

Creating Purpose, Power, and Passion: Sister Souljah and the Rhetoric of Hip Hop

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This article introduces a special issue of the Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric addressing the rhetoric of Hip Hop. The essays that follow address a wide range of salient issues, showcasing both how scholars of rhetoric contribute to a richer understanding of Hip Hop and rhetoric and how Hip Hop helps to shape our understanding of rhetoric.

In Spring 2007, I (Andre) taught the first course on hip hop at the University of Memphis. While still a graduate student in the Department of Communication at the University of Memphis, Dr. Beverly Bond, director of the African and African American Studies (AAAS) program, asked me to create a “special topics” class. I had previously taught the African Religions in the Diaspora class for the program, and based on the success of those two classes, Dr. Bond felt that I was ready for this “special assignment.”

When asked to create a “special topics” class, I knew exactly what course I wanted to create. Earlier, in 2005, with Dr. Barbara A. Holmes, who then served as an Associate Professor of Ethics and African American Studies at Memphis Theological Seminary (MTS), I helped create the first hip hop and theology class at MTS.¹ I now wanted to create a class that combined my interest with hip hop and rhetoric—and so, the “Rhetoric of Hip Hop” class was born.

In the course description, I wrote that the class would focus “primarily on how hip hop spoke to a diverse group of people” by studying “hip hop’s persuasive, identifying, and constitutive features and effects.” Here I used “rhetoric” to examine or understand discourse(s) that help us flesh out meanings from and within Hip Hop culture. Even though we emphasized hip hop’s written texts, we also understood that hip hop was more than rap music. Therefore, the class analyzed and critiqued other features that made up hip-hop and the culture that hip hop produced. When I finally completed the syllabus, it read as a hip hop studies overview—each week examining a part of hip hop’s culture.

While designing the course, I came across a speech by Sister Souljah delivered in June of 1992. Souljah’s address responded to then Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas and Democratic Nominee for President speech he gave earlier at a Rainbow/Push Coalition gathering. As Clinton courted Black voters with promises of rebuilding crumbling inner cities across America, especially after the Los Angeles uprising in response to the not guilty verdicts for the police officers who beat motorist Rodney King, many remembered this speech for the critique Clinton leveled at hip hop

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¹ I would soon later learn that this class was the first of its kind at any higher educational institution.

activist Sister Souljah. She had spoken at the gathering the previous night. Clinton did not level his critique of Souljah at the speech she gave at the Rainbow/Push event, but at comments she previously made a month earlier to David Mills, a reporter from the Washington Post.²

Clinton started his critique of Souljah by directly confronting the audience in attendance by saying:

You had a rap singer here last night [on the panel] named Sister Souljah...Her comments before and after Los Angeles were filled with a kind of hatred that you do not honor today and tonight. Just listen to this, what she said: She told the Washington Post about a month ago, and I quote, "If black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people...So if you are a gang member and you'd normally kill somebody, why not kill a white person..." If you took the words 'white' and 'black' and reversed them, you might think David Duke was giving that speech.³

Clinton further said that what Souljah told the reporter was "so inconsistent" with what the Rainbow Coalition was about. He continued, "What she said really bothered me, not only because she said it but because she is somebody who obviously is bright and has a lot of influence over young people. And I think we have to take issue with it... We have an obligation, all of us, to call attention to prejudice wherever we see it."⁴

Clinton's critique of Sister Souljah in front of the Rainbow Coalition irked Jackson and many people associated with the Coalition. It would forever become known in political circles as the "Sister Souljah Moment."⁵ However, many may have forgotten Souljah's speech she delivered at a press conference a week later. While many in the mainstream political world saw this as simply a political strategy, she and the hip hop community viewed Clinton's remarks as a *dis*—which, of course, in hip hop slang is short for *disrespect*. I was interested in what she had to say because of my interest in studying public address; therefore, it was one of the first pieces I taught in the class.⁶

Souljah started her speech by quickly positioning herself as a "very confident, steadfast and powerful young African woman," who is "surprised" that she has "impacted and affected the development of not only national politics but international politics as well." She found it "shocking" that at a time of "economic recession, and inner city chaos, Bill Clinton has chosen to attack "not the issues but a young African woman who is very well educated, alcohol-free, drug-free, and a successful self-employed businesswoman, and community servant."⁷

² For a partial transcript of the interview between Sister Souljah and reporter David Mills, see "In her Own Disputed Words. Washington Post. June 6, 1992. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/06/16/in-her-own-disputed-words/2a1a2a50-fb15-48c9-b2fb-d701e4f56a45/>

³ Thomas B. Edsall. Clinton Stuns Rainbow Coalition. Washington Post. June 14, 1992. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/06/14/clinton-stuns-rainbow-coalition/02d7564f-5472-4081-b6b2-2fe5b849fa60/>
⁴ *ibid*

⁵ For more on the "Sister Souljah Moment" and its context, see Clarence Lusane. A Historic Moment: Black Voters and the 1992 Presidential Race. Trotter Review, 6 (2) Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1239&context=trotter_review; Antonio de Velasco. Centrist Rhetoric: The Production of Political Transcendence in the Clinton Presidency. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010, (chapter 2) and Sarah J. Jackson, Black Celebrity, Racial Politics, and the Press: Framing Dissent. New York, Routledge, 2014 (chapter 4).

⁶ Sister Souljah. Rap Artist's Response to Clinton Remarks. C-SPAN. June 16, 1992. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?26613-1/rap-artists-response-clinton-remarks>. For a printed copy of the remarks, see Sister Souljah, Press Conference Statement. <http://hiphopandpolitics.com/2012/06/13/20-years-ago-the-infamous-sister-souljah-moment-occured-we-look-back/>

⁷ Souljah, (para.1) <http://hiphopandpolitics.com/2012/06/13/20-years-ago-the-infamous-sister-souljah-moment-occured-we-look-back/>

Furthering her positioning, Souljah wanted to “clarify to the press who I am.” She defined herself as a “rapper, activist, organizer, and lecturer” who was “born in the Bronx, New York.” She worked as an intern for the Republican Party in the House of Representatives, attended Rutgers University, and won an oratorical contest. She studied abroad, worked with, and shared the platform with both national and international dignitaries. Thus, she argued that she was “no newcomer to the world of politics and she was emotionally, intellectually, and academically developed” to handle this situation.⁸

After establishing who she was for the wider audience, Souljah then turns her attention to Bill Clinton. She claimed that Clinton was a “draft dodger” who “feels it’s alright to send your son to fight wars when he himself would not fight for the principles he says he believes in.” She then offered a comparison between herself and Clinton by mentioning that the former “talks about morality but admits he was a reefer smoker.” At the same time, she “has never smoked reefer or any other drug.”⁹

She then moves to Clinton’s extramarital affairs by saying that while Clinton “believes in a strong family unit,” he could never quite get his own personal and social behavior together.” She criticizes him for “attacking and alienating women for his own shortcomings.” She also critiques Clinton for joining an all-white country club, supporting giving prisoners lobotomies, for not having a “substantive, comprehensive agenda around economic development, foreign policy, or social policy, and for distancing himself from Jesse Jackson, who in Souljah estimation, is “more qualified for the job.”¹⁰

She sums up her argument by denouncing Clinton as a person who “lacks integrity as a “staunch patriot, a people’s servant, a compassionate liberal, a family man, pro-woman candidate, and a coherent scholar.” Moreover, Souljah argues that Clinton “used” her as a vehicle, like Willie Horton and other Black victims, which for Souljah makes him a “poor excuse” and an “agenda-less candidate.”¹¹

Souljah then turned her attention to America or society in general through indirect comments aimed at establishing her ethos and putting distance between herself and the America that Clinton was running to represent. By way of anaphora, Souljah recalls some of America’s indiscretions.

Sister Souljah does not own a gun, has not shot or killed anyone, did not invade Grenada, Panama, Nicaragua, Kuwait or Angola. Sister Souljah has never ordered the National Guard into anyone’s community and has not made drug deals with Noriega. Sister Souljah has never been a member of a terrorist organization, has no history of crime, has not burned crosses on anybody’s lawn or lynched or hanged White people from trees. Sister Souljah has not systematically denied people the right to study and enjoy their culture in the so-called public education system. Sister Souljah did not send Haitians back to Haiti as though they were sub-human. Sister Souljah did not kill the native Indians under the guise of friendship. Sister Souljah did not cause or inspire police brutality, did not beat Rodney King, or shoot Phillip Panell and never shot and killed a little White girl in the head for stealing orange juice and let her murderer go free. Sister Souljah did not vote on the Simi Valley jury and let criminal cops free.

⁸ Souljah, (para.2-3) <http://hiphopandpolitics.com/2012/06/13/20-years-ago-the-infamous-sister-souljah-moment-occured-we-look-back/>

⁹ Souljah, (para. 6-7) <http://hiphopandpolitics.com/2012/06/13/20-years-ago-the-infamous-sister-souljah-moment-occured-we-look-back/>

¹⁰ Souljah, (para. 8-12) <http://hiphopandpolitics.com/2012/06/13/20-years-ago-the-infamous-sister-souljah-moment-occured-we-look-back/>

¹¹ Souljah, (para. 13-14) <http://hiphopandpolitics.com/2012/06/13/20-years-ago-the-infamous-sister-souljah-moment-occured-we-look-back/>

Sister Souljah did not create the economic conditions of South Central L.A. or any other urban area for that matter and did not create an environment of insecurity that forced people into gangs.¹²

“White people,” she continues, “deny it all, refuse to discuss it, silence intimate and harass those who take a stand and fight back.” Souljah then affirms her anger—equating her anger to that of a “sane person” who understands that she has a right to be angry at the “racist White transgressions of this society.” She concludes her recall of history by reminding her audience that she is not a racist because “neither Sister Souljah nor any other African leader in this world has the power to collectively and systematically beat down and destroy European people.”¹³

Souljah then shifts to the event that precipitated the Clinton response and the one that brings her to this point. She reminds her audience that her comments should represent the “mindset of a gang member.” Therefore, when she said to the Washington Post reporter:

Were you surprised at what happened in L.A.? No, I was not, White people should not have been surprised either; they knew that Black people were dying every day in the streets of Los Angeles to gang violence created by poverty and social chaos, but they did not care. If young Black men in L.A. would kill their own kind, their own Brothers and Sisters, what would make White people think they wouldn't kill them too? Do White people think they're better or is it that White death means so much more than Black death.¹⁴

In arguing that she took on the persona of a gang member and not speaking as or for herself, Souljah concluded her speech by invoking the popular Martin Luther King Jr's phrase— “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” She followed this statement by noting that she “reserves the right to fight against White racism” and reminding her audience that she did not “order anyone to kill anyone.”

I highlight ethos and how Souljah creates and develops it throughout the address when teaching this speech. Drawing from the work of Michael Hyde, my use of ethos is not limited to the character or ethical standing of the speaker. Hyde argues for a more comprehensive understanding of the term—referring to *ethos* as a way “discourse is used to transform space and time into “dwelling places” where people can deliberate about and “know together” some matter of interest.”¹⁵ Once formed, these “dwelling places” become spaces where the speaker's ethics and moral character begin to take shape. It is not that the speaker comes to the speaking event without ethics and moral character, but the dwelling place creates the space for ethics and moral character to be displayed.

While Souljah faced several rhetorical challenges, Coretta Pittman has argued that the main challenge she faced was an ethos problem.¹⁶ Many argued that hip hop artists and by extension all of hip hop culture should not be looked upon as experts in the political arena because the art form was one that promoted violence, and non-affirming values for children and society. Thus, defining ethos as “discourse used to transform space and time into dwelling places” opens an avenue that

¹² Souljah, (para. 14) <http://hiphopandpolitics.com/2012/06/13/20-years-ago-the-infamous-sister-souljah-moment-occured-we-look-back/>

¹³ Souljah, (para. 15-16) <http://hiphopandpolitics.com/2012/06/13/20-years-ago-the-infamous-sister-souljah-moment-occured-we-look-back/>

¹⁴ Souljah, (para. 17) <http://hiphopandpolitics.com/2012/06/13/20-years-ago-the-infamous-sister-souljah-moment-occured-we-look-back/>

¹⁵ Michael Hyde, *The Ethos of Rhetoric*. Columbia, South Carolina: South Carolina Press, 2004, xiii

¹⁶ Coretta Pittman, Black Women Writers and the Trouble with Ethos: Harriett Jacobs, Billie Holiday, and Sister Souljah. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. 37.1 43-70, 2006.

would allow us to understand Sister Souljah's oratorical performance in her response to Bill Clinton.

From her use of ethos, I then suggest Souljah's rhetorical goals were fourfold. Her first goal was to create space that would allow her to speak and have an audience to hear. The press conference gave her a platform to speak, but her construction of a hip hop ethos allowed her voice to have an audience. Speaking authoritatively, Souljah quickly establishes her ground by feeling "very confident, steadfast, and powerful." In other words, she alerts her audience that she will not be intimidated, weak, or stand down in the face of criticism, which she felt was not fair.

After Souljah established her position as an oratorical emcee, her second rhetorical strategy offered a compelling narrative that provided two rhetorical functions. First, the narrative functioned to introduce Souljah to a broader audience. At the time of her speech, Souljah's notoriety was strong in the hip hop community by her association with the rap group Public Enemy and rapper Ice Cube. However, before the Clinton event, Souljah was practically unknown to the mainstream society—and if a mainstream audience knew her at all, it was for the comments attributed to her from the mouth of Bill Clinton. The narrative offered Souljah the chance to define herself against the perceived notions of herself and hip hop.

Second, the narrative also helps Souljah resituate her ethics and character could develop. Throughout the narrative, Souljah shares her story on her own terms with her audience. Souljah is not one-dimensional—she is a "rapper, activist, organizer, and lecturer." She has been involved with politics, attended Rutgers University, and has spoken on the platform with world leaders. Thus, Souljah's narrative also becomes a refutation against the prevailing thoughts of what hip hop was/is supposed to be because she does not fit the mold.

Souljah's third rhetorical strategy is the critique of Clinton. The critique, as the narrative, serves two purposes. First, in hip hop, a verbal *dis* cannot go unanswered. Souljah's invectives of Clinton offer a platform to address the *character* assassination of her life by exposing *character* flaws in Clinton's own life. However, the second purpose is that it sets the foundation to expose hypocrisy in Clinton's life and the life of the nation. By asserting that Souljah "never own a gun," invaded any two-third world country, dealt with dictators and terrorists, or caused or tacitly approved any oppression against other humans, she offers a strong critique against America.

Finally, the fourth rhetorical strategy employed is explaining hip hop culture. Souljah has already demonstrated her knowledge of the political climate, and now, she explains her comments. She defends them as her riff on adopting a gang member persona to make a more significant point. In other words, Souljah is not making the comments; her persona does. What Souljah attempted to do was to offer a good faith in understanding of hip hop culture and what it does—by adopting different personas, one can acutely offer comments and criticisms of the broader culture—thus whereas Lisa Williamson¹⁷ could not grab the mike and speak, Sister Souljah, can command the mike and speak—creating the space and place to claim her own agency.

In keeping with my original idea for the "Rhetoric of Hip Hop" course, this special issue of the Journal, "Creating Purpose, Power, and Passion," attempts to examine ways in which Hip Hop "speaks" to a diverse group of people. While some in academia and even the society at large still devalue and stereotype Hip Hop, the rhetoric of Hip Hop and its attending rhetoric(s) provides keen insights into the thinking and understanding of those traditionally on the margins of society. Along with the trend of scholars inside and outside of communication studies and rhetoric, we wanted to use the term "rhetoric" to examine or understand discourse(s) that help us flesh out meanings from and within Hip Hop culture. We were looking for papers that would interrogate the

¹⁷ Sister Souljah's birth name.

multiple ways hip hop speaks and the variety of purposes that these varied ways of “speaking” present.

In this special issue, the authors more generally address a broad range of topics related to Hip-Hop rhetoric and rhetorical theory. Tyler Bunzey is interested in the aesthetics of Hip-Hop, specifically its sonic production, by offering what he calls the “Hip-Hop sublime.” Bunzey maintains that the Hip-Hop sublime serves as a considerable means of sense-making. For instance, Notorious B.I.G.’s unforgettable grunt (“unhh”) that he frequently employed prior to his verses can only be known through the experience of that sound. Bunzey suggests that the Hip-Hop sublime affords artists the capacity to articulate pleasure, pain, and belonging outside of the confines of written or spoken language. In short, Bunzey’s work seeks to advance our understanding of sound to attend to how sound signifies below literate semiotics.

Nicole Lowman examines the political efficacy of four of Kendrick Lamar’s musical performances. She contends that Lamar’s performances afford a vibrant assessment of Hip-Hop rhetoric’s ability to engage with and dispute common sense discourse rooted in White supremacist logic regarding the infallibility of police and the criminality of Black bodies. Lowman theorizes Lamar’s political rhetoric as a “poetics of inversion,” a varied, multivalent, and politically efficacious rhetorical strategy involving self-narration, political gestures, and reformulation of hegemonic American mythologies. Lowman maintains that Lamar’s critique of the State broadens the national conversation on racially motivated police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Lee Murkey and Andrea N. Hunt explore the rhetoric of consumption, mainly through their analysis of the intersection of the American educational system and Hip-Hop rhetoric. These scholars observe Hip-Hop as a pedagogical phenomenon and note that in a capitalist society, the American education system simply serves as a sociopolitical institution to propagandize hegemonic ideals that maintain the status quo. These scholars argue for the urgency of Hip-Hop rhetoric and pedagogy to resist the commodification of Hip-Hop music and, by extension, Black bodies. Ultimately, Murkey and Hunt are convinced that such commodification adversely impacts the material conditions for Black people.

George White uses Public Enemy’s music video, “911 is a Joke,” as a case study to investigate how Hip-Hop serves as a medium for Black expression to challenge the healthcare disparities between Black and non-Black bodies. Through his analysis, White makes the case that Public Enemy’s employment of various music samples and explicitly Flavor Flav’s visual performance compels us, particularly Black folks, to resist subordination to White supremacist ideas about the value of the Black body.

Moya Harris and Frank A. Thomas examine DJ D-Nice’s *Club Quarantine* on Instagram. These scholars draw on both rhetorical theology and theomusicology to make their case regarding the significance of Club Quarantine in terms of the (re)conceptualization of community, public health, theology, and Hip-Hop rhetoric and culture in the age of a global pandemic. Harris and Thomas specifically argue that DJ Nice’s Club Quarantine, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, carves out digital space to help reframe the sacred and secular, often blurring the customary boundaries that generally exist between the two.

Finally, DiArron M and Dianna Watkins-Dickerson explore the Battle rap culture, specifically examining rap battlers, Aye Verb, TSU Surf, and Hitman Holla’s discourse, contending that battle rap allows scholars a new terrain to understand communication, culture, and identity.

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reviewers who provided insight to make these essays even better. Special thanks to our graduate students, Walter Henry and Solomon Cochren, for their assistance in helping with this project.

We hope that this special issue will present a more comprehensive understanding of the rhetoric of Hip Hop. Moreover, we hope that this special issue will further the discussion of Hip Hop and rhetoric and how rhetoric helps shape our understanding of Hip Hop, and how Hip Hop also helps shape our understanding of rhetoric.