



Texting Identities: Lessons for Classrooms from Multiethnic Youth Space

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Texting Identities: Lessons for Classrooms from Multiethnic Youth Space

Django Paris

DJANGO: Here you have “True Hamoz” [True Samoan]. Tell me why you write the things down. Why do you write it on there? [I point to the text Ela has written inside the Superman logo on her backpack.]

ELA: I don’t know. I like writing stuff all over my backpack, you know, “Samoan.”

DJANGO: But why do you write “Samoan”?

ELA: Because I love where I grew up at.

Ela,¹ a Samoan tenth grader I learned from during a year of ethnographic and sociolinguistic fieldwork with her multiethnic youth community, joined her peers in using various texts to express solidarity and self as they navigated their high school years. Ela and her Pacific Islander, African American, and Latino/Latina classmates attended South Vista High, a public charter high school serving a community of color in the urban West. South Vista, like many urban communities, underwent major demographic shifts in the 1980s and 1990s from a predominantly African American city to a predominantly Latino/Latina (mainly Mexican American and Mexicano) city. A significant population of Pacific Islanders from Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji also joined in this shift. I spent hundreds of hours observing, participating, interviewing, and photographing with the youth of South Vista High.

One major focus of my work was to understand the purpose and educational value of the texts authored across *multiethnic youth space*, a *borderland* (Anzaldúa, 1987) defined by interaction between youth within and across ethnicity. To gain this understanding, I employed ethnographic and critical discourse analytic strategies of interpretation. While I sought

the perspectives of students through ethnographic interviews and conversations, use of critical discourse analytic methods allowed me to interpret the meaning of texts in relation to issues of voice and power during prolonged fieldwork. I offer both youth understandings and my own as ethnographer, discourse analyst, and educator. As a former English teacher currently teaching English educators, I am interested in how the texts of multiethnic youth space can expand notions of writing and the teaching of writing as well as our conceptions of pluralist classrooms that can honor and extend what it means to live together in difference.

Identity Texts as an Analytic Lens

The youth of South Vista wrote texts on their backpacks, clothing, and skin. They sent texts from cellular phones and over online spaces. And many authored and performed texts as youth emcees. I came to understand these cultural inscriptions as *identity texts*, an analytic category that allowed me to parse out the various types of text while seeing them as a whole textual system. I use *identity texts* to refer to youth-space texts inscribing ethnic, linguistic, local, and transnational affiliations on clothing, binders, backpacks, public spaces, rap lyrics, and electronic media. These texts were bound together by three factors: they indexed identities as members of particular groups, they were unsolicited literacy acts not officially evaluated by school, and all youth at South Vista participated in creating them.

I analyze three types of interconnected texts in this article. The first, *worn texts*, were those written on objects such as clothing and backpacks. The second were *delivered texts* and were sent and received via electronic media. I call original raps written and performed in youth space *flowed texts*. In looking at these texts, I join a long tradition in seeing all oral and written language as socially performed throughout (Bakhtin, 1981). More than just the socially performed activity of printing on paper texts, these identity texts engaged in a multimodal performativity that Lunsford (2007) has called *secondary literacy*. Such literacy spans various media between the oral and written, the textual and otherwise symbolic, the static word and the moving word, and the dominant voice and the marginalized one.²

In attempting to understand the ways such identity texts resisted dominant systems and expectations of print, I find de Certeau's (1984) notion of the *scriptural economy* particularly helpful. De Certeau theorizes that the

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power of “writing” has been subsumed by institutions and capitalist class structures to create and sustain the haves and have-nots. This economy functions by stratifying individuals and groups through systems of recorded text with clear, dominating social purposes. On the micro-institutional level of a high school, such textual records include files of academic and social evaluation, report cards, and demographic summaries of race/ethnicity and language proficiency. De Certeau’s scriptural economy also maintains its power by defining who is literate, educated, and productive given the set of institutional records, thereby reinforcing power inequities. In schools, legitimated text participates in this economy as students’ school writing is regulated, evaluated, and translated into the systems of power that determine their advancement.

Set against this dominant scriptural economy is the *counter scriptural economy* of youth space, the practices I am referring to as identity texts. Such texts survive outside the dominant economy of school. Although such counter economies in no way eclipse the power held by the dominant economy, they can hold important keys for revisioning school writing. In addition, they offer an excellent window into some ways youth of color are enacting difference in contemporary multiethnic schools.

As I observed and, at times, participated in the textual world of multi-ethnic youth space, two organizing questions guided my work: How did these texts reinforce and challenge notions of ethnic and linguistic difference? How did these texts resist and offer alternatives to school-sanctioned writing?

“True Hamoz gurl fo lyph”: Mapping Cultural Geography through Worn Texts

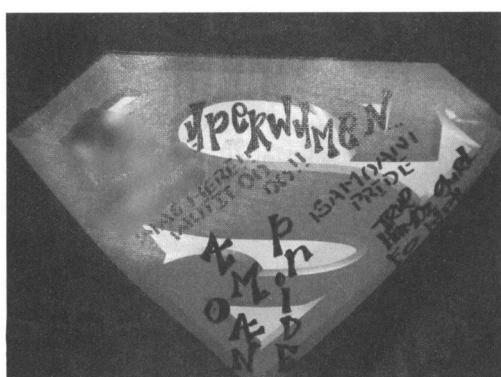


Figure 1. True Hamoz Gurl Fo Lyph³

At South Vista, texts covered the objects youth owned or attempted to own. The significance of such worn texts did not occur to me until several months into my fieldwork as I sat in the back of Ela’s classroom. As I looked around the room, my gaze fell on backpacks strewn anarchically in a pile. Ela’s backpack came into hyper-focus. Figure 1 is the picture I took that day in the classroom.

Ela’s backpack text is multi-layered, with symbols and language

indexing various identities. At the top of the text, Ela created a feminist revision of the commercial Superman emblem, resisting traditional uses of the symbol by using the “S” to write “Superwymen.” In addition, Ela appropriated the “S” to write “Samoan Pride,” a bold indexing of ethnic identity. She wrote “Samoan Pride” again on the right side of the text, this time in bamboo-style lettering characteristic of the Samoan tattoos she and her cousin planned to get on their next visit home to the island. Importantly, these statements of ethnic pride were written in English. As Ela told me in an interview, writing “Samoan” let her peers know her ethnicity within the complex ethnic terrain of South Vista.

Ela inscribed “True Hamoz gurl fo lyph” (True Samoan girl for life) on the far right side of the emblem, communicating ethnic and linguistic solidarity with her Samoan community and her broader youth community. The majority of Ela’s peers would not know what “Hamoz” (Samoan for “Samoan”) meant. Ela’s use of “Hamoz” was a small act of agency and linguistic pride in a school where speaking Samoan was a rarity. It was also a way for Ela to voice a connection to her homeland.

Another feature is the small phonological sharing in African American Language (AAL) by representing “for” as “fo” (called r-vocalization).⁴ AAL in oral communication was shared across ethnicity at South Vista and worked as a linguistic and cultural unifier—a sort of lingua franca of multiethnic youth space (Paris, 2009). This sharing pushed against traditional notions of linguistic ownership and made its way into written communication as well.⁵

Ela and the many youth who represented “for” as “fo” knew the conventional spelling; resistance to Dominant American English (DAE) norms was the standard. Continuing for a moment with resistant orthography, Ela’s spellings of “Superwymen,” “Gurl,” and “Lyph” are examples of what sociolinguists term “eye dialect” (alternative spelling that does not change the sound, but indexes vernacular language). As Baugh and Smitherman (2007) have noted, the counter spellings of AAL and hip-hop culture are often conscious acts of linguistic identity.

Miles, an African American young man, joined his peers in wearing identity texts. Like many of the youth I worked with, Miles wore texts claiming neighborhood and metropolitan affiliations. Such worn texts mapped out the neighborhoods of South Vista into three areas: “Central-Town” (or “C-Town”), “Tha District,” and “Tha Fields.” Miles discussed these areas and theorized about geographic identity claims in an interview on March 26, 2007.

MILES: Tha District is red. Tha Fields has blue, and the C has green. So, you know, it’s like your little own area. It’s like Bronx and Brook-

lyn and Harlem and all that. But just on a very, very, very, very tiny scale.

DJANGO: That's interesting. And so you think of the C as kind of where you're from in terms of where you were born and where you grew up.

MILES: Uh, huh.

DJANGO: Do you think of South Vista that way or is it just the C?

MILES: Inside of South Vista, I rep the C. Outside of South Vista—inside the Metro area, it's like South Vista, you know. . . . And then outside of the Metro area to L.A., it's like Tha Metro. But then it stops there. You don't really rep California.

Miles “represented” or claimed geographic identity through the shirts he wore and what he wrote on his objects. These scales of texts and geographic identities rippled outward, stopping at the metropolitan borders for Miles but crossing international borders for others. Miles compared the neighborhoods of South Vista to several historically Black burrows in New York City, suggesting the desire for continued geographic ownership and a harkening back to the African American majority he had seen diminish during his lifetime. A sweatshirt Miles often wore to school, printed and sold in a local South Vista shop, indexed his membership in the C-Town neighborhood where he was born and raised. As he told me in the same interview, “You rep what you’re from,” meaning a person represents or indexes her or his affiliations with space and place through worn text.

At the bottom of Miles’s C-Town sweatshirt, along a green banner, was a message that seemed to summarize his worn text as a whole: “Money, Power, Respect.” These three words capture the meaning of the counter scriptural economy of South Vista youth. In Cintron’s (1997) work on graffiti among Latino gangs, he calls such public texts “an intense need to acquire power and voice” (p. 186) in situations that offer little of either. Such was the case with worn identity texts; they attempted to gain power and respect within situations of marginalization by a dominant culture.

“Was up dis bugz wat u doin”: AAL and Resistance in Delivered Text

While youth were busy navigating the network of worn texts, another identity text was circulating through the counter scriptural economy of South Vista. Texts delivered over electronic media constituted a matrix of real literacy

for social purposes through which youth indexed various identities. To date, language and literacy research has yet to look into the ethnic and linguistic identities expressed through text messages, and it is here where I focus my analysis in this section. Specifically, I am interested in the ways AAL made its way into the delivered texts of youth across ethnic groups and, more broadly, the resistant orthography of such texting.

Carlos was a Mexican American young man who had immigrated to South Vista from Michoacán, Mexico, in 1999. Carlos and I texted each other quite a bit in the fall as the South Vista soccer team was heading toward the league title. Here is an excerpt of an exchange on October 20, 2007.

DJANGO: Whn is the nxt game?

CARLOS: The semi final iz diz Thursday at 4pm. Here at da school

DJANGO: Dang, U r heroes!!!

CARLOS: I know! . . . We makin history! . . . We undefeated!! We north division champz. And now we goen 4 sections.

This text showed Carlos employing linguistic features of AAL in his writing as well as other acts of resistance to DAE writing conventions. Carlos texted alternative phonology into his phone with “diz” for “this” and “da” for “the” (a common consonant replacement of AAL and other nondominant Englishes). He also shared in one of the major features of AAL grammar by omitting the copula in a string of emphatic statements beginning with “We makin history!” (for the DAE “We *are* making”). Finally, Carlos represented “going” as “goen” and “making” as “makin,” another common phonological feature of AAL and other nondominant Englishes. Also important is the eye dialect with “iz” and “champz,” both resisting standard conventions in words Carlos knew how to spell.

This grammatical sharing in AAL shows a close relationship between vernacular talk and text messaging that goes beyond a mere efficiency of print and resistant orthography. Carlos was being a particular user of language by indexing a youth identity through uses of AAL and eye dialect. Crucially, these uses mirrored the identities Carlos expressed in the worn identity texts that adorned his personal objects and clothing.

Carlos and other Latino/Latina and Pacific Islander youth shared in AAL in delivered text, joining their Black peers in texting as they joined them in their everyday talk. African American students like Rochelle and Miles also used AAL features in delivered texting. Although this may not seem surprising, the types of features used and the fact they occur in writing *is* surprising. Representing the vernacular in writing is a more conscious act



Figure 2. *Ma plants go*

ROCHELLE: *Ma plants go*

DJANGO: They look nice chelle

ROCHELLE: I knw dj *tanx*

Rochelle's initial text was significant to her identity and representative of our growing relationship and of her happiness at the state of her sunflowers. On the linguistic level, Rochelle's texting "Ma" instead of "My" was an example of monophthongization—the transformation of the two vowel sound sequence in "My" (m-ah-ee) to a long one-vowel sequence in "Ma" (m-ah)—common in AAL and southern varieties of American English. Another phonological feature is "thanks" as "tanx," a voiceless consonant replacement even more common in Caribbean Creole English varieties. Rochelle also used the local adjective "go" (looking, sounding, or being good) common in the larger metro area.

Cherished selves as members of the youth community were forged and sustained through the linguistic choices youth made in delivered texting. For some, like Carlos, this meant crossing certain boundaries of linguistic division. For others, like Rochelle, media texting was a space to solidify her position as an AAL and youth language user. For all youth at South Vista, texting was a space where DAE norms and evaluative educators did not constrain why, what, how, or when they wrote.

"A New Root": Flows in South Vista and Rahul's Textual Plurality

Many of the young men I came to know at South Vista participated in writing and performing rap. Youth emcees shared their raps on the schoolyard,

through recordings, over electronic media, in battles, and sometimes in the classroom as fully embodied counter scripts to official classroom literacy activities. Such flowed texts were shared across ethnicity, making a practice originating in African American and Caribbean American urban culture a major activity of all youth communities of South Vista.⁷

Classrooms were by and large hostile places to make and perform flows; crafting flows happened most often in less regulated areas of multiethnic youth space. Rahul, a Fijian-Indian young man born and raised in South Vista, wrote and performed rap lyrics. Rahul is an example of the types of identities texted through flows, particularly by Pacific Islander and Latino youth who might not traditionally be seen as valid emcees.

The following excerpt comes from a flow Rahul performed for me and his African American friend Dominique after class in mid-December 2006. Rahul, whose emcee name was Larul, always wrote his lyrics down before performing them. He gave me these typed lyrics after his impromptu performance.

They call me Rahul but pronounce Larul
 'Cause I'm the one with the most hustle loot
 It doesn't run in my family so I call it a new root
 Yup keeping it real from south vista, the metro, the yetro, mane,
 From the californ I A
 From the Fiji Islands to this ghetto beautiful place
 I rose from the streets
 Teaching me to kill it on a type of beat
 From rock to country to Hip Hop to rap
 Yeah you know me as the first Fijian to ever do that

Larul's text shows many features common to the raps I read and heard at South Vista. First, he shared in AAL and hip-hop lexicon and semantics with the items "hustle loot" (street-made money), "the streets" (the urban community), and "kill it" (to do something well). His writing also employed a popular local hip-hop and AAL pronunciation of "man" /man/ as "mane" /mānə/.

Rahul was aware that his text did not stem from his Fijian heritage. As he put it, rapping was a "new root" and he was "the first Fijian." Instead, his text explains that this craft came to him from "south vista" and "the metro" (which is repeated as the popular local hip-hop derivative, "the yetro"). At the same time, by calling out "Fijian" Rahul maintains solidarity with his

community. Finally, Rahul participated in the larger AAL rhetorical tradition of toasting, declaring his imagined wealth and his prowess at the craft of flowing.

Rahul's text was hardly as static as it appears on the printed page. While the texts delivered through phones and Internet sites were in constant, building conversation, and the texts worn by youth were selected on particular occasions and often layered over time, flowed texts were shared aloud and recorded. The recorded version of Larul's song was flowed over the instrumental of a popular club song of 2006, *The Game* featuring 50 Cent's "How We Do" (2005). The lyrics in the original detail the exploits of men driving flashy cars, carrying handguns, and making sexual advances on women in a dance club. Rahul's lyrics offered a rather revolutionary revision to the song, focusing instead on what he termed "the real" topics of life in South Vista: ethnic pride, cultural sharing, and survival through lyrical expression.

Rahul's participation in this "new root" was intense. Writing and recording raps, their meanings, and what they meant for Rahul dominated many of our interviews and conversations. It is worth exploring Rahul's explanation of his lyrics for the "New Root" flow to help explain multiple selves as indexed through flowed text.

DJANGO: And so tell me a little bit about the words to that flow

RAHUL: I wrote like, "From the Fiji Islands to this ghetto beautiful place." I came from the Islands, you know, and I'm doing it big right here. . . . I'm trying to bring the Fijians out, trying to show what we got. Any of us Polynesians, you know. . . . No matter what race you are, what other people say, "Oh, you this race, you can't rap." No, if you got flows, you can rap . . . When I'm saying "from the Fiji Islands" it's not only indicating me, it's indicating my people from the Fiji Islands. . . . It's like an inspiration, so it's like a little direction to tell them how to go, where to go. (12/8/06)

Rahul's explanation touched on the way his text claimed several identities at once. His lyrics embody a triple purpose: showing his membership in South Vista, claiming prowess as an emcee, and displaying solidarity with his Fijian community in the United States and in Fiji. He was conscious of the tensions he had to navigate to successfully claim these various memberships over who could be a rapper and how his community continually adjusted to "doing it big" in new lands. That Rahul had never traveled to his parents' homeland and was born and raised in South Vista did little to temper his sense of Fijianess. Likewise, the fact that people said a Fijian shouldn't be

raping only fueled his drive to create flowed texts. Rahul's flows showed a *textual plurality*, an ability to span difference and division, at the same time challenging and embodying both.

In examining phonology and orthography in flowed texts, choices such as "mane" instead of "man" were deliberate. Rahul asked me if what I heard in the recordings matched what he had written and told me how hard he worked to try to spell things like they sounded. His point was large and linguistic; it speaks to how our alphabet fails in so many ways and shows how Rahul actively resisted DAE spelling and phonology in his flows, mirroring the resistance found in other texts at South Vista.

Like other identity texts, the linguistic elements of flows were micro acts of identity layered on top of macro-level content displaying ethnic, geographic, and linguistic memberships. Also like other forms of texts, major sharings occurred, cutting through borders and reinforcing or drawing others.

The ways that the division between writing and oral performance were blurred in South Vista also have implications for classroom learning. Elements of vernacular talk made their way into all forms of identity texts, sometimes as choices of resistance. Yet flowed texts in particular were often textual representations of what had already been or would be orally practiced or performed. Flowed texts, then, could be considered attempts at capturing embodied orality in printed form. This brings to mind de Certeau's (1984; Collins & Blot, 2001) discussions of the false assumptions of a separation between literacy and orality, and how such distinctions are historically and culturally determined. The line between spoken and written for emcees is not always clear. Often, written and oral tasks are separated as if they have little relation, but capitalizing on the performed and oral natures of flows in classroom activities has the potential to promote elements of voice and style in both prose and public speaking (Dyson, 2005).

While many South Vista youth were participating in flowed identity texts inside and outside the classroom, other texts were being modeled and practiced by caring and dedicated teachers inside the classroom. Yet the many possible bridges between flowed identity texts and traditional classroom texts were not a part of the classroom lessons I observed. The utility of using rap in critical ways as a resource for classroom learning is becoming apparent (Alim, 2004, 2006; Alim & Baugh, 2007; Kirkland, 2008; Mahiri, 2001; Morell, 2003; Morell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Smitherman, 2006). It is high time such approaches gained wider application.

It is also important to realize that the exploding body of scholarship on hip-hop language and culture remains, for good reasons, focused on

African American-produced rap and language. Hip-hop was born in African American and Caribbean American urban cultures and the majority of emcees remain Black. Yet, as Larul and many others at South Vista and in urban communities across the nation show, teachers should look at the ways other groups are participating deeply in flowed texts and the broader hip-hop culture.

Far beyond my romanticizing rap in general, the truth is that many young people of color, who continue to lead drop-out and incarceration rates, participate heavily in flowed texting.

Joining the Work of the Counter Scriptural Economy

South Vista youth were engaged in powerful literacy and identity work to claim ethnic, linguistic, and geographic affiliations by sharing in AAL and hip-hop culture across ethnic lines, consciously resisting DAE spelling and grammar, and forging spaces for multimodal writing.

Acknowledging the *culture of power* (Delpit, 1995) while also acknowledging the *counterculture* of power marginalized youth participate in will mean finding ways to join the work of youth texts and dominant school texts to show the value of each for communicating meaning to and exercising power with audiences. Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, Alvarez, and Chiu (1999) have called a joining of the official and the unofficial the *third space* (also see Kirkland, 2008, for a discussion of the concept in English pedagogy). Gutiérrez (2008) has recently strengthened this concept by calling for educators to move beyond simple resource models that use marginalized practices as bridges to more “important” practices. She argues that teachers and youth should collaborate on understanding languages, literacies, and cultures

in this third space where new, hybrid practices will emerge.

What must we do to bring the work of identity texts into level dialogue with more traditional school print literacies?

What must we do to bring the work of identity texts into level dialogue with more traditional school print literacies? First, we must acknowledge with Lunsford (2007) that *new rhetorics* and literacies are evolving to include sounds, voices, language varieties, and organizational structures that school writing has been unable and unwilling to deal with. This was the case at South Vista, where school writing was mainly a print-on-page, standard essay affair. It is telling that I needed photographs to analyze worn identity texts and would need audio to do analytic justice to flowed texts. Joining the work of identity texts means that teachers and teacher educators should stretch to include the media,

modes, and performativity practiced in youth space and in workplaces and professions. We must push to incorporate worn, delivered, flowed, and other multimodal and digital literacies into our classroom lessons.

In addition to revising what text and writing can encompass, our pedagogy needs to address ethnic and youth identity as well as resistance to DAE norms evident at the linguistic levels of syntax, phonology, morphology, and lexicon. While important work has looked at the way AAL grammar and organizational patterns carry into the writing of AAL-speaking students (Ball, 1995, 1999), research should explore AAL in the textual economy of youth space, including among Latino/Latina, Pacific Islander, and other youth who share in AAL. We know much about pedagogical and curricular strategies supporting youth in using AAL literacy practices while acquiring DAE literacy practices (Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici, & Carpenter, 2006; Rickford, Sweetland, & Rickford, 2004). To truly join youth texts, such strategies must also engage in critical conversations about power and audience and history—the “why” behind a need to acquire command of multiple written and oral varieties. In addition, we need to be willing to see such linguistic features as valid, equal modes of communication and encourage preparing teachers to do the same.

To genuinely *problem pose* (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970), using the purpose and power of youth texts as a foundation will help to forge a third space that invites the counter scriptural economy of youth texting to dialogue with the dominant practices teachers promote and demand. In the process, youth and their teachers will need to grapple with the ways that claiming difference and reinforcing division through text *and*, at times, cutting across those differences and divisions can make shared cultural spaces possible and productive. Ela’s statement of her Samoaness inscribed on her backpack, Rochelle’s and Carlos’s expressions of AAL and youth language in their text messages, and Rahul’s flows merging his Fijian and emcee identities show how youth employing literacies can challenge and reinforce traditional notions of difference and writing. It is our job as teachers and teacher educators to learn to read these texts and meaningfully incorporate them into classroom lessons about audience, purpose, grammars, difference, and power.

The youth of South Vista engaged in a textual dexterity that suggests great promise for what English education can do to reinvigorate language and literacy learning in multiethnic high schools where youth are engaged in living and writing together in difference. Miles’s C-Town sweatshirt demanded, “Money, Power, Respect.” We may all need a little of each; so do our young people. We can begin by trying to understand the textual worlds youth create and live within.

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Notes

1. All names of people and places are pseudonyms.
2. These multimodal forms of writing are challenging the primacy of dominant print literacy, though they are in no way new. Anzaldúa (1987) and Baca (2008) have shown such writing at the heart of Mesoamerican written communication systems that were destroyed by conquistadors in favor of alphabetized print dominance.
3. I have blocked identifying information from photographs.
4. AAL is a systematic variety of English spoken by many African Americans. AAL has a rich tradition in the literature, spiritual practices, music, and everyday lives of African Americans. See Green (2002) and Rickford and Rickford (2000) for a full account of the AAL features described in this article.
5. Although such linguistic sharing may hold importance for the way youth challenge static notions of difference in multiethnic schools, it is important not to overstate what language sharing can achieve in an unequal society. Language is one major marker of ethnicity and identity, but other major markers of race, such as skin color, play heavily into systems of discrimination, racism, and privilege.
6. The title of this section is a text message I received from Rochelle in July 2007. It includes AAL phonology in consonant cluster reduction ("was" for "what's") and consonant replacements ("dis" for "this" and "doin" for "doing").
7. According to Chang's (2005) thorough history, hip-hop music and rapping trace their roots to Jamaica, though the craft and culture grew up in mixed African American and Caribbean American communities in New York City.

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