

ENGAGING YOUNG MEN AS ALLIES TOOLKIT

Curriculum Unit #3: Beyond Beats & Rhymes

(Adapted by Mariame Kaba from a draft copy of *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes Resource and Discussion Guide*, May 2007—included in “Something is Wrong” Curriculum Guide)

The **Media Education Foundation** has agreed to offer the film *Beyond Beats & Rhymes* to interested facilitators at a cost of \$19.99. This includes screening rights to the film. Copies of the film can be ordered for this special price by visiting the following website: www.mediaed.org/chicago.

Time for screening and discussion: 1.5 to 2 hours.

INTRODUCTION TO THE FILM

Hip-hop has undeniably become the universal language for young people—from kids in urban neighborhoods, to youth on reservations and suburban hamlets. No longer the domain of “inner city” youth, hip-hop culture is exported across the globe—providing millions a window into the hearts and minds of a handful of mostly young, male African American artists. The lyrics and videos of these mainstream artists often present a world of violence and drugs, newfound wealth and materialism, homophobia and misogyny.

The violent and hypersexual imagery in hip-hop has been a topic of heated debate on school campuses, in civic organizations, legislative sessions, women’s magazines, churches and homes. These debates stir strong emotions, with particular resonance among African Americans, arguably the community most affected by the negative messages and stereotypes reinforced by the music. The conversations expose divisions along lines of gender and sexual orientation and between hip-hop’s young fans and their Civil Rights era elders.

Even outside of the African American community, opinions about hip-hop are deeply polarized with little room left for a middle ground. Some defend the right to self-expression or argue that hip-hop encourages entrepreneurship; others link it to an increasingly nihilistic youth culture that supports violence against women and homosexuals. Missing from the debate are tools to help communities lead and sustain productive conversations that engage all sides. *HIP-HOP: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* examines representations of manhood, sexism, and homophobia in hip-hop culture through the eyes of an adult fan, an African American male, and anti-sexism trainer. Instead of offering simple conclusions about hip-hop’s fans and creators, the candid voices in the film describe the cultural and political environment in which the music is created, commercialized, and consumed.

Parents, educators, artists and other professionals can use the film and resources in this guide to engage both young consumers and media makers in discussions about gender, race and community values, support media literacy, and encourage young men and women to reflect on

the impact of the violent and sexual imagery on themselves, in their relationships and in their communities. It can also inspire intergenerational conversations on an increasingly violent, materialistic and sexually explicit American culture using hip-hop as a point of reference. As each generation has expressed itself in a new musical genre, hip-hop is the voice of our youth. With these resources viewers can better listen, understand and respond.

PAVING THE WAY FOR A PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATION

The film raises many complex and emotionally charged issues around race, gender, sexuality, power, identity and violence. The role of the facilitator is to help the group discuss these complex issues by creating a safe space for dialogue. People who feel safe, encouraged, respected and challenged are likely to share openly and thoughtfully. Here's how you can encourage that kind of participation:

PREPARE YOURSELF

Identify your own hot-button issues. View the film before your workshop and give yourself time to reflect so you aren't dealing with raw emotions at the same time as you facilitate a discussion.

Consider a Co-Facilitator. With gender as a focal point of the film, it might be helpful to consider a co-facilitation (with a male and female) as a way to engage all participants.

Be knowledgeable. You don't need to be an issue expert to lead a workshop, but knowing the basics can help you keep a discussion on track and gently correct misstatements of fact.

PREPARE THE GROUP

Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to be heard. Be clear about how people will take turns and indicate that they want to speak. Plan a strategy for preventing one or two people from dominating the discussion.

Explain the difference between dialogue and debate. In a debate, participants try to convince others that they are right. In a dialogue, participants try to understand each other and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening to each other actively. Remind people that they are engaged in a dialogue.

Encourage active listening. Ask the group to think of the event as a listening, as well as discussing event. Encourage participants to listen for things that challenge as well as reinforce their own ideas. You may also consider asking people to practice formal "active listening," where participants listen without interrupting the speaker, then re-phrase to see if they have heard correctly.

Remind participants that everyone sees through the lens of their own experience. Who we are influences how we interpret what we see. So participants may have a different view about the content and meaning of the film they have just seen, and all of them may be accurate. Inviting speakers to identify the evidence on which they base their opinion can help people to understand one another's perspectives.

GENERAL DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Take a few moments after the film to allow the viewers time to process what they have seen. Gauge the mood of the participants. If the group needs more time to decompress before a discussion, offer time for a free write where participants jot down their feelings before speaking.

If you could respond to one person in the film who would it be and what would you say?

What person or scene made the strongest impression on you?

How did you feel about hip-hop music and videos before seeing the film? How have those feelings changed after seeing the film?

MEDIA LITERACY, ACCOUNTABILITY, PRODUCTION, IMAGES AND STEREOTYPES

Who do you feel bears the most responsibility for the images in hip-hop videos—directors, artists, dancers, or record company executives? What responsibility do viewers carry? In what ways might viewers hold these players responsible for images they deem unacceptable?

Jada Kiss argues that most violent lyrics are for entertainment and should not be taken literally, much like action movies are accepted as fantasy. Does all violent imagery (action movies, hip-hop videos, news clips) feel the same to you? How do you distinguish realistic violence from entertainment?

Should artists create socially responsible work? Why or why not? Are artists of all ethnic backgrounds held to the same standards when it comes to creating art? Where might those differing expectations come from?

When speaking of white fans, rapper M-1 argues that their appreciation and understanding of hip-hop is “*as put on as baggy jeans...that’s all*”. In another scene, a young white woman explains that her interest in the music, “*appeals to our sense of learning about other cultures*”, but that it also reinforces stereotypes about African Americans. What are the implications when hip-hop serves to represent an entire community for those with little personal interaction with African Americans?

Filmmaker Byron Hurt defends his critique of hip-hop by saying that he is also a fan. How would you have felt if the filmmaker was not a fan? Was not African American? Was a woman? How does Byron’s onscreen identity impact your reaction to his critique?

Consider these two quotes:

“The time when we switched to gangsta music was the same time that the majors bought up all the [record] labels...and I don’t think that is a coincidence.” –Carmen Ashurst-Watson, former president of Def Jam. “The industry don’t give us deals when we speak righteously...they think we don’t want to hear that” –Unidentified M.C. on the street.

What did you learn about the record label's influence over the types of artists that are signed and heavily marketed? Do you think that record companies base their decisions on economics, politics or aesthetics? What are some of the effects of those decisions?

CONSTRUCTION OF MANHOOD AND REPRESENTATIONS OF MASCULINITY

Which political or cultural figure most influenced your gender identity as an adolescent? What attributes did you most admire in that person? If you were to choose a public figure that represents your ideal of manhood or womanhood today who would that be and why? How does that differ from your earlier role model?

Do you agree with Michael Eric Dyson's statement, "*The notion of violent masculinity is at the heart of American identity*"? What examples can you think of to support or refute this notion.

Play the montage of clips showing politicians, businessmen, musicians, athletes and actors displaying aggressive behavior. Stop the tape. Ask the group to consider the trajectory of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's career from action hero to statesman, or the career of Jesse Ventura, a professional wrestler-cum-state governor. Imagine how a hip-hop artist such as Jada Kiss might be viewed if he attempted to enter into political office. How are perceptions of masculinity influenced by the economic status of the person? How are they shaped by race?

"*We're playing a role from the time we're 7 and were walking down the street and someone call us a sissy, sucker, church boy, and we start playing that role.*" In this quote, Rev. Conrad Tillard speaks about the roles that young men play to maintain the respect of their peers. Where do young men receive messages about what it means to "be a man"? In what circumstances are young men encouraged to be sensitive? What are the implications of a society that raises young men to stifle certain emotions, and project others? How can we support young men who refuse to "play the role"?

Rev. Conrad Tillard argues that, "*we have to challenge this notion that it's ok for black males to die early.*" Do you believe that Americans have become desensitized to images of violence against black men? If so, how have we arrived at this point? Can hip-hop artists paint a realistic picture of the realities in their communities and also challenge that notion? How can communities challenge that notion?

GENDER VIOLENCE AND HOMOPHOBIA

Hurt describes his experiences as an anti-sexism trainer that led to an increased sensitivity to degrading lyrics in hip-hop music. Can you recall an incident, or series of experiences, that lead you to become more sensitive to how certain groups are talked about or portrayed in media? How have those experiences shaped your consumer choices?

Media educator Sut Jhally suggests that, "*hip-hop culture is not separate from the rest of American culture...the objectified female bodies...are everywhere.*" If hip-hop music is holding a mirror up to American society, what do we learn about the value of women's bodies in mainstream media?

Professor Jelani Cobb argues that, “*music videos have taken a view of women of color that is not radically different from the views of 19th century white slave owners.*” What “view of women” is Cobb describing? In what other ways can you identify the legacy of slavery within hip-hop culture?

“Generally speaking, Black people do not believe that misogyny, sexism and violence against women are urgent issues. We still think that racism, police brutality, black male incarceration are the issues that we need to be concerned about.” –Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall

Why do you think sexism has taken a back seat to other forms of oppression in certain communities? What would it take to elevate the importance of combating sexism in all communities?

In a scene from Daytona, Florida a group of young women are asked how they feel when they are called derogatory names because of how they are dressed. One woman responds, “*It’s not really directed towards you personally. I know he’s not talking to me. I know what I am.*” At the same time, one young man explains, “*You know who are the bitches cause you see how they are dressed...sistas don’t dress like that.*” If mainstream hip-hop has put manhood in a box, how has the music reinforced a limited view of what it means to be a woman?

While mainstream media becomes more accepting of homosexuality, homophobic slurs found throughout hip-hop continues to represent the ultimate insult to one’s manhood. Why do you think hip-hop has become one of the last art forms to take an openly hostile stance on homosexuality?

RESOURCES

For fact sheets and issue briefs related to the film, visit <http://www.itvs.org/outreach/hiphop/>

Alternate Activity (adapted from Hip Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes – Study Guide written by Bill Yousman [Media Education Foundation])

Time: 40 minutes or one class period

If you do not have enough time to show the entire film, just show the first two sections (introduction and everybody wants to be hard).

THE KEY POINTS OF SECTION 2—EVERYBODY WANTS TO BE HARD

- Filmmaker Byron Hurt attended Spring Bling in Florida and talked to aspiring rappers. He found that all of their raps revolve around guns, killing, being tough and invulnerable, feminizing other men, and terrorizing other men.
- This vision of violent masculinity is not found only in rap music. In fact, it is a longstanding and central part of American culture and American identity.

- By way of example, Michael Eric Dyson points to the early years of America, the expansion of the frontier, and the manner in which guns were equated with manhood and the ability to protect and care for one's family.
- Guns in American culture are in fact a standard symbol of masculinity.
- Today young men of color employ gun and gunplay as outlets for their rage
- The ability to use words skillfully and aggressively is central to being masculine in the hip-hop world, as is the ability to survive the violence that is so much a part of young, poor, and working class men's lives.
- Hip Hop and rap were born out of poverty, created in what Kevin Powell calls urban "war zones," cityscapes torn apart by neglectful and abusive government policies.
- This societal neglect is itself a form of violence in America—a systematic, structural form of violence historically directed at poor people.
- From out of these conditions emerged the creative defiance and energy of rap music, dance, graffiti art, fashion, and other aspects of hip-hop culture.
- Rap also grew out of a long tradition of male boasting in African American culture, a tradition of boys and men fighting for respect by projecting and proclaiming their own power and ability while simultaneously denigrating other men.
- Being "hard" in American culture is equated with being a real man. Not showing any weakness or emotion is a crucial aspect of being hard and therefore considered "manly."
- Jackson Katz argues that males who feel powerless—particularly men of color and working-class white men—often turn to their own bodies as a source of power. Men who have other forms of power (economic, social, political) do not have the same need to adopt this kind of hyper-aggressive physical posture.
- Chuck D. points out that often men of color don't confront the real sources of their oppression, but instead turn their rage on each other. He refers to this as a culture of "black animosity."
- Violence is so much a part of American culture that we have become desensitized to it. It is found not only in rap music, but across the culture in movies, sports, video games, and the real-world politics of militarism and war.
- American culture as a whole, at its very historical core, is hyperviolent and hypermasculine.
- There is a self-destructive element to this societal glamorization of violence. Black men, in particular, are murdering one another in disproportionate numbers, and the notion that this is simply a natural state of events must be challenged.

- But Chuck D. argues that instead of challenging the notion that black male violence is natural, the industries that produce popular culture actually exploit stories and images of black death for profit.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Hurt asks the question: “Why are so many rappers preoccupied with violence and gunplay?” What answers does the film offer? What do you think is the answer to this question?
2. Fat Joe says “everybody wants to be hard.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Does “everybody” include women?
3. He also imitates the tough demeanor of men in clubs. Do you see this kind of behavior when you go out? Where else do you see it?
4. Katz argues that not only men of color but also working class white men feel the need to be physically hard and tough. Do you think his argument could be extended to other men as well? Why or why not? What connections do you see between this working class white male need to be tough and what Hurt is saying about the need of so many black men to project hardness?
5. What do you think is meant by the phrase “the culture of black animosity”? What is your initial response to that phrase?

SOME THINGS TO THINK ABOUT...

MEDIA VIOLENCE RESOURCE SHEET

Because children and adolescents have so much exposure to technology and media through television computers, movies, music, video games etc..., there is a lot of concern about the amount of violence that they are exposed to at young ages. The Kaiser Family Foundation reports that 99% of Children in America live in homes with televisions. According to the American Psychiatric Association, the average American child watches 28 hours of television each week and will have seen 16,000 murders and 200,000 acts of violence by the age of 18. Prime-time programming for adults is far less violent than commercial television for children. Some cartoons, for example, include more than 80 violent acts per hour.

Studies have found that violence in the media poses three threats to children. First, young children who are exposed to media violence become desensitized to acts of aggression and violence and perceive reality to be more violent than it actually is. Second, due to their inability to separate fiction from reality, young children begin to imitate the violent behaviors that they see. In fact, studies have found that children who see aggressive acts on television are more likely to imitate those actions in play, or generally be more aggressive in their interactions. Third, children exposed to media violence are more likely to fear becoming a victim of such acts¹ (Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003).

¹ Source: Children Exposed to Violence by Linh Vuong, Fabiana Silva, Susan Marchionna (in FOCUS: Views from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, August 2009).