FREN-499: Global Ciphas: Hip Hop Circles around the World

**Maymester Course in Los Angeles and Paris**

*May 15 – June 12*

Professor: E. Hill  
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Dept. of American Studies & Ethnicity

Days: Mon-Thurs  
Class Hours: 10-1:15  
Office Hours: Monday 1:30-3

In this course, we will analyze the formation of hip hop circles around the world, especially focusing on local scenes in Los Angeles and Paris. Building on the ideas of James Spady et al (2006), the “global cipha” in this course refers to the practice of gathering in a circle during moments of exchange in hip hop sessions, but it also signifies the transnational circling of hip hop culture itself around the world as well as the cosmopolitan social circles that form in and through local hip hop cultural practices. Rather than reducing hip hop to the products of the rap music industry (and the global rap stars that dominate it), this course will attend to the practices of all four elements of hip hop culture (emcee, dj/beatmaker, bboy/dancer, and graffiti writer) as they manifest on local scenes involved in global flows of people, practices, and styles. Together we will learn about—and create ourselves—original studies of the aesthetic practices, transnational movements, and social networks of hip hop cultural exchange circulating around the world today.

The first two weeks will take place on campus in Los Angeles (May 15 – 26) where we will learn the basics of hip hop history and meet with local hip hop cultural practitioners active in LA as well as on international scenes. Our readings will help us analyze classic debates in hip hop culture and show us some of the innovative ways that scholars in the humanities and social sciences approach conducting research on hip hop today. The second two weeks will take place in Paris (May 29 – June 12). Why Paris, France? Scholars call it the second largest market for hip hop culture in the world. We will have the opportunity to construct a comparative study of how hip hop cultural history and contemporary practices (re)located themselves in a different socio-economic context. Our sessions in Paris will focus on readings and lectures that will help us better understand hip hop culture in France. Special sessions will be devoted to meeting with local hip hop practitioners and scholars, attending local hip hop events (concerts, battles, etc), visiting important sites for graffiti writing and street art, and individually conducting research in the field.
COURSE OBJECTIVES

- Explore the history and the contemporary reality of hip hop cultural practices in the United States and in France, focusing especially on the international and transnational social relations manifest in local scenes in Los Angeles and Paris.
- Examine classic debates about hip hop culture around the world, especially in the US and in France, and study some of the innovative ways in which scholars (and fans) express the complexity and the value of global hip hop culture.
- Investigate the dynamics of race, gender, class, and language that flow through the local scenes of the global cipha and compare them to the dominant discourse of and about mainstream rap music.
- Develop original scholarship in the form of a research paper that builds on existing scholarship and that incorporates on-location research and first-hand discussion with cultural practitioners.

READINGS

2. Tricia Rose, The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop. (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008)
7. Course Reader containing book chapters and articles, many specifically on French hip hop.
ASSIGNMENTS

Participation (10%)
Students will receive two participation grades: one for the two-week LA part of the course, and one for the Paris two-week session. Participation means being fully present, sharing ideas, asking questions, responding to others, being an active listener, paying attention during lectures, and attending special events.

AQCI’s (8X5 = 40%)
Students complete 2 one-page AQCI’s per week: one due Monday, the second Thursday. AQCI’s (Argument, Quote, Connections, Implications) are one-page (single spaced, 1” margins all around, Times New Roman font) assignments that require students: state the main (A) argument of an assigned reading; quote (Q) its most important single sentence; make (C) connections between this argument/quote, other articles, as well as personal research and on-location interactions; and suggest some of the (I) implications of this argument and the connections the student has made from it. Submission via Blackboard.

Proposal (10%)
Week three students submit a proposal for research that builds on methods learned in Booth’s text and in-class workshops. The proposal will intelligently articulate an issue or problem discussed in readings or meetings with guest lecturers. This problem should be developed into a series of research questions. The proposal states the specific plan for how the student plans to answer the research questions, especially how they plan to incorporate notes from the field. Submission via Blackboard.

Research Journal (15%)
The research journal is a diary of scholarly activity. Whenever students attend an event, have an interesting encounter, interview someone, etc. they should take notes in a small spiral notebook, which will be therefore organized chronologically. This will help keep track of research progress and reflection while working out questions formulated in the proposal.

Research Paper (25%)
The course will culminate with an original research paper that pulls from scholarship, meetings with cultural practitioners in LA and in Paris, and field notes taken from local scenes. The research can deal with any aspect of the transnational dynamics that animate the aesthetic and social circles of hip hop practices in Los Angeles and/or Paris. In addition, the research paper should build on the tools and methods learned in Booth’s text The Craft of Research as well as in-class workshops. Research papers will be saved and, with student permission, shared with students studying French hip hop in the future at USC. Research paper due June 19th. Submission via Blackboard.