



a national film board of canada production

breakin' in

the making of a hip hop dancer
teacher's guide

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INTRODUCTION

The documentary *Breakin' In: The Making of a Hip Hop Dancer* heightens our awareness around the intersecting relationships between media, race, gender and consumerism. As technology and media develop at a faster and faster pace, it is essential that we polish our tools for making sense of these “advancements.” *Breakin' In* is suitable for students ages 12 to 18.

The Teacher's Guide for *Breakin' In* can be used to meet the following expectations for Media Studies in the Ontario curriculum:

- Identify factors that influence media production, distribution and advertising.
- Analyze the relationship between media works and the production and marketing of related products.
- Demonstrate critical thinking skills by identifying the differences between explicit and implicit messages in media works.

The DVD Outline & Summary

Breakin' In: The Making of a Hip Hop Dancer follows the ambitions of three young female dancers who attempt to make it in the hip hop music scene. The documentary captures the diverse life experiences of Linda, Michelle and Tracy. A number of topics arise as their stories unfold, such as family (commitment, pressure and responsibilities), exploitation and education. Intersecting societal forces and geo/demographic limitations complicate such delicate issues. The DVD is organized as follows:

Chapter 1: Opening	Chapter 10: Audition #2
Chapter 2: Linda's Intro	Chapter 11: Linda and her Ex
Chapter 3: Michelle's Intro	Chapter 12: Tracy's Big Gamble
Chapter 4: Tracy's Intro	Chapter 13: Linda's Christmas Blues
Chapter 5: The Club and the Casting Agent	Chapter 14: Audition #3
Chapter 6: Audition #1	Chapter 15: Linda's Big News
Chapter 7: Tracy's Photo Shoot & Back Story	Chapter 16: Tracy's Big Break
Chapter 8: Michelle's Audition & Back Story	Chapter 17: Conclusion
Chapter 9: 2 Shades of Black	Chapter 18: End Credits

Pre-viewing Activity

Educators may wish to read two related articles, which are included at the back of the guide before watching the film, or assign two groups of students to each read one of them. The first is “Reproducing the Hottentot Venus: (Re)Sexualising black Women in Hip Hop and R & B Music Videos.” This article looks at the historical social construction of black women as hypersexual beings, which began during transatlantic slavery. The article explores how black women are similarly portrayed in pop music videos. [See Appendix A]

The second article, “Ambition Week,” focuses on the issues that a contemporary black female choreographer has to confront in following her art form. Tanisha Scott, speaking from an insider’s perspective, raises interesting questions about who is responsible for combating negative images of black women. [See Appendix B]

Setting the Context: Canada and Black Popular Culture

According to Queen’s University professor Dr. Katherine McKittrick, this documentary can be read with certain historical and geographical connections. Black popular culture in Canada is greatly influenced by a Caribbean heritage. And since the country is a neighbour of the U.S.—where hip hop was born—Canada is also influenced by American hip hop culture.

Although the Canadian hip hop scene is not as big as in America, the impetus for the documentary came out of a little known aspect of the music video production world. Hip Hop music producers were taking advantage of the relatively lower cost and easy access to studios and locations in Toronto, Montreal and other centres that could substitute for U.S. cities, and therefore were scouting for young women at a rate that was disproportionate to the actual number of Canadian music videos being produced. It also created among these women, a false promise about the chances of breaking into the U.S. market.

The scant and underpaid positions found in Canada’s hip hop scene for dancers has improved slightly by the creation of urban format commercial radio in cities such as Edmonton, Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa and Vancouver. These radio stations have helped to increase the popularity of Black music (usually called ‘urban’) and have also provided spaces for artist development and exposure through various high-profile events and contests. Nevertheless, a sparsely populated Canadian landscape and a small market for hip hop music make entry-level positions hotly sought after.

McKittrick asserts that historically the role of black women in the performing arts is not a recent phenomenon. There is a continuum between Josephine Baker in the 1920s and what we see today in the entertainment industry. The ways in which black women’s bodies are on display in hip hop music videos can also be historically linked to the status of enslaved black women in the United States in the 17th and 18th centuries. Thus, as McKeown’s article, “Reproducing the Hottentot Venus: (Re)Sexualising Black Women in Popular Hip Hop Music Videos” further explains, today’s hip hop music videos reference specific historical experiences.

Strategies for Reading *Breakin' In*

Breakin' In can be analyzed through three thematic lenses: 1) gender, 2) race and 3) consumerism.

1) Read through a feminist lens, learners will identify how gender influences the production, distribution and advertising of hip hop music videos. Questions arise as to who shoots these videos and why there are so few women directing them. See Chapters 5, 10 or 14 of the DVD.

2) Through a race lens, the film can highlight the consequences of centuries of black female exploitation specifically tied to chattel slavery in the Western world. While the documentary focuses on three black women and their appeal in media such as music videos, *Breakin' In* also reflects how images of young black women are socially constructed differently from Asian or Caucasian women. By using race as a theme to read this documentary, learners will be able to identify the implicit and explicit messages around issues of race and thus satisfy one of the curriculum guidelines' expectations listed at the opening of this guide.

3) Read through a consumerism/commercialism lens, *Breakin' In* highlights how underdeveloped markets (e.g., the Canadian 'urban' music market) play a role in the potential opportunities for young people. Through this lens questions around worker exploitation also come into focus. Why is it that young women are paid so little for their contribution to a multi-billion dollar industry? The consumerism lens allows us to explore the specific expectation in the curriculum guideline which asks learners to "identify factors that influence media production, distribution and advertising" (see Michelle's parents in Chapter 3).

Pre-Viewing Activities (30-60 minutes)

Before watching *Breakin' In*, teachers should get a sense of students' general exposure and familiarity with hip hop music videos, even if students' experiences are largely connected to videos created in the USA. These exercises should get students to begin to think about hip hop music videos and the industry as a whole, before they view the film.

1. As a class, brainstorm a list of hip hop music videos. For example, "The way you move" by Outkast, "Big Pimpin'" by Jay Z, "Area Codes" by Ludacris, and "Shake ya' ass" by Mystikal.
2. Write the list on the board or chart paper. Then ask, **What do these music videos have in common?**
3. Teachers should record this information (again, where students can see it). Possible answers may include: what the women are wearing: bikinis, skimpy clothing; the characteristics of the women in the videos: long hair, fair skin, slim or muscular build; the types of things these women are doing: dancing sexually, or found in sexual situations.
4. Have students consider what purposes are being served in formatting these videos in a similar way. (audience appeal, popular conceptions of women, images per second, lighting, scenery etc.)
5. After students have completed the tasks above, ask, **Why do you think women choose to be in these music videos? What do they have to gain?**
6. Teachers should encourage students to think about the following responses (only if students do not generate these ideas themselves): general exposure, possible acting and modelling careers, the chance to be a recognized symbol of beauty, the chance to break into the industry and branch out as musical artists or dancers.
7. Teachers may want to ask students if they would consider being in any of these videos (male or female) to gauge the lure of the hip hop industry for this target group. Students who feel comfortable sharing their responses should be asked to justify their answers.
8. To bring the pre-viewing activities to a close, teachers may ask their students to write a short paragraph on the following: **How do hip hop and R & B music videos represent black women and other women of colour?** This question should help students begin to think critically about how black women are depicted in this form of media.

These pre-viewing activities are of particular importance because they help introduce students to some of the main ideas and themes that will be dealt with in *Breakin' In*. Ideally, after watching the documentary, students can return to the issues raised above and make connections between their initial opinions and their ideas after watching the documentary.

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions

In small groups, have learners discuss some of the following questions (20 minutes in groups, 20 minutes in class setting):

1. What might have been the motivation for Elizabeth St. Philip to make this documentary about dancers? Are her motivations tied to larger issues or institutions in society?
2. What motivated these young women to enter the hip hop music video industry? Compare their goals with those of the director.
3. What were the factors that influenced how the documentary was produced (narration, visuals, characters)? Specify how each factor influenced the work, such as target audience, format or genre.
4. Take a look at the postcard/poster for the documentary. Examine the image, posture, colour schemes and fonts. What is the relationship between the marketing of this work and its target audience?
5. How is the format of the work just as important as the content? Could the work be as effective in another format such as a radio documentary? How might the content differ with the format?
6. How might the three protagonists' stories differ if this film were set outside of Canada? In the United States does geographic location make a difference? If so, explain.
7. The lives of Michelle, Tracy and Linda are as much about class as they are about race. What are the implicit and explicit messages that are conveyed in regards to race and class in the work?
8. According to the filmmaker many of the women she interviewed felt dancing was an entry-level position to larger careers in the entertainment industry. Why might we see more black women attempting to enter the industry as dancers rather than videographers or directors?

Group Activities

Working in small groups of five, have learners list the implicit and explicit messages in the following topics, giving examples (35 minutes):

Gender

- What are the messages conveyed about women in the documentary?
- What are the messages that are implied?
- What are the messages conveyed about men in the work?

The Hip Hop Music Video Industry

- What does this documentary teach us about the hip hop music video industry?
- What messages are conveyed by the director Elizabeth St. Philip?
- What are we not told, or what are the implicit messages about this industry?

On Being Canadian

- According to *Breakin' In* what is the significance of being Canadian?
- What are the benefits or limits of trying to enter the industry from Canada?
- What are the implicit and explicit messages the work conveys about being Canadian and the Canadian hip hop music industry?

Exaltation or Exploitation?

- Are the women portrayed as being exalted or exploited? How might Linda, Tracy and Michelle answer this question? Would their answers contrast to the view presented by the narration in the documentary?

The Body

- Central to this documentary is the human body, its presentation, movement and style. What are some of the implicit messages about men's and women's bodies? What value, if any, is attached to the human body, and what kinds of bodies receive positive attention? What are we explicitly told, by both men and women in and outside of the industry, about women's bodies? Does sexuality play a significant role in how these dancers obtain work?

Extensions

Learners will connect the perspectives/critiques from the group work, discussion questions, Elizabeth St. Philip's interview and the Tanisha Scott article to the larger themes (Gender/Feminism, Race, Consumerism/Capitalism) and then re-evaluate the work. Working in groups of three, the learners' re-evaluation will consist of a remaking or a sequel to *Breakin' In*.

The re-evaluation can take the form of a storyboarded skit, a short scene (video-recorded), an interview with another central figure (e.g., a black Canadian feminist) or a music video that centralizes some of the issues taken up in the work. (2 periods + ½ period for presentations)

Bibliography & Additional Resources

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*Scott, Tanisha as told to Celine Wong. "Ambition Week" www.dose.ca/ambition.

About the Filmmaker

Elizabeth St. Philip is a director and producer with more than ten years in broadcast journalism. St. Philip has covered national and international events in Egypt, America and at home in Canada. She directed *Red River* for Good Earth Productions Inc. (Discovery Channel), *Gene Hunters* for Cineflex Productions Inc. (National Geographic Channel, Discovery Channel and TVO) and produced for CTV National News and CBC's *The National*. St. Philip was the recipient of the NFB's Reel Diversity 2003 award and is a graduate of Concordia University with a B.A. in Journalism/Communications.

Film Credits

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Teacher's Guide

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Reproducing the Hottentot Venus: (Re)Sexualising Black Women in Popular Hip-hop Music Videos

By Judith McKeown

HISTORICALLY, black women have been defined within three rigidly structured constructions: first, as the docile and desexualised mammy figure, second, as the controlling matriarch, and third, as the highly sexual seductress. I plan to focus on the latter. In *Slave Women in Caribbean Society*, Barbara Bush argues that during slavery, based on European conceptions of morality, respectability, and aesthetics, black women were considered inferior to their white counterparts. Slave women were considered lewd, lascivious, and wanton, which

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was in direct conflict with European conceptions of femininity that upheld the virtues of purity, delicacy, modesty, and physical frailty. Following from these constructions of black womanhood, black women were labeled as 'Sable Queens' and 'Ebony Beauties' by elite European men. Although these labels reflect some of the more favourable perceptions of slave women at the time, they also perpetuated the myth that African slave women were foreign, exotic, and highly sexual. The myth of black female exoticism was reinforced for many Europeans when they saw African slave women either partially or completely nude, thus revealing and validating black women's perceived sexual availability. Their nudity further became a symbol of their 'uninhibited' sexual practices to European society and justified the negative stereotypes that existed about black women. From this discussion, it is evident that early conceptions of femininity constructed female slaves as sexually promiscuous and inferior to white women. This definition of femininity debased black women and provides the framework from which I will argue that some black women, at present, have internalised these definitions of black womanhood and reproduce them by using their physical appearance and sexuality in black music videos.

During the nineteenth century, the symbol or icon for the black woman was further constructed and popularised through the image of the 'Hottentot Venus'. In *Black Bodies, White Bodies*, Sander Gilman argues that black women were constructed as the antithesis of European sexual moral practices and beauty. Black women were believed to be "primitive" and more "sexually intensive" than were white women. The perceived heightened sexuality of the black woman was justified by pseudo-scientific theories developed by J. J. Virey (and other academics of the time). According to him, black women's "voluptuousness is developed to a degree of lasciviousness unknown to our climate, for their sexual organs are much more developed than those of whites." Here, Virey attributes black females' perceived sexual availability to their physical appearance and genetic makeup. He further suggests that differences in genitalia between blacks and whites account for different corresponding sexual appetites in blacks. Another academic of the time, Georges Cuvier, proposed that physical differences—skin colour, genitalia, protruding buttocks, and phenotype—that were exhibited in black women were signs of deviant sexual behaviour. As a result, black women came to symbolise 'unbridled' sexuality, not so much because of their actions, but due to their socially constructed physical appearance, mainly their 'voluptuous' figures. At present, black

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women continue to be depicted as icons of heightened sexuality, especially in their portrayals in popular hip-hop music videos.

The sexual objectification of black women continues today through negative sexual representations of black femininity. Nowhere are these representations echoed more coherently than in popular hip-hop music videos. For example, hip-hop artist, Mystikal, in his video "Shake ya' Ass" perpetuates the notion that black women are only useful as sexual objects. The video opens with three black women approaching Mystikal with an invitation to a party. Of course, he accepts and upon his arrival he is greeted by a *scantily* clad masked woman who leads him throughout the house where numerous other women, in like physical appearance and dress, also greet him. In this video, the women are generally wearing masks and bikinis. That the women are wearing bikinis is particularly problematic in

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this situation because they are not in a beach or pool setting. Here it is obvious that the women are outfitted in bikinis merely to 'show off' their bodies and there is no real purpose or explanation as to why they are not wearing regular clothing. Furthermore, the masks symbolise the exoticism and sexuality of these women, which is not a far cry from the historical representations and constructions of black womanhood outlined previously. The masks further represent the perceived immateriality of black women's faces and the corresponding importance of their bodies as objects of sexual significance. Lastly, the masks also reveal the anonymity or invisibility of black women's individual identities and highlight their frequent reduction to mere sexual or body parts, both historically and at present. Here black women's bodies are objects of spectacle for the male gaze (ultimately to be ogled).

Similar to the representation of black womanhood in Mystikal's music video, Jay Z's *Big Pimpin'* video also portrays black women as mere sex objects. Set on a cruise ship where approximately forty women are scantily clad in either bikinis or revealing outfits, the women generally outnumber the men with a ratio of eight to one, however, the men are fully clothed (with the exception of maybe one shirtless male). This is of particular importance because it shows the oppositional nature in which black men and women are constructed

and positioned. That the men are fully clothed reveals their power to subvert early constructions of black masculinity that also designate them as oversexualised. Their clothes, in this instance, represent their refusal to be reduced to mere body parts, although their female counterparts fall victim to this categorisation. Ultimately, the women in this video are 'put on display' again for white, black, and other audiences, which is reminiscent of the ways in which black women were put on display historically.

Though I have only provided a brief history of the constructions of black womanhood and the ways in which certain sexist-racist interpretations of black femininity have been reproduced, I do not want to overgeneralise or oversimplify a very complex issue. We have to consider why women choose to be in these videos, especially bearing in mind the historical past of women of African descent. Are they pas-

sive victims or active strategists? Many women in these videos get paid or see this type of televisual exposure as a stepping stone to modeling, acting, and other careers involving the spotlight. Does this absolve them of their responsibilities to compete against negative stereotypes about black women? Do they have that responsibility in the first place? These are important questions that cannot be answered in an article as brief as this one, but they are important to think about. I just want to leave you with this. The reproduction of certain stereotypes about black womanhood in popular music videos are dangerous on two levels: first, these images are perpetuated in the black community, affecting the self-esteem of black adolescent youth, skewing the perception of what a black woman should look and act like for black females and males alike, and second, non-blacks and specifically whites are privy to these images as well and continue to perceive black women as sexual objects that remain inferior to white women (who are not represented in the media in the same ways as their black counterparts, especially in music videos). Although I do not pretend to have the answer and there are clearly no simple solutions, the first step would be for more favourable representations of black women (as active participants and not simply objects) to permeate this growing televisual medium.

Ambition week

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There's something that drives the best to be even better.

Blame it on lofty goals, a childhood plagued by underdog status or the need to make a major impact. This week, we look past the obvious successes of five Canadians in entertainment and urge them to share -- in their own words -- their true motivation. They each reveal their goals for 2006 (which Dose will track over the year) to shed light on the inner workings of an ambitious mind.

There's no position that cultivates more ambition and determination than that of the underdog. Constantly being underestimated and overlooked is what's driven Tanisha Scott to become the hottest new choreographer in North America, with A-list clients like Beyonce proclaiming they want to move the way Scott does. With no formal training, Scott got her start dancing her ass off in videos for Mariah Carey, Mary J. Blige and Shaggy. Now, this Toronto-born, New York-based overachiever creates the stars' best moves and shares her hip-undulating secrets with the likes of Ciara ("Oh") and Beyonce ("Check On It"). She's also brought Jamaica's dances to the mainstream as the sole choreographer for dancehall artist Sean Paul, which earned Scott a best choreography nomination at the 2004 MTV Video Music Awards, the first-ever nod in that category for a reggae-related clip. While competing against professionally trained choreographers for the top jobs is still a daily battle, Tanisha, ever the underdog, knows that's when her ambition truly thrives.

The weird thing about me is I don't like attention, which is crazy. It doesn't make any sense because I love to dance on stage, love to perform. But half of the time, I don't want people knowing it's me. I used to always have on a hat that's really low, so you couldn't see my face, so I'm forcing you to look at what I'm selling and that's my dance.

It all started with my father, who used to be a DJ. I'd follow him to a lot of his gigs and he'd show me the latest moves. I started dancing in '95 at the University of Windsor (in Ontario) with a dance agency called Do Dat, dancing in videos and in stage shows. Before that, I was just going to clubs all the time.

I never wanted to be a choreographer, to be honest. All I ever wanted to do, and I'll say it till today, is just

dance. What ended up happening is when (Canadian video director) Little X got the job to do Sean Paul's video for "Gimme the Light," he called me frantically and was like, "Listen, you got to do it -- not just dance, but choreograph." So, basically, I was put right there on the spot. My agent was like, "Don't do the video. There's no money involved." But reggae music is my heart. I love Sean Paul and I knew "I'm going to do this."

I got paid nothing on that video. Ironically, when you do things from your heart, when it's goodwill, great things happen. I've been choreographing for Sean ever since. He really respects what I do. Sean is straight dancehall. He's not watered-down whatsoever, and I keep his dancing just as real as his music -- I keep Jamaica's dance really alive.

I wanted to start a movement with "Gimme the Light." I was covered from head to toe, so people had to see the dance because that's all they could look at. But, of course, we're definitely in an industry which is sex. Rock 'n' roll, rap, hip hop, it's all the same. I put it this way; in order to change something, you have to be a part of it, but without losing yourself and your own integrity. It takes us, the women, to make that change. You can't expect the men to be like, "Oh, it's bad." Heck no! It's up to us to stand up.

People complain, "There are too many stereotypes. Women are being degraded in these videos." What I'm really trying to change is I want women to look at themselves in these videos and be proud, comfortable and respect themselves. Everyone wants to hurry up and be a star and be seen on TV, but there's a lot more to it than that. You have to think long-term: do you want your kids to see you doing that? Do you want them to think that this is what we have to look like in order to get someplace?

Being in music videos, you can say "no." I've said no to bikinis. I don't want to be in a video dancing in a bikini. I've said no to sitting on a rapper's lap. A while ago, they asked me to choreograph a song called "I'm in Love with a Stripper" by T-Pain. I was like, "No, I'll pass." I didn't start off naked and I'm not going to end naked.

When I was at school, I always got an A- or B+, I never got just straight As. When I ran track, I was always the person coming in second or third. But this

is the only thing where nobody can tell me anything different. I hung with the best of the best, without the same experience that a lot of people had because I'm not a trained dancer. My heart is there. That's the one thing I know. So, when it comes to dance, my ambition is strong. I really believe in it.

TANISHA SCOTT'S AMBITIONS FOR 2006

- 1) Challenge myself more, not just with choreography, but also get into whole different realms, be it acting or having my own business and opening my own dance school in Toronto.
- 2) Take dance hall to another level. Go to Jamaica and challenge the Jamaicans out there. In Jamaica, what they lack is choreography skills. I want to teach them breakdance. I want to teach them how to vogue. Then they can take the way they move and build upon it.
- 3) Keep my relationships, my family and my friends a lot stronger.