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Cultural Histories of 20th Century Black and Latinx Freedom Struggles

Curriculum Unit 21.01.03
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Context

This unit was developed for an African American and Latinx History course at a public high school in New Haven. The course begins with indigeneity, pre-enslavement and pre-colonization, in Africa and in the Americas, a critical reminder that these histories don't begin with domination. To the extent that these histories are shrouded in narratives of oppression, they are also abundant with stories of resistance—and must be taught as such. This is a theme throughout the curriculum and in this unit in particular.

The course continues with movements for abolition and decolonization throughout the early and mid-19th century, as well as those still active today in places like Puerto Rico. Next, we study Reconstruction and the sense of hope and possibility brought by this short era—dashed by the end of the 19th century. Yet, the fight for liberation endured throughout the 20th century and continues still today. This unit revolves around the 20th century, and the Black and Latinx freedom struggles of that era.

The goal of this unit, though, is not only to teach this critical history, but also to introduce students to a new way of learning history: through the lens of cultural studies. That is, we will examine Black and Latinx cultural production—including visual art, music, dance, and fashion—to help us understand the political dynamics of the 20th century, especially around themes of race, racism, and racial justice, as well as gender and sexuality. Through this unit, students will see how Black and Latinx art, music, dance, and fashion can be forms of resistance and expressions of freedom, as well as primary sources that help us to better understand the past and make connections to the present.

Introduction to Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies is an interdisciplinary field that emerged in England in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Stuart Hall, a founding figure of the field, was "trying to understand how ideas, politics, popular culture, and the movements of history can be understood in relation to each other—and how the theorization of those

conjunctions can better shape effective political interventions."[1] These intersections and questions form the basis of this unit.

The origin of this field offers insight into its purpose and its stakes. In Stuart Hall's words, "I want to insist that [Cultural Studies] is in fact born as a political project, as a way of analysing postwar advanced capitalist culture."[2] This explicitly political origin, whose premise is still deeply relevant for us today, guides us—as scholars and as educators—in how we must approach this discipline. About this, Stuart Hall is unequivocal: "[Cultural studies analysis] has to be about politics, not just as a 'celebration' of the popular: it needs to be a way of investigating politics through culture."[3]

Framing the Unit

We can learn a lot about a historical era and a people by examining their cultural production. A people's culture—their visual art, music, dance, and fashion—can be an expression of their joy, pleasure, beauty, and humanity, as well as their struggle, their rage, and their resistance to domination. This unit will focus on Black and Latinx cultures of resistance created in the US throughout the 20th century. By analyzing these creative expressions of resistance, students will learn about the political history that created the oppressive conditions to which the art is responding. But more importantly, students will analyze the ways in which the cultural production is also a political response, oftentimes with real political impact. Students will have many examples to inform their response to the unit's essential questions.

Unit Essential Questions

1. What is the relationship between culture and politics? To what extent do politics influence culture? To what extent does culture influence politics?
2. Can cultural production be a tool for freedom struggles or movements for justice?
3. How does analyzing the cultural production created during a particular time period help us to understand the history of that era?
4. To what extent are Black and Latinx struggles for freedom shared or similar? In what ways do they diverge or differ?

Themes Across Black and Latinx Cultures of Resistance

This unit was written for an African American and Latinx History course, and therefore looks at Black and Latinx freedom struggles of the 20th century in concert. While there are many shared struggles, as well as shared approaches to resistance, across these groups, they are also undoubtedly distinct. This unit begins with bomba, a centuries-old Afro-Boricuan tradition, that has flourished for hundreds of years, and which

inspired other 20th century traditions such as plena. This is an essential starting point for this curricular unit, not only because it showcases culture as a tool of resistance, but also because it reminds us that we must not think of Black and Latinx histories and cultures as necessarily separate. Rather, we must teach about Afro-Latinx histories, cultures, and people. Next this unit moves into the Blues, examining this form through the lens of Black feminism, a framework that is still relevant and necessary today when analyzing contemporary music across genres. Following the Blues, zoot suits remind us that our everyday choices, our fashion, how we present ourselves to the world can also be an art and an expression of freedom. From Los Angeles to Boston, zoot suits display how forms of resistance were often shared among Black and Latinx youth, even across great distances. The following lesson moves into the second half of the 20th century and is the first to delve into visual art as a tool of resistance, focusing on Emory Douglas, the Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party. Next, the unit moves both back and forward in time, examining the drag balls of the early 20th century, and their resurgence in the 1970s and 1980s alongside the explosion of disco on the radio and on the dance floor, powerful forms of queer resistance whose Black and Latinx foremothers deserve their due. The final lesson focuses on hip-hop, a culture of resistance created by Black and Latinx Bronx youth, and undoubtedly still relevant and on the rise today.

This unit is by no means exhaustive. In fact, an entire course could be taught on cultural histories of 20th century Black and Latinx freedom struggles. Absent from this unit are poetry and other literary traditions of which there are too many to count; their addition would expand the variety of genres this unit covers. Although films and documentaries are recommended resources throughout this unit, a study of film as a culture of resistance is missing and would add new dimensions to the unit. Also, more visual arts, namely realism and surrealism, would be a powerful addition. Finally, while this curricular unit ends in the 1980s, the electronic music of the 1990s and its connection to Afro-futurism, not to mention speculative fiction more generally, would be another compelling extension.

Across the six topics analyzed in this unit, several themes emerged. The first is the role these various forms of cultural production played in confronting racism, but also the ways they were intersectional, responding to classism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia as well. The second major theme is the ways that most of these cultures of resistance were also resisting respectability, pushing boundaries and insisting on new ways of being—and of being more free—and embracing radical politics. The third theme is centered on the role that young people played in forming and spreading nearly all of these cultures of resistance, still true today. These three themes are at the heart of this unit and are also precisely what will make this unit particularly engaging for young people.

Bomba and Freedom

Cultures of resistance in this country pre-date the formation of the United States, and reflect the resistance to enslavement and colonization, which would eventually give birth to the US. Beginning in the Caribbean, on an island whose history of resistance is not only long, but also still active today as a colony fighting for independence, Puerto Rico is home to the powerful tradition of bomba. While this unit focuses on 20th century cultural history, and bomba's origins precede this era by nearly 500 years, the tradition has endured throughout these centuries and is still practiced today. What's more, in the early 20th century bomba gave birth to another Afro-Boricuan tradition, plena, whose emergence "coincided with the consolidation of the

Puerto Rican working class." As Juan Flores writes, "Many of the best-known *plenas*, from the earliest times on, tell of strikes, working conditions and events of working-class life; they give voice, usually in sharp ironic tones and imagery, to the experience of working people in all its aspects."4 As plena became more popular in Puerto Rico and the mainland U.S, particularly in New York City, its working class roots were lost for several decades. Alongside bomba, in the 1950s and 1960s both interrelated traditions saw a renewal and a reconnection to their radical roots.

As the 2020 documentary called "Why Puerto Rican Bomba Music Is Resistance" explains, bomba was developed in the 1500s in Puerto Rico by enslaved Africans as an expression of freedom and a form of resistance. A bomba gathering is called a "bámbula," which translates to a practice of re-remembrance. In the face of kidnapping and enslavement, the tradition of bomba is a remembrance of home, a connection to community, and an assertion of humanity and freedom. Bomba was also a form of communication, which bridged language and cultural differences among Africans of different ethnic groups. The language of bomba drumming and dancing told stories, spread news, and even organized revolts. Thus, this cultural form was not only an expression of humanity, but also a tool for revolution and liberation.

Ivelisse Diaz, a vocalist member of Bomba Con Buya, describes the art form: "Bomba is the oldest genre of Puerto Rico, tracing back to our African roots. It tells the story of our ancestors. It is meant for healing. It is a time traveling genre. And it's Black music!"[5] The tradition of bomba is a reminder of the often-erased Black identity of many Puerto Ricans who are Afro-descendants. Natasha S. Alford traces this erasure, as well as a celebration of Blackness in her personal history and in Puerto Rico more broadly, in her 2020 documentary, "Afro-Latinx Revolution: Puerto Rico." Bomba is featured prominently in the documentary given its uniquely Afro-Boricuan origin.

Given its revolutionary history, it's not surprising that bomba music and dance have been present more recently at Ricky Renuncia protests, May Day rallies, and other uprisings in Puerto Rico, as well as at Black Lives Matter protests in both Puerto Rico and mainland US.

Bomba and Freedom - Questions, Connections, and Activities

Guiding Questions

1. Why is Puerto Rican racial identity so diverse? What is the history behind this?
2. How can music and dance be an act of resistance and a tool for liberation?
3. How is bomba, a 500-year-old tradition from Puerto Rico, connected to the contemporary Movement for Black Lives?

Contemporary Connections

- Bomba performances at BLM rallies
- New Haven's Movimiento Cultural Afro-Continental (MCAC)

Lesson Activities

- Opener - analyze tweet about Puerto Rican racial identity (found in resource section below)
- Analyze maps of the transatlantic slave trade to understand that a large percentage of enslaved people disembarked in the Caribbean, including Puerto Rico
- Read about Hatuey and other Indigenous Taínos who allied with enslaved Africans to resist Spanish colonizers

- Watch either/both documentaries, “Why Puerto Rican Bomba Music Is Resistance” and “Afro-Latinx Revolution: Puerto Rico” (both pasted in resources below), and discuss

The Blues and Black Feminism

Angela Davis refers to the blues as the “predominant postslavery African-American musical form,” one that “both reflected and helped construct a new black consciousness.”[6] Though influenced by slave songs and spirituals, the blues were distinct, in their secularity, as well as their relationship to emancipation: “blues created a discourse that represented freedom in more immediate and accessible terms.”[7] While male musicians eventually dominated the blues, it was actually Black women who were the first to record the blues in the 1920s. Angela Davis’ *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* focuses on some of these early Black women blues musicians, namely Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith, as well as later jazz musician, Billie Holiday. Davis challenges notions that these blues musicians and their songs were apolitical or anti-feminist, offering close readings of their lyrics and recordings, as well as providing context about their personal lives and careers.

The blues gave voice to the struggles that poor Black communities were facing, including songs about “work, jail, prostitution, natural disasters, and other issues that when taken together, constitute a patchwork social history of black Americans during the decades following emancipation.”[8] While there are numerous such songs to analyze—and there would have been more had Black artists been permitted to record all the songs they wrote and performed—Bessie Smith’s “Poor Man Blues” and Ma Rainey’s “Chain Gang Blues” exemplify the political views and expressions of early blues women.

“Poor Man Blues” concludes with the following two stanzas:

Poor man fought all the battles, poor man would fight again today

Poor man fought all the battles, poor man would fight again today

He would do anything you ask him in the name of the U.S.A.

Now the war is over, poor man must live the same as you

Now the war is over, poor man must live the same as you

If it wasn’t for the poor man, mister rich man, what would you do?

Recorded in 1928, this song is a social commentary on the racial inequality and exploitation that was—and still is—pervasive in the United States. It speaks of African American men’s service as frontline soldiers in World War I—not to mention every previous and following U.S. war—along with their lack of recognition and compensation. The song also captures this era succinctly, calling into question the wealthy’s reliance on poor

people, yet their unwillingness to share the profits generated by their labor.

Ma Rainey's 1925 song, "Chain Gang Blues," gives voice to another injustice that has caused significant harm to the Black community, continuing to disproportionately target Black folks today. Despite the official end of slavery, slave-like conditions continued in Black communities for decades after the Civil War's end—and some would argue still do today. During the Jim Crow era, Black codes and convict leasing meant that African Americans were kept bound in chains, figuratively, and in many cases quite literally, as Ma Rainey declares in her song. Interestingly, while most accounts of chain gang's focus on men, Ma Rainey's protagonist is a woman, bringing attention to the less-discussed fact that Black women too suffered under convict leasing and chain gang systems, and today Black women too are victims of the police state and prison industrial complex.

Using these and other songs as examples, Davis concludes that: "Gertrude Rainey's and Bessie Smith's songs may be interpreted precisely as historical preparation for political protest [. . .] While there may not be a direct line to social activism, activist stances are inconceivable without the consciousness such songs suggest."[9] This not only demonstrates the political perspectives of early blues singers like these two women, but also speaks to the need for political art and music, as a medium that inspires and sustains activism.

Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith's songs were not only expressions of the economic and racial injustices that Black communities experienced during this era, but also were expressions of Black women's distinct experiences under racism, capitalism, and patriarchy. Through their music, blues women created a vital space: "The performances of the classic blues women—especially Bessie Smith—were one of the few cultural spaces in which a tradition of public discourse on male violence had been previously established."[10] Fifty years later, second wave feminism—the face of which was white feminists, who often excluded their Black counterparts—would proclaim that "the personal is political," and that women needed a space to speak out about domestic and sexual violence. Countless songs by Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, written and performed throughout the 1920s, 30s, and 40s did just that, yet these Black women were not revered as feminists as they ought to have been.

Another under-recognized feminist aspect of Rainey and Smith's music is their expressions of desire. It was—and in many spaces, still is—considered radical for women to give voice to their sexuality, especially in the non-heteronormative way both Smith and Rainey did in their songs. For example, in "Young Woman's Blues," Smith sings of her desires for pleasure, and her resistance to marriage:

No time to marry, no time to settle down

I'm a young woman and ain't done runnin' 'round

I ain't no high yella, I'm a deep killer brown

I ain't gonna marry, ain't gon' settle down

I'm gon' drink good moonshine and run these browns down

See that long lone road, Lord, you know it's gotta end

And I'm a good woman and I can get plenty men.

This feminist song not only celebrates women's desires, but also in doing so, bucks against what we have only recently come to call slut-shaming. It also does this in a distinctly Black feminist way, as it revels in the protagonist's ability to get plenty of men as "a deep killer brown" woman. Such positive portrayals of Black women's sexuality is something our mainstream society today is still struggling to embrace nearly 100 years after Bessie Smith sang these words. Songs like these created fissures in what must have felt like a monolith of patriarchal white supremacy.

Ma Rainey's "Prove It on Me Blues" goes even further to challenge heteronormativity:

They said I do it, ain't nobody caught me

Sure got to prove it on me

Went out last night with a crowd of my friends

They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men

It's true I wear a collar and a tie

Make the wind blow all the while

'Cause they say I do it, ain't nobody caught me

They sure got to prove it on me

Wear my clothes just like a fan

Talk to the gals just like any old man

'Cause they say I do it, ain't nobody caught me

Sure got to prove it on me

Here Ma Rainey's celebration of herself and her desires are made all the more radical by her gender-play and queerness. What's more, the song's lyrics make clear Ma Rainey's awareness of the heteronormative world and their disapproval, yet she is proud in her defiance. This is a sentiment that seemed radical to many in the 1970s, yet is here performed several decades earlier. As Davis states, "Both women were role models for untold thousands of their sisters to whom they delivered messages that defied the male dominance encouraged by mainstream culture. The blues women openly challenged the gender politics implicit in traditional cultural representations of marriage and heterosexual love and relationships."[11]

The Blues and Black Feminism - Questions, Connections, and Activities

Guiding Questions

1. What were some of the key struggles Black Americans were experiencing—and resisting—in the post-emancipation, post-Reconstruction years?
2. In what ways did—and do—Black women face multiple, compounded struggles as a result of racism and sexism? What is intersectionality, and what is its relevance to Black women both past and present?
3. How are contemporary Black women artists whose music and performance may not be seen as political, and who are often criticized, actually engaging in political work through their art?

Contemporary Connections

- Megan Thee Stallion
- Cardi B

Lesson Activities

- Read lyrics and listen to Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith songs
- Watch Dee Rees' *Mudbound* to learn more about Jim Crow era racism and the experiences of Black veterans returning to the U.S. after service
- Watch excerpts from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* to learn more about Blues women
- Read opinion-editorial by Megan Thee Stallion, as well as article about how Megan Thee Stallion became a symbol (both linked in resources below)

Zoot Suits and Fashion as Resistance

In the mid-20th century in cities across the U.S., many young Chicanos and Black Americans donned themselves in zoot suits, oversized and extravagant fashion choices that required quite a bit of fabric. For Black and Latinx youth, zoot suits were a sign of their cultural pride, an expression of their sense of self-worth, and an act of disobedience that aimed to subvert white middle-class ideals. Interviews with former zoot suiters revealed their desire to resist white America's negative depictions of them by dressing "to the nines," as well as creating a sense of belonging within a culture where they were seen as outsiders. Zoot suits were also associated with other liberating cultural practices of the time, including jazz music and lindy hop dancing. "People's everyday cultural practices, including fashion, music, and dance are often among the most common resources they use to garner strength, make their lives better, and shape the society in which they live."[12]

In addition to resisting assimilation to whiteness, zoot suiters were also challenging the gendered roles of the WWII era. "The social practices and behavior of zoot suiters also often conflicted with gender norms regarding how young men and women should act [. . .] Male zoot suiters were often labeled by urban authorities, the media, and the general public as overly feminine for their constant attention to appearance, and female zoot suiters as too masculine for what was perceived as bold and very public behavior."[13]

Zoot suiters were seen by white Americans as an affront, and zoot suiters of color were attacked by white mobs across American cities during this time, a violence that was state-sanctioned as police officers permitted or even enabled these assaults. Particularly notable were the June 1943 attacks on Chicano and Black youth in Los Angeles, which came to be known as the Zoot Suit Riots, during which white sailors and soldiers attacked

zoot suiters, stripping the youth of color of their zoot suits publicly. In the aftermath of this racist attack, Los Angeles City Council passed a resolution banning the wearing of zoot suits in public, punishable by time in jail.

Similar attacks took place in cities across the country. While living in Boston in the 1940s, a young Malcolm X was introduced to Black working-class subculture and along with it, to the zoot suit. Robin Kelley, in his 1994 book *Race Rebels*, argues the various ways that this period in Malcolm X's life "was not a detour on the road to political consciousness but rather an essential element of his radicalization."[14]

For Malcolm and his counterparts, the zoot suit was an expression of their identity and collectivity, one which resisted expectations from both white America and the Black bourgeoisie. As Robin Kelley writes, borrowing Malcolm X's own words, "Seeing oneself and others 'dressed up' was enormously important in terms of constructing a collective identity based on something other than wage work, presenting a public challenge to the dominant stereotypes of the black body, and reinforcing a sense of dignity that was perpetually being assaulted."[15] Zoot suits were especially common at jazz clubs and dance halls, an extension of expressions of creativity and pleasure—expressions of freedom. Beyond that, the zoot suits and ballroom scenes also resisted politics of respectability and bootstraps mentalities, which were prevalent not only among white people, but also in Black middle-class communities.

The politics of zoot suits, though, went beyond both expressions of freedom and resistance to respectability—they were a political statement. In 1942, the War Productions Board instituted fabric rationing regulations, banning the manufacturing and sale of zoot suits. Therefore, buying and selling zoot suits was illegal and was done through underground networks. Those who wore zoot suits were deemed anti-American, especially young able-bodied men who were draft dodgers. "Thus when Malcolm donned his 'killer-diller coat with a drape-shape, reat-pleats and shoulders padded like a lunatic's cell,' his lean body became a dual signifier of opposition—a rejection of both black petite bourgeois respectability and American patriotism."[16] Malcolm X and his zoot suit wearing days exemplifies the multi-layered political significance that our fashion can have.

Zoot Suits and Fashion as Resistance - Questions, Connections, and Activities

Guiding Questions

1. What does the history of the zoot suits teach us about WWII-era experiences of Black and Chicano youth in the U.S.? How did these experiences vary across geographic space and groups?
2. What are the various ways that fashion has been used as a tool of resistance throughout U.S. history?
3. Do fashion choices have a political impact today?

Contemporary Connections

- The Fashion and Race Syllabus

Lesson Activities

- Watch short documentary about zoot suits and riots in Los Angeles (linked below in resources)
- Watch excerpts from Spike Lee's, Malcolm X film depicting Malcolm X's zoot suit wearing days
- Gallery walk and chalk talk of images throughout the 20th century of fashion as a tool of resistance (students interact with images and one another using post-its to write comments, questions, and responses to one another) — use the Fashion and Race Syllabus (linked below in resources) for ideas of images

- Read and discuss article about the history of protest fashion (linked in resources below)
- After analyzing the resources above, debate/discuss whether fashion choices have a political impact today

The Black Panther Party, Emory Douglas, and Visualizing Black Revolution

Moving into the second half of the 20th century, we turn to visual culture and to the Black Panther Party. The Black Panthers knew that arts and culture were critical to their work as revolutionaries, which is why they had a Minister of Culture within their organization. While this section focuses on the essential role of visual culture, it is also necessary to mention the lesser-known fact that the Black Panthers also had a revolutionary funk band called The Lumpen, which formed in 1970. Although the musical group was short-lived, touring and recording for just under a year, the visual culture of the Black Panther Party still lives on today. In his role as Minister of Culture, Emory Douglas created visual art for the Black Panthers, which was published in the Black Panther Party newspaper between 1967 and 1980.

As Douglas explained in his 1968 essay on revolutionary art, titled "Position Paper #1," also published in the Black Panther newspaper: "We, the Black Panther artists, draw deadly pictures of the enemy—pictures that show him at his death door or dead—his bridges are blown up in our pictures—his institutions are destroyed—and in the end he is lifeless—We try to create an atmosphere for the vast majority of Black people—who aren't readers but activists—through their observation of our work, they feel they have the right to destroy the enemy."[17]

Not unlike speaking something into existence, Douglas wanted Black people to *see* the future into existence. Though he alone did not create that vision of the future, he played a major role in creating the visuals, which in 2021 still endure and inspire vision for a revolution in the future ahead of us. Inspired by the Black Panthers, the Young Lords also relied on visual art in their own newspaper, Pa'lante. Juxtaposing art by the Black Panthers and the Young Lords demonstrates their common vision for revolution, as well as the similarity of their visual art intended to inspire revolution.

The revolutionary future Douglas and the Black Panthers were envisioning was not just about destroying oppressive institutions or enemies. As Colette Gaiter synthesizes, "Although the Black Panthers were most closely associated with the call for armed revolution, perhaps their most persistent and resonant revolutionary activity was visualizing alternative aspirational standards for African Americans in the United States after the Civil Rights Movement."[18] As the Civil Rights movement came to a close in the late 1960s, despite some key victories, anti-Black racism continued to persist in every institution in this country. The visuals that white America put forward were ones steeped in racism and white assimilation. The Black Panthers resisted this through their programs and through their visual culture. As Gaiter explains:

> Directly oppositional to images of smiling middleclass Black people assimilating lifestyles of their White counterparts in mainstream media, the *Black Panther* newspaper in 1968 visualized armed self-defense in response to police brutality in black communities. Over time the BPP's focus shifted toward community building and self-reliance, presenting pictures of sustainable, even thriving lives in Black working class and poor communities. The paper's images served two purposes: "to illustrate conditions that made revolution a reasonable response and to construct a

visual mythology of power for people who felt powerless and victimized."[19]

This speaks to the extraordinary power that images can have. How can seeing a reality in certain lights or frames help to make real the truth that has been right before our eyes all along? What role does seeing a vision of oneself liberated and a vision for a liberatory future play in manifesting it, in making it a reality?

Against the backdrop of a long history of racist imagery of Black people, Black Panther artists portrayed Black folks in beautiful and powerful ways, reclaiming the very embodied traits that had so long been degraded by white artists and media makers. As Gaiter writes, "Strategically, the BPP took the same visual devices that promoted, normalized and idealized racism in popular media and weaponized them for Black liberation. Douglas and the other Panther artists drew people with dark skin, broad noses, and thick lips to celebrate Blackness and allow Black people to see themselves in printed media representations that were at that time revolutionary."[20]

These visuals were undoubtedly a catalyst for a cultural revolution whose reverberations are still felt today. The Black Arts Movement more broadly, including writers like Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, and Nikki Giovanni, and artists like Elizabeth Catlett, members of AfriCOBRA, and Betye Saar, to name just a few, played a crucial role in reminding the world that Black is beautiful.

The Black Panther Party, Emory Douglas, and Visualizing Black Revolution - Questions, Connections, and Activities

Guiding Questions

1. In what ways were the struggles of the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords connected? In what ways did they differ?
2. What role did visual and graphic arts play in the Black Panther Party's movement for justice? What role did it play in the Young Lord's movement?
3. What were similarities and differences between the art of Emory Douglas and that of contemporaries such as AfriCOBRA members and artists like Elizabeth Catlett and Betye Saar?
4. How can seeing oneself in powerful light or seeing a vision for a liberatory future be a tool for helping to manifest those visions?
5. What role can visual and graphic arts play in movements for justice today?

Contemporary Connections

- *Black Futures,* edited by Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham
- Allied Media Project
- Miguel Luciano
- Maria Gaspar

Lesson Activities

- Gallery walk and chalk talk of art by Emory Douglas and the Black Panther Party; you may also choose to include artwork by other Black Arts Movement artists, such as AfriCOBRA, Elizabeth Catlett, Betye Saar, as well as artwork by the Young Lords Party (post artwork around the room and use suggestions from article linked in the resource section below, students interact with images and one another using post-its to write comments, questions, and responses to one another)
- Watch and discuss "Emory Douglas: The Art of The Black Panthers," a short documentary (linked below

in resource section)
- Students design a graphic/visual for a historic or contemporary social movement or campaign of their choice

Queer Resistance: Gay Balls and Disco

The history of gay liberation is often mis-remembered as starting in the 1960s, and even worse, is frequently whitewashed, erasing its far-earlier roots and its home in Black communities. While all of the lessons in this unit serve as counter-narratives to dominant-narratives that are taught or simply ignored in schools, this topic of queer resistance, perhaps more than any other in this curriculum, must be revisited and revised.

In popular culture today, we are seeing the beginnings of a reconstructed narrative. Television shows like *Pose*, for example, begin to correct some of false narratives we have been told. The ball community of the 1980s is certainly worth revisiting, but the history of gay balls began over 100 years prior to this era. Harlem's Hamilton Lodge is known to have hosted a gay ball in 1869. By the early 1900s, Harlem was regarded "as the most exciting center of gay life."[21] These gay balls were one of many Black cultural expressions of New York City in the 1920s, yet they are often left out of curricula about the Harlem Renaissance. As Tim Lawrence narrates:

> Invited to attend another ball at Hamilton Lodge by the entrepreneur and party host A'Lelia Walker, Harlem Renaissance social activist and writer Langston Hughes proclaimed the drag balls to be the "strangest and gaudiest of all Harlem's spectacles in the 1920s' and described them as 'spectacles in colour". Noting the presence of "distinguished white celebrities" during this period, Hughes concluded that "Harlem was in vogue" and "the negro was in vogue."[22]

Harlem's gay balls drew a crowd, with hundreds of drag queens and sometimes thousands of spectators. Black newspapers wrote about the balls, at first with some derision, but eventually with quite a bit of admiration or at least amusement. Most Harlem ball performers and spectators were Black, but there were some white audience members and dancers among them. The interracial aspect of the balls led to varied responses. As George Chauncey summarizes, "Racial divisions were hardly erased at the balls, however. Drag queens mixed across racial lines but never forgot them."[23]

Harlem's gay scene was not just about gender bending performances and drawing spectators, but also about carving out spaces for queer folks to dress up and dance, to couple and find community with more freedom than could be found in most other places at the time. As George Chauncey writes of the visibility of queer and trans folks "in the streets and clubs of Harlem during the late 1920s and early 1930s," this did "not mean they enjoyed unqualified toleration throughout Harlem society. Although they were casually accepted by many poor Harlemites and managed to earn a degree of grudging respect from others, they were excoriated by the district's moral guidelines."[24]

Eventually, the balls and neighborhoods were heavily policed, criminalizing queer and trans expressions, with frequent raids and many arrests, which trans and queer folks resisted not unlike the rise of the gay liberation movement of the 1960s. "The history of gay resistance must be understood to extend beyond formal political organizing to include the strategies of everyday resistance that men devised in order to claim space for

themselves in the midst of a hostile society."[25] This is a queer tradition that would continue throughout the 20th century, certainly during the 1960s, but also in the disco scene of the 1970s and 1980s, and of course in the balls and houses of the 1980s and beyond.

Alice Echols echoes this sentiment in her book on the history of disco, whose Black origins and political undercurrents are often forgotten or ignored. In particular, Echols writes about Sylvester, an icon who "not only stood 'at the origin of the disco tradition,' he also embodied the genre's upending of gender norms and conventions. When Sylvester sings 'Mighty Real,' [Walter] Hughes argued, the identity he enacts 'will never be permanent, fixed, or naturalized.'"[26]

Queer Resistance: Gay Balls and Disco - Questions, Connections, and Activities

Guiding Questions

1. In what ways do everyday forms of resistance, such as fashion, music, and dance, have a political impact and pave the way for liberatory political movements?
2. Why has the history of queer expression and resistance been so whitewashed? What is the significance that these histories have their roots in Black communities like Harlem as early as the 1800s?

Contemporary Connections

- *Translocas: Puerto Rican Drag and Trans Performance*, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes
- *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric*, Madison Moore
- Clotilde Jimenez
- *Pose* TV show
- Lil Nas X
- Bad Bunny

Lesson Activities

- Gallery walk of images from early Harlem balls and excerpts from newspapers of the time covering the drag balls
- Analyze live performances or music videos by Sylvester
- Analyze and read article about Bad Bunny's "Yo Perreo Sola" music video (linked in resource section below)

Hip-Hop and the Youth of the Bronx

Contextualizing the rise of hip-hop within the loss of manufacturing jobs, Jeff Chang narrates the impact of deindustrialization on poor communities of color, especially in the South Bronx. It was against this backdrop — nose diving average incomes and skyrocketing unemployment rates — that hip-hop was born. "If blues culture had developed under the conditions of oppressive, forced labor, hip-hop culture would arise from the conditions of no work."[27] Today as hip-hop continues to flourish, change, and adapt, these historical conditions are still ever-present.

More specifically, hip-hop was born out of the violence of racial capitalism—or rather, out of resistance to that

violence. In December of 1971, in response to the murder of Ghetto Brothers member, Black Benjie, the Black and Latinx gangs of the Bronx gathered in the gymnasium of the Bronx Boys Club to form a peace treaty. Charlie Suarez opened the meeting with: "I would like for the police to leave or we got nothing to say."[28] After an undercover cop left, the group applauded, and the business of remaking the Bronx began. Taking lead from Benjy Melendez, the group decided: "The thing is, we're not a gang anymore. We are an organization. We want to help blacks and Puerto Ricans to live in a better environment."[29] While local officials smiled for photo ops at the peace treaty, they rejected former gang members' proposals for more jobs, recreation programs, and services in the Bronx. State-sanctioned poverty and racism continued to dominate the Bronx, but the peace treaty planted a seed that would grow into a cultural and political movement that would forever change the landscape of the United States.

Several of the gangs, like the Ghetto Brothers, became music groups soon after the truce. Though many of their albums didn't sell, their block parties were powerful spaces of celebration, connection, and freedom in the Bronx. Among those present at the peace meeting was Black Spades member Afrika Bambaataa, a teen at the time who would soon, alongside DJ Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash, become founders of the emerging hip-hop movement. This movement, still on the rise 30 years later, has evolved and changed shape, has been commercialized and strayed from its radical roots. Many hip-hop artists today, especially young hip-hop artists, continue to speak truth to power and use their art as a form of resistance.

Hip-Hop and the Youth of the Bronx - Questions, Connections, and Activities

Guiding Questions

1. What were the conditions under which hip-hop was born? How is this reflected in the music?
2. How has hip-hop changed over time?
3. How does the spirit of hip-hop persist in the Bronx, especially in movements that resist gentrification of the borough?
4. To what extent is hip-hop a political art form? What impact has it had, and what impact can it have on fighting back against racism?

Contemporary Connections

- Noname
- Rebel Diaz
- Take Back the Bronx
- Decolonize This Place

Lesson Activities

- Listen to prominent hip-hop songs of past and present, analyze lyrics and videos, discuss, and compare and contrast
- Watch excerpts of hip-hop documentaries and films listed in resources below and have a class discussion about this lesson's guiding questions

Classroom Activities

Embedded in the narrative above are guiding questions, contemporary connections, and lesson activities for each of the six topics within this curricular unit. Below you will find an opening lesson to launch this unit and introduce the field of cultural studies and the notion of culture as a tool of resistance. In this section you will also find a unit final project description.

Opening Lesson

For this opening lesson, post the following quotes around the classroom. Students participate in a gallery walk/chalk talk in which they use chart paper or post-it notes to write their reactions and questions in response to the quotes, as well as their responses to one another. This is meant to be the beginning of a discussion, first in writing, and then aloud. Use the course essential questions to guide the class discussion that follows the gallery walk/chalk talk.

“Culture is the way we make sense of [or] give meaning to the world.” (Stuart Hall)

“Cultures consist of the maps of meaning, the frameworks of intelligibility, the things which allow us to make sense of a world which exists, but is ambiguous as to its meaning until we’ve made sense of it.” (Stuart Hall)

“Culture is experience lived, experience interpreted, experience defined.” (Stuart Hall)

“The question of the circulation of meaning almost immediately involves the question of power. Who has the power? In what channels? To circulate which meanings? To who? But it’s why the issue of power can never be bracketed out from the question of representation.” (Stuart Hall)

“Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged” (Stuart Hall)

“If you can understand the changes that are taking place in the culture of the society, you will have a very important strategic clue to understanding broader changes in society’s nature and how it is working.” (Hall, Stuart. C*ultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, 7)

“Ideas always arise in particular concrete historical locations which inflect the ideas in certain ways. The ideas arise in part because of the history.” (Hall, Stuart. C*ultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, 2)

“A sense of transformative possibility often manifests itself in cultural expressions long before it becomes fused into a political force. New signs and symbols spring up, new forms of speech emerge, new styles of dress become popular, and new kinds of songs take route, because the old ones no longer seem to suffice.” (Lipsitz, 55)

“It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive.” (James Baldwin)

“I want to suggest two propositions. The first one is that the poets (by which I mean all artists) are finally the only people who know the truth about us. Soldiers don’t. Statesmen don’t. Priests don’t. Union leaders don’t. Only the poets. That’s my first proposition. The second proposition is what I really want to get at tonight. And

it sounds mystical, I think, in a country like ours and at a time like this when something awful is happening to a civilization — when it ceases to produce poets, and what is even more crucial, when it ceases in any way whatever to believe in the report that only poets can make." (James Baldwin, "The Artist's Struggle for Integrity," 1963)

"For culture is merely the vital effort through which each race and each individual by their experience and aspirations, their work and reflections, reconstruct a world which is filled with life, thought and passion and seems to thirst more than ever for justice, love and peace." (Presence Africaine: The 1st International Conference of Negro Writers and Artists, "Modern Culture and Our Destiny," 1956)

"Popular culture is energized in 'moments of freedom,' specific, local plays of power and flashes of collective imagination. It is 'popular' because it is the culture of 'the people,' the common folk, the poor and the powerless who make up the majority of society." (Flores, Juan, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*, 17.)

"We need images of tomorrow; and our people need them more than most. Without an image of tomorrow, one is trapped by blind history, economics, and politics beyond our control. One is tied up in a web, in a net, with no way to struggle free. Only by having clear and vital images of the *many* alternatives, good and bad, of where we *can* go, will we have any control over the way we may actually get there in a reality tomorrow will bring all too quickly. And nothing gives such a profusion and richness of images of our tomorrow—however much they may need to be revised—as science fiction." (Samuel Delaney, *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, 35.)

"Visionary fiction encompasses all of the fantastic, with the arc always towards justice. We believe this space is vital for any process of decolonization, for the decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is, for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless." (Adrienne Maree Brown & Walidah Imarisha)

"The surrealist not only taught me that any serious emotion toward freedom must begin in the mind, but they have also given us some of the most imaginative, expansive, and playful dreams of a New World I have ever known. Contrary to popular belief, surrealism is not an aesthetic doctrine but an international revolutionary movement concerned with the emancipation of thought." (Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 5)

"The most radical art is not protest art but works that take us to another place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling." (Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 11)

Unit Final Project

The final project for this unit should allow students to not only analyze art throughout the 20th century, but also to choose an artform of their choice, be it visual art, music, dance, or fashion, and to create art that sends a political message. Teachers may choose whether the art students create is meant to reflect social movements of the past or present, or can give students the choice. Use unit essential questions to guide students in developing their final project. Create an opportunity for students to exhibit and present their artwork with an authentic audience, including their peers, school staff, and broader community.

Resources for Teachers and Students

Below are links to many resources for both teachers and students, organized by theme and including a general section for contemporary cultures of resistance.

Bomba and Freedom

- “Why Puerto Rican Bomba Music Is Resistance” documentary by PBS’ Sound Field - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RGqiGHWDrQ&t=37s&ab_channel=SoundFieldSoundField
- “Afro-Latinx Revolution: Puerto Rico” documentary by Natasha S. Alford - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uM83LNZmWs&t=723s&ab_channel=theGrio
- “Bomba: The Enduring Anthem of Puerto Rico,” Photographs by Rose Marie Cromwell, Text by Lauren Du Graf - https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/07/style/bomba-puerto-rico-music-dance.html
- “Rooted in resistance, Puerto Rico’s bomba honors Black lives,” Vicky Diaz-Camacho, Kansas City PBS - https://artscanvas.org/arts-culture/rooted-in-resistance-puerto-ricos-bomba-honors-black-lives
- “Bomba Reveals A Story Of Slavery,” Leah Andelsmith
- https://www.newhavenarts.org/arts-paper/articles/bomba-reveals-the-story-of-slavery
- Slave Voyages interactive website with maps - https://slavevoyages.org/voyage/maps#introductory-
- “Movimiento Cultural Afro-Continental Keeps The Beat,” Alma Mendoza
- https://www.newhavenarts.org/arts-paper/articles/movimiento-cultural-afro-continental-keeps-the-beat
- “Feb. 2, 1512: Taíno Leader Hatuey Executed in Cuba,” Zinn Education Project - https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/hatuey/
- Hurray for the Riff Raff, Navigator album, music video for “Rican Beach” - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqfxkKR7y98&ab_channel=Pitchfork
- Hurray for the Riff Raff, Navigator album, music video for “Pa’lante” - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LilVDjLaZSE&ab_channel=HFTRRVEVO

The Blues and Black Feminism

- Bessie Smith, “Poor Man Blues” (audio) - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ykl6o4GAEq8&ab_channel=BessieSmithVEVO
- Ma Rainey, “Chain Gang Blues” (audio) - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9y1POslMDUE&ab_channel=TravelerIntoTheBlue
- Bessie Smith, “Young Woman’s Blues” (audio) -

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAUfnWKE3Ts&ab_channel=BessieSmithVEVO
- Ma Rainey, “Prove It On Me Blues” (audio) - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srSLnF8xcj8&ab_channel=MaRainey-Topic
- Megan Thee Stallion, “Why I Speak Up for Black Women” Opinion Editorial - https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/opinion/megan-thee-stallion-black-women.html
- Megan Thee Stallion (video) - https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000007387419/megan-thee-stallion-black-women.html
- “The Year Megan Thee Stallion Become a Symbol,” Rawiya Kameir https://pitchfork.com/features/article/the-year-megan-thee-stallion-became-a-symbol/

Zoot Suits and Fashion as Resistance

- “A Brief History of the Zoot Suit,” Alice Gregory - https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/brief-history-zoot-suit-180958507/
- LACMA Exhibit - https://unframed.lacma.org/2016/01/26/search-authentic-zoot-suit
- “‘Zoot Suit,’ a Pioneering Chicano Play, Comes Full Circle,” Robert Ito - https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/26/theater/zoot-suit-a-pioneering-chicano-play-comes-full-circle.html
- “How Anti-Mexican Racism in L.A. Caused the Zoot Suit Riots,” History Channel short documentary - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KxtThBTf0sI&ab_channel=HISTORY
- “A Brief History of Protest Fashion,” Scarlett Newman - https://www.teenvogue.com/story/a-brief-history-of-protest-fashion
- Fashion and Race Syllabus, Rikki Byrd, https://fashionandrace.wordpress.com/

***T*he Black Panther Party, Emory Douglas, and Visualizing Black Revolution**

- “Emory Douglas: The Art of The Black Panthers,” Dress Code (documentary) https://vimeo.com/128523144
- “Fifty Years Later, Black Panthers’ Art Still Resonates,” By Angelica McKinley and Giovanni Russonello (including images of Emory Douglas artwork) - https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/16/arts/fifty-years-later-black-panthers-art-still-resonates.html
- “Black is Beautiful: The Emergence of Black Culture and Identity in the 60s and 70s,” National Museum of African American History and Culture - https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/black-beautiful-emergence-black-culture-and-identity-60s-and-70s
- “A Brief History of the Lumpen, the Black Panthers' Revolutionary Funk Band,” Eric Arnold - https://www.kqed.org/arts/13851531/a-brief-history-of-the-lumpen-the-black-panthers-revolutionary-funk-band
- ¡Presente! The Young Lords in New York exhibit at the Bronx Museum - http://www.bronxmuseum.org/exhibitions/presente-the-young-lords-in-new-york
- AfriCOBRA - https://www.swanngalleries.com/news/african-american-art/2020/04/africobra/
- Elizabeth Catlett - https://www.elizabethcatlettart.com/new-gallery/6nyr9fzjttm3rql1gykx6v23388oqy
- Betye Saar - http://www.betyesaar.net/
- Hiram Maristany - https://americanart.si.edu/artist/hiram-maristany-31147
- Taller Boricua - https://tallerboricua.org/about/
- Allied Media Projects - https://alliedmedia.org/resources
- Maria Gaspar, interdisciplinary artist - https://mariagaspar.com

Queer Resistance: Gay Balls and Disco

- “‘Listen, and You Will Hear all the Houses that Walked There Before’: A History of Drag Balls, Houses,

and the Culture of Voguing," Tim Lawrence - https://ezratemko.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/A-history-of-drag-balls-houses-and-the-culture-of-voguing.pdf
- "A Brief History of Voguing," National Museum of African American History and Culture - https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/brief-history-voguing
- "The Ballroom Scene Has Long Offered Radical Freedoms For Black and Brown Queer People. Today, That Matters More Than Ever," Benji Hart and Michael Roberson - https://time.com/5941822/ballroom-voguing-queer-black-culture-renaissance/
- "Already Obsessed With *Pose*? Here's A History Of New York's Ball Culture," Elena Nicolaou - https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2018/06/200854/ball-culture-history-pose-fx
- "Walk!" documentary, Nicholas Jenkins - https://vimeo.com/156953364
- "Paris is Burning" documentary
- "Kiki" documentary
- Clotilde Jimenez, painter and sculptor - http://www.clotildejimenez.art/
- Bad Bunny Gets a Full Drag Makeover in New 'Yo Perreo Sola' Video, Suzy Exposito - https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-latin/bad-bunny-drag-transformation-yo-perreo-sola-video-974467/
- Lil Nas X - https://www.teenvogue.com/story/lil-nas-x-queer-representation-music

Hip Hop and the Youth of the Bronx

- "Wild Style," hip hop film, Charlie Ahearn - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GaXMfw0IJOo&ab_channel=UNIVERSALHIPHOPTV
- "Hip Hop Evolution" series (Netflix)
- Noname - https://www.npr.org/2019/02/10/692701998/we-need-to-exist-in-multitudes-noname-talks-artistic-independence-women-in-rap-a
- Rebel Diaz - https://rebeldiaz.com/
- Shellyne Rodriguez - https://www.shellynerodriguez.com/
- Take Back the Bronx - https://www.instagram.com/takebackthebronx/?hl=en
- Decolonize This Place - https://decolonizethisplace.org/

Contemporary Cultures of Resistance

While each lesson includes contemporary connections and relevant resources, there are many additional artists who must be mentioned. The following list, though certainly not exhaustive, includes contemporary artists across a variety of genres who are currently creating cultures of resistance. These can be excellent openers to share with students throughout the length of this unit, making connections between the past and the present.

- Alok Vaid-Menon, performance artist - https://www.alokvmenon.com/about
- Bisa Butler, textile artist - https://news.artnet.com/art-world/bisa-butler-art-institute-chicago-interview-1957021
- Daniel Lind-Ramos, sculptor - https://daniellindramos.com/biography/
- Dread Scott, interdisciplinary artist - https://www.dreadscott.net/
- Jennifer Packer, painter - https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/jennifer-packer/
- Kehinda Wiley, visual artist - https://kehindewiley.com/
- Kenny Rivero, visual artist - https://www.kennyrivero.com/

- Nick Cave, textile artist, sculptor, performance artist - https://jackshainman.com/artists/nick_cave
- Nicole Eisenman, mixed media - https://www.hauserwirth.com/artists/26346-nicole-eisenman
- Terence Nance, filmmaker - http://terencenance.com/
- Titus Kaphar, visual artist - https://kapharstudio.com/

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

All six of New Haven's 21st Century Competencies, which are a graduation requirement for our students, are addressed within this curriculum:

1. Problem Solving and Critical Thinking:
    - Reason effectively
    - Make insightful judgments and decisions
    - Solve problems
2. Accessing and Analyzing Information:
    - Use research tools to access and evaluate information from multiple sources
    - Organize and synthesize information using multiple methods
3. Communication and Collaboration:
    - Articulate ideas clearly to a variety of different audiences using multiple modes
    - Communicate effectively and work productively with others
4. Creativity and Innovation
    - Demonstrate originality and inventiveness in work
5. Initiative, Self-Direction, and Accountability
    - Set and meet high standards and goals for one's self and others
    - Manage time and resources to produce high quality results in a timely manner
    - Take responsibility for one's own learning
6. Citizenship and Responsibility
    - Exercise empathy and respect for diverse cultures and perspectives
    - Contribute to and take responsibility for the larger community

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Notes

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[1] Hall, Stuart. *Essential Essays,* 2.

[2] Hall, Stuart. *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, 7.

[3] Hall, Stuart. *Essential Essays,* 10.

[4] Flores, Juan. *Divided Borders*, 89.

[5] Sound Field. "'Why Puerto Rican Bomba Music Is Resistance.'" PBS.

[6] Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 5-6.

[7] Ibid, 7.

[8] Ibid, 91.

[9] Ibid, 119.

[10] Ibid, 25.

[11] Ibid, 41.

[12] Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot*, 7-8.

[13] Ibid, 5.

[14] Kelley, Robin D. G. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, 163.

[15] Ibid, 169.

[16] Ibid, 166.

[17] Gaiter, Colette. "The Art of Liberation: Emory Douglas and the Black Panther Artists in 1968," 581.

[18] Ibid, 567.

[19] Ibid, 569.

[20] Ibid, 570.

[21] Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940, 227.*

[22] Lawrence, Tim. "'Listen, and You Will Hear all the Houses that Walked There Before': A History of Drag Balls, Houses and the Culture of Voguing," 3.

[23] Chauncey, George. *Gay New York, 261.*

[24] Ibid, *253.*

[25] Ibid, 5.

[26] Echols, Alice. *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture,* 147.

[27] Chang, Jeff. *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 13.

[28] Ibid, 58.

[29] Ibid, 60.