

# Unit: Race, Class and Gender – The Hip Hop Perspective

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## Key Texts:

[\*Cant Stop, Wont Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation\*](#) . (2005). By Jeff Chang.

[\*Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes\*](#). (2006). A documentary by Byron Hurt

[\*Wild Style\*](#) . (1983). A documentary directed by Charlie Ahearn.

[\*The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest\*](#) . (2001). by [David R. Croteau](#) and [William Hoynes](#).

[\*We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity\*](#) . (2004). By bell hooks

[\*Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip Hop\*](#) . (2007). By Jeff Chang.

*A Girl Like Me*. (2006). Directed by Kiri Davis, Produced by Reel Works Teen Film

Making. <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1091431409617440489>

*Deep Dick Collective* website: <http://www.deepdickcollective.com>

## Description:

Hip Hop is one of the largest cultural movements that the world has seen. It was born in the United States through racial, class and gendered divides as a way for marginalized, primarily black and brown youth in the United States, to share their stories and experiences. In desegregated communities suffering from the effects of “white flight”, from near non-existent social services, from police who were the bad guys, from the devastation of drug addiction and dealing, in communities that suffered – hip hop grew.

The spirit of hip hop has always been one of empowerment through artistic expression. The four elements of hip hop - b-boying/b-girling, DJing, graffiti and MCing - are art forms that have enabled people to articulate the reality of their lived experiences and to share their knowledge with the world. It is the artistic embodiment of “the personal is political.” These art forms have always represented another aspect of hip hop: the notion of constant battle. Just as hip hop is about fighting both self-imposed and systemic oppression; success for hip hop artists is about competition - with oneself to be better, and among others to be the best.

Hip hop is about self-education and the encouragement of people to improve their circumstances through advancement of their knowledge and their skills. This unit has been created to reflect that attitude – to encourage students to learn about hip hop culture, to encourage them to critique and analyze what mainstream hip hop presents to them, and to regard the four elements as sources of inspiration for their learning. The lesson topics are introduced with a product of hip hop culture, like raps, movies and spoken word pieces. The idea has been to have students first realize that a lot of hip hop art has been inspired by real life politics and events, and to have them start to explore the philosophies that have fueled the hip hop movement. The expectation is that students will be the primary educators of their peers. The role of the teacher in this unit becomes a little more like that of a facilitator, supplementing what is taught or mentioned in the videos, raps, spoken word pieces and student discussion with clarification of the philosophies, political and historical events that they need to know. Teachers are primarily responsible for broadening students’ understanding of the issues raised in the songs and videos by asking questions that deepen students’ level of analysis.

Ultimately, by providing access to and encouraging students’ knowledge of the philosophies, events and actors that have contributed to hip hop, students can begin to take up the race, class,

gender and sexual politics that hip hop espouses. By learning about the roles that women, queer people, poor people and people of color have played, students will also be able to look critically at the problems with those same issues that hip-hop is plagued by. They can look at the culture and its products in a way that is both appreciative and critically perceptive of its intersectional and paradoxically oppositional politics. Finally, they can battle it out for themselves how they wish to situate and be situated by a cultural movement that has influenced everything from the music they hear to the words they speak.

### **Objectives:**

- To give students a deeper, contextualized understanding of the evolution of hip hop as not just a source of slick beats, but as a cultural movement with a variety of arts forms all of which are rooted in political resistance, civil rights and social justice.
  - To expand students' knowledge of the political and historical events, as well as the philosophies and economic factors that have made a lasting impact on hip hop so that they can understand how hip hop became its current mainstream form
  - To encourage students to explore the relevance of American-made hip hop to Canadian experiences; to explore Canadian hip hop; and to be able to situate themselves within hip hop as consumers and contributors with an appreciation of their own impact on the culture.
  - To persuade students to think critically about the images of hip hop that are presented to them by the mainstream media; to question and break down the messages that those images and representation of hip hop artists mean; and to consider and recognize the significance of all of the elements.
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## **Lesson 1: What is Hip Hop?**

**Activity 1: (5-10 minutes)** Ask students to talk about what they think of when they think of hip hop (i.e. music, clothes, shoes, art, everything associated with hip hop). Ask them about what they think about the portrayal of women, queer people, poor people, etc. Get all of these thoughts down on paper... they will be explored throughout the units and can be revisited at the end of the unit/compared with thoughts at the end of the unit to see if their understanding of hip hop has grown.

**Activity 2: (1 hour 22 minutes)** Watch *Wild Style*... this is a hip hop classic video/documentary that brings together all of the four elements of hip hop:

- B-boying/b-girling

- graffiti
- DJing
- MCing

**Assignment:** Get students to read pages 184-187 and pages 109-125 (Chapter 6) of *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* by Jeff Chang.

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## Lesson 2: The Four Elements

**Activity 1: (20-30 minutes)** Discuss Wild Style and the four elements based on the reading assignment from the day before. Leave it open... students should comment on what they learned and want to learn more about, any issues they had with the movie or the readings. Talk about the absence of women in crews... why it's usually called b-boying, and the hyper-masculinity of b-boy culture (how "giving someone the dick" is the biggest insult in the dance). Talk about queer people in hip hop... gay graf artist (name??) What about female graf artists, MCs and DJs?

**Activity 2: (30-40 minutes)** Listen to these raps and talk about it:

**Boogie Down Productions, *The Racist* from the album *Edutainment* (3:21 min)**

A song about different forms of racism/types of racists.

**De la Soul, *Millie Pulled a Pistol on Santa***

This is a song about a young girl being sexually abused by her stepfather. He's a youth social worker and a well liked-member of the community so her friends don't believe her when she tells them about him. She resorts to violence to stop the abuse.

**Issues brought up by this song:** sexual assault (women are more likely to be assaulted by men they know and trust), rape/sexual assault myths about women lying and general disbelief, use of violence as a means of escape... you can discuss appropriate methods of dealing with these issues (ie, what should students do if one of their friends come to them with a similar story? What other means of escape are there... how can friends help to get them out of the abusive situation? What else constitutes assault/abuse... verbal, physical, emotional, etc.)

**Abstract Rude, *No Longer a King***

This is a song that deconstructs the movie King Kong along racial lines... it parallels the story of Kong with colonial slave trading and samples the movie to bring the point home. It's like an English essay with fabulous flow and it's just generally awesome.

**Issues brought up by this song:** Racism in the story, colonialism, imperialism and the slave trade, black violence, black power.

**Assignment:** Divide the class into five groups and give each group a different chapter to read from Loop 3 of *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*: chapter 11 (pages 215-229), chapter 12 (pages 231-261), chapter 13 (pages 263-297), chapter 14 (pages 299-329), and chapter 15 (pages 331-353). Ask them to write down their thoughts on their assigned chapter to be reviewed in class the next day.

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## **Lesson 3: Thinking Hip Hop: The Philosophies That Have Influenced It**

**(2 hours, 45 minutes)**

**Activity 1: (30 minutes)** Ask each group to summarize their assigned chapter and to discuss their thoughts on it.

**Activity 2: (2 hours)** Watch *School Daze*

**Activity 3: (15 minutes)** Listen to Boogie Down Productions (KRS One), and talk about the political issues that the song discusses.

Sarah Jones, *Your Revolution*, and talk about the politics of it, and the evolution of spoken word as an art form that began to increasingly involve women's voices and other marginalized groups: queer, differently able, color, etc.

**Assignment:** -Read an excerpt from *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* by bell hooks.

- Read chapter 22 from *Total Chaos* by Jeff Chang. The chapter is called *A Brand New Feminism: A Conversation* by Joan Morgan and Mark Anthony Neal

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## **Lesson 4: Thinking Hip Hop: The Philosophies That Have Influenced It (continued...)**

**Activity 1: (25 minutes)** Watch *A Girl Like Me* (downloadable off the internet, 8 minutes long) and discuss the issues of beauty standards (why the dark skinned girls are often hyper-sexualized, while the light skinned girls are the ones that can be "taken home to the parents").

- Discuss how women (esp. women of color) are sexually objectified, but how the objectification of women and hip-hop doesn't exist in a cultural vacuum

- Link sexual objectification of women of color in hip-hop to the objectification in social institutions, government policies, and laws (i.e. our cultures acceptance of violence against women, sexual assault, and lack of caring when women of color disappear or are killed).

**Lecture on the Philosophies that have influenced Hip Hop: (20 minutes)** (general info can be found in Tayannah Lee Macquillar's *When Rap Music Had a Conscience* --- it's not the best written book but has a lot of good references to resources)

Philosophies to talk about:

- Five Percenter
- Universal Zulu Nation
- Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers
- Feminism

**Activity 2: (15 minutes)**

- Watch the Documentary by Byron Hurt: "Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes."
- Refer to the Deep Dick Collective website: <http://www.deepdickcollective.com/>

Discuss

- how men are portrayed in hip-hop music videos, songs, and magazines
- the images of hyper masculinity, violence and guns, 'bling', etc. that are prevalent in hip-hop culture.
- how these images of masculinity are connected to the violent and hyper masculine culture in North America, and especially in Neo-liberal, militarized America.
- how masculinity is defined in our society: men have to be 'hard', tough, violent, etc. and how these standards limit the way boys can act and express themselves.
- Connect the violent images in hip-hop culture, to the military industrial complex esp in the United States. America is a country that condones and often uses violence on a daily bases (growing prison industrial complex; policy brutality; foreign policy; little to no gun control; and by waging wars around the world)
- Is the violence and hyper masculinity in mainstream hip-hop culture, just a reflection of the violence in America?
- Discuss Homoeroticism and images of masculinity and hip-hop
- Are the homophobic lyrics in hip-hop, similarly, just a reflection of the homophobia in America?

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## **Lesson 4: Thinking Hip Hop: The Events That Have Influenced It**

**Lecture: (20 minutes)** (Refer to *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* – Loop 1)

- Discuss how hip-hop music originated as an artistic expression for poor black and brown youth in the south Bronx, New York in the late 1970's to the early 1980's.
- Hip hop music came as a response to the displacement and destruction of communities in the south Bronx where poor black, brown, and white (but to a lesser extent white people) had their communities and homes torn apart and were driven into abject poverty as a result of Robert Moses architectural plans to change New York.
- Discuss How Moses and other corporate power holders wanted to make New York a drivable city for middle to upper class, mostly white, families. Highways and freeways were put built in the middle of the Bronx and the subsequent destruction of the Bronx and surrounding boroughs took place.
- **IMPORTANT POINT: HIP HOP MUSIC ORIGINATED AS AN ARTISTIC OUTLET** for, and to give a voice to black and brown youth in response to the destruction and oppression forced upon them and their communities by the actions of capitalist power holders, and institutions.

**Activity 3: (20 minutes)** Listen to Suheir Hammad, “First Writing Since,” and talk about the issues discussed and the importance of spoken word to hip hop and to the inclusion of voices of women, queer people, differently abled women, etc.

**Assignment:** Get the class to read pages 407-435 of *Can't Stop Won't Stop*.

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## Lesson 5: Dollars – The Economics of Hip Hop

**Lecture: (20 minutes)**

- Discuss how hip hop music is produced, distributed, and how and by who it is consumed.
- Most mainstream hip hop music is produced by a few major record labels that are owned by a few corporations. For example, BET is owned by Viacom
- Discuss how the evolution of hip-hop music and culture corresponds with increasing corporate concentration; neoliberal economic policies; and deregulation of the telecommunications industry that began and thrived under the Regan administration.
- Discuss how most consumers of mainstream hip hop are young white middle to upper class men (about 70% of total hip hop consumers). What are the implications of this consumer basis and what does this say about the images and representations of mostly African Americans presented in hip hop?
- Read specific chapters of *The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest* by [David R. Croteau](#) and [William Hoynes](#).
- ‘*Can't Stop Won't Stop*’ Loop 4; by Jeff Chang.

**Assignment:** Get the class to read Loop 4 in *Cant Stop Wont Stop* and Part II of the *Business of Media*

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## **Lesson 6: Hip Hop in the Here and Now... What's Our Scene?**

**Activity 1:** Watch *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*. If you have already watched it, discuss it again in light of today's hip hop scene. Ask have the images and representations changed? Has the political economic context in which these images are produced changed?

**Activity 1: (15 minutes)** Discussion: discuss how the themes in the documentary relate to today's hip hop culture. Discuss ways students can change or add to hip hop culture.

**Assignment:** Get students to pick a song that they like, and to analyze the lyrics for what it is talking about, and to incorporate what they have seen/learned from the video. They should answer the questions: do the lyrics reflect reality, and if so, whose reality? Who is the audience? What is the message? Who is left out?

(they can also visit the site: <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/hiphop/film.htm>)

This assignment can be submitted for evaluation on the extent of their analysis.

### **Ways to evaluate students on this unit:**

Daily participation based on readings and class contribution

Final assignment

