

INTERPRETIVE 'RAP BATTLE' PROJECT

ASSIGNMENT OVERVIEW

THIS PROJECT IS DUE ON BLAZEVIEW BY 11:59 P.M. ON FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6

Following our conversations about *Hamilton: An American Musical*, you will be broken up into small groups and asked to follow the example of Lin-Manuel Miranda to produce a “rap battle” of your own that offers a contemporary reinterpretation of early American literature. What makes *Hamilton* such a striking musical is, in part, its ability to remix old texts and histories in a way that makes their content relevant to contemporary conversations about race, immigration, and American politics. Using the soundtrack as inspiration, each group is responsible for filming their own *Hamilton*-esque “rap battle” using other early American texts. What would it look like to “rap” as Anne Bradstreet in a way that speaks to a contemporary audience? Or Phillis Wheatley? What other authors or texts might engage with them productively? And how would your staged “battle” speak to both their writings and our contemporary moment? For this assignment, you will be placed into groups of 4-5 students. Groups will be required to submit both a 3-4 minute video and their lyrics for credit, and each individual student will write a 500-word reflection about the project and their creative decisions. This assignment will help us to explore questions about cultural appropriation, revisionism, genre, canon-formation, and media.

This assignment is intended to be fun, creative, and challenging—a chance to stretch your intellectual muscles and to work collaboratively. That said, this is *still* an exercise in close reading, interpretation, and comparative analysis. Producing your “rap battles” will invite you to read (and reread!) several texts closely, to demonstrate an understanding of those texts, and to (quite literally!) put them in conversation with each other. This assignment will prepare you to write stronger research essays in the future; you see, to produce quality research, it is imperative that you learn how to facilitate conversations between multiple texts and multiple voices. It is also important that you help your readers (or your listeners) to understand why your analysis matters, so be sure to answer the “So What?” question!

Not every member of your group must appear on camera, although all students are invited. Indeed, there is a great deal of flexibility in how you produce this video, so long as you produce a thoughtful and sophisticated conversation between authors/texts. That said, your final productions will benefit from you being both creative and resourceful. Feel free to draw on your group’s talents and experiences. It is worth noting that many of the most sophisticated examples of “rap battles” on the *Hamilton* soundtrack include little more than a good beat and carefully-crafted lyrics. “Cabinet Battle #1” and “Cabinet Battle #2” make excellent examples. You might also look at something like “Farmer Refuted” for a mixed-genre performance. If you have singers in your group, feel free to deviate from rap to produce conversations in a different musical genre (for example, listen to the songs performed by Phillipa Soo and/or Leslie Odom, Jr. on the album). Or, if you don’t feel like your group is musically inclined, you might consider performing your “battle” as spoken-word poetry (i.e. Lin-Manuel Miranda during “The World Was Wide Enough”). You can always approach me for clarification or to work through your ideas. Take some risks!

Finally, while I hope that you will find this assignment fun, I also expect you to tackle it responsibly: this marks an attempt to engage *seriously* with rap (and/or related genres of performance) as a medium of resistance and revision—one that is historically rooted in both African American and Latinx cultures. As a genre, hip-hop has been borrowed, used, and appropriated in many ways and across many cultures over the years—sometimes in ways that respect its origins and its legacy, and sometimes in ways that are considerably more fraught. But don’t worry; we will talk about cultural appropriation and the risks of an assignment like this when we discuss the *Hamilton* soundtrack more thoroughly mid-semester.

Your group should plan to meet with me beforehand to discuss your plans for the project, to plan out each group member’s role, and to discuss logistical plans for how you plan to submit your video. Depending on the size and formatting of your video, we may need to consider alternative methods of submission. We

will all watch the final videos together on the last day of class: Monday, December 9. This will provide us with a great opportunity to celebrate your work and to revisit what we learned throughout the semester.

SUGGESTED PROJECT TIMELINE¹

- 10/4: After meeting in the New Media Center, enjoy a dedicated work day for your group while I am away at an academic conference. You should meet with your group (in-person or virtually) and brainstorm ideas for this project. Eventually, you will need to come to a consensus about which authors/texts to examine.
- 10/14: You might consider creating a shared Google Doc for your group where you can collect early ideas for lyrics, verses, themes, passages, arguments, etc. In the following weeks, your group should then consider which quotations from your authors you want to make it into the final project and which quotations might otherwise inform your “rap battle.” You can also use the Discussion Forum and Group Lockers on BlazeVIEW if needed.
- 10/25: By this date you should have met with me as a group (either in-person or virtually) to discuss your initial ideas and to get feedback or suggestions as you move forward. Please be sure to email me to set up a group appointment. This would be a great time to present me with a set of draft lyrics if you would like feedback on them.
- 11/4: You should regularly meet (either in-person or virtually) with your group to revise and confirm your project plans. Use this time to review remaining tasks and continue planning your “rap battle.” You should also schedule time to meet with the New Media Center if you need additional assistance with the technical components of this assignment.
- 11/18: By this week, you should begin the actual filming of your project to avoid any last-minute challenges. In addition, please be sure to set aside some time for editing your “rap battle” before submitting it.
- 11/25: Dedicated work day for your group to begin wrapping up your “rap battle” projects.
- 12/6: **INTERPRETIVE ‘RAP BATTLE’ PROJECT DUE BY 11:59 PM.** This includes not only your video, but also a copy of your lyrics and your individual reflections. All of these items should be submitted to BlazeVIEW.
- 12/9: Watch all of the videos in class for our last day together!

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

Research has shown that two of the highest-impact experiences that undergraduate students can have in the classroom are to produce a “public demonstration of competence” (e.g. an oral or video presentation) and to work together on “collaborative assignments and projects.” While I recognize the anxieties that the dreaded “group project” can often produce, the skills developed in working on an assignment like this will prove valuable well beyond our classroom. Regardless of your career interests, your post-college life is likely to include situations where you are placed into a group of people that you do not know (each bringing different interests and skills to the table), and asked to accomplish a task together on your own schedules. Learning to do so cooperatively and efficiently will matter to your success in those endeavors. An additional benefit to this particular assignment, of course, is that you will also gain exposure to new media technologies that will boost your media literacy and give you access to tools that may be useful to you in future classes and in your personal lives. I am really excited to see what you all produce!

¹ Please note that this is only a suggested timeline for your group to assist with planning. You should communicate with all of your group members early and often to establish your own timeline—one that is tailored specifically to your individual schedules.