

# Breakbeat Lit: Hip-Hop Generation Sounds & Stories

English 819.02



**Location & times:** Tuesdays, 4:10-7:00pm, 112B Berkey Hall

**Professor:** Emery Petchauer

**Contact:** [petchau1@msu.edu](mailto:petchau1@msu.edu)

**Want to meet?** Tuesdays before class or many other times by appointment (virtually or in person)

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## Course focus

This interdisciplinary seminar focuses on the aesthetic forms across the verbal, sonic, visual, and bodily expressions of hip hop cultures. Fiction, poetry, criticism, personal narrative, urban stylized lettering, and dance – well beyond rap music – will be the sites to explore these forms. The course also engages directly with hip-hop creators (DJs, emcees, dancers, etc.) and related practices – like record digging, sample chopping, and more.

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## Guiding questions

What is the relationship between aesthetic forms of hip-hop arts and the socio-political concerns of the hip-hop generation? What do Black and hip-hop aesthetics afford life today both on and off the page? What are the stakes associated with archiving and teaching hip-hop in university settings? Or, are graduate seminars where hip-hop goes to die?

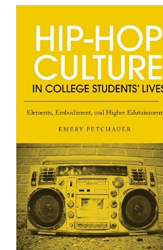
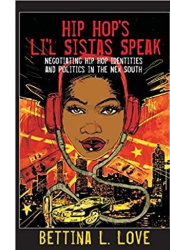
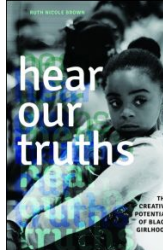
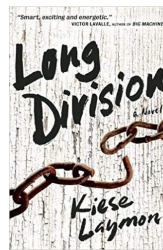
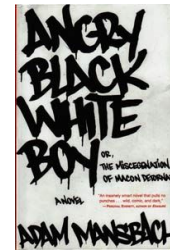
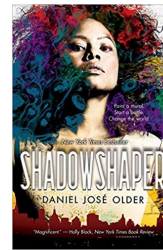
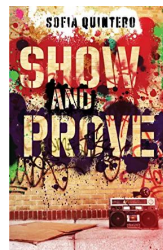
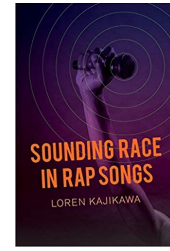
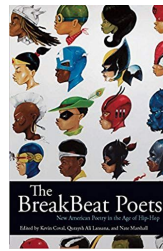
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## On caring for yourself & others

Our class meets only once a week. All of us together are smarter than any of us alone. So, it's important we all are in the room. But! Events may happen this semester that take priority over class. That's okay! We can work things out together if we are proactive. In that spirit, please let me know if a serious situation will cause you to miss class, if you are falling behind on work, or if something about class isn't working for you. I can best support you or direct you to the right resources if we are open and proactive with one another.

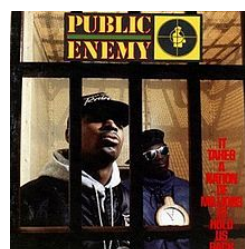
## Required texts

1. *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop*, edited by Kevin Coval, Quraysh Ali Lansana, & Nate Marshall, 2015.
2. *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls, and Hip-Hop in New York*, Joseph Scholss, 2009.
3. *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*, Loren Kajikawa, 2015
4. *Show and Prove*, Sophia Quintero, 2014.
5. *Shadowshaper*, Daniel José Older, 2016.
6. *Angry Black White Boy: A Novel*, Adam Mansbach, 2006
7. *Long Division: A Novel*, Kiese Laymon, 2013.
8. *Hear our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*, Ruth Nicole Brown, 2013.
9. One of the following (your choice)
  - a. *Hip-Hop's Lil Sistas Speak: Negotiation Hip-Hop Identities and Politics in the New South*, Bettina Love, 2012.
  - b. *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*, Marc Lamont Hill, 2009.
  - c. *Hip-Hop Culture in College Students' Lives: Elements, Embodiment, and Higher Edutainment*, Emery Petchauer, 2012. (Provided for free if you like)



## Required albums

1. *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, Public Enemy. Def Jam, 1988.
2. *Eve*, Rapsody, Jamala Records, 2019.
3. *DAMN*, Kendrick Lamar, Aftermath/Interscope/Top Dog, 2017.
4. *Donuts*, J Dilla, Stones Throw Records, 2006.



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## Course assignments

The small size of our class allows us to shape assignments toward your individual interests, passions, and goals. Please know that you and I will work together to develop more specific parameters for the main assignments below.

- **Listening quiz (20%):** Hip-hop has a sonic foundation to it. In this audio quiz, you'll identify (by listening) 10 of the most sampled songs in hip-hop and popular music ([playlist here](#)), and have to find the break on a record I give you. **Due: 12/3 in class.**
- **Midterm essay (20%):** You'll write one significant essay about halfway through the course. We will work together to craft the focus of the essay around your specific interests and broader goals. You and I will meet to discuss your interests and decide how long it should be and what kinds of supports you need. You'll build out from the ideas in the essay for your final creative project. **Due: Fri, 10/18 before midnight.**
- **Community hip-hop visits (20%):** Most people who learn about hip-hop do so in community settings, not campus classrooms. In this spirit, we'll visit/participate in at least 2 community hip-hop spaces/events this semester. Some of these events are listed on the syllabus [in blue boxes](#). Others will be added. **Due: various times.**
- **Creative project (40%):** Your creative project will build upon ideas in your midterm essay. As with the essay, we'll be in conversation about what you want to focus on and what supports you'll need. In short, the project will use any medium you like (sound, visual, text, etc.) to take-up hip-hop aesthetics "on

and off the page" and/or the guiding questions of the course. The project needs to have a public-facing element -- meaning, it isn't just something that you and I see. **Due: end of semester; specific date TBD.**

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## MSU grading scale

94% - 100% = 4.0	75% - 79% = 2.5	60% - 64% = 1.0
86% - 93% = 3.5	70% - 74% = 2.0	Under 60% = 0.0
80% - 85% = 3.0	65% - 69% = 1.5	

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## Accommodations & counseling services

[Counseling & Psychiatric Services](#) on campus is your starting point for academic and personal support -- both immediate and long term.

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## Course policies appendix

Please see the appendix [here](#) for other policies on confidentiality, copyright, etc.

## Reading Schedule

**Heads up!** Three texts do not appear on the reading schedule: *DAMN.*, *Eve*, and *The BreakBeat Poets (BBP)*. Instead of assigning these on specific dates, we'll aim to read/listen to these works "on repeat" over the course of the semester. So you should be listening to *DAMN.* and *Eve* multiple time each week and reading *BBP* selections intentionally but "at your leisure." As the semester gets rolling, we'll start class by asking one another "what'chu feeling?" and discuss what we are feeling in these works. Having them on repeat will make sure we are ready for this in-class routine.

### 9/3 WEEK 1: Introductions, background, personal timelines, etc.

### 9/10 WEEK 2: Focus on listening

Hip-hop is a sonic phenomenon: sound waves hit our ears and bodies, reverberating through us and the physical spaces we inhabit. In response to these sounds, sometimes we dance, sometimes we nod our heads, sometimes we sit and think about what the sounds of words mean. As such, this week we key into readings about LISTENING from the interdisciplinary field of sound studies. These readings should *tune us into listening* (get it!) across the semester.

**Read:** 1. "Three listening modes" by Tom Rice. 2. *The Sonic Colorline* introduction by Jen Stoever. 3. "(Re)educating the senses: Multimodal listening..." by Steph Ceraso. [Find readings [here](#)]  
**Listen:** *Donuts* by J Dilla. Skim [this piece](#) for a background on the album and/or watch [this](#) 10 min video.

**Event:** Art Attack hip-hop workshops as part of [Below the Stacks festival](#) in Lansing. **Sat, 9/15, 1-7pm.** Cadillac Room Parking Lot (outdoors), 1115 S. Washington Ave, Lansing.

### 9/17 WEEK 3: Aesthetic Foundations

There are common aesthetic features across hip-hop creative expressions and elements. Flow, layering, sampling, and rupture are some of them. This week's readings jump us into these aesthetic feature as articulated by artists across a variety of forms. The documentary *Style Wars* plus readings by Rose and Chang also provide important historical accounts of how these arts and aesthetics developed from youth in the 1970s New York City. Finally, you'll hear many of these aesthetics in this listening from Public Enemy.

**Read:** 1. *Black Noise* chapter two by Tricia Rose. 2. *The BreakBeat Poets* Ars Poeticas & Essays, pgs. 300-329. [[Here is a grid](#) you can use to capture ideas if you like.] 3. "On lit hop" by Adam Mansbach. 4. "Furious styles: The evolution of style in the seven-mile world" by Jeff Chang [Find PDF readings [here](#)]

**Listen:** *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* by Public Enemy. OPTIONAL LISTENING: The [Ciphur podcast episode](#) with *BreakBeat Poets* editors.

**Watch:** *Style Wars (1983)*; OPTIONAL VIEWING: [Scratch \(2001\)](#) DJ documentary.

**Play around with:** [Sample Stitch](#)

### 9/24 WEEK 4: Aesthetic Foundations

Most people think first of rap music when they think about hip-hop. Music as a starting point leads to certain questions about lyrics, words, and maybe beats. But what if our starting point wasn't with music but instead the body? Tuning into hip-hop dance (and b-boying and b-girling, specifically) gives us a different starting point for understanding hip-hop and its aesthetic system. Starting with dance and the body generates insights that we can then apply to all other aspects of hip-hop and beyond.

Read: *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls, and Hip-Hop in New York* by Joseph Schloss

Listen: [Foundational breaks and songs](#)

Watch: *From Mambo to Hip-Hop*; OPTIONAL viewing: [The Freshest Kids: The History of the B-Boy \(2002\)](#).

Due: Go record digging at Flat Black and Circular sometime before class. Come ready to talk about your experience and bring a record back with you.

**Event:** Break LA Detroit Edition b-boy event in Detroit, **Sat, Sept 28, time TBA (late afternoon/evening).**

## 10/1 WEEK 5: Tuning into Sound

Lyrics are the most common analytical object of hip-hop, but sound has meaning too. We hear its vibrations to mean something about race, gender, age, place, and more. This week we jump into analyses of how sound can have these meanings in hip-hop music. We'll want to learn how to make similar sound analyses in *Eve*, *DAMN*, and other hip-hop productions. Both of the listenings below are covered in the Kajakawa book, so be sure to make connections among them.

Read: *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* by Loren Kajakawa

Listen:

1. Grandmaster Flash and the 4 Emcees live at the Audubon Ballroom, 12/23/78. This recording is broken up into 3 parts because it was recorded LIVE on tapes!
  - a. [Part 1](#)
  - b. [Part 2](#)
  - c. [Part 3](#)
2. *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* by Public Enemy.
3. Other songs discussed in *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*.

Due: Set up a personal meeting with me this week to talk about the direction for your midterm essay.

## 10/8 WEEK 6: Tuning into Sound

As you (re)listen to *Eve* and *DAMN*, think about how the analyses of sound from last week tune you into the album: the different ways Rapsody and Kendrick Lamar make their voice sound and for what affect/effect, the samples used to make the beats, and -- of course -- the naming of tracks.. You are also reading a foundational piece in hip-hop feminism; think about how these albums might execute some of the ideas in this essay.

Read: 1. "The stage that hip-hop feminism built" by Asha Durham, Brittney Cooper, & Susana [Folder here] Morris. 2. "[Afeni Shakur and the mothers that shaped hip-hop](#)" by Latifah Muhammad

Listen: "[I'm a hip-hop cheerleader](#)" by Jessica Care Moore (poem the above article is titled after)

Due: In-class musing: come prepared to talk for about 5 minutes to the class about your ideas for your midterm essay. What are you interested in? What direction are you going? Are you struggling with anything? Is there something you'd like feedback on from the class? *This is not a formal*

*presentation*. Prepare what you want to say, but keep it somewhat open.

**10/15 WEEK 7: In-class-workshop Writing week (in class)**

Due on Friday before midnight: Midterm essay

**10/22 WEEK 8: Hip-Hop & Fiction**

This week jumps into fiction connected to and produced through hip-hop. We start with young adult lit. *Show & Prove* maps over the readings by Rose and Chang from week 3 as well as the films *Style Wars* and *From Mambo to Hip-Hop*: a fictionalized account of youth transversing the social, political, and physical spaces of hip-hop's formative years. Consider the ways this novel maps over these earlier readings/viewings as you read and how its *content* attempts to be hip-hop.

Read: *Show & Prove* by Sophia Quintero

**10/29 WEEK 9: Hip-Hop & Fiction**

Still with young adult lit, *Shadowshapers* departs from orthodox hip-hop history and elements, incorporating spiritual elements and more. One of the questions we should ask of this novel is to what degree it still counts as hip-hop literature.

Read: *Shadowshaper* by Daniel José Older; poems from BBPoets: “mic check, 1-2” (p. 70), “Bronx Bombers” (p. 98), “a remix for remembrance” (p. 212), “to the notebook kid” (p. 215), “prelude” (p. 250).

**11/5 WEEK 10: Hip-Hop & Fiction**

We heard about *Angry Black White Boy* in week 3 through the “On lit hop” essay by the author. We got a glimpse of how he conceives of hip-hop aesthetics in the novel: the mixing board of samples leveling in and out -- just like in the Public Enemy album you've been listening to. Revisit the essay as you jump into the novel and consider how the aesthetic forms of hip-hop -- flow, layering, sampling, rupture -- (rather than content) are at work with one another in this novel.

Read: *Angry Black White Boy: A Novel* by Adam Mansbach; poems from BBPoets: “post-white” (p. 18), “Ode to the Crossfader,” (p. 76-77), “Quantum Spit” (p. 117-124), “white on the block” (p. 140-141), “I Have a Drone” (p. 165-167), “Small Poems for Big,” (p. 200-202), “PLUTO SHITS ON THE UNIVERSE” (p. 243-244).

**11/12 WEEK 11: Hip-Hop & Fiction**

We finish our dip into hip-hop and fiction with *Long Division*, a novel that plays with the grooves of time like the grooves of a record. In *Phonographies*, Alexander Weheliye talks about history/time like grooves in a record: they can rupture and collide for different outcomes. He states, “Should we not ask what transpires when different grooves of history interface and/or collide?” Let's think about how the “grooves of history” collide and rupture in *Long Division*, and how we can make sense of this rupture through hip-hop aesthetics.

Read: *Long Division: A Novel* by Kiese Laymon; poems from BBPoets: “Love Letter to Zach, the Black Power Ranger” (p. 222), “Dinosours in the Hood” (p. 256-257), “Dear White America” (p. 258-259), “Blk Girl Art” (p. 261), “Four Elements of Ghostdance” (p. 282-283), “My niece's hip-hop” (p. 290-291).

**11/12 WEEK 12: Hip-Hop & Education**

People in various settings have leveraged both the content and aesthetic forms of hip-hop in for educational purposes. Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) is one such initiative. SOLHOT is much more complex than just studying rap music to learn. By design, it remains illegible to those it's not made for. SOLHOT organizers also create music together. Founder Ruth Nicole Brown once said "we make music together and then we theorize and write about our practice." Below you'll also listen to some of the music SOLHOT organizers make together as the group We Levitate.

Read: *Hear our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* by Ruth Nicole Brown

Listen: Songs by We Levitate: "[Black Girl Genius](#)," "[SOLHOTEWF](#)", "[This is.](#)"

Watch: "[Miss me with that](#)" by SOLHOT

### 11/26 **WEEK 13: Hip-Hop & Education**

This week you have choice from three different enactments of hip-hop education. Accompanying your choice is a listening to an album excerpt from *The Space Program* by Stevie Johnson (aka Dr. View). For his dissertation, Stevie explored the experiences of Black men attending a predominantly white college. As a DJ and producer, writing songs, picking out beats, and creating an album together was part of his scholarly process.

Read one of the following (your choice):

1. *Hip-Hop's Lil Sistas Speak: Negotiation Hip-Hop Identities and Politics in the New South*, Bettina Love, Peter Lang Press, 2012.
2. *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*, Marc Lamont Hill, Teachers College Press, 2009.
3. *Hip-Hop Culture in College Students' Lives: Elements, Embodiment, and Higher Edutainment*, Emery Petchauer, Routledge, 2012. (Provided for free)

Listen: *The Space Program: Prereqs & Upsets*, a dissertation album created by Stevie Johnson (aka Dr. View). Short background [here](#).

### 12/3 **WEEK 14: Project work together**

Work week together.

Due in class: Listening quiz

### 12/11 **FINALS WEEK: Event TBA**