Dominant Genre Emeritus: Why It's Time to Retire the Essay

Adam J. Banks

The very first question that comes to mind for me when I wrestle with Dana Williams's call for us to pursue scholarship and teaching to decolonize the mind is "how do we decolonize writing instruction?" From First Year Composition through writing in the major or writing across the curriculum efforts through the doctoral dissertation, writing has been the primary mode through which we attempt to teach students what it means to be a thinker, what it means to put their ideas in conversation with others, what it means to participate in community. Writing is the primary mode through which we try to teach students what it means to do intellectual work. While there is wide variety in the writing assignments and activities being used to teach writing, the essay remains the primary genre we use to introduce and teach academic discourse, however slippery that phrase may be.

I want to make the case that it is time to promote the essay to "dominant genre emeritus," to retire it as our main (and sometimes our only) mode for student to develop the intellectual abilities and writing practices we hope they will. Cultural relevance, the speed of technological change and the impact of technological change on communication practices, and the narrow bandwidth of what the essay enables us to do in this expanded communication landscape demand that we bring a richer array of writing and communication practices to use in its place—or at the very least, include with the essay and its related forms. To that end, I will use this space to present the DJ as a model of rhetorical performance, and trace a writing pedagogy based on the tropes of "mix," "remix," and "mixtape."

There are many reasons why the essay should be retired beyond the fact that it is a writing technology that represents a myopic mélange of practices and values cobbled together from a wide, random, range of European figures and traditions. Besides, despite the fact that it is a mysterious mashup, it is one that works. In a different space I described it this way:

> The essay is a valuable, even powerful, technology that has particular affordances in helping us promote communicative ability, dialogue and critical thinking. But we have gotten too comfortable relying on those affordances as our writing and communication universe goes through not only intense change, but an ever increasing tempo of change. (Banks, "Ain't No Walls Behind the Sky, Baby!")

We should retire the essay as our dominant, and sometimes, only, genre for writing instruction because, by itself, it is tired. If we take the literacies,

the abilities, that we use the essay to build with students: ethical source use; connection to scholarly community; the ability to value other voices, including those with whom we disagree; the ability to develop compelling support for an idea; experimentation with different rhythms and organizing strategies in our prose, we should free ourselves enough to understand that we can work on those literacies and critical understandings with students in almost any genre of writing or production. Further, there are many other abilities that are emerging as crucial components of literacy, as thoroughly saturated by media and embedded in digital technologies as it is, that we must build space for in our writing pedagogy. Henry Jenkins, Ravis Purushotma, Margaret Weigel, Katie Clinton and Alice J. Robinson describe the challenges of our moment as one of demanding

> new media literacies: a set of cultural competencies and social skills that young people need in the new media landscape. Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from individual expression to community involvement…these skills build on the foundation of traditional literacy and research, technical and critical analysis skills learned in the classroom. (xiii)

They list 11 distinct skills that are crucial to these new literacies some of the most salient ones for me include: play, performance, simulation, appropriation (which they define as "the ability to meaningfully sample and remix content" [4]), distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking and negotiation, as "the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms" (xiv).

I have excerpted their list to show that many of the abilities Jenkins et al argue are crucial to literacy in our current moment are also understandings that emerge from Black griotic traditions. These abilities and the framework they use to assert their importance to a new media landscape emphasize the importance of a communal approach to literacy that Black communities and scholars have theorized, taught and practiced. Moreover, the individualistic focus of the essay simply does not allow such a communal approach to literacy (despite the fact that there are communal elements to practices like peer review and collective brainstorming), or many of the specific abilities presented in *Confronting the Challenges to Participatory Culture.*

A few examples will show this expanded set of literacies at work. Jamilah Lemieux, Senior Editor at Ebony.com, writes, produces and edits a great deal of content that would be built on the foundations of writing skills emerging from print literacies. However, she also has to work continually on how even her (and EBONY's) most print-based stories will circulate in a multimodal, transmedia

environment. This means navigating considering audio, video, still photography, and design—and the interaction of all of these genres—at once, and having to navigate multiple forms of media, from print to broadcast, to several social media platforms, at once. Finally, in addition to the transmedia navigation, negotiation, and judgment that these abilities require, success as a "writer" for Lemieux demands building and engaging with complex networks of both people and information.

Humor and culture blogger Luvvie Ajayi, in her blog Awesomely Luvvie exhibits these same abilities and adds a twist: her most popular blog entries build collective intelligence as a central element of the content. To put it differently, her blog (and her social media presence generally) are not simply about her unique and brilliant wit and perspective, but about what her audience creates together. In one post from August 9, 2016 "Whose Blasphemous Kool-Aid Chicken Wings Are These?" Luvvie goes in about some egregious mess that happened to go viral, and after offering her take on it, she includes the comments of many of her audience members: "[a]nywho, I posted this on my Awesomely Luvvie Facebook page, and you know my folks have ZERO chill. They owe chill." She uses her blog and broader social media presence to cultivate community with her audience, and this audience becomes a communal collaborator whose members gladly participate. Of course, rather than phrases like "collective intelligence" we would recognize work like this as classic call and response, or an embodiment of "I am because we are" as a central component of a writer's ethos.

I highlight call-and-response and contemporary examples like Lemieux and Ajayi to note that approaches to writing instruction that emerge from Black rhetorical traditions broadly, and especially from griotic traditions and their resonances in our current era, can help us transform writing instruction to account more fully for the needs for cultural relevance and meaningful ways of responding to technological change. While I focus here on genres for writing instruction, the call to transform it means that our approach to writing instruction for Black students and for all students should lead us to change not only the genres we use as the bases for writing activities and assignments, but our methods for evaluation, feedback, our course design and content, teacher stance and even the instructional goals we bring to the classroom.

More Than Boxes and Wires, and More Than Mere Tools

Any approach to transforming writing instruction that we advocate for must deal richly with the challenges and possibilities post by the ways in which our lives are thoroughly enmeshed with media and digital, networked technologies. We must develop activities, courses and degree programs that engage both the ability to produce and participate in these spaces and wrestle with the difficult structural

issues that technological tools and systems present. Thus, a first challenge in addressing the relationship between technologies and writing instruction lies in what we understand technology to mean. There are two major roadblocks that hinder rich engagement with technologies in writing instruction. The first is one that I'll crudely label a shiny stuff fallacy. The second, related, problem is that of an instrumentalist view of technologies.

We often think of technologies as representing only what is newest, or the most cutting edge, on a particular scene. This can lead to departments and schools being taken for huge amounts of money on expenditures that may or not be necessary, and it also leads instructors to feel that they are not able to take up technologies or technology issues more broadly if their school or their lab—or their students—don't have the latest gadgets. This roadblock is related to the second, more difficult one. When we think about the relationships that endure between technologies and communication and how we want to prepare our students to deal with those challenges through our work at writing instruction, we have to avoid an instrumentalist view of technology, or the view that technology is merely a tool for something, in this case, a tool for communication. Technology is not just the newest gadget to come out in a product line, but involves new, current, dated, old, and obsolete items as well. And far more than mere artifacts, technology involves tools, yes, but also processes, policies, design, labor, use, marketing, content, cultural production as well as broad social and cultural understandings users bring to those spaces. Finally, technology engagement in writing instruction does not involve mere utility: learning how to annotate a text or a video or audio clip on a device, or learning how to use a particular kind of blogging software, or how to get the most out of the learning management system a campus uses is not full engagement with technologies. Writing instruction needs to engage technologies both as a site of inquiry and a site of production. The messiness of social, cultural, economic and political issues related to technologies comes to bear heavily on oral, written and visual communication. To give just one, overly simplified example of how this broader messiness comes to bear on writing instruction beyond the skills and tools, consider how different the conventions of intellectual property operate in the genre of the essay submitted for a class, with a primary audience of only the instructor and fellow students, and a video presentation of the same research presented on a site like Vimeo or YouTube. The ability to navigate what can feel like the remarkable inconsistency of some hosting services' terms of service and the constant push-pull of battles over copyright is just as important as the skill of posting a video, or writing an essay, or mastering a citation style.

Legba on the 1s and 2s: The Digital Griot as a Model for Writing Instruction

If technology as involves far more than merely tools and if writing instruction involves far more than critical understandings and skills that can be learned through a genre like the essay, what should some of our goals be for writing instruction that engages in rich ways with the multimedia, networked, digital landscapes we and our students inhabit? Let me offer 3 major goals that connect with the imperatives of both *Confronting the Challenges to Participatory Culture* and communal, Black understandings of literacy:

- The ability to be strategic communicators across modes and media: students should have opportunities to produce, analyze, interpret, edit, revise, deliver and circulate messages as print, audio, image and video.
- The ability to build, understand and curate networks and archives.
- The ability to honor the rhetorical traditions and current practices of communities with which people align, and to develop agility with the discursive practices of diverse communities and spaces.

To put it differently, I'm looking for curricula in writing and rhetoric that move beyond the retired, retread essay and encourage students to think of themselves as digital griots, as Legba on turntables and laptops, committed to both futuristic visions and the pursuit of deep, searching, knowledge of the past. Legba, the ultimate linguist in Afrodiasporic oral traditions, is presented as a guardian of mythic crossroads and skilled in all languages. Alondra Nelson, in an essay titled "Future Texts," works through Ishmael Reed's Papa LaBas as one source of inspiration so that

> 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)

For Nelson, LaBas (and thus, Legba) is the figure who helps us link past, present and futures; technologies and Black experience; and the many "languages" that mark participation in the many spaces we attempt to prepare students to connect to and participate in: the academy, workplaces of various kinds, home and community.

With Legba as a model for synchronizing life at all of these crossroads, with the griot as a model for the complexities of communicating in this moment, I want us to teach students to be Legba on the 1s and 2s, or digital griots. A compelling,

yet under attended version of the griot is the DJ, and one worthy goal for writing instruction would be to teach students to be DJs with words and ideas.

Mix, Remix, Mixtape: A DJs Writing Pedagogy

What makes the DJ's practices a potential model for writing instruction? In *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*, I argued

> 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 an ideal rhetorical model for multimedia writing…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. (31)

While any of the practices of the DJ could be adapted compellingly for the writing classroom (I often talk with my students about the importance of the "shoutout" as a means for identifying oneself within a community, or of "cratedigging" as a continual commitment to critical research, for example), I want to focus here on 3 main practices that can serve as tropes for critical writing practices: mix, remix and mixtape. Among my many reasons for selecting these specific practices is the fact that each of them calls attention to the roles that selection and arrangement play *as invention*, locating second use as crucial elements of any writing pedagogy responsive to the challenges of communication when anything can be copied, pasted, sampled, shared.

I explain the mix to my students in a couple of different ways: as the studio DJ or producer on a mixing board making adjustments to every quality imaginable to produce the ideal sound for a final product "I need to go put the final mix down on this draft I've been working on" and as the J Dilla or Beth Coleman type of DJ bringing together elements from all kinds of songs, videos, texts and other sources

to create something new out of those elements. From samples of recognizable hooks that were a staple of Hip Hop in the 1990s to breaking songs down into far more discrete elements into dizzyingly complex, infinitely layered creations: a guitar riff from one place, a drum kick from another, a chord or a chord progression from somewhere else. Coleman highlights the rhetorical dimension of this work as describes part of her process in DJing live events in an interview with Tricia Rose: "being a DJ is like being a cipher of the most radical kind. In each place you play, the audience takes a new face and so do you. Sometimes I make subtle shifts between rhythmic patterns—going from a jump drum and bass roll to some funky electro booty-shaking business without losing the sonic thread" (144).

When I use the DJ's mix as a writing practice in the classroom, what I most want my students to see is the ways combining materials from many different sources can, through their perspectives and aesthetic choices, lead to an entirely new creation. One assignment I use for this purpose is one that I have given different titles to at different times, but which here I will call "Mixing the Intertext." This assignment is a Pecha Kucha (20 slides, 20 seconds each) slideshow played in class at the end of the course. In the assignment, I ask students to select 20 quotes from material we've read over the course of a quarter or semester and arrange those quotes in some way that serves not only as a recap of the readings, but also provides some kind of critical, engaged response. Here's an excerpt of an assignment prompt I use:

> How you arrange those 20 quotes and what visual, oral, or design elements you might add to the slides is completely up to you… In other words, in addition to selecting and arranging the 20 quotes (and other elements you choose), you will have to make sure they work together to present some kind of response you want to offer
>
> A few keys for this assignment: you may NOT add other textual elements to your slides beyond the quotes. You will have to use the other design elements you add (images, music, sounds, design) plus the selection and arrangement of your slides to make the coherent statement you want to make. This assignment intentionally pushes you to focus on selection and arrangement as key compositional practices. The second key is you want to think about both overall coherence and statement. The individual slides have to work on their own and the whole presentation has to fit and flow together. The third and final key/hint is that 20 seconds is both a very short time and a long time: what you choose to include on each slide must be viewable and intelligible to your peers in the 20 seconds it will show. This time limit is intentional—it will be frustrating for you, but it opens up a great deal of creative possibilities.

By restricting students to only the quotes from course readings as the only "text" they may use, I force them to work diligently on which ones they select to make a statement they want to make about the course, and I push them to think intently about arrangement. How should they show the connections they have made across readings and class discussions? How should they demonstrate the shifts in their own thinking? How might they let other students know what was most compelling for them? What affirmed them, what challenged them? I often (but not always) combine this with a written piece asking students to describe their process in creating their PechaKucha, but even with the "written" component, the slideshow is always the dominant portion of the assignment.

Another level on which these individual mixes become part of an intertext is through the combined effect of all the students' slideshows becoming part of a conversation not simply with the course texts, but with each other. After 15, or 20, or 30, the range of approaches to the assignment, the statements the students make with their slideshows, the quotes that are repeated and the places where students diverge, all combine to create the possibility of a kind of Nommo moment: one in which the power what emerges from the call and response of a group of voices can become greater than the slideshows themselves. The iterative playing of different elements of the course discussions and readings through different versions of slideshows helps a collective take on the ideas of the course come together, where students see multiple possibilities for playing within and without that collective take, and the signifying repetition, the repetition with differences, of many versions can make central ideas of a course more memorable. I've continued to use the assignment as one way to end my courses because it also provides me with more insight into how my students think through the goals, outcomes and content of a course than many other kinds of instruments I might use, including the tired, re-tired, term paper type essay.

Eduardo Navas, in his book *Remix Theory: the Aesthetics of Sampling,* offers the following definition of remix: "a reinterpretation of a pre-existing song, meaning that the 'aura' of the original will be dominant in the remixed version" (65). After providing this definition, he presents a taxonomy of 3 distinct types of remix: what we might call the EP, or extended play; a selective version, which might delete some elements of the original and/or add other elements while "keeping the 'essence' or 'spectacular aura' of the composition intact" (66); and a reflexive remix, one that "allegorizes and extends the aesthetic of sampling, where the remixed version challenges the aura of the original, and claims autonomy, even when it carries the name of the original; material is added or deleted, but the original tracks are largely left intact to be recognizable"(66.) Trap music out of Atlanta, Techno and House out of Detroit and Chicago, and Chopped and Screwed emerging from Houston

give us compelling examples of each of these kinds of remix at work. And of course there are other types of remixes: when 1990s r&B group Pure Soul did a remake of the O'Jays version of "Stairway to Heaven," the producers combined Pure Soul's and the O'Jays version into a remix that linked groups and generations together in tradition—and made for a compelling update of the classic.

In the classroom, I use two different takes on remix in order to push students to think about the rhetorical considerations of audience. One of these approaches is simply an "update" or "refresh" activity. I usually do this as something informal, as a part of reading responses, in order to get students to reflect on tacit knowledge and aesthetic choices that can shape a rhetor's choices and therefore, be more attuned to strategic considerations. A regular conversation on twitter is what would the popular television show "A Different World" look like if it were re-cast and produced to take up contemporary issues? This form of remix takes a similar approach: if in an African American rhetorics class we are working through a speech from Claudia Jones or Malcolm X, I will ask students to draft a remixed version that they can imagine being given today. Of course the range of responses, rather than any particular response, shows the dynamics of what students think would need to be revised and why; for individual students, the challenge to preserve the character of the original while updating for a contemporary context can help to illuminate assumptions (or educated guesses) they are making about such an audience; and these guesses or assumptions can be used to teach principles of audience analysis.

The other take on the remix assignment that I use fairly regularly would involve a written version of what DJs would refer to as beat matching. I often use the Tom Joyner moment with DJ Steve Silk Hurley, the "Old School/New School Remix," to show what happens when songs from different eras are skillfully blended to put them in conversation with each other. Of course it takes incredible skill as well as a highly refined ear and as well as an aesthetic that values intergenerational connection in order for Hurley (and other DJs) to create these mixes. One has to account for speed, rhythm, melody, harmonic structure in order to beat match such different songs to bring them together. I highlight these skills and reflect with students on how we make transitions in writing, in images, and (sometimes) in video. In some settings, I may move from that reflective discussion to ask them to apply the principles at work in one of Hurley's mixes to a pair or a group of distinct texts.

Of course, the passage of time means that it has become difficult to speak in detail about the "mixtape" beyond the metaphorical, even as enduring as the term has been in popular culture. The shift to streaming music services has meant that everything becomes an infinite playlist, far removed from the confines of 60, 90, or 120 minutes for a cassette tape or 80 minutes for a CD, and even further removed

from the artifacts of CDs and tapes. Despite the slippage in the use of the term, it remains an important element of a writing pedagogy based on DJs composing practices. I ground conversation about the mixtape not only in the practices of artists (from DJs to MCs and singing groups) who self-produced versions of their work or their best mixes of others' work in order to subvert corporate dominated radio and record labels in order to find an audience, but also in the practices of everyday people who recorded tapes off of the radio or put together their own compilations of their favorite music onto CDs:

> …[I]n the hands of everyday people, the mixtape was an act of vernacular canon formation, deeply personal yet also part of a public conversation, as other young people talked about their favorite songs, new releases they thought others didn't know yet, their staunchly defended positions about who were the best artists, singers, DJs and MCs, and their own idiosyncratic ways of choosing and arranging the tracks. Even in our junior high and high school hands, these anthologies became about the challenge of imposing order on the chaos—the challenge of getting everything that mattered on the two sides of those sixty- or ninety-minute cassettes. (Banks, *Digital Griots* 114)

Everyday anthologies. Vernacular canon formation. The core of the idea of mixtape as a writing practice for me is the fact that one does not have to work for a record label or a publishing company or a journal to engage in it. I want students to always feel empowered to create their own narratives and counternarratives and to be able to share content in networks far beyond the classroom. To that end, I approach mixtaping from two directions: in what we might call a playlist activity in music streaming environments, and anthology creation similar to what scholars might pursue as edited collections.

One assignment that I use under the title of "Intellectual Mixtape" is the challenge to create a soundtrack for the ideas of a course. This activity or assignment is a little more difficult without the artifact of a CD to bring some closure to the creation, but I still use it as a less formal, often ungraded, activity. In prompting the activity, I ask students to create a mixtape "that works as a soundtrack for the class's readings. Just like a good soundtrack to a movie will be inseparable from the film, working with both its content and style, your mixtape should include songs that work with, speak to, challenge, and/or build on the ideas and texts we've used in this part of the course." When I was doing more formal versions of the assignment for a grade, I would ask students to write an explanatory piece that would serve as "liner notes" for the CD. One thing I learned fairly early in using the assignment is that the genre of liner notes is itself a dated technology that requires a good deal of explicit instruction before even using it as a metaphor for a writing activity. All

these years later, I still think it is worth the effort, when the course design and time allow.

For the anthology version, the mixtape is simply a critical research project that turns over more elements of the charge to students. At some levels, I might ask students to combine scholarly and public/popular sources on a topic related to the course, and to find enough thematic coherence that their sources can be compiled into a printed volume, a handcrafted Zine, an audio collection on a site like Soundcloud, or a blog. The challenge that I attempt to pose for the students, sometimes more successfully than others, lies in developing a compilation that is coherent enough that they can create an introduction for it, whether in print, audio, or video. Selection and arrangement remain key compositional principles for this activity just like for the text mix slideshow, or the remix, but the challenge of framing the discussion in the way that an introduction to a print anthology or the liner notes to an album once did, is the key intellectual task. My goal therefore, is for students to have to impose some order of their own on the chaos of scholarly and public information available on any topic they might choose; being able to synthesize and connect ideas across texts becomes more important than having any single line of argument one might adopt and defend.

Rhetoric is Technological/Technologies are Rhetorical

The focus on the DJ as an important figure in rhetorical study and practice and this particular set of writing activities—mix, remix and mixtape—and the underlying pedagogical principles they privilege, represent only one, very narrowly drawn, way we might bring theories, tropes and practices from Black rhetorical traditions more directly into writing instruction with the goal of transforming it, for Black students and for all students. I use this case to be illustrative rather than instructive, to show the wide range of possibilities that exist, rather than to limit them.

No matter what we think and know about the ways technology issues are implicated in both oppression and liberation, this much is true: any approach to writing instruction that we design or advocate for in this moment must deal in depth with both the challenges and possibilities posed by our relationships with technologies. Given this imperative, we cannot deal with technology issues in multimodal writing and communication working from an instrumentalist view of technologies and writing instruction that would lead us to believe that technology means only the hardware and software, or that writing is simply a set of skills to be learned in service of other kinds of intellectual work. The good news in crafting new responses to this old, old problem is twofold: Black pursuits of liberation and

the rhetorical traditions that emerge from them have always been connected to technology issues, and technologies themselves, are always inherently rhetorical. A deeply rhetorical approach to writing instruction, rooted in the practices of the digital griot, distilled through the diaspora, give us a chance to build writing instruction in the pursuit of academic excellence, connection to community, professional pursuits, and intergenerational connection. It might even give us a chance to begin the work of decolonizing writing instruction.

Works Cited

Ajayi, Luvvie. "Whose Blasphemous Kool-Aid Chicken Wings Are These?" *Awesomely Luvvie Blog*, 9 Aug. 2016, www.awesomelyluvvie.com. Accessed 10 Aug. 2016.

Banks, Adam. *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*. Southern Illinois UP, 2011.

---."Ain't No Walls Behind the Sky, Baby! Funk, Flight, Freedom." Conference on College Composition and Communication 2015, 19 March 2015, Tampa Convention Center, Tampa, FL. Chair's Address.

Coleman, Beth and Tricia Rose. "Sound Effects." *Technicolor: Race, Technology and Everyday Life*, edited by Alondra Nelson, Thuy Linh N. Tu, and Alicia Headlam Hines, NYU Press, 2001, pp. 142-153.

Jenkins, Henry et al. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*. MIT Press, 2006.

Lemieux, Jamilah. *Jamilah Lemieux: Love. Culture. War.* www.jamilahlemieux.com. Accessed 10 Aug. 2016.

Navas, Eduardo. *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling*. SpringerWien, New York, 2012.

Nelson, Alondra. "Introduction: Future Texts." *Afrofuturism: A Special Issue of Social Text*, edited by Alondra Nelson, vol. 20, no. 71, 2002, Duke University Press, pp. 1-15.