**Title**
Review: *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity* by Marc Lamont Hill

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**Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity** by Marc Lamont Hill. New York: Teachers College Press, 2009. 148 pp. ISBN 978-0-8077-4960-9

There is a growing sector of the academy that has begun to recognize the utility of Hip Hop culture as a way of making educational material culturally relevant to urban youth (Alim, 2006; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002, 2004). Troubling graduation rates (Howard, 2008) and standardized test scores (NCES, 2008) of minority youth have led some districts to be amenable to using alternative interventions designed to increase engagement in the schooling process. *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life* describes an intervention using Hip-Hop-Based Education (HHBE) in a class of Twilight High School students in Philadelphia. The intervention was designed to help students develop mainstream textual analysis skills, but also to engage in important identity examination about themselves as students and how pop culture texts influence that perception. Over the course of the school year, Hill takes the students increasingly deeper into the texts to the point where not only students made themselves vulnerable about their identity struggles, but Hill himself became transparent to the group in order for his pedagogy to remain credible.

Hill opens the book by laying out the theoretical and methodological arguments for creating his text. In addition he argues for the urgent necessity to not only form grounded theory around HHBE, but also the need to develop praxis; hence the title of Chapter 1, "Stakes is High." Theoretically he specifies the Hip Hop lens he is using to approach this work. He acknowledges the work done using Hip Hop in the social sciences and humanities yet argues that the analyses rendered could be enhanced by adding perspectives from the fields of critical pedagogy, culturally relevant curriculum, and racial identity examination. Hill argues that utilizing the ethnographic tradition allows a researcher to observe and explain in rich detail the ways that students not only engage Hip Hop texts, but also form multilayered analyses that have varied effects on their identity formation very similar to the way that Morrell and Duncan-Andrade's (2008) work has led to a broader understanding of critical literacy.

In "Real Recognize Real," Hill demonstrates how conversations with students about what is "real" in Hip Hop can be connected to ongoing debates about how texts get included or excluded from the literary canon. By assisting his students in making these connections, Hill also helps them see how power dynamics work to decide what is accepted and what is not. The conversations about what is authentically Hip Hop also allow Dr. Hill to challenge the students' notions of what is authentically Black. Because the space was considered more "real' by the students, it enabled them to use dress, language, and behaviors they felt more accurately represented them than they could in their normal school

space. While the class empowered Black students to explore, the perception of the class as an authentic Black space actually served to inhibit non-Black students from engaging in their own identity exploration because non-Black identities were not deemed valuable by the classroom community. Using the Tatum (1999) and Helms (1990) models of identity development for white students as a backdrop, there is evidence from the text that one white student in particular was discouraged from fully exploring her identity despite attempts to be part of the community. As Helms (1990) notes, "The greater the extent that racism exists and is denied, the less possible it is to develop a positive white identity" (p. 49).

"Wounded Healers" and "Bringing Back Sweet (and Not So Sweet) Memories" provide the reader powerful examples of how the analysis of Hip Hop texts creates the possibility of community-forming storytelling. These stories often invoke painful memories that, through sharing, are meant to help prevent the next person from being wounded. Hill details how the community took shape when one student opened herself up to the class following the reading of a particularly poignant text. The personal nature of the story set the stage for others to share, and established unwritten norms that in order to be a "Regular" (p. 77) in the class, you had to be willing to open yourself up and be transparent. Hill skillfully shows how the students responded differently to his co-teacher and him based on how much they had been willing to share. The chapter concludes with Hill noting how powerful the bonds can become when there is a critical mass willing to share, but also cautions that practitioners must carefully consider the consequences of enabling this type of sharing in class as it has the potential to both separate and unify students and teachers.

While Dr. Hill's ethnographic account of the Hip Hop Lit class is insightful, emotionally moving, and often entertaining, the text fails to fully interrogate the factors that allowed Hill to gain insider status while Mr. Colombo, his co-teacher, did not. There were power dynamics between Hill and Colombo which might have led to a higher level of participation for Colombo had they been dealt with explicitly as Obidah and Teel (2001) found in their time working together with urban students. Obidah and Teel kept their often contentious relationship alive by learning to have frank conversations and not subverting thoughts. Ultimately this led to Teel becoming more effective teaching in classrooms with a majority of Black students. Hill missed an opportunity to provide similar support to Colombo. While this was not the primary scope of the book, the exclusion of this analysis leaves the reader to wonder whether non-Black teachers can effectively engage urban youth in identity exploration using HHBE. The narrative clearly demonstrates that Hill accomplished his goal of having the students examine their self-perception. The Cross (1991) model of Black racial identity development maps effectively onto the way that the class unfolded for Black students. Students were able to use the Hip Hop Lit class as an

Immersion-Emersion space, meaning that they were free to explore material that in their mind was "quintessentially black" (p. 49). Hip Hop was allowed to be framed as a Black genre instead of global one which proved problematic for non-Black students and teacher.

Ultimately, the reader is left to deduce the quality of the work students produced having been exposed to a Hip Hop curriculum. Identity exploration is valuable, but as scholars such as Delpit (2002, 2006) and Gay (2002) note, skills must be developed so that urban youth are able to gain access to American cultures of power. The pedagogies of, about, and with Hip Hop that Hill describes cannot be scaled up if mainstream educators cannot see or make the connection between what it has to offer and skills mandated in state content standards which continue to be a reality of public schooling.

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## Reviewer

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