



Revisiting Digital Sampling Rhetorics with an Ethics of Care

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Abstract

Rhetoric and composition studies have conceptualized and defined digital sampling as a method of composition in many ways and for various pedagogical purposes: from a means of free-play invention that is critical of more formalistic writing practices to a semiotic strategy rooted in African American rhetorical traditions designed to effect political change. The latter view is critical of the former in that the former does not account for student digital sampling projects that unquestioningly appropriate from other people and communities. This is a real pedagogical problem, but students can create unethical and hurtful digital sampling projects, no matter the assignment prompt. To supplement such free-play invention strategies and anticipate problematic student projects, this essay suggests to view digital sampling through a rhetorical ethics of care perspective and offers a pedagogical heuristic for ethical in(ter)vention through the concept of vulnerability. Considering digital sampling through a heuristic of vulnerability entails a questioning of all sampling practices as potential acts of wounding or caring in the hopes of helping students develop into more sophisticated rhetors capable of producing nuanced compositions and engaging with ethical issues of digital media.

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1. Introduction

I begin with an analogy: teaching research-based argumentation and critique in composition studies is like learning how to perform hip-hop music. (Rice, 2003, p. 453)

While I see value in both Rice's and Sirc's arguments in favor of the ability to play freely in texts and techniques in the writing classroom, . . . the mixtape as rhetorical practice offers composition pedagogy and digital writing theory far more than a whimsical pursuit of the cool. (Banks, 2011, p. 13)

The vulnerable is not the same as the killable. The latter stands poised between death and life, the former between the wound and healing care. (Cavarero, 2011, p. 32)

The appeal of incorporating digital sampling into the composition classroom is now stronger than ever. Still, practices of digital sampling present rhetorical and ethical challenges for students as they struggle to select and use samples in their composition practices. Although the genres most commonly incorporating sampling methods share certain values

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with academic writing, such as the interest in acknowledging invention through “outside” source materials, they also depart from academic conventions in important ways, particularly in the practice of how to cite those outside source materials. These differences leave instructors no less immune to rhetorical and ethical challenges. In response to these challenges, on one hand, versions of “limitless” assignments have been promoted for use in the multimodal composition classroom by those attune to the inventive strengths of digital sampling and remixing practices demonstrated in hip-hop, DJing, and other genres that incorporate the practices (Sirc, 2002; Sirc, 2006; Rice, 2003; Rice, 2007). On the other hand, some have countered this idea by showing how these digital sampling and remixing practices are actually informed by a complex awareness of communal difference and cultural histories (Banks, 2011; McFarlane, 2013). The latter position has critiqued the former as potentially endorsing naïve cultural appropriation at best and, at worst, enabling the production of racist, sexist, and homophobic content.

Powerful benefits apply to both arguments, however incompatible and polar opposite they may appear at first glance. To offer some guidelines for instructors and their students in meeting the rhetorical and ethical challenges presented by each position, in this essay I suggest applying what I call a *heuristic of vulnerability*—which is informed by a feminist ethics of care—to digital sampling assignments and the multimodal composition classroom, in general. As composition instructors, we can bring both digital sampling positions into the classroom to help students produce (and question) inventive and more ethically aware multimodal compositions without prescribing a dogmatic morality. To these ends, I explain the logics of the main proponents of these seemingly polar digital sampling positions, that of Rice, 2003; Rice, 2007 and Banks (2011), respectively. Then, in the second half of this essay, informed by feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero’s ontological work (2005; 2011), I explain a heuristic of vulnerability not so much to rehabilitate the stance focused on free-play invention strategies with the critiques its opponents have brought to bear, but rather, I share this heuristic because students can produce digital compositions that are harmful and unethical, no matter the assignment prompt, and this heuristic has helped me negotiate such challenges.

In brief, this heuristic is not a flowchart or lens explaining exactly how to solve the problem of students creating potentially unethical compositions—such heuristics for ethical decision-making are too often devoid of enough contextual concerns and are thus ineffective and unhelpful. Rather, this heuristic is more of a lens to generate ethical questions of relationality. This heuristic prompts multimodal writers to justify or at least to account for their acts of sampling and remixing in terms of wounding or caring for the people and communities who took part in the history and creation of the sampled-from compositions. While I present the aims of applying this heuristic of vulnerability to digital sampling practices mainly as a strategy for developing more complex, nuanced, and critically aware compositions in the classroom, I acknowledge that I am advocating a particular kind of normative ethics informed by a feminist ethics of care. This ethics of care, or what I broadly call an *ethic of care for singularity and community*, while not falling neatly under deontological, virtue, rights, or consequentialist ethical frameworks, is related to if not completely consistent with many of the normative positions other compositionists have worked from when engaging with problems of cultural appropriation. Not deontologically rule-bound, this ethic asks rhetors to place themselves in an empathetic relation with those they are responding to (i.e., sampling from) and is motivated by an attempt to respect the difference of others and acknowledge a responsibility to those individuals and communities to which the rhetors are in relation. Composition studies has negotiated with problems of appropriation for decades; although these problems seem familiar at the outset, the genres incorporating digital sampling are resistant to traditional citation conventions and how we might typically understand appropriation versus appreciation, thus complicating and intensifying the seemingly familiar problem of acknowledging indebtedness to others in rhetorical invention.

2. Perspectives and definitions of sampling as a strategy for rhetorical invention

In *Rhythm Science*, Miller (2004), also known as the writer, musician, and artist DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid, defined sampling as,

a new way of doing something that’s been with us for a long time: creating with found objects. The rotation gets thick. The constraints get thin. The mix breaks free of the old associations. The script gets flipped. The languages evolve and learn to speak in new forms, new thoughts. (p. 25)

Claiming “there is no such place as an ‘immaculate perception,’” Miller (2004) saw creativity in “how you recontextualize the previous expression of others” (p. 33). He maintained that the DJ is an archetype of contemporary artists and writers who use multimedia, as the DJ’s ability to create art is contingent upon a critical embrace of technologies

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