

***We Want Live Words:
The Black Arts Movement and Its Hip-Hop Progeny***

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*Back in the days when I was a teenager
Before I had status and before I had a pager
You could find the Abstract listening to hip-hop
My pops used to say, it reminded him of be-bopⁱ*

– *A Tribe Called Quest*

‘Respectability’ ...is arguably more counterproductive in the composition classroom because it reflects the middle-class concern with propriety at the expense of critical dialogue in the pursuit of truth.ⁱⁱ

– *Kermit E. Campbell*

Background

Early this past school year, in a classroom interchange with one of my male students whom I knew to be an avid rap listener, if not yet a true “head,” I jokingly chided the boy for his unfamiliarity with some song off the rapper Nas’s *Illmatic* album. After the initial pleasure of schooling the youngin’ about his music and for the moment fighting back the feelings of my own increasing obsolescence in this youth culture, I thought more about how unreasonable my expectations for this student actually were. I thought about how I should have been surprised had the student spoken from a wealth of knowledge about an album that’s two decades old. I put myself in his shoes. In 1998, just because I told teachers I liked rock music did not mean I was picking up on their allusions to the Talking Heads, had they been pretentious enough to make them. (Interestingly, though, I have a specific memory of a classmate of mine years later relating to me that our eighth grade social studies teacher was the one who had introduced him to the Clash, a monumental discovery in the boy’s teenage life.)

Still, hip hop occupies a much different place in 2012 than rock ‘n’ roll does. A Top 40 pop song is much more likely to contain a guest verse by a rapper than feature a guitar solo. It’s also much more likely to simply be a rap song. And that, I think, is the appeal of studying this music and its history: Students will have the chance to excavate and unpack a culture that is entwined with the mass culture to the point of being nearly

indistinguishable, a culture whose presence and influence they have almost undoubtedly grown up taking for granted.

Rationale

The students at my school do not study the Civil Rights Movement. It's possible that it gets squeezed in for a day or two sometime after World War II in their American History surveys. And then there's Black History Month, during which an MLK speech might get an analysis of rhetoric in a Language Arts classroom. (In the past few years, I have experimented with and developed a lesson that places Curtis Mayfield's music in the context of the Movement, though after a few days of song analysis, it's usually back to business as usual.) However, I would wager a bet that our matriculating eighth-graders enter high school largely ignorant of the major players, policies, and literature of this period. As a Language Arts teacher, it is with the latter that I seek to contend most directly.

Taking an African American Literature course in college, I became that the literature of the era, specifically the poetry of the Black Arts Movement, is some of the most engaging, ferocious, and formally transgressive in the English language. Amiri Baraka begins "Black Art," what became the Movement's poetic manifesto of sorts, "Poems are bullshit..."—it's the kind of complaint a thirteen-year-old lobs at poetry, until one like that reaches out, grabs him by the neck, and screams in his ear.ⁱⁱⁱ It is, for a number of reasons, ideal poetry for the many thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds I teach, an anathema to poetry's common and "boring" reflection on things like nature and mood. The literature of this era is more often than not direct, engaging, political, and forceful. Those words could also be used to describe another artistic movement that sprang from urban African American communities a generation later: hip-hop.

This movement is one with which most of my students are at least cursorily familiar. By product of the time and place in which they live, and notwithstanding their suburban upbringing, hip-hop is an integral part of popular music and culture to the degree that my middle school students have an implicit understanding of the genre in a way that would have been impossible for me, growing up in similar circumstances (a middle-class suburb of Charlotte, NC) a decade and a half earlier. However, while the rap music is superficially familiar, I have observed that students—even those rare "heads" at Jay M. Robinson Middle School—have no sense of the music's history or its fascinating origins in the urban America of the post-Civil Rights Movement. Thus, by teaching literature and nonfiction texts of the Civil Rights Movement along with rap music, lyrics, and that era's attendant texts, the two artistic movements of twentieth-century America will serve to illuminate each other, and fill gaps in their literary and history education.

This unit is structured in a way that pairs selections of literature from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, with a focus on the Black Arts Movement of that era, and related nonfiction of that time period with rap songs and related hip hop texts. While there can certainly be argued that a causal relationship exists between the two artistic periods, especially focusing on the urban decay of the 1970s New York City as a result of some of the failures of the Civil Rights Movement, the pairings are, rather, mostly associative, with regard to subject or theme. For example, a treatment of Malcolm X includes a portion of his “Message to the Grass Roots” speech, the rap group Public Enemy’s “Bring the Noise,” which samples the audio of that speech, as well as Baraka’s response to his assassination, “A Poem for Black Hearts.” Subjects of focus include, but are not limited to, the role of the artist; the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr; the everyday life of the working, urban poor; Afrocentrism; and aesthetic metrics for evaluating these specifically African American works.

The Mixtape

The ongoing and culminating product of this unit will be the construction of a “mixtape” (or “playlist”) in which students develop a sequence of texts that are in “conversation” with each other around a current civil rights issue. The roots of this project lie in a similar assignment I completed this summer. In a class I took for graduate school, entitled “Hip Hop and Youth Culture as Social Justice Texts,” we were given the task of composing a “Soundtrack” in which texts of multiple genres were juxtaposed to “explore some larger social issue” as it related to “hip hop, language, and literacies.”^{iv} I ended up composing a “soundtrack” on a webpage; it dealt with the African American trope of “masking” in a diverse set of texts—album covers, music videos, excerpts from books, songs, etc.—and wrote an accompanying essay to bridge the gaps between the selections. Just as the unit too is built in a way that creates “dialogue” between pieces of literature, often reactions separated by decades to similar social conditions, political events, even other texts, students will engage with the practice of creating dialogue by positioning a variety of texts in a sequence and the composition of detailed, analytical “liner” notes that elucidate the relationship of each text to the next sequentially. Students will define for themselves what “civil rights” are. They will use as guidance such questions as the ones posed at the beginning of the first episode of the *Eyes on the Prize* documentary series: “What is an inalienable right? What is equal treatment under the law? What is liberty and justice for all?”^v Students can also use as a guide the “Civil Rights: An Overview” page on the Cornell School of Law’s Legal Information Institute website. Students will have freedom with the medium in which they present the product—it could be a burned disc with accompanying liner notes, a book with images, poetry, and lyrics, or something altogether different. However, the written “liner notes” must explore how each text provides commentary on a specific civil rights issue and how two selections in sequence relate to one another. They must also produce one selection of their own to include in the

mixtape; it may be a revision or extension of one of the assignments previously completed in the unit.

(As a means of focusing on this juxtaposition, even collision, of texts, each section of the unit is preceded by a list of the “texts” students will read, view, and listen to, in conjunction with one another.)

Setting the Stage

- “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin (short story)
- “What a Wonderful World” by Louis Armstrong (song)
- “A Night in Tunisia” performed by The Quintet [incl. Charlie Parker] (song)
- “Eric B Is President” by Eric B. & Rakim (song)

“Sonny’s Blues,” though it predates (its publication being in 1957) both what is traditionally considered the period known as the Black Arts Movement and, by nearly two decades, even the most nascent strains of hip-hop, serves as an apt introduction to the themes and goals of a unit that seeks to link and juxtapose the two movements. For a group of students, predominantly white and middle-class, it, by means of a compelling and affecting narrative, broaches a number of issues that are nearly taken for granted in a discussion of both Black Arts literature and rap music. Primary among them is the detailed description of the environment of the poorer areas of America’s large urban centers (what are known today casually and collectively as “the ghetto”) and the life prospects for their denizens. Baldwin’s narrator describes the frustration of this lack of options for young black men in particular, their “heads bump[ing] abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities.”^{vi} The story, among other things, presents in Sonny and his narrator brother a dichotomy in what ends can be achieved with such paltry means. A fundamental question is: “Is a dream that will likely become nightmare before it’s accomplished worth deferring?”

This philosophical rift is born largely of the age gap between the title character and his brother. The anxiety of influence that haunts Sonny and the corresponding feelings of impotence his older brother experiences preview both the radical ways in which the poets of the Black Arts era broke with their poetic forebears and also the relationship of the architects and early practitioners of rap music had with the ideas of those older poets and artists, the political activism of that day, and also the music of the period, samples of which would go on to serve as the foundation of rap. As Tricia Rose puts it in the seminal *Black Noise*, “Hip hop culture emerged as a source for youth of alternative identity formation and social status in a community whose older local support institutions had been all but demolished along with large sectors of its built environment.”^{vii}

Perhaps most importantly, this story is about an artist, a young, black, male artist who struggles in New York City. Ultimately, though this unit seeks to expose students to history they won't get to cover in-depth in their eighth-grade American history surveys, it is primarily about the literature and the choices its creators make.

Perhaps most importantly, and fortunately, for the purposes of this unit, is that the final pages focus the students on that very subject. The story concludes with one of English literature's most famous descriptions of artistic rhapsody, for the students, a subtle nod to the potential force of art, a force that we will scrutinize over the following weeks.

The class will begin with a whole-class discussion of the following line of Sonny's: "I think people ought to do what they want to do, what else are they alive for?"^{viii} It can start as simply as, "Do you agree?"

Students will read the first half of the story in class and discuss the following issues:

- a) What effect does drug abuse seem to have on the narrator's neighborhood?
- b) What do you think Sonny's brother feels when he receives a letter that starts, "You don't know how much I needed to hear from you"?
- c) What does the incident about the narrator's father tell us about race relations during the previous generation?

As an introduction to the second day, students will listen to "What a Wonderful World" by Louis Armstrong and "A Night in Tunisia" off the famous Quintet album *Jazz at Massey Hall*. A Quickwrite will start the day's discussion: What are the sonic differences between the two pieces? Who do you think Sonny wants to sound like? Use quotes from the text to back up your response.

Finish reading the story.

In the small groups, students will access the Internet via computers or tablets and search for a song that find an audio excerpt that they think sounds like what Sonny is playing at the end of "Sonny's Blues." Again, they must pair the music to specific lines from the story, matching minutes and seconds in the songs to lines of the story. Share the recordings.

Play Eric B & Rakim's "Eric B for President." The song should sound nothing like any of the selections the students have made. However, stress the connections between the two texts. Model by means of a Venn Diagram drawing similarities. Lyrics should be connected to lines from the end of the story. The most defensible connections can be made when one considers the relationship of the performer to the performance piece. This is a touchstone for the central belief of this unit that any two texts can be connected.

King and His Legacy

- “I Have a Dream” by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. (speech)
- “Dream” by Common [ft. will.i.am], (music video)
- “Assassination” by Haki Madhubuti (poem)

These classes are centered around a discussion of the famous “I Have a Dream” speech with a focus on the power of **allusion** as both a rhetorical device and a means of bridging the gap between multiple texts.

Students will begin class by reading a brief biography of Martin Luther King from the Glencoe *African American Literature* textbook.^{ix} After a brief explanation of context for the “I Have a Dream” speech, presented in August of 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial, students will listen to the audio, while following along with a transcript. They should mark the text for any words or phrase they believe to be indirect references to other texts. After sharing out to their groups and the whole class, students will discuss the usage of the following phrases:

- 1) "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream." (Amos 5:24)
- 2) “and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together." (Isaiah 40:4-5)
- 3) “Free at last!” – (traditional Negro spiritual)

In a whole-class discussion, the following questions will be considered: Why does King choose to make these subtle references to the Bible and church songs? Do you think his audience gets the allusions? Does it make his speech more effective?

After briefly recounting the specifics of MLK’s assassination, students will watch the music video of the rapper Common’s song, “A Dream” and follow along with a text of the song. Though the song is not an example of the Chicago rapper’s best work and indulges his tendency for pedantry, it makes repeated use of allusion through both musical and verbal references to King and other historical figures and events.

- 1) What similarities in content do you observe between the King speech and Common’s rap? Do the similarities point to unsolved problems existent since prior to King’s death?
- 2) Do the constant references to King work to further Common’s purpose, or are they in any way distracting?
- 3) There are three allusions made in the following line of the song: “Read scrolls and stow slaves / And Jewish people in cold cage.” What are the allusions to, and how do they advance Common’s theme?

Consider the Madhubuti poem. Notice the complete absence of allusion. Why does he make this decision?

Homework

“If both works can be considered tributes to Martin Luther King Jr., which serves as a more effective elegy for King?” Students will respond to the prompt in an argumentative paragraph of eight to twelve sentences.

Malcolm X and the Argument for the Necessity of “Any Means”

- “Message to the Grass Roots” by Malcolm X (speech transcription)
- “Bring the Noise” by Public Enemy (song)
- “A Poem for Black Hearts” by Amiri Baraka (poem)

Debate I

Watch Stokely Carmichael’s discussion of his generation’s response to King’s philosophy in the “1967” chapter of *The Black Power Mixtape* film. Here, the leader makes compares him to the Dr. King, his attitude anticipating that of Malcolm X: “Unfortunately I am from a younger generation. I am not as patient as Dr. King, nor am I as merciful as Dr. King.”^x In King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” he quoted St. Augustine: “an unjust law is no law at all.”^{xi} At what point is violence justified in effecting social change?

Following this debate, students will watch the first twenty-five minutes of Episode Seven of the PBS documentary series *Eyes on the Prize*, which covers the ascent of Malcolm X as national leader until he returns from his travels. Students will then read the eleventh and twelfth paragraphs of the “Message to Grassroots” speech. Here, Malcolm X makes the case for “any means” by way of two points. First he explains that all revolutions are fought in blood, and then he points out an apparent hypocrisy in the (in)action of African Americans, that they were willing to fight in other countries in the interest of the United States but not use violence to combat oppression of their own people at home.

Then, play the song “Bring the Noise” by the rap group Public Enemy. The track evokes Malcolm by sampling a brief portion of the “Message to Grassroots” speech in its introduction. MC, Chuck D, conflates physical violence, the power of rhetoric, and the use of music in the lines “Can I tell 'em that I really never had a gun? / But it's the wax that the Terminator X spun.”^{xii}

Watch the next eight to ten minutes of *Eyes on the Prize* that deals with Malcolm X's assassination.

Read the poem, "A Poem for Black Hearts."^{xiii}

Debate II

Divide the class into three groups and assign each one of the texts. Review with students the three main types of argumentative appeals (logical, emotional, and associative). Each group will come up with as many examples of each type of appeal in their assigned text. Do they find any logical fallacies? Students will discuss as a whole class what might be an argument of all three of the texts. Then, students will engage in a three-way debate over which text most effectively argues the issue. Students should refer to these three types of appeals in the debate.

Homework

Students respond to the following prompt: What is the irony in the fact that Chuck D of Public Enemy praises Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan (in addition to the song sampling Malcolm X), who later admitted that he was complicit in creating a culture within the Nation that encouraged X's assassination? Does such an apparent contradiction weaken Chuck D's argument?

Naming and Un-naming

- Muhammad Ali Press Conference (video)
- "The Meaning of a Name: How 10 Artists Received Their Rap Monikers" by Sacha Jenkin, et al. (book excerpt)
- "What's in a Name? Negro vs. African American vs. Black" by Lerone Bennett, Jr. (article)
- "Sucka Nigga" by A Tribe Called Quest (song)

This section of the unit seeks to explore a question Americans of African descent of the time period posed to themselves, simply, "How should I be named?" In an essay, "The Topos of (Un)naming," Kimberly W Benston substantiates the significance of such a question, positing that "All of Afro-American literature may be seen as one vast genealogical poem that attempts to restore continuity to the ruptures or discontinuities imposed by the history of black presence in America."^{xiv} This desire restore continuity to history by means of naming seemed to manifest itself in two discreet choices on the part of African American men and women. The first, and more personal choice to be made was, essentially, "Should I keep my 'slave' name?" Bentson continues, "The

simultaneous unnamng and naming—affirming at once autonomy and identification in relation to the past—finds its contemporary analogue, as Lloyd Brown suggests, in the Black Muslim movement, whose adherents (like the onetime Malcolm Little) replace their given or ‘slave’ surnames with a singular ‘X’.^{xv} Writers of the Black Arts Movement were among those to make this decision; for example, Leroi Jones, already an established poet, took on the Muslim name Imamu Amiri Baraka. His peer Don L. Lee renamed himself to Haki Madhubuti, words which mean “just” and “accurate,” respectively, in Swahili.

The second of the aforementioned choices is that of what name American citizens of African descent wish to call themselves and be called collectively. “[T]he semantic lineage stretching from ‘nigger’ to ‘Colored’ to ‘Negro’ to ‘black’/‘Afro-American’”—this progression as Benston calls it has divided scholars and citizens, and also more recently confounded those who wish to speak in a politically correct manner.^{xvi} It is a debate that rose, perhaps, to its hottest fever during the 1960s and 1970s and that leaves those who are not of (recent) African descent to hesitate before saying “black” or “African American.”

Certainly, the name change of the former kind most notable to white America was that of the boxer Cassius Clay, briefly Cassius X, who rechristened himself “Muhammad Ali” in 1967. This public announcement, in the form of a taped press conference in Oakland on June 30 of that year, will serve as our first text on this feature of the Civil Rights Movement.

Students will begin this section with a Quickwrite on the following prompt: “In what instances do people change their names or have them changed for them? What psychological effect or symbolic importance does this have? Think about the realms of immigration, politics, school, professional athletics, writings, musical and performance art.” After a discussion of the significance of such an act, we will briefly discuss the reasons why celebrities of our era choose to alter their names. (The most notable or public examples to eighth graders, I imagine, will be the likes of sports figures Chad Ochocinco and Metta World Peace. If time allows, there is an interesting article from the New York Times entitled, “For Metta World Peace, a New Name and Outlook,”^{xvii} that would serve as fine introduction to and reinforcement of the Ali press conference video.)

Ali in this video is, by his own account, very much influenced by the leader of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, also a prolific writer. Ali echoes, albeit with an infusion of his trademark sly humor, Muhammad’s lines from the book, *Message to the Blackman in America*, “It is only when we come to America and learn the names that our people are now going by that we discover that a whole nation of 20,000,000 black people are going by the names of white people. How can a so-called negro say that his name is ‘Sam Jones,’ a white man’s name with roots in Europe, when ‘Sam Jones’ (Black Man) comes from Africa or Asia?”^{xviii}

After watching the clip, students will discuss the efficacy of Ali's decision. Use the following questions as a starting point: If you were in the same position, would you have made a similar choice? How is Ali's decision firmly rooted in his desire for power? Given that his decision to change his name was one concurrent with the Black Power Movement, how does that help you define that movement's goals?

Either in class or for homework, students will use the Internet (and later family assistance) to research the meanings of their names. They should find the origin of their first, middle, last (and any other) names. Students will then create nametags to be shared during the next class session that display the "translated" version of their names. As an extension, we will discuss how rappers might use similar meaning-making strategies to devise their own MCing sobriquets. Use the *Ego Trip's Book of Rap Lists* list, "How Ten Artists Received Their Rap Monikers" to explore how everything from location to ancestry to gang affiliation has an affect on a name. Students will then create on the reverse of their nametags MC names that are extensions of their own names' origins. (These will be used later.)

After this sharing, students will respond to the following prompt with a Quickwrite: What is the difference between the phrases "black" and "African American"? Do you use both terms? Do you use them interchangeably or in discreet situations and occasions? Have you ever been corrected for using one or the other? A discussion of this should follow.

Students will then read excerpts from a 1967 article written by the Senior Editor of *Ebony Magazine* that addresses the basically identical dichotomy of the day: "black" vs. "Afro-American"—these were the new alternatives to the word "negro." Students will then listen to the song "Sucka Nigga" by A Tribe Called Quest and compare MC Q-Tip's discussion of the etymology of the term "nigga" and his argument for using it with fellow African American youths "as a term of endearment" to the arguments put forth in the article with a focus on author's purpose.^{xix}

Job Prospects for Urban African Americans

- "White on Black Crime" by Haki Madhubuti (poem)
- "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five (music video)
- "Job Plight of Yong Blacks Tied to Despair, Skills Lack" by *The New York Times* (article)
- "Rosy Statistics" by James Bush (newspaper editorial)

Is employment a civil right?

Like much of the early hip-hop music that would follow it by about a decade, much of the poetry of the Black Arts Movement drew on the dire economic situations of urban blacks as subject matter. Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee) in his poem “White on Black Crime” does just this, as he chronicles the diminishing prospects of one, “milton washington.” Lee was also drawing on his childhood in Detroit, where “He grew up poor, and his family was often on welfare.”^{xx}

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Why does Madhubuti title the poem “White on Black Crime”? Consider how the only “crime,” as we would traditionally define it, is suggested at the end, as the main character becomes “close to hurtin somebody / real bad” (Madhubuti 1546).
- 2) “his manhood,” “his god,” and “his dreams” are some of things that washington loses as a result of his unemployment. First, what does each mean? Do they go in ascending order of essentiality to identity? Which is the most devastating loss?
- 3) Why is the line, “more american than black” important in the poem’s connection to mainstream audiences?
- 4) Why would washington end up “hurtin somebody real bad”? What does this imply?

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s 1983 track “The Message,” for many rap music historians, and certainly the listening public of the time, was the song that brought social consciousness to what had been, basically since its inception, party music. Listening to this record was in no way bringing a the experience of live rap, a disco party into private quarters, in the way that early rap records served the purpose of merely documenting and making portable the live experience. The lyrics depart completely from notions of rocking a crowd, perhaps originally due to its relatively few BPMs—“The Message” was notably slower than any other popular rap single that preceded it. Despite the fact that this song would have blared from car radios and boom boxes in the mid-eighties, it aimed for the head and not the feet.

The song is credited to the DJ (Grandmaster Flash) and company, but it is undoubtedly the MC Melle Mel’s show. Both the song and its documentary-style video illustrate the reality of urban life for many New York teens in the early eighties. The song begins with a characteristic pair of couplets:

“Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice”^{xxi}

What remains so striking about “The Message,” especially given what rap music was at that point in its early life, is this introversion of the speaker (years before Rakim got put on wax) and the journalistic eye for sensory detail. Melle Mel does not expend much effort either announcing his presence as the song’s emcee or inviting the listener’s engagement, two staples of early rap singles. Rather, his rhymes are overloaded with concrete proper nouns and strewn with description of roaches, garbage, and junkies, symbols indicative of the prospects for young black men in 1983 New York City. Further, he connects the dots between his individual swelling rage and frustration (“Don’t push me...”) to the economic and societal failures that are the indirect cause of his feelings of entrapment (“Got a bum education, double-digit inflation / I can't take the train to the job, there's a strike at the station”).^{xxii} As Jeff Chang points out in *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, “Black poverty hit a twenty-five-year peak in 1983, with 36 percent of the population counted as living below the poverty level.”^{xxiii}

In order for students to gain insight into the ways in which place affects identity, they will first connect Melle Mel’s rhymes to a primary source. A *New York Times* article from April of 1983, titled “Job Plight of Young Blacks Tied to Despair, Skills Lack.”^{xxiv} The article touches on trends such as the entrance of college graduates into a workforce that has no need for their degrees and thereby reinforces one of the major themes of this unit, that individuals’ situations are largely a product not of their own determinism but the success or failure of large, societal institutions. Students will discover the roots of the MC’s frustration in the documented economic realities of the newspaper report.

Homework

As an extension, students will be asked to mirror the walk Melle Mel takes through his neighborhood in the song’s music video by taking an actual afternoon, evening, or weekend stroll through their own neighborhood. The goal is for students to create a context for the MC’s experience by positioning it relative to their own. On the course of their walks, they will be asked to focus on sensory experience and, according, make field notes that record the activity. They will engage in four types of directed experience: 1) Cover your ears and walk 50 paces. What are the most salient sights? Who do you see and not see? What kinds of buildings are there? 2) Find a safe space for standing. Cover your eyes with your hands. For one minute, focus on the sounds you hear. How can you interpret them? 3) Walk a distance of some length and purposely sniff, smell the air. What are the scents you pick up? 4) What was the feeling you experienced during your walk? Were you ever nervous, anxious, bored? Students need not compose a poem or rap at this point; however, it is significant that they examine the raw materials they have collected and consider how their art would be impacted by their particular experience.

In Search of Our Mother(land)’s Gardens: Women and Afrocentrism

- *All Hail the Queen* by Queen Latifah (album cover)
- *Pink Friday* by Nicki Minaj (album cover)
- “Ladies First” by Queen Latifah (song)
- “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” – Alice Walker
- “Women” – Alice Walker
- “Watch Out” – Jayne Cortez
- “Everyday Use” – Alice Walker
- “Tennessee” (music video) – Arrested Development
- “Boots Riley of The Coup Tells It How He Sees It” (interview that postulates reasons for the descent of Afrocentrism in rap)

Students will next explore the relationship of women artists of both the Black Arts Movement and hip hop to their respective cultural milieus. In each, women seem both an integral part of the movement and, in a way, resistant to some of its crucial themes: most saliently, in both, this could be an omnipresent sense of aggressive, even violent, masculinity. Critic Karen Ford points out, in a defense of the unique resistance of Black Arts-era poet Jayne Cortez’s work, “Giovanni, Sanchez, Rodgers, Evans, Amini (Latimore), and countless others, who published one or two bombastic poems and were never heard from again, frequently retreated to some form of conventional femininity that was almost as disabling as the overbearing masculinity they sought to escape.”^{xxv}

Similarly, in a discussion of the struggle of the female, black artist, Tricia Rose states that “marginalization, deletion, and mischaracterization of women’s role in black cultural production is routine practice.”^{xxvi} This dovetails perfectly with author Alice Walker’s description of the tragic underuse of black women’s creative energies: “They waited for a day when the unknown thing that was in them would be made known; but guessed, somehow in their darkness, that on the day of their revelation they would be long dead.”^{xxvii} Rose reads her women rappers as those willing to take up the mantle that would not have even been an option for their forebears, to do what they can to rectify, to “interpret and articulate the fears, pleasures, and promises of young black women whose voices have been relegated to the margins of popular discourse.”^{xxviii} We will marry to this examination of the role of women in each movement a consideration too of the role of Afrocentrism, a theme that is linked by both of the most significant artists of the unit’s section, writer Alice Walker and rapper Queen Latifah.

We will begin by projecting an image of the cover of Queen Latifah’s best known album, *All Hail the Queen*. The cover has the eponymous Latifah decked in all black, with a head wrap. She stands at attention like a military officer. On the upper right of the cover is a picture of the continent Africa with the album’s title and artist surrounding the graphic in red and black font. Then, students will view the cover of the album *Pink Friday* by the eminent female rapper, Nicki Minaj. The album features the artist reclining in fairy-like

garb, high heels, and a pink wig. Students will participate in an abbreviated Socratic seminar revolving around the following questions:

- 1) How does each artist represent a culture?
- 2) What values do each espouse?
- 3) Given that an album cover's purpose is at least partially to advertise for the music, how do you imagine men and women are supposed to respond to each image?

After the discussion, students will listen to the Queen Latifah song, "Ladies First." The text to be used as counterpoint is Alice Walker's poem "Women." In another min-Socratic seminar, students will discuss one issue: How are the two texts similar in the ways they speak to the importance of education? Students should be guided to toward lines "How they know what we / *Must* know / Without knowing a page / Of it Themselves."^{xxix}

Homework

Students will read the poem "Women" to their mothers or another older female family member. Then, they will briefly interview the family member about how she feels the experience of being a woman in American society has changed over the course of her lifetime. Questions for the interview might include:

- Who were your role models?
- What sort of work did they do?
- How has the work you do changed over the course of your life?
- What is your relationship to education?

Students will compose a short imitation of "Women" based on the interview with this family member. It should begin with the lines, "They were women then / My mama's generation."

The next day, students will begin class by reading Jayne Cortez's poem, "Watch Out." After a discussion of how the author's word choice creates (an angry) tone, students will be assigned the task of looking for the potential roots of such anger in "Women." The class will discuss how the social situation for many African American women as "the mule of the world" (in the words of Jean Toomer) contributed to Cortez telling others to watch out for these women.^{xxx}

Read aloud excerpts from Alice Walker's essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," concerning the historical lack of creative opportunities and outlets for African American women. Then, read the passage near the end in which Walker describes her mother's

gardening. Ask, “What do you imagine, besides gardening, would have been a way that women of Alice Walker’s mother’s means would have been able to create?”

Introduce and read the story, “Everyday Use,” also by Alice Walker.^{xxx} Questions for discussion:

- 1) What does the title seem to mean?
- 2) What is the narrator’s sense of her own identity—see the fifth paragraph?
- 3) How does some of Dee’s behavior seem to connect to the goals of the Black Arts Movement?
- 4) Why does Dee want the quilt?
- 5) Who has a better understanding of “heritage,” Dee or Maggie?

Students will be given a paper tile on which they will copy their imitation of “Women.” Then, they will illustrate on it a symbol that connects them to the family member about whom they wrote the imitation. The tiles will be sewn together with yarn and hung on the wall as a class quilt. (I must give credit to one of my colleagues, Samantha Schragger, for this idea, though I imagine it has been done before.)

After completing the tiles, show the music video to the Arrested Development song “Tennessee.”^{xxxii} Discuss the similarities in motif between the video and the short story just read. Students will probably find the dress and the sounds of the music video foreign, even humorous. Discuss why this is the case. Relate to them that this was not too long after Queen Latifah’s album came out. What reasons can be postulated for the demise of this Afrocentric style? For homework, students must respond by means of an argumentative paragraph to the following quotation: “The other, perhaps more profound, reason for the death of Afrocentric hip-hop as a force within the genre was because for all the protesting and complaining it presented, no matter how valid, at the end of the day it offered no tangible solutions.”^{xxxiii} “Do you agree with this assessment? In addition to using ‘Tennessee’ as a case in point, you must include at least one reference to either “Everyday Use” or “Ladies First.”

A New Aesthetics

- “The Black Arts Movement” by Larry Neal (article)
- “Black Art: Mute Matter Given Force and Function” by Maulana Karenga (article)
- “Kool Moe Dee’s Rap Report Card” by Kool Moe Dee (liner notes)
- “10 Commandments of Hip-Hop” by Adam Bradley (book excerpt)

This idea of a nascent literary or artistic movement laying out specific guidelines for its literary goals and rejection of the old guard is of course nothing new. Romantic,

symbolist, and imagist poets all wrote defenses of their aesthetic approaches, especially as such approaches reacted to those of their immediate forbears. This is evidenced both in the Black Arts Movement's explicit manifestos and the radical message of the poetry itself.

In his seminal essay, "The Black Arts Movement," Larry Neal refers to Maulana Karenga's definition of culture as aesthetic yardstick by which Black Art can be measured.

"Culture is the basis of all ideas, images and actions. To move is to move culturally, i.e. by a set of values given to you by your culture.

"Without a culture Negroes are only a set of reactions to white people.

"The seven criteria for culture are:

1. Mythology
2. History
3. Social Organization
4. Political Organization
5. Economic Organization
6. Creative Motif
7. Ethos^{xxxiv}

In an analysis of Baraka's inaugurating "Black Art," the critic Werner Sollors imagines the rechristened poet Leroi Jones's inauguration of the movement in verse as a veritable scorching of the earth. In the time prior to its writing, Jones both physically extricated him from New York's downtown arts scene to put roots down in Harlem, as well as trading in his slave surname, Jones, for a new moniker, Baraka. He announces the new identities of self and cause with anti-poetry that clears the ground for new seedlings:

"One of Baraka's most typical nationalist poems, "Black Art" . . . is an expression of his Black Aesthetic, but is striking for its venomous language and for its rhetorical violence. The poem characteristically casts the "negro-leader," the "Liberal," the "jew-lady," or the Eliotic "owner-jews" as the enemies. The "abstract" and arbitrary sounds "rrrrrrrrrr . . . tuhtuhtuhtuhtuh tuhtuhtuh" are now the volley-shot sounds of "poems that kill" these enemies. The poem itself is to commit the violence that Baraka considers the prerequisite for the establishment of a Black world. By becoming an "assassin" the poem becomes political; and art merges with life by leaving its artfulness behind. Only this process makes an art that is as organic as a "tree." Admittedly, the poem must abandon poetry in order to perform this function. "Black Art" implies that poetry must die so that the poem can kill."^{xxxv}

This concern with establishing a set of aesthetic criteria is, as one might imagine, accordingly, a concern too of hip-hop music. This is a literary form, after all, in which a significant percentage of words spent are spent to the effect of arguing for the aesthetic superiority of the speaker. The tenets of the aesthetic are not as codified as those of other poetic movements, which makes sense for what is now a global movement. However, methods of evaluation, such as “Kool Moe Dee’s Rap Report Card” do create interesting dialogue on the subject. “On the inner sleeve of his second solo album, *How Ya Like Me Now* (Jive 1986), old school legend Kool Moe Dee turned the tables on his rapping peers by delivering a critical beatdown of what it took to be a great emcee.”^{xxxvi} From the critic’s corner, Adam Bradley’s “10 Commandments of Hip-Hop” from his *Book of Rhymes* serves a similar purpose.

For many aesthetes, especially those who concern themselves with evaluating performance art, there is no greatest testament to an artist’s consummate mastery over form and aesthetic superiority than the act of successful improvisation. For rap MCs and fans, this goes without saying. There is perhaps no greater thrill than witnessing a live vocal performance that calls attention to its own improvised nature and does so in a way that guarantees its birth from the ether (as opposed to verses memorized beforehand and repeated live) by referencing and commenting on the situation of performance as it unfolds in real time. It is as if a jazz saxophonist solos the stage, garage, or backyard itself. To boot, this improvisation is often not simply concerned with its own lyrical and rhythmic cogency but with a specific argument: namely, that its lyric and rhythmic qualities are of clear, qualitative superiority to those of the other improvisational poets in the locality. Such is the rap battle. Adam Bradley, in the first book-length examination of the poetics of rap music, *Book of Rhymes*, makes the point that rap music’s favoring of this battle only further cements its status as a poetic movement in dialogue with movements past. “Battles are an essential part of almost every poetic tradition in the world,” he writes. “In the tenth-century Japanese royal court, for instance, a poet named Fujiwara no Kinto gained fame for his ability to vanquish his adversaries with just a few lines.”^{xxxvii} This feature of hip-hop culture was of course made most famous by the opening and closing scenes of the Eminem pseudo-biopic, *8 Mile*, in which the rapper, playing what is essentially a version of himself as a poor, white MC on the come-up, goes from choking to smoking the competition over the course of the film.

While students can certainly appreciate the skill and discipline required to engage in battling, it’s doubtful that they—especially the eighth-graders of Jay M. Robinson—possess the freestyling ability to make this practice a reality in the classroom. However, there is also a tradition of battling on record that is of equal pedagogic value. While hip-hop heads might refer to the Nas vs. Jay-Z beef of perhaps LL Cool J vs. Kool Moe Dee as the greatest of all time (G.O.A.T., if you will), the one that undoubtedly has the tightest ties to concepts of place and identity is without a doubt Boogie Down Productions and The Juice Crew, more specifically KRS-One vs. MC Shan. Over the

course of six songs (or one initiating diss and five rebuttals) between 1986 and 1988, the two MCs battled for supremacy and, more interestingly, the claim of coming from the borough that birthed rap music.

Students will be able to use this event as a jumping off point for discussion of how the idea of name-checking our origins, representing, simply, is a crucial part of forming identity. How do we show public pride in where we're from? Does the kind of place we're from affect the degree and means by which we represent? Why is it important to establish the history of an art form?

Further, students will participate in a scripted battle rap against a single opponent. In order to give students greater insight into their own constructed identities and avoid what at the middle school level could easily devolve into a session of name calling, students will swap identities with their competitor. That is, they will write rhymes that diss themselves. Wearing signs bearing their opponent's name to visually reinforce the inversion that has taken place, the two will engage in a battle rap. The winner will be determined one student's superiority it cleverly putting down him- or herself in the conventions of rap verse.

Teacher Resources

Bradley, Adam. *Book of rhymes: the poetics of hip hop*. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2009.

Bradley's is the only book-length treatment of rap lyrics from the standpoint of poetics. The book is current and uses a variety of examples that will be familiar to rap fans of any era. The book is essential for elucidating the differences in the ways rap lyrics should be analyzed in differently from traditional poetry.

Chang, Jeff. *Can't stop, won't stop: a history of the hip-hop generation*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005.

The best history of hip hop in existence. This book is just as much a sociological history of the genre's evolution as it is a musical one.

Charnas, Dan. *The big payback: the history of the business of hip-hop*. New York, N.Y.: New American Library, 2010.

A great companion to Chang's bible. This lengthy book chronicles the evolution of rap through the lens of business. Especially compelling is the section that deals with the formation and ascent of Def Jam.

Hill, Marc Lamont. *Beats, rhymes, and classroom life: Hip-hop pedagogy and the politics of identity*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2009.

Strategies for teaching hip hop, especially in an urban classroom. Hill spends time connecting hip hop to traditional poetry. Beware: much of the book reads like a case study.

Hill, Patricia Alveda Liggins, and Bernard W. Bell. *Call and response: the Riverside anthology of the African American literary tradition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

The best anthology of African American literature? If you can afford it, buy a copy. Perhaps even superior to the Norton.

Jay-Z. *Decoded*. New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau, 2010.

Fascinating in that it's the only book of lyrics or poetry that has the author annotating himself with footnotes. Wonderful insights into the craft of rapping from one of the greatest MCs of all time. The prose is largely in vernacular.

Randall, Dudley, and Margaret Taylor Burroughs. *For Malcolm; poems on the life and the death of Malcolm X*. 2d ed. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969.

An anthology of poems about Malcolm X. They are divided into four sections: The Life, The Death, The Rage, The Aftermath.

Rose, Tricia. *Black noise: rap music and black culture in contemporary America*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994.

The seminal academic study of hip hop culture. The reading is dense and a little dated. Essential reading.

The Norton anthology of African American literature. 2. ed. New York [u.a.: Norton, 2004.

The standard bearer of anthologies. A few thousand pages of slave narratives, poems, short stories, novel excerpts. As true with other Norton anthologies, the exquisitely written author biographies are often just as enjoyable as the literature.

Walker, Alice. *In search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

Collection of essays that deal largely with the role of the female, African American artist. The title essay is essential reading.

Student Reading List

African American literature. New York, N.Y.: Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, 2001.

A compilation of poems, short stories, excerpts from longer works and biographical information that is appropriate for middle and high school age students. Not in-depth.

The Black Power Mixtape. Directed by Goran Olsson MPI HOME VIDEO DVD

A documentary footage shot by a Swedish crew in the 1960s and 1970s. The film contains commentary by civil right notable names. The film effectively portrays the Black Power movement as one focused on empowerment.

Bradley, Adam. *Book of rhymes: the poetics of hip hop*. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2009.

An academic study of the poetics of hip hop that is not bogged down with academic prose. A swift read that provides strategies for reading and evaluating hip hop lyrics.

Chang, Jeff. *Can't stop, won't stop: a history of the hip-hop generation*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005.

The best history of hip hop in existence. This book is just as much a sociological history of the genre's evolution as it is a musical one.

Eyes on the prize. DVD. Directed by Henry Hampton. Alexandria, Va.: PBS Video, 2006.

The most comprehensive documentary on the Civil Rights Movement. Essential viewing.

The Norton anthology of African American literature. 2. ed. New York [u.a.: Norton, 2004.

The go-to source for a survey of the literature.

Randall, Dudley, and Margaret Taylor Burroughs. *For Malcolm; poems on the life and the death of Malcolm X*. 2d ed. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969.

An anthology of direct and powerful poems about the Civil Rights leader.

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- ⁱ A Tribe Called Quest, "Excursions," *The Low End Theory*, 1991, Zomba. Audio recording.
- ⁱⁱ Campbell, Kermit E. "There goes the neighborhood: Hip hop creepin' on a come up at the u". College composition and communication. Feb. 2007; 58, 3; Proquest education journals, 331.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Baraka, Amiri. "Black Art". *The Norton anthology of African American literature*. 2. ed. New York u.a.: Norton, 2004., 1943
- ^{iv} Kirkland, David. "7112 Hip Hop and Youth Culture as Social Justice Texts." *The Bread Loaf School of English, Middlebury College*, 2012. Print, 3.
- ^v *Eyes on the prize*. DVD. Directed by Henry Hampton. Alexandria, Va.: PBS Video, 2006.
- ^{vi} Baldwin, James. "Sonny's Blues." *The Norton anthology of African American literature*. 2. ed. New York u.a.: Norton, 2004., 1728.
- ^{vii} Rose, Tricia. *Black noise: rap music and black culture in contemporary America*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994, 34.
- ^{viii} Baldwin, 1738.
- ^{ix} *African American literature*. New York, N.Y.: Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, 2001, 91.
- ^x *The Black Power Mixtape*. Directed by Goran Olsson MPI HOME VIDEO DVD
- ^{xi} King, Jr, Martin Luther. "Letter from Birmingham Jail." *The Norton anthology of African American literature*. 2. ed. New York u.a.: Norton, 2004, 1896.
- ^{xii} Public Enemy. "Bring the Noise." *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Def Jam, 1988.
- ^{xiii} Baraka, Amiri. "A Poem for Black Hearts" *The Norton anthology of African American literature*. 2. ed. New York u.a.: Norton, 2004, 1940.
- ^{xiv} Benston, Kimberly W. "I yam what I am: the topos of un(naming) in Afro-American literature". Gates, Henry Louis, and Sunday Ogbonna Anozie. *Black literature and literary theory*. New York: Methuen, 1984. Print., 152
- ^{xv} Ibid, 153
- ^{xvi} Ibid, 152
- ^{xvii} Beck, Howard. "For Lakers Metta World Peace, a New Name and Outlook - NYTimes.com." *The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/30/sports/basketball/for-lakers-metta-world-peace-a-new-name-and-outlook.html>>.
- ^{xviii} Muhammad, Elijah. *Message to the Blackman in America*. Secretarius MEMPS Ministries, Pheonix. 1973, 55.
- ^{xix} A Tribe Called Quest, "Sucka Nigga," *Midnight Marauders*, 1993, Zomba 01241-41490-2. Audio recording.
- ^{xx} Madhubuti, Haki. "White on Black Crime." *Call and response: the Riverside anthology of the African American literary tradition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998, 1536.
- ^{xxi} "Grandmaster Flash The Message HQ - YouTube." YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4o8TeqKhgY> (accessed November 11, 2012).

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- ^{xxii} Grandmaster Flash
- ^{xxiii} Chang, Jeff. *Can't stop, won't stop: a history of the hip-hop generation*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005, 177.
- ^{xxiv} "Job Plight of Yong Blacks Tied to Despair, Skills Lack - NYTimes.com." The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia. <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/04/19/us/job-plight-of-young-blacks-tied-to-despair-skills-lack.html> (accessed September 26, 2012).
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- ^{xxvii} Walker, Alice. *In search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983, 233.
- ^{xxviii} Rose, 146
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- ^{xxx} Walker, 232
- ^{xxxi} Walker, Alice. "Everyday Use." *The Norton anthology of African American literature*. 2. ed. New York u.a.: Norton, 2004, 2437.
- ^{xxxii} "Arrested Development - Tennessee - YouTube." YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VCdJyOAQYM> (accessed November 27, 2012).
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- ^{xxxiv} Neal, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement." *The Norton anthology of African American literature*. 2. ed. New York u.a.: Norton, 2004, 2043
- ^{xxxv} Sollors, Werner. *Amiri Baraka / LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism"*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.
- ^{xxxvi} Jenkins, Sacha. *Ego trip's book of rap lists*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999, 45.
- ^{xxxvii} Bradley, Adam. *Book of rhymes: the poetics of hip hop*. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2009, 176.