

BEATS, RHYME, AND CULTURE FALL 2003

GROUP PROJECT

Hip-hop as a means of viable academic discourse is a fairly new phenomena. GMU is one of about 30 or so universities across the nation which offer courses about Hip-hop (see http://www.hiphoparchive.org/research/course_listings.htm for complete list). Beats, Rhyme, and Culture takes a somewhat unique approach as we investigate the culture in an academic/historical setting, but also monitor current events in an attempt to participate in the ongoing culture.

In class, I have attempted to introduce the notion of ‘urban validity’¹ and its importance in rap music and Hip-hop culture. As Hip-hop continues to gain momentum in academia, central to the culture maintaining its authenticity is making sure academic works are rooted in the culture. For instance, on March 25th, 2003, the NY Daily News labeled ‘soft-core’ rapper Fabolous a gangster rapper. Fabolous has since sued the paper for this mistake. Another area may be the glorification of Eminem (see excellent article on this here: <http://www.urbanthinktank.org/paclikeme.cfm>) by media and academicians alike. Either way, it is painfully clear that academics need to be held to a higher standard when it comes to critiquing the culture.

Thus comes your mission:

To date about 75 PhD dissertations (available from the Library of Congress, I’ll save you the trip and get them for you) have been written on Hip-hop/rap. Your goal will be to determine the ‘urban validity’ of one of these works. For instance, I have been in the audience where Gangstarr (the seminal group consisting of DJ Premier and Guru) has been referred to as a person and Bahamadia has been called a non-entity in rap – surprisingly, both of these remarks came from Professor’s who teach courses about Hip-hop.

Obviously, everyone is entitled to an opinion, but when academics talk, people (especially those who are uninformed) listen. Someone needs to be a watchdog, which is where I see our class coming in.

I’ve identified the following steps needed for completion of this project:

1. Among your group members, brainstorm on topics which you may want to investigate. Some possibilities:
 - a. Feminism in Hip-hop
 - b. The Glorification of Violence in Hip-hop

¹ Based on the term external validity, which describes how lab results can be generalized in the real world, urban validity measures how well one’s message, recorded in a studio and constructed in the emcee’s mind, reflects the reality of the milieu they speak of. Paradoxically, the maturation of rap has witnessed the message veer further away from its target audience.

c. The Global Impact of Hip-hop

2. I will present the list of papers next week at which point you will be responsible for performing background research (interviews with subject matter experts, surveys, literature (i.e. more than just the web) review, list of artists/albums/lyrics/videos which may be of importance)
3. Defining your argument vis-à-vis the paper you chose
4. Writing the report (8-12 pages)
5. Preparing a videotaped presentation to complement your findings)

The final paper will be due on December 1. I will announce intermediate dates next week.