

UN1001: Perspectives on Inquiry
Section #17: Hip Hop Culture, History & Politics

Contextual Analysis Project

For a youth with no other hope in a system that excludes them, the gang becomes their corporation, college, religion, and life. It is in this reality that gang members go to the extreme with tattoos. I now have "Eight Trays" written across my neck and "Crips" on my chest. Ever see George Bush with "Republican" on his chest or "Capitalist" on his neck? -- From *Monster: Autobiography of an LA Gang Member*. Sanyika Shakur, aka Monster Kody Scott, 1993.

Thug Life = **The Hate U Give Little Infants F***s Everybody.** Tupac Shakur.

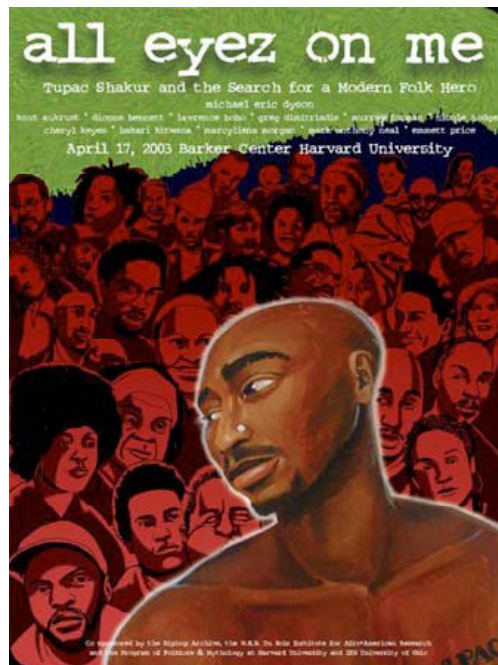
Purposes: to analyze and to describe the circumstances surrounding the design, production, distribution, and reception of a text in order to make some reasoned argument about its meaning.

We analyzed and described the meaning of previous texts in our class based on *textual* evidence — tone, language, rhetorical appeals to an audience of readers, claims, etc. — and now we broaden our view to include *context*. There are several different ways to do a contextual analysis, some of which you will notice have emerged directly from our class discussions:

- A "reception study," where you collect, analyze, and discuss examples of how a film or book was received and reviewed. For example, what can the range of responses to -- and reviews of -- *8 Mile* tell us about where in the public imagination that film resides, and why?

You can also apply that approach to any number of contexts that interest you. Your research will help reveal the ways in which a film, a book, or music interacts with the concerns, hopes, and fears of a culture at large, or with particular segments of a culture. For example:

- How do contemporary fan web sites, film reviews, or other materials respond to *Do the Right Thing*? What do they suggest about the nature of hip hop in a historical context, or in our contemporary times? How are representations of hip hop designed, produced, distributed, and received?
- "Remember this face / save me a place / in thug's mansion": put Shakur's lyric, "Thug's Mansion" into context with other related music: what's at stake in these lyrics? Do they have arguments? Are the lyrics composed for political or aesthetic (or some other) ends? Can the legal argument in "Much Respect: Toward a Hip-Hop Theory of Punishment" provide a helpful context for analyzing and understanding these lyrics?
- When are gang-related and hip-hop visuals, music, and language co-opted into mainstream, suburban, and middle-class commerce and culture? How? By whom? Why?



Conference Poster: "all eyez on me: Tupac Shakur and the Search for a Modern Folk Hero." Harvard University, 2003.



For example, developers of the most recent version of the video game Grand Theft Auto, (*San Andreas*), “draw upon a conceptual style reminiscent of the popular 1990s gangsta films like *Boyz in the Hood* and *Juice*,” according to one game reviewer.

What can a contextual analysis of the game’s marketing strategy, typography, soundtrack, characters, and action tell us about the ways gang life functions in the popular and in the consumer’s imagination?

<http://www.rockstargames.com/sanandreas/>

Deadlines:

Friday, 10/10: Research Notes & Questions

Friday, 10/17: *Oxford English Dictionary* Keyword Assignment

Friday, 10/24: 1st draft due -- Peer-Editing Group Meetings & Worksheet

Friday, 11/7: 2nd draft due-- (3 copies)

Friday, 11/14: Final draft

Length: 1800-2500 words (or about 8-10 pages), with Works Cited

Research Sources: Eight to ten sources and citations, with at least half of them from scholarly/academic sources

I began this assignment description with a conventional academic definition of a contextual analysis: a project that examines the design, production, distribution, and reception of a text. The payoff — the *value* of a contextual analysis — is that we will gain a new, richer understanding of that text’s meaning.

Another way to think of it is this: you select a question or area of inquiry and pursue, via research, sources and conversations surrounding those questions. Imagine yourself sitting at a noisy table with the people who care about hip hop and “thug life” — writers, designers, legislators, marketers, musicians, filmmakers, critics, (and, well, *gang members*), and other stakeholders of that text. A contextual analysis reports on that conversation: what are they saying? How does what they’re saying add new ideas and knowledge about the issues that we’ve been studying?