how Puerto Rican and African American students at an alternative high school in a northeastern U.S. city deployed multiple linguistic resources to negotiate their collaborative participation in a hip-hop media production class. Based on five months of ethnographic observation, the discourse examined includes teacher and student interviews, classroom and recording studio interactions, students' reflexive journals and recorded lyrics. The students' translanguaging practices (García, 2009) are significant not simply in terms of form, but also in the ways that they summon ethnic, racialized, gendered, sexualized and social class-based *identities of participation* (Wenger, 1998) that seek to both resist and embrace participation in the hip-hop production project.

## Introduction

Active participation in the creation of digital and mass-mediated content is increasingly becoming known as a hallmark of contemporary youth media practices (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Black, 2008; Jenkins, 2009). Henry Jenkins' work on *participatory cultures* (2009) is an extensive resource in elucidating the skills, access issues and thus, the pedagogical potential of contemporary media practices. In practice, however, this portrait is incomplete unless it considers the activities occurring within participatory spaces beyond the technical skills they require or the creative output they yield. This is mainly due to the fact that individuals' participation as contributors in participatory learning spaces cannot be assumed to be uniform nor unified. Entangled with the distribution of knowledge, ideas and resources in these spaces are non-neutral identity positions that are constantly negotiated toward the end of participation as a member of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

This study is based on my observations of the interactions of nine African American and Puerto Rican students in a high school hip-hop media production class in an urban area of the northeastern United States. I merge principles of participatory cultures with poststructuralist theories of language and subjectivity to form a broad interpretive framework for studying how students' participation in the hip-hop media project is not only functional, but symbolic. As such, these practices involve ongoing processes of negotiation and struggle. In particular, I focus on instances of *translanguaging* (García, 2009), or the blending of diverse linguistic codes to index nuanced forms of personhood, allegiance and meaning. A translanguaging perspective is particularly useful in light of the historical relevance of hip-hop as a forum where African Americans and Puerto Ricans have reorganized the boundaries of their collective experiences and identities. Overall, I aim to show how students' translanguaging practices consist of familiar and novel configurations of personhood that work to negotiate (embrace, exchange, resist) the parameters of their participation in the hip-hop media production project. The data show that these negotiations unfold in students' bilingual and monolingual writing, selection of hip-hop aliases, use of (gendered and sexualized) emblematic markers of identity and specialized hip-hop repertoires.

### **Identity at Work in Participatory Learning Communities**

Among the literature that has been dedicated to exploring the connection between identity and learning, it is common to find the results articulated in terms of a key concept: *participation* (Jenkins, 2009; Norton & McKinney, 2011; Cummins, 2006). Lave and Wenger (1991) have greatly influenced this theoretical stance by stressing that learning takes place not according to the dictates of curriculum, but rather by the structuring of opportunities for individuals to participate as members of a *community of practice*. This socially-focused view of learning is characterized primarily by its contrast with a cognitivist orientation in which learning is understood solely as something that takes place inside of the brain. A look at participation exposes the dimension of pedagogy in which individuals structure what is chosen to be learned, how it is valued, how it is to be understood and who will learn it. For newcomers, such as the recently immigrated Puerto Rican students of this study, full participation as members of the hip-hop classroom—as an instance of a community of practice—is anything but automatic. Participation, in this sense, is worked through in trials and stages, or processes of experimentation with known practices of the community.

Henry Jenkins' *participatory cultures* (2009) is a contemporary, media literacy oriented framework that also shares Lave and Wenger's (1991) social, experiential orientation to learning. In a rather idealistic sense, Jenkins (2009) describes a participatory culture as:

[A] culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another... (p. 3)

Participatory cultures is primarily concerned with outlining how educators can develop and optimize students' ability to participate in collaborative, cross-cultural media production such as the hip-hop projects made by the students of this study. Jenkins (2009) enumerates several teachable skills toward this end – multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence and so on. Participatory cultures also acknowledges *negotiation* of cultural differences as a skill to be acquired for effective media literacy. The functional recommendations Jenkins offers toward the skill of negotiation, however, tend to be framed narrowly, with the goal of distant, separate communities learning to interact with each other. In the current study, I expand upon Jenkins' focus, exploring the complexity of how one's (media) creations are derived from and evaluated according to different identity or subject positions, particularly within a shared community of practice. Against the global hip-hop mandates of being perpetually real (Pennycook, 2007) and on point, a relevant concern emerges: in what ways do the member contributions that Jenkins speaks of end up mattering in the context of the current study?

Within several of its theoretical dimensions, a poststructuralist approach to subjectivity is useful toward addressing how processes of creation in participatory cultures are in fact non-neutral social constructions. One key aspect of expression emphasized by a poststructuralist position is the historical relevance of expression. Any signifying resource used to produce meaning is engaged not only in its contemporary moment and space, but it also carries traces of meaning produced in encounters that preceded it (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981; Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Kress, 2010). A second important contribution of poststructuralist thought is the way that it accounts for the multiple, non-static nature of how one chooses to represent his or her subjectivity. In her work on poststructuralist feminism, Weedon (1987) contrasts the view of the individual implied by subject(ivity) with a humanist view, which assumes fixed, essentialized personality traits. Agha's (2006) *emblematic figures of identity* explains that notions of personhood are dynamically modeled and their shifting meanings only become relevant according to how they are read and enacted by different individuals. These multiple expressions and readings of personhood are often accompanied by conflicting claims of truth, knowledge and power, which forms yet another important dimension of poststructuralist thought.

The opportunities for learning through participatory media creation are almost entirely a matter of doing. Within such an experiential endeavor, students of this study are faced with the matter of how they see themselves and the world as well as how they want to be seen through their work. The poststructuralist lens through which I capture their expression involves the dimensions mentioned above as they are mediated, in a more particular sense, through language use. In the following section, I contextualize the significance of language as a particular symbolic resource for African Americans and Puerto Ricans to jointly assert subject positions in the realm of hip-hop production.

### **'Ricans, African Americans and the Translinguistic Politics of the Hip Hop Endeavor**

García (2009) began using *translanguaging* for the conceptual robustness it offers over the term codeswitching. Through a translanguaging lens, every

utterance can be inspected for traces of the social, historical and political forces that have shaped it (Creese & Blackledge, 2010). Because of its focus on contrasts in observable social meaningfulness and not simply on contrasts in *a priori* systems of linguistic form, translanguaging is an apt construct for discussing the historical and contemporary complexities of African American and Puerto Rican language use in hip-hop.

Since its inception around the 1970s, hip-hop has been known to involve eclectic fusions of Afro-diasporic languages and cultures. The close physical, socioeconomic and racial proximity of Puerto Ricans and African Americans in New York City (Urciuoli, 1991) nurtured the development of hip-hop as a jointly constructed forum for expressing shared triumphs and tribulations. Still, the unification factor of hip-hop among African Americans and Puerto Ricans must be addressed carefully and unromantically, as it is intertwined with a myriad of contentious models of racial and ethno-linguistic personhood. The nebulous boundaries that separate notions of blackness and *latinidad* lie at the heart of this continuous dilemma. As an example, in her longitudinal work on hip-hop, Rivera (2003) has found that Puerto Ricans choosing to participate in New York hip-hop communities often find themselves not able to measure up fully to the expectations of either group.

Against the historic backdrop of relations between African Americans and Puerto Ricans in urban communities such as New York and the northeastern city where this study took place, translanguaging is constituted by the terrain in which contemporary matters of ownership, allegiance and membership are worked through discursively and dialogically (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981). The normativity of blackness and African American English in hip-hop (Alim, Lee, & Carris, 2011) generates perpetual debate about how non-African Americans should engage the pursuit of making hip-hop authentic to local, more familiar customs (Barrett, 2012; Pennycook, 2007). Puerto Ricans seeking recognition in earlier New York-based hip-hop communities faced pressures to “Latinize” their music, or “reduce [its] range to fit into acceptable parameters of *latinidad*” (Rivera, 2003, p. 97). Latinization includes practices such as rapping exclusively (or mostly) in Spanish, using linguistic markers of Latino cultural artifacts, places, people and events, and even the instrumentality of the music. Some Puerto Rican rappers have rejected Latinization, or what New York-based Puerto Rican rapper Q-Unique calls “imposing Puerto Rican culture on hip-hop” (Rivera, 2003, p. 152), thus revealing the construction of a competitive relationship among Puerto Ricanness, (African American) blackness and hip-hop.

The push and pull between African American blackness and Puerto Rican *latinidad* is a phenomenon that not only plays out in the artistic domains of hip-hop production, but also reflects of the everydayness of multi-ethnic interaction in Puerto Rican and African American communities. In an in-depth case study of language use among Puerto Rican youth in New York City, Zentella (1998) points out that in addition to numerous varieties of Spanish, several ethnically-stylized varieties of English are increasingly being used by Puerto Rican youth. The Puerto Rican students of Zentella’s (1998) study quickly note the hierarchies of prestige that demean the marked phonology of their parents’ Hispanicized English and reject the idea of “sounding like a nigger” (p. 100) when one uses African American English (AAE). Similarly, the divergent range of ideologies—

both negative and positive—and acceptable social domains associated with AAE illustrate that translanguaging is also meaningful in monolingual forms of talk (Bailey, 2007). Signithia Fordham (1999) uses the metaphor of a battleground to describe how African American students deploy AAE as a resource to demand acceptance of their linguistic resources in academic settings. Despite, or perhaps because of, these undeniable sites of strife, scholars argue that translanguaging between the zones of African American and Puerto Rican modes of expression are increasingly producing novel, hybridized varieties, from sporadic Spanish-language tropes by monolingual African American rappers to lengthy mixtures of AAE in Puerto Rican English (Zentella, 1998) and *Lengua Reggaetona* (Alexander & Satterfield, 2006).

### Researching the Classroom Hip Hop Zone

This study is a result of my weekly ethnographic observations in a semester-long (5 month) high school course aimed at the production of hip-hop music. The course was offered at an alternative high school in an urban area of the northeastern United States. Several students come to the school with limited financial resources and insufficient high school credit due to a variety of circumstances such as lacking support at home, dropping out of a previous school, involvement in criminal activity and/or becoming parents themselves. The school's approach to teaching and learning is drastically different from the approaches of many schools in the district. According to the mission stated on the school's website, the curriculum emphasizes "real world learning" in the form of internships and hands-on projects. The teacher-student hierarchy is said to be "flat", implying that student knowledge is as valuable as that of the instructors. Through my own observations and discussions with teachers and administrators, I learned that the majority of students (around 80%) in this alternative high school identify as Puerto Rican. Similar to Zentella's (1998) findings on Puerto Rican youth in New York City, the linguistic abilities and ways of identifying along lines of nationality vary tremendously among the Puerto Rican student participants in this study.

Of the nine students in the class, six are Puerto Rican and three are African American. The ages of the students in the class range from 15-18. The hip-hop class was designed in such a way that students worked on projects collaboratively, thus reflecting Jenkins' (2009) view of knowledge construction as distributed and participatory. These collaborative processes of production have led to an unconventional moment, one in which hip-hop (and associated images, symbols and values) have moved from the margins of official learning spaces to the center, or the main text (Ibrahim, 2009).

The teacher of the hip-hop class, Manuel, explained that his approach is driven by his awareness of the students' feelings of "disenfranchisement [and] trust issues with education and with the system." Consciously urging them to explore the conditions of their lives through the creation of hip-hop music, Manuel intends to engage the students in a pedagogy of transgression (bell hooks, 1998). By transgression, I am referring to bell hooks' description of "teachers [who are] willing to transgress those boundaries that would confine each pupil to a rote, assembly-line approach to learning" (1998, p. 231). This pedagogy is an active project of sincerity (Jackson, 2005, p. 18) that "privileges [the] intent" of valuing

(rather than marginalizing) the linguistic resources of the Puerto Rican and African American communities to which these students belong. Manuel has shared that he sees this script flipping (Smalls, 2010; Smitherman, 2006), or reversal of normative standards, not only as a matter of developing academic skills, but as a matter of much needed spiritual nourishment. In theory, this nourishment comes from establishing a credible persona in a venue (school) where the students have been typically deemed failures.

From the start, I found myself sorting through awkward transitions between my role as a recruited unofficial teacher's helper (participant) and passive observer. I approached the recording of daily activities cautiously, sensing that the students needed a chance to read me before trusting me enough to document the personal hardships they were encouraged to express through their creations. After about a month of visiting I began regularly audio and video taping the students' interactions during activities related to the course. These activities took place in the classroom, in their makeshift recording studio next to the classroom and in offsite field trip locations such as a professional recording studio and a commercial radio station. The sporadic attendance of some students made it difficult to observe their interactions and to designate certain students as focal. I conducted one group interview (with two students and the teacher) and individual interviews with five students to reflect on their language use, thoughts about the class and factors that affected their participation in class. In addition, I conducted an interview with the teacher to discuss his thoughts about the students' participation. I also reviewed the students' reflective journals where they free wrote their thoughts, their lyrics, and they responded to prompts from the teacher over the course of the semester. The students and teacher also offered me a CD of their final recorded lyrics, which I listened to repeatedly for leisure and research purposes; many of the songs featured collaborative work. The data sources above were triangulated and transcribed to form the basis of my analysis.

### **Get on my level: Establishing diacritics of space and personhood**

#### **Transgressing boundaries in participatory space**

A translanguaging perspective liberates our analytic purview from the limitations of classifying language use according to discrete, nationally-anchored code systems (cf. Pennycook, 2010). Before moving into a discussion of the *trans*—the change or movement across, through and beyond social constructions—aspect of students' languaging, I want to engage the foundational task of unpacking some of the substance of these constructions. This seems especially crucial because movement across any number of things would imply the establishment of boundaries and distinctions of what each thing is and what it is not. Agha (2006) refers to such differentiating (lexical) markers as *diacritics*. In this section, I focus on the ways in which diacritics were constructed and deployed in students' discourse and in self-styling moves, namely alias selection. These languaging activities were key in designating roles of (non)participation for individuals and more broadly, for this classroom as a socially constructed space.

Several of my conversations with students and the teacher revealed an understanding of their hip-hop learning space as distinct from typical school



environments. Miguel is a 15-year-old U.S.-born Puerto Rican student. He is very active as a producer and lyricist in class as well as at home. Below, Miguel explains his perspective on what differentiates the hip-hop class from others:

Yeah, that's why I like this school because the teachers don't try to be TOO smart. They like in the middle of smart and our level. They try to be smart to teach us and be on our level so we can understand at the same time. Because in other schools, as you see, there's a lot of students failing because they don't understand what the teachers are saying. That was happening to me. They wasn't so professional. (Interview, 5/26/11)

As stated earlier, diacritics are lexical markers that differentiate aspects of personhood. In this case, Miguel's use of diacritics is apparent through the way that he lexically dichotomizes the social rift between two groups—people who “try to be too smart” and his classroom peers (himself included), who collectively share their own set of linguistic resources for communicating and understanding—on their level. Miguel's comments reveal that he and his peers' languaging activities are not arbitrary manifestations of code, but they are “strategic, affiliative and sense-making processes” that mark belonging (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez & Alvarez as cited in García, 2009). Another revealing aspect of Miguel's comment is the postmodern hue embedded in his reading of teachers' performances, or “*trying to be too smart.*” In this sense, the “smartness” of the teachers Miguel refers to is not an essentialized trait, but a linguistically-mediated enactment loaded with disdain and social distance. Although not stated in such terms, it appears that Miguel favors a translanguaging pedagogic stance, as it allows for the flexibility to traverse the terrain in between what he sees as “unprofessional” pompous posturing and the reality of the students' modes of linguistic expression.

Omar is a Puerto Rican student who, at the time of the study, had been in the US for almost one year. He primarily interacted in Spanish with the teacher, Manuel, and with Spanish-speaking peers. On occasion, he would communicate bilingually, such as in his written response to a prompt given to him by Manuel:

**Prompt:** Would you work for someone who stresses you out even if the money was good? Why or why not?

*Si yo work for somebody que mediera stresses yo si segiria workin for tha people bicus comoquiera estoy ganando mucho dinero poroso nadamas y sifuera porpoquito dinero me iria porque mi salud es la que se esta afectando*

If I work for somebody that stressed me out I'd keep workin for tha people because I'm still earning a lot of money anyway that's the only reason and if I weren't getting paid much I'd leave because it is affecting my health

Omar's bilingual response demonstrates his clear understanding of the prompt. He shows lexemic dexterity in English by replacing the original referent of employer in the prompt, “someone”, with fitting substitutes – “somebody” and “the people.” His use of the English verb phrase “work for” is repeated in a deliberate and rhythmically-patterned fashion within and immediately following the initial conditional clause. As one of the more recently arrived Puerto Rican students, Omar's bilingual languaging can be read not only for its semantic or

poetic purposes, however. The additional layer of Omar's translanguaging lies in how it functions as a means of negotiating increased participation of the (African American) English-dominant classroom space. In class, Manuel regularly prompts Omar in English, inviting him to participate to the extent that he is ready as a member of the English-speaking community. Omar communicates almost exclusively with Spanish-speaking peers in class, who provide emotional and academic support for one another. Omar's translanguaging in the excerpt above is one of several isolated instances where he seeks to engage in what Wenger (1998) refers to as *peripheral participation*. Regardless of his current English abilities, Omar's translanguaging is strategic in preventing him from being *marginal* (Wenger, 1998), or completely obstructed from participation as an English-speaker; he is still able express an overall cohesive and coherent message using his personal level of communicative resources. In the following section, I will inspect students' use of specific hip-hop rhetorical conventions for the ways that they contribute to constructions of personhood and consequently, bring about different forms of participation.

### Authorship and ownership through hip-hop rhetorical practices

In hip-hop communities worldwide, the alias is an important linguistic marker of uniqueness and authorship over one's craft. Therefore, selection of an alias is a global convention that linked the students of this hip-hop class to a larger community. Participation in the alias selection process was symbolic, implying a level of accountability and responsibility for establishing respect for one's identity as a hip-hop artist. Jenkins' (2009) participatory cultures framework includes this practice of *performance* as the "adopting of alternate identities as a means to improvisation and learning through discovery" (p. 28). As Table 1 shows, students' participation in the task of alias selection was not entirely uniform:

Only four of the nine students opted to craft a performative hip-hop persona for themselves. Not surprisingly, these four students were very active in their hip-hop and reggaeton production efforts outside of class as well. In daily classroom interactions and in recorded productions, these four students regularly self-referenced and referred to others by their alternate names. Their investment in a hip-hop identity was evidenced further by the well-memorized narratives they shared with me about the meanings of their aliases.

Although the majority of students not selecting an alias were Puerto Rican, there is no strict correlation between ethnicity and participation in alias selection, nor between language proficiency and alias selection. One exception is the two recently arrived Puerto Rican students, Elena and Omar, both of whom avoided contributing to hip-hop production more often than not. These two students were especially close friends and could often be found chatting in Spanish in a section of the room away from the larger group. In an interview, Elena and Omar explained that in Puerto Rico "no andabamos en eso [hip-hop]" (we weren't into hip-hop) and that they prefer "música en español" (music in Spanish) such as reggaeton, bachata and merengue. Other students who did not participate in alias selection offered reasons such as being shy, not seeing themselves as artists, or being interested in art forms other than hip-hop. For these students, hip-hop artistry was a social enterprise in which they had difficulty seeing themselves. Their avoidance of the alias selection process was thus a means of formulating an identity of non-participation (Wenger, 1998).

Table 1: *Student Alias Selection*

Name	Ethnicity	Language Proficiency	Alias
Tariq	African American	EM	Leek Raw
Kim	African American	Eng	Sparkle
Jennifer	African American	Eng	None
Miguel	Puerto Rican	EB	Dynasty
Gloria	Puerto Rican	SB	Nena Flow
Elena	Puerto Rican	SD	None
Omar	Puerto Rican	SD	None
Ronaldo	Puerto Rican	ED	None
Carlos	Puerto Rican	EM	None
Manuel (Teacher)	Puerto Rican	BB	N/A

SM<sup>1</sup> – Monolingual in Spanish, limited English comprehension  
 SD – Spanish dominant, weak English [limited vocabulary, grammar]  
 SB – Spanish dominant bilingual, fluent English  
 BB – Balanced bilingual, near equal fluency in both languages  
 EB – English dominant bilingual, fluent Spanish  
 ED – English dominant, weak Spanish [limited vocabulary, grammar]  
 EM – English dominant, limited Spanish comprehension  
 Eng – English monolingual

**Niggas and Bugarrones: Participation Logics of Gender, Class and Sexuality**

An initial mention of translanguaging and Puerto Ricans might invoke imagery of bilingual Spanish and English use, but for some Puerto Ricans – especially second and third generation – translanguaging increasingly involves the use of multiple stylistic resources in English (Zentella, 1998). Deployment of these diverse linguistic resources often reflects intimate contact and negotiation of relationships with other ethnic groups. As a result, if viewed for their historical, social and political significance, monolingual forms of talk have as much translinguistic substance as bilingual talk. As a case in point, I turn to one of the most frequently used and intriguing words I encountered during my observation – nigga. Smitherman (2006) describes the word “nigga” as “the lexicon of the counterlanguage that African Americans have created over the centuries...[as] a symbolic challenge to white hegemony” (p. 51). And while invocations of racialized personhood seem to be most commonly associated with the term (see Barrett, 2012), the premium on constant verbal innovation in African American communities combined with the

<sup>1</sup> The proficiency classification scheme used here is based on Zentella’s (1998) Language Proficiency Spectrum. In my view it is always problematic to attempt to ascribe a proficiency level to an individual due to the contingent nature of the construct. I would definitely like to make known that the designations in this table are based on my own etic observations; they not self-ascribed by the participants. Please read them in light of this limitation.

proliferation of hip-hop as a multi-ethnic endeavor has undoubtedly contributed to an indexical expansion. The two excerpts below show how Gloria, a Puerto Rican female and Tariq, an African American male invoke the gendered effects of the term to expose their own positioning:

Gloria:

If hip hop/rap music had a gender it could of be counfused [sic] to me because some females be sounding like a *nigga* and some *niggas* be soundin like females. Because when you record at a studio your voice kinda change (Journal entry, 10/2010)

Tariq:

"I'm a top class *nigga* you don't even have a sticker on the chart" (Written lyrics, 3/2011)

Gloria's text is a response to the question of whether hip-hop is male or female in gender. Rather than replicating the original terms from the prompt (male and female) in her response, Gloria replaces male with *nigga*, implying lexical interchangeability of the two terms. She utilizes the heteronormative weight of the term, no doubt very familiar within hip-hop discourses (Alim et al., 2011), to emphasize what she sees as gender confusion in broader hip-hop communities. She concedes on the harshness of the assertion by reflecting on her observations of changes that happen to her voice when she participates in recording activities.

Tariq's invocations of masculinity are more subtle. Intertwined with the clever trope on familiar classroom imagery (top of the class and reward sticker), Tariq's self-reference collectively adheres to a larger usage chain where *nigga* is used to refer exclusively to male classmates, as in the interactions below:

Context: *Two Puerto Rican male students, Miguel and a visiting student (Emanuel) are sitting around. Miguel has been practicing reciting his lyrics, which he plans to record later. He turns to the visiting student:*

Miguel: Go 'head, spit some bars.

Emanuel: You go first.

Miguel: You go 'head, nigga.

Context: *Omar (Puerto Rican male), in his usual way, wanders around the classroom to socialize when he doesn't feel like working. He notices a Puerto Rican male student (Felix) from another class and approaches him to talk about an assignment that is due:*

Omar: You going to do it, nigga?

Felix: (shakes head)

Omar: If you're don't doing it, you gonna be fucked up.

Both of the interactions above took place between Puerto Rican males with varying levels of language proficiency and lengths of time in the US. The first interaction reflects the unease that pervades the highly evaluative environment of creating and sharing one's creations. When Miguel's initial attempt to prompt

Emanuel to be the first to “spit some bars” or share his lyrics was not successful, he shifts footing by addressing Emanuel as nigga. With this move Miguel engages Emmanuel in a more commanding male-to-male posturing. As I mentioned above, the history of racism associated with the word nigger/nigga has generated major offense, especially in cases when it is used by non-blacks (Low, 2007; Cutler, 2009; Alim et al., 2011). Over the years, however, hip-hop has served as a platform for African Americans and Puerto Ricans to re-arrange the in-group parameters of nigga. This flexibility has emerged through a mutually constructed narrative of racial/ethnic-based socioeconomic oppression and marginalization (Rivera, 2003). In an interview, Tariq and Miguel reinforced their alignment with this shared narrative, commenting that it was okay for Puerto Ricans to say nigga since “their ancestors went through slavery too.” The exchanges of the male students in the class demonstrate the negotiability of the meaning of nigga – or what it means to qualify for this identification (Wenger, 1998).

The second interaction is significant in that Omar, as discussed earlier, rarely uses wholly monolingual English utterances with his peers. This is one of several experimental moments where I observed Omar trying out *nigga* as an address term to participate discursively from the masculine, monolingual identity position normative to the hip-hop mediated discourse of this classroom.

The analysis above does not intend to imply that the gendered invocations of the term nigga function in isolation. The interaction below involves nigga in a more complex juxtaposition with sexualized emblems of personhood:

*Context: Students were sitting and working in small groups. The teacher, Manuel, was tapping an African American male student, Tariq, with a stick to get his attention. A Puerto Rican male student from another class (Felix) decided to make a comment about Tariq by referring to the object:*

Felix: That’s called a nigga beater  
 (Manuel then turns to tap Felix with the stick)  
 Manuel: Then what’s this called?  
 Tariq: A faggot beater  
 Felix: Man, shutup!

From the context, Felix’s designation of Tariq is completely unsolicited and lacks the tone of camaraderie present in the interactions above. In other words, Felix has intentionally provoked Tariq to participate in a lighthearted verbal joust. This practice of one-upping, also known as *signifying* (Gates, 1989; Smitherman, 2006), is a common oral African American tradition imported into the rhetorical fabric of hip-hop. In her ethnographic observations of Puerto Rican and African American friendships, Urciuoli (1991) noted numerous accounts of male-to-male signifying. She also noticed African American males playfully appropriating insults in Spanish to “attribute congruent, not opposing, personas [with Puerto Rican males]” (p. 304). In this sense, the logics of signifying through the use of nigga, a word that is typically off limits, work to establish trust and equal social footing between the African Americans and Puerto Rican students.

Having realized the intent of Felix’s first stab, Manuel offers Tariq a chance to retaliate by pointing the object at Felix and asking Tariq to use an insult to associate it with Felix. Tariq responds with a known sexual epithet aimed at calling

Felix’s heterosexuality into question. Alim, et al. (2011) provide several examples from hip-hop freestyle battles that bring this same type of heteronormative verbal battleground into a public sphere. In the midst of such hyper-assertions of heterosexuality, the Puerto Rican slang term *bugarrón* emerged among the male students as a diacritic to distance oneself from homosexuality. Synnott (2001) locates *bugarrón* amongst a vast typology of terms defining male sexuality in Puerto Rico. Omar and other male students of both ethnicities engaged in frequent “*buggarón checks*”, addressing male students by the term and measuring whether their response displayed enough resistance to warrant heterosexual designation. Omar also followed up these checks with announcements such as “I never do that. I stay with my girls.” In a climate of frequent heteronormative constructions, Tariq’s identity as a bisexual African American male remained concealed. This manifested not only in his classroom interactions with females or his participation in the “*buggarón checks*,” but also in his lyrical delivery:

I see your girl  
Yo, she’s a nice nine  
But I prefer ten

(Recorded lyrics, 5/2011)

Within a space favoring participation as a heterosexual male, Tariq operates with his homosexuality suppressed under the tight parameters of masculinity. As this section has shown, the indexical robustness of *nigga* and *bugarrón* have been taken up in this classroom context to form mutual alignments that structure participation according to specific logics of gender, class and sexuality. In the final data analysis section, I will look at the hip-hop repertoire as a specialized mechanism for navigating participation in technical aspects of music production.

### Claimin’ the Hip Hop Repertoire

Rymes (2010) defines a communicative repertoire as “the collection of ways individuals use language and literacy and other means of communication (gestures, dress, posture, accessories) to function effectively in the multiple communities in which they participate” (p. 528). In addition to the language and hip-hop based literacy skills students exercised in the course, they also developed a range of technical skills for editing their productions. The process of re-appropriating popular rap rhythms for use with the students’ original lyrics is a media literacy skill (Jenkins, 2009) that required hours of collaborative editing and negotiation. Students’ ability (or desire) to develop specific communicative repertoires affected their ability to participate as contributors in the recording and editing processes. In the exchange below, Miguel is working in the role of producer of the song Gloria is recording in the school’s makeshift recording studio. Being the classroom producer is a regular service that Miguel provides for his fellow classmates. As a result, he has acquired impressive skill in doing so over the semester. At this point in the session, however, Gloria has begun to question Miguel’s arrangement of the song’s components (hook, verse, etc.):

- 1 Gloria: But uh, you put the hook?
- 2 Miguel: What?
- 3 Gloria: Can you put the hook again?

- 4 Miguel: You wanna put the hook again?  
 5 Gloria: No, not now (1) after this thing (inaudible)  
 6 Miguel: I know. After your jawn<sup>2</sup>, right?  
 7 Gloria: No. Well, yeah, but after yours have to be done (.4) after the first verse you did, it was the hook.  
 8 Miguel: =This is gon be the first verse and then Imma do [that]  
 9 Gloria: [Oh, you did it together with the other one?]  
 10 Miguel: The other jawn I don't remember. That's the [thing].  
 11 Gloria: [So you ain't get it down?] So that's the first verse then?  
 12 Miguel: It is. Just do the first verse with the eight bars. Remember we was gon split once?  
 13 Gloria: Oh no. Mmhmhm. Put the verse down.

Throughout the recording/editing process, a large share of the creative outcome typically depends on how the producer chooses to time, sequence and layer the sonic elements of the piece. This ultimately amounts to an imbalance of power in the creative process since the artist and producer operate with differential access to the “resources or facilities” that affect their “capability to secure outcomes” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 41). Through Gloria’s extensive in-school and out-of-school investment as a hip-hop artist, she has developed a communicative repertoire for analyzing the arrangement of her song. This repertoire includes specialist hip-hop production metalanguage to refer to the “bars”, “hooks” and “verses” of the “track”. Her mastery of the repertoire allows her to procure a portion of the creative control from Miguel and transform the production into an interactive, negotiated speech event. Gloria’s involvement here illustrates the power dynamics of Jenkins’ (2009) *distributed cognition* principle, or the effective decentralization of knowledge so that “multiple resources shape and enable [the accomplishment] of an activity” (p. 65).

The hip-hop “specialist language” (Gee, 2004) that Gloria and Miguel are using to negotiate the parameters of production can be considered required academic language insofar as it has been standardized into the framework of this classroom microculture (Wulff, 1995). The sociocultural nature of learning becomes evident when we consider that Gloria’s out-of-school involvement with prototypes of this specialist language lends her a distinct advantage in class. The same applies to students possessing similar experience with any other privileged academic language variety (Gee, 2004). Our realization of this fluidity in language standardization unsettles any notions that mainstream, Anglo-centric academic language carries a greater level of inherent correctness or evidence of intelligence due to its current prestige (Charity-Hudley & Mallinson, 2010). If nothing else, this excerpt should illustrate that learning to participate linguistically in academic environments involves cultural processes of acquiring the repertoires required to produced privileged forms of meaning. That which is privileged in this scenario is translanguaging through repertoires that distort the boundaries between vernacular and specialist talk. The excerpt above shows ample examples of this in the students’ seamless co-placement of Puerto

<sup>2</sup> Jawn is part of the lexicon of African American slang in the region where the study took place. It can be thought of as an all-purpose noun which can be used to refer to any other noun. In this case, Miguel is using jawn to refer to Gloria’s verse in the song.

Rican English (“put the hook”), regional African American slang (“jawn”) and specialist hip-hop language.

Next, I turn to the case of Elena, a Spanish-dominant, English language learner who does not use a hip-hop communicative repertoire. She struggles through her recording, prompting a different configuration of translanguaging to negotiate the session. Similar to the interaction above, Elena and Miguel are in the studio working on her song. Elena is generally discouraged about participating in recording activities; Miguel has become frustrated with her mistakes:

- 1 Miguel: You know you did it wrong.
- 2 Elena: I know.
- 3 Miguel: Okay, now I’m tryna help you get a good song.
- 4 Elena: ((sigh))
- 5 Miguel: Okay? *Dílo más alto como (.2) tú sabes que tú hablas mucho en la clase.*  
*Okay? Say it louder like (.2) you know you talk a lot in class*
- 6 Elena: ((laughter))
- 7 Miguel: *Tú sabes eso.*  
*You know that.*
- 8 Elena: [Oh my god!]
- 9 Miguel: Alright. *Uno, dos y tres. MÁS ALTO, okay? (.5) Dílo ahora. Más alto.*  
*Alright. One, two and three. LOUDER, okay? (.5) Say it now. Louder.*
- 10 Elena: C’mon!
- 11 Miguel: Just say it real quick.
- 12 Elena: *Más alto.*  
*Louder.*
- 13 Miguel: Nooo!
- 14 Elena: ((laughter)) Okay, Imma try. Imma try.

The translinguistic resources Miguel uses in his interaction with Elena differ significantly from his monolingual interaction with Gloria. In place of regional slang and hip-hop specialist language, Miguel initiates bilingual talk with Elena on line 5. Miguel’s decision is most likely based on his reading of Elena’s persona as talkative (line 5), Spanish-dominant and, at the moment, in need of accommodation. Interestingly, aside from her teasing on line 15, Elena does not respond to Miguel in Spanish. This is not typical for Elena, who regularly converses with Puerto Rican Spanish-speaking students (even English-dominant ones) in Spanish. She is known, however, to use frequently English to convey generous amounts of profanity and exclamatory language like “oh my god!” (line 8). Her English monolingual talk in this case, could possibly be read as a demand for respect despite the limitations of her hip-hop repertoire and interest in hip-hop production.

Not surprisingly, when evaluated formally by the teacher, Gloria fared much better than Elena throughout the semester. Gloria maintained consistent participation as one of the class’ top rappers and was scheduled to represent the class in a school-wide performance. Elena, on the other hand, remained in danger of receiving a failing grade in the class for most of the semester. The contrasting example of these two students’ differing backgrounds, abilities and interest with the privileged linguistic codes of the classroom provides compelling evidence for



the need to consider how traditional academic environments, similarly, favor the participation of students who have mastered the privileged language conventions of the classroom while distancing those who have not.

### **Keepin' the Mix Raw? A Discussion of Translanguaging, Identity and Praxis**

This paper has aimed to show how the social considerations of translanguaging can enhance the structural-functional underpinnings of theories of learning such as participatory cultures. Participation in learning communities cannot be assumed to be balanced, uniform or valued in any sense. Students' participation in the activities of the hip-hop production class varied based on the ways that they identify with the members and the practices of the community. Students' formulation of identities of (non)participation (Wenger, 1998) were in some instances based on a shared sense of identity between African Americans and Puerto Ricans. At other times, the routines, meanings and codes privileged in the class generated participatory tensions that kept some students in a marginal position. As in the case of students such as Elena, the data of this study complicate the idea that marginalization is an imposed status rather than a deliberate move on the part of the marginalized to express a misalignment of the learning communities' goals, desires and identities with her own. Despite its common packaging as a "culturally relevant" pedagogy, the fabric of participation in a hip-hop-based learning community is tightly coupled with students' appraisal of the wavering logics of personhood that circulate within.

Additionally, this study has sought to join with the voices that emphasize translanguaging not just as a matter of bilingual form (Canagarajah, 2011; Creese & Blackledge, 2010). Translanguaging does much more. It exposes the juncture of contrasts in histories, styles, personas, relationships and desire. As a methodological note, it is important not to assume the boundaries of these constructs a priori, but to look for evidence of them in discourse and moment-by-moment modes of signification. Pedagogically, translanguaging represents an opportunity to involve students in reflecting on these bounds and to probe their awareness of how/whether they are using the resources at their disposal to make meaning effectively (Rymes, 2010; Canagarajah, 2011).

In a moment of revelation, one of the student artists of this study carefully explained to me that his alias, "Leek Raw", represents an unedited realness, an unfettered sincerity that nourishes his sense of purpose. Located at the nexus of translanguaging and praxis, his confession captures the challenge that warrants our greatest response: reconciling the rawness of vernacular sincerity with the discursive mandates of academic convention.

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