Course Description

This course explores the political and aesthetic foundations of hip hop. We will trace the musical, corporeal, visual, spoken word, and literary manifestations of hip hop over its thirty-five year presence in the American cultural imaginary. We will also investigate specific black cultural practices that have given rise to its various idioms. Hip hop has invigorated the academy, inspiring scholarship rooted in black musical and literary traditions. We will also assess these sharp breaks and flamboyant versionings of hip hop style that have occurred within the academy.

Because “hip hop” is an ever-expanding area in formation, we will be concerned with the process of research circumscription. How are areas of popular culture to be explored? What research methodologies are useful in the study of popular culture? What are the discursive boundaries of something we can call “hip hop?” To pursue these questions, each student will work with groups responsible for leading the weekly discussion sessions with a presentation. The presentation should be conceived to interrogate the readings and viewings; to raise questions and issues around the material and its presentation; and to critique the relationship of the weekly theme, hip hop, and the popular culture we share at MIT and in Cambridge, MA. If you decide to include music in your presentation, you must provide lyrics for the entire class. Two fairly reliable lyric resources are www.ohhla.com and www.anysonglyrics.com.

Requirements for this course will comprise four components: free-write exercise, performance review, group oral presentations, and final paper, as detailed below.

Course Materials

Required Texts

| Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America | Tricia Rose | Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994 |

Other readings, listening, and music videos to be distributed via Athena course locker.

Tickets to one hip hop concert performances, to be determined.

Recommended Texts

| The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop | Murray Forman | Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002 |
| Rap Music and Street Consciousness | Cheryl Keyes | Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002 |
Class Requirements:

1. Approximately 50 pages of reading and 2 hours of music/video listening/viewing weekly.
2. An initial “free write” assignment of 3-5 pages length. 10% of the final grade.
3. Attend and write about at least one “hip hop” performance in the Boston area. 20% of the final grade. Your assessment of the performance should consider at least two of the analytical paradigms explored in class. A detailed assignment will be posted on the web page.
4. Two Oral Presentations developed with different research groups. Each group will assemble an hour-long presentation on the topic at hand for that week’s session. The presentation should reflect an understanding of key concepts proposed by the readings. It should also build on those concepts, either in consent or dissent, with additional musical and visual materials. Each student will create individual research notes for the presentation that develops on the MetaMedia website. 30% of the final grade (15% each).
5. A final paper, of 7-10 pages length, on a topic other than the Oral Presentation topic. The paper should synthesize material covered throughout the semester. The final paper shall account for 40% of the final grade. Proposals for final paper topics are due by email Thursday October 21. The final paper will be due during class time on the last day of classes, Tuesday December 9. No extensions will be granted for the final paper.

Sessions:

Unit 1 - Introduction and Overview - 3 Sessions September 9, 14, 16

READ Black Noise Chapters 1 and 2, pp. 1-61
READ "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" by Stuart Hall in Black Popular Culture edited by Michele Dent, Seattle, Bay Press, pp. 21-33

INITIAL FREE-WRITING ASSIGNMENT DUE Tuesday, September 14
Write a position paper of three to five pages length that outlines your take on "hip hop." Questions you might consider include: What's important about hip hop? Which elements among its users are most important? What are hip hop's "problems?" How has hip hop changed for the better or worse? Use thick description of at least one sequence, song, or "artifact" to underscore your point of view. Also include first-person narrative that details your experiential relationship to hip hop as you describe it.

VIEW Wild Style September 13

Supplementary

READ "Introduction" in Spectacular Vernaculars, pp. 1-23

Special Event: World Peace Concert, Saturday, September 11, Kresge Main, 9pm Includes Several Hip Hop/Slam poetry Artists

GROUP PRESENTATION DETAILS
The oral presentation should be a group project, developed in collaboration with all the members of each group. The group will assemble an hour-long presentation on the topic at hand for that week’s session. The
presentation should reflect an understanding of key concepts proposed by the readings; in fact, it MUST refer to at least some part of the readings. The presentation should also build on those concepts, either in consent or dissent, with additional musical and visual materials. Performance is welcome! The most successful presentations will include critical analysis, supporting materials, media examples drawn from beyond the course syllabus, as well as a performance of some sort.

The presentation should last no more than an hour, so that there is time for discussion and response.

Before the presentation, the group must post conversation and discussion notes on the MetaMedia site. In addition, each student must email the instructor individual research notes for the presentation. These notes should detail the individual contribution to the group presentation; they should also provide documentation of the point of view pursued by the individual in the presentation. Your notes should document what you chose to present, and more importantly, why. You should account for the choices in the presentation and offer some context for the presentation from your point of view as one of the discussion leaders. Each presentation will account for 15% of the final grade.

Performance Analysis Details. Attend at least one “hip hop” performance in the Boston area. Considering at least two of the analytical paradigms proposed in class, write a 3-5 page analysis of the performance. Note: You should approach two different paradigms than the ones for your group presentation or your final project. Your analysis might offer a close reading of performance and its context, or it might suggest future avenues for research. Your analysis should offer a close reading of the performance and its context in terms of your chosen lens. For example, if you decide to write about anarchy/activism and dance, you might offer an interpretation of specific lyrics that suggest an activist impulse, and how those lyrics relate to beats. You might continue your analysis to question the implications of dances that the artists and audience do in response to these lyrics/beats. Does the dance allay the potential impact of an activist message? Does the dance suggest a sort of physical anarchy? How do you know, or why do you think that?

Your analysis should refer with direct quotation to course materials, either media or literary. Please submit your performance analysis electronically to defrantz@mit.edu. The performance analysis is due before December 2, and will account for 20% of the final grade.

Unit 2 - Dance 2 Sessions September 21, 23
Group Presentation September 23
How is dance "central" to hip hop culture? How is it marginalized? What kinds of dances do hedz do? How have hip hop dances changed over time? Where are the sources of dance in hip hop? A consideration of capoiera and early African American dance forms.

READ "Dance in Hip Hop Culture" by Katrina Hazzard-Donald in Droppin' Science, pp. 220-235
READ "Hip Hop 101" by Robert F. Thompson in Droppin' Science, pp. 211-219

Supplementary

READ "Exer(or)cising Power; Black Bodies in the Black Public Sphere" by Paul Gilroy in Dance In The City, edited by Helen Thomas, New York, St. Martin's Press 1997, pp. 21 - 34.
READ “Breaking” by Sally Banes in Fresh: Hip Hop Don't Stop, pp 79-112.
Guest Artist Visits September 28, 30

VIEW Rhyme and Reason (David Spirer, dir. 1997)

September 28 - Visiting Guest Artist Hanifah Walida
September 30 - Guest Artist Mark Graham
Special Event! Attend Hanifah Walida Performance at Theatre Offensive, October 1 at 8pm.

Unit 3 - Sex and Sexuality - 2 Sessions October 5, 7
Group Presentation October 7
Is hip hop obsessed with depictions of sex and sexuality? What kinds of depictions are most prevalent? What depictions are resisted by hedz, and why? How do sex and sexuality feed hip hop into world markets?

LISTEN Hard Core Lil Kim (1996)
LISTEN Cookie (2002) Meshell Ndegeocello


Unit 4 - Misogyny and Feminism- 2 Sessions October 12, 14
Group Presentation October 14
Why does misogyny occupy such a large part of the hip hop imaginary? How might sexual role-playing be healthy or hurtful to young people in various contexts? Is misogyny inevitable in the construction of popular culture? Is misogyny inseparable from hip hop? Alternately, how can hip hop be enabled to empower women? What kinds of hip hop combats misogyny, and how is it produced? What sorts of rhymes and beats support feminist concerns?

VIEW Nobody Knows My Name (Rachel Raimist, 1999)
LISTEN The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill Lauryn Hill (1998)
LISTEN Ready to Die Notorious B.I.G. (1994)
READ "A Small Introduction to the ‘G’ Funk era: Gangsta Rap and Black Masculinity in Contemporary Los Angeles" by Todd Boyd in Am I Black Enough For You? Popular Culture from the ‘Hood and Beyond (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1997) pp. 60-81
READ "Women Writin’ Rappin’ Breakin’” by Nancy Guevara in Droppin’ Science, pp. 49-62
READ Black Noise Chapter 5 pp. 146-182

Supplementary
READ Gangsta: Merchandising the Rhymes of Violence by Ronin Ro

October 21 - Final Paper Proposals Due
FINAL PAPER INSTRUCTIONS
Working in consultation with the instructor, choose a topic for your final 7-10 page research paper that addresses a topic other than those of your Oral Presentations. While your paper may be on any topic related to course materials; it must synthesize material addressed throughout the semester. For example, if you decide to write about visual culture of hip hop, you should probably refer to Tricia Rose’s arguments about “preferred transcripts” suggested by music videos and Todd Boyd’s conception of “hyperreal” cinematic imagery.

Your paper should also incorporate research that extends beyond the boundaries of materials on our syllabus. You should also be sure to construct an argument and offer a critique of assumptions surrounding your argument. The most successful papers will allow the “messiness” of researching popular culture to foreground contradictions implicit in your arguments. For example, if you want to argue that misogyny is less of a concern in 2004 than it was in 1995 because many of the gangsta rap groups responsible for “bitch-ho” rhetoric have disbanded, you would probably want to underscore the pervasive lack of feminist female representation in any hip hop idiom in 2004. In other words, less gangsta rap has not meant more positive heterosocial conditions for the production of hip hop.

This is a research paper, and it will be graded according to standards of college-level humanities writing. Your paper must be typewritten, double-spaced, and thoroughly edited for spelling and grammar. Composition counts! For compositional guidelines, you might consult a guide for writing research papers in MLA style at http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/4184/. For citation style, see http://www.northern.wvnet.edu/~tcraig/wc.html.

The final paper shall account for 40% of the final grade. The final paper shall be due no later than during class time on Tuesday December 10; early submissions are welcome. No extensions will be granted for the final paper. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the course instructor.

Unit 5 - Graffiti, Fashion, and Visual Culture 2 - Sessions October 19, 21
Group Presentation October 21
How have fashion and graffiti been important to hip hop style? How did graffiti grow up? How did baggy pants and dookie chains become popular? Has flossing always been a part of hip hop? Are there boundaries to gender representations in hip hop fashion or visual culture?

VIEW Style Wars (Tony Silver and Harry Chalfant, 1983)


READ “Suckers Don’t Last a Minute: Good Rhyme, Bad Theory” and “Hip-Hop is Supposed to Eliminate Itself” by William Upski Wimsatt in Bomb the Suburbs New York: Soft Skull Press, 1994, pp 145-155


Supplementary

Unit 6 - Anarchy and Activism - 2 Sessions October 26, 28
Group Presentation October 28
Hip Hop has long been figured as the “CNN of the Streets,” able to incite action and progressive change. But gangsta strains of hip hop seem to incite anarchy as much as activism. Are activism and anarchy two sides of the same coin? Can they be successfully combined in popular music for progressive social action?

View
Freestyle (2004)

Listen
Steal This Album by The Coup (1998)
Dead Prez Let's Get Free (2000)

Read
"Making the Strong Survive: The Contours and Contradictions of "Message Rap" by Ernest Allen, Jr, in Droppin Science pp. 159-191
"Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: The Politics of "Gangsta Rap" in Postindustrial Los Angeles" by Robin D. G. Kelley in Droppin' Science pp. 117-158
Hip Hop America "Black Owned" pp 56-75, "Where my eyes can see" pp 97-113, "Capitalist Tool" pp 154-175, "Too Live" pp 178-192, "Da Joint" pp 208-210

Supplementary
Chuck D with Yusef Jah Fight the Power (New York, Delacorte Press, 1997)
"Prelude to Public Enemy" pp. 57-94, and "Gangs" pp 241-262
Black Noise Chapter 4 pp. 99-145

Unit 7 - DJ'ing, Musicality, Live Performance - 2 Sessions November 2, 4
Group Presentation November 4
If hip hop music is mostly mediated, how does live performance figure into its aesthetic imperatives? What sorts of "liveness" are valued in hip hop music? How is musicality measured by djs? What are the relationships between composing and turntablism?

View
Scratch (2002)

Listen
The Roots Come Alive by The Roots (1999)
College Dropout by Kanye West (2004)

Read
More Brilliant than the Sun "Transmaterializing the Breakbeat" pp. 013-025;
"Virtualizing the Breakbeat" pp., 67-77

Explore
battlesounds.com on the web

Unit 8 - Whiteness and Hip Hop -2 Sessions - November 9, 16
Within an American context, what are some of the ways that white youth respond to hip hop? How is "whiteness" embedded in the construction of hip hop? What are the particularly American wages of racial segregation in terms of popular culture, and especially hip hop?
LISTEN The Slim Shady LP by Eminem (1999)
To The Five Boroughs by Beastie Boys (2004)


Supplementary

READ "Mighty, Mighty Spade and Whitey: Black Lyrics and Soul's Interaction with White Culture" by Ian Hoare in The Soul Book Edited by Ian Hoare, London, Methuen, 1975, pp. 117-168
VIEW Black and White (2000)
VIEW Bullworth (1998)

Unit 9 - Consumerism, Commodity Fetishism, Globalization - 2 Sessions November 18, 23

Group Presentation TUESDAY November 23
Guest Lecture by Ian Condry, November 18

Condry is Assistant Professor of Foreign Language and Literatures and CMS. He is at work on a book about Hip Hop in Japan.

How important is consumption to hip hop culture? How is the global reach of hip hop related to commodities and exchange? How has hip hop changed as it has attracted a global audience and inspired a global marketplace?

LISTEN Grey Album by DJ Dangermouse (2004)


READ "A Nation of Thieves": Consumption, Commerce, and the Black Public Sphere" by Regina Austin, in The Black Public Sphere edited by the Black Public Sphere Collective, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 229 - 252


Supplementary

READ "The Funkification of Rio" by George Yúdice in Microphone Fiends pp 193-217

Unit 10 - Electronica, Technology, Mediated Performance - 2 Sessions November 30, December 2

Group Presentation December 2

What are the implications of mediated artifacts on the musical world of hip hop? What genres of electronic
music does hip hop embrace? How does science fiction figure into the hip hop "real?" What effects do technology inspire in hip hop? A consideration of Afro-futurism.

LISTEN  Da Real World  Missy Elliot (1999)

READ  Black Noise  Chapter 3, 62-98
READ  More Brilliant Than the Sun "Motion Capture" pp. 175-193

Supplementary

READ  Interview with Kodwo Eshun - On Website

Unit 11 - Space and Place  - 1 Session December 7
How is hip hop grounded in particular locations? How is hip hop different in different regions of the United States? What are the terms of regionalism that seem to define certain genres of hip hop?


Supplementary


The “Real” - For Further Study - Wrap Up and Review - 1 Session December 9
Compile Annotated Bibliographic Snapshot - Suggestions for [Academic] Interventions