

Hill, Marc Lamont (2009). *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*. (Foreword by Gloria Ladson-Billings) NY: Teachers College Press.

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Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity is an innovative and interesting book from scholar, educator, political pundit, and activist Dr. Marc Lamont Hill. His book has six chapters plus an appendix. These chapters include: 1) “Stakes Is High”: Toward an Anthropology of Hip-Hop Based Education; 2) “Spaces and Places We Fly”: The Texts and Contexts of Hip-Hop Lit; 3) “Real Recognize Real”: Negotiating Authenticity Politics in Hip-Hop Lit; 4) Wounded Healers: Forming Community Through Storytelling; 5) Brining Back Sweet (and Not So Sweet) Memories: The Cultural Politics of Memory, Hip-Hop, and Generational Identity; 6) Stakes Is High (The

Dr. Marc Lamont Hill is one of the nation’s leading hip-hop generation intellectuals. His work on hip-hop culture, politics, sexuality, education and religion has appeared in many journals, magazines, books, and anthologies. He is on the faculty of Columbia University as an Associate Professor of Education at Teachers College. He also holds an affiliated faculty appointment in African American Studies at the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University. Dr. Hill has lectured widely and provides regular commentary for media outlets like NPR, *Washington Post*, *Essence Magazine*, and *New York Times*. He is currently a political contributor for Fox News Channel, where he appears regularly on programs such as *The O’Reilly Factor*, *Huckabee*, and *Hannity*.

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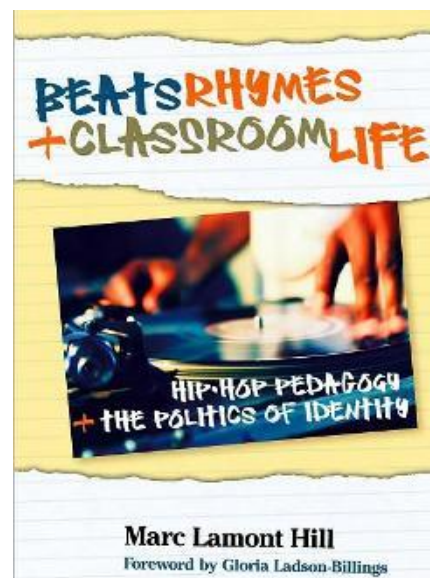
Remix): Toward a Hip-Hop Pedagogy. Dr. Hill also includes an appendix entitled: Bonus Track – Representin(g): Negotiating Identities in the field and Behind the Desk. Quite obviously, the chapter titles are appropriately unique, and the subject matter of each chapter is just as compelling. This book represents the next step in the scholarly evolution of what is coming to be known as Hip-Hop Studies and more specifically Hip-Hop Based Education which Hill (2009) states “has drawn on a variety of theoretical, empirical, and practical insights in order to substantiate the importance and effectiveness of linking various aspects of hip-hop culture to formal and informal educational processes” (p. 10). This book is the result of an 18-month ethnographic study in which Dr. Hill co-taught an English literature class in an urban alternative high school in Philadelphia, PA. In an innovative pedagogical twist, the course emphasized hip-hop texts, which resulted in thought-provoking discussions on hip-hop themes and culture. The course became known as Hip-Hip Lit.



The book had several different aims. First, was the issue of extending the conversation regarding Hip-Hop – Based Education “beyond parochial considerations of contemporary educational policy” (Hill, 2009, p. 2). Thus, while research has generally advocated HHBE as beneficial to urban learners who identify with hip-hop, there is a dearth in the literature around the complex identities of youth and how they construct reality, constrict relationships, categorize culture, and collectively cosign to hip-hop texts, culture, and related themes. Second, this book explores the role of teachers in urban classrooms. It seeks to challenge long-held notions of teacher power, superiority, and control for a more malleable mindset that encourages student engagement, recognizes students’ prior knowledge, and promotes student empowerment in a more democratic manner. Finally, this work seeks to inform qualitative research as an applied ethnographic study. Such research is fraught with difficulties with regard to sensitivity of subject matter, anonymity of respondents, and the complex roles of the researcher. All of which were addressed in the study.

The opening chapters are used to provide context with regard to previous literature and appropriate background for the study. Hip-Hop Studies recognizes the scholarly research that has been applied to hip-hop culture for the last decade. Much of the early work, though insightful, was dominated by a viewpoint of scholars and educators who emphasized the impact of hip-hop music and culture on youth (Beachum & McCray, 2004; Kunjufu, 1993; Tyson, 2002) or it framed the discussion from a position that may not have included the voice of those closest to the culture (Rose, 1994; Thompson, 1996). This work is also complemented by social commentary kinds of literature that provided its own illumination on hip-hop (Dyson, 1997; Kitwana, 2002). Petchauer (2009) asserted that a grounded literature approach would place more of the focus on those who live, develop, and are immersed in hip-hop.

“Because grounded explorations are normally directed toward an academic audience, a reader is often afforded enough methodological specificity on which to make a critical evaluation of the research findings and attempt to replicate studies, unlike social commentary approaches” (p. 952). This book is an example of such a grounded approach that intimately involves the voices of urban youth, carefully co-constructed through the epistemological insight of the researcher. The methodological rigor increases the works academic integrity and acumen while at the same time creates social space for the voices of those youth closest to hip-hop culture to be heard. Additionally, the opening chapters give critical background into how the course was developed, the curricular approach and pedagogy used, team teaching guidelines, and arrangement of assignments to name a few. Although the course had a heavy emphasis on hip-hop texts and analysis, it did include formal assignments and tasks like journal writing and sharing, group reading, unit projects, and a final project. Furthermore, the hip-hop texts discussed in the class, had literary themes attached like: allusion, signifyin(g), metaphor, and plot. Thus, the class became



much more than just “talking about rap music” as some outsiders may criticize.

In the following chapters, readers are introduced to how a community was created in the Hip-Hop Lit classroom. This community, though collegial and family-like, included its own tensions and disagreements on multiple levels. In course discussions there was much debate with regard to what constituted “real” hip-hop. This was ongoing debate about authenticity. While some students felt “real” hip-hop was solely the realm of lesser known or more obscure artists who claim a closer connection to hip-hop’s roots, others felt that “real” hip-hop was more connected to the contemporary urban experience or the “streets”. Oliver (2006) depicts “the streets” as “Public and semipublic social settings including street corners, vacant lots, bars, clubs, after hour joints, convenience stores, drug houses, pool rooms, parks and public recreational places in which primarily lower and working-class black males tend to congregate” (p. 919). Thus, in the minds of other students, hip-hop’s authenticity was gauged by its ability to reflect chaos, culture, creativity, calamity, connectedness, and code of the streets (Oliver, 2006). As the teacher, Hill tried to challenge students’ somewhat rigid conceptions of authenticity. Other outcomes from the class included the recognition of Hip-Hop Lit as “Black” social space. It should be pointed out that there were a few white students in the class. In this instance, the White students became the “other,” one who is viewed as an outsider, alien, or foreign as compared to the norm (Said, 1979). This created new classroom roles and understandings. For instance, one student commented,

When you in a regular class, it’s like a White class so you feel like you gotta stand up for Black people. When you in a Black class [e.g. Hip-Hop Lit] it’s different. You don’t want the [Whites] to feel uncomfortable *the way we do in class* so we just talk around it [referring to race]. (Hill, 2009, p. 53)

Data like this are extremely insightful with regard to enhancing our understandings with regard to student interactions around race-related topics and how students construct reality around race.

One extremely important theme in the book is the way students shared stories and engaged in a process of “wounded healing.” According to Dr. Hill, wounded healing refers “not only to the therapeutic dimensions of personal and collective storytelling, but also a critical engagement with majoritarian narratives that exposes and produces new possibilities” (Hill, 2009, p. 65). Two critical components of this notion include personal disclosure and additional affirmation through co-signing. Co-signing nonverbal gestures, interjections (e.g., Exactly!), or complementary stories that built community through this mutual sharing (Hill, 2009, p. 71). This emergent community was not only for students, Hill also discovered that he began sharing more about his life experiences, thereby bringing him closer to his students, while the teacher he was working with chose to remain guarded. These interactions directly touch on the issue of teacher power in the classroom. “The willingness to render oneself vulnerable can reorganize classroom power relations in ways that allow for more democratic, engaged, and productive practices” (Hill, 2009, p. 89). This is simply one of numerous instances in the text where not only did students increase their knowledge concerning the subject area, but also benefited in unintended ways by the creation of a *safe space* in the school where they could speak in their own language and share stories of their lives with one another.

Toward the end of the book, Dr. Hill takes the reader closer to the realization of a coherent hip-hop pedagogy and he also would discuss methodological tensions while conducting his research. Hill (2009) elaborated when he wrote:

By hip-hop pedagogy, I am not suggesting a prefigured set of strategies or activities for reaching students through hip-hop culture. As I have demonstrated in this book, such strategies are inevitably defied by the everyday identity work of students

and teachers. Rather, hip-hop pedagogy reflects an alternate, more expansive vision of pedagogy that reconsiders the relationships among students, teachers, texts, schools, and the broader world. (p. 120)

Although progressive educational practices are advocated in this book, Dr. Hill, at the end of the book, cautions those who might “overinvest in” or romanticize such approaches. He reminds us that even *Hip Hop Lit* is still a course that has increased student learning as its goal. Hill cautions, “it is important not to romanticize the use of hip-hop texts...the tension between challenging school-sanctioned knowledge and providing students with bodies of knowledge that are requisite for mainstream educational success is one that must be carefully negotiated by hip-hop-based scholars” (2009, p. 124). In the end, any approach should spark students’ minds, touch their hearts, or in the best case, do both. Dr. Hill also discussed the tension involved with his role as teacher-researcher and mentor-friend. He also recognized the difficulty in his position as an outsider from the university, who was actually granted temporary special status as a co-teacher. Thus, he was part of the group, immersed in the educational setting, yet also required to collect (sometimes personal) data from respondents, and to acutely and adroitly analyze what he heard and saw. He noted that “the decisions that we make about how we want to represent ourselves and our research participants, both in the field and behind the desk, have powerful personal, social, and methodological implications that cannot be adequately responded to through traditional methodological considerations of validity, internal generalizability, or thick description” (Hill, 2009, p. 147)

This book points hip-hop scholars and educators in a new and insightful direction. It pushes beyond parochial visions of how hip-hop and education intersect and seeks to seamlessly intertwine the two into a newfound pillar for 21st century urban education. It builds on a solid scholarly tradition of academics and educators who have addressed hip-hop history and

origins (Rose, 1994), warranted and unwarranted attacks on hip-hop (Dyson, 1997; 2004; 2007), the evolution of hip-hop culture (Kitwana, 2002), values and hip-hop culture (Kunjufu, 1993), collisions between hip-hop and school culture (Beachum & McCray, 2004), and the importance of hip-hop and pop culture in the classroom (Duncan-Andrade, 2008). This work challenges long-held notions of teacher power and authority, advocates for the creation of emergent and healing communities in classrooms, complicates the notion of the lone researcher, and seeks the pathway toward a hip-hop pedagogy that properly incorporates context-driven complexities and collaborative reflexive relationships with subjects.

Some may levy certain criticisms on this work. First, there is the audience who may feel that the incorporation of hip-hop into pedagogical approaches is educational blasphemy. This can be fueled by generational drift, a bias against hip-hop culture, and/or narrow visions of what classroom restructuring should look like. Second, are those who may agree with some of the content, but have serious concerns with regard to its practical value or they may crave for “concrete” steps (a more procedural explanation). In the first case, it is clear that this book builds upon solid scholarly research around culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It is plainly clear that the same status quo and mundane educational approaches are not working in the vast majority of American urban schools. Therefore, new approaches that reflect students’ interests should be explored. With regard to the latter concern about practicality, educators should first start with an affirming attitude toward students (as opposed to a deficit view) and this is should be complimented by a sociocultural perspective that respects students’ cultures, honors the knowledge they bring to the classroom, and engages them in a way that makes the academic content relevant to their lives (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Thus, there can be no real emphasis on practice without the proper perspective.

Ultimately, this book makes a strong contribution to the body of knowledge. It enhances our understandings of anthropological educational

approaches in urban schools. In addition, it gives educators another good example of what culturally relevant pedagogy can look like. Also, it gives clearer insight to Hip-Hop – Based education undergirded by a cogent research methodology. This book is also unique in that it not only adheres to the rules of research rigor, but it also provides a forum for the inclusion of urban students' voices, in their words and in a setting they helped to develop. Thus, this study becomes a good example of the grounded literature that Petchauer (2009) advocated. The heart of the book is summarized by Hill (2009) when he wrote, "In order to fully understand the pedagogical power of hip-hop, our intellectual energy cannot be merely exhausted at the level of textual analysis. Instead, scholars, critics, and everyday observers must also consider the relationships between hip-hop culture and the ever-expanding range of economic, political, and social arrangements that shape its consumption and production" (p. 121).

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