

The Hip in Hip Hop: Toward a Discipline of Hip Hop Studies

Monica Miller, Daniel White Hodge, Jeffrey Coleman, and Cassandra D. Chaney

For nearly four decades now, Hip Hop culture, something that was expected to only last a few years as a “fad,” has developed into a trans-global phenomenon in almost every industrialized nation in the Western world. By securing its position through the five cultural modes of rap music (oral), turntablism or “DJing” (aural), breaking (physical), graffiti art (visual) and knowledge (mental),¹ Hip Hop has become an astute public teacher to those who cared to listen to its weighty messages and learn from its many lessons. That is, Hip Hop necessitates anything but ‘easy’ listening and passive consumption. Moreover, its messages of resistance, social awareness, personal consciousness, activism, pleasure and power, and community engagement have transcended its early days of locality in the Bronx and West Coast cities against the turmoil of post-industrialism. In 2013, Hip Hop remains a sustained voice for many and a space and place to express oneself in a manner that is both contextualized and legitimate. Furthermore, Hip Hop culture has seemingly transcended its initial “fad” trope and developed into more than just a musical genre; it is a voice; it is an identity; it is a movement; it is a force; it is a community of people seeking justice and higher learning; it is an environment for those seeking spiritual solace and cathartic release; it is performance art; it is, as KRS-One has argued, a place where both marginal and mainstream voices can be heard and flourish.

For many, Hip Hop emerged as a vehicle of artistic discourse which echoed the concerns, anger, hate, love, pain, hope, vision, anxiety, desire, and joy which had gone unheard in the public sphere known as the American media. Hip Hop was, as Chuck D once said, “Our CNN.” It was the voice of a generation that had gone unheard for far too long, a voice that expressed and dramatized the turmoil being lived out in ghettos across the United States.² Through Hip Hop, one was able to discover the shared experiences and crises taking place in various urban cities, and realize that he or she was not alone or singled out. It was a narrative that needed to be heard and explained—one that would ultimately lay the ground for postmodern and post-soul³ expression in

¹ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. (New York: Macmillan, 2005)

² Otis Moss, “Real Big: The Hip Hop Pastor as Postmodern Prophet,” in *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation*, ed. Ralph Watkins (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 2007).

³ This is a term used to describe the period and era which followed the soul era. Both of these terms, originated by Nelson George *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps & Bohos : Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992)., are contextualized terms for what postmodernism is for Black, Latino, Urban, and Hip Hop contexts and which includes such societal shifts like the Civil Rights Movement, The Migrant Farm Workers Movement, and the Black Power Movement—to name a few—which helped shape postmodern elements of current societal mores See Nelson George, *Post-Soul Nation : The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980s as Experienced by African Americans (Previously Known as Blacks and before That Negroes)* (New York, NY: Viking, 2004); Daniel White Hodge, *Heaven Has a Ghetto: The Missiological Gospel & Theology of Tupac Amaru Shakur* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Muller Academic, 2009)..

the years to come.⁴ Hip Hop was and still is a way to construct knowledge and find a way to release and come to terms with anger, frustration, hate, social revolutionary worldviews, the questioning of authority, and rebellion. The field of Hip Hop studies is, arguably, a palpable growing field of study. Much like the advent of film studies during the late 1970s in which established disciplines asked, “Why do we even need to study film?” Hip Hop studies, over the years, has sought to embody the answer to that question and fill a void in scholarship across disciplines. Furthermore, when universities such as Harvard, Penn State, USC, UCLA, Stanford, Duke, Princeton, and NYU offer a variety of courses on the subject of Hip Hop culture specifically and conjoin that with the 2012 announcement by the University of Arizona about a Hip Hop Studies minor along with rap artists and journalists now doubling as visiting scholars and lecturers and co-teaching courses with academics (i.e. Anthony B. Pinn and rapper Bun-B at Rice University and formative Hip Hop journalist Jeff Chang who is also The executive director of the Institute for Diversity in the Arts + Committee on Black Performing Arts at Stanford University, among a host of other examples, you indeed have a field of study that is both growing and strong.

Until it became mainstream⁵, Hip Hop’s independent lyrical prophets predicted that years of racial animus and societal lethargy would not remain indefinitely and would one day be met by racial retribution. For example, in 1982, Hip Hop pioneer Grandmaster Flash released the culturally-poignant work *The Message*. In this piece, Flash articulated a multitude of ugly realities in the “jungle,” his metaphor for chaotic life in the inner-city and warned, “Don’t push me cause I’m close to the edge, we’re trying not to lose our heads.” For those that understood the message, the mounting frustrations of the inner-city would one day boil over, take center stage, and be noticed by the very world that had created the conditions of limitation to which they were responding to. Subsequently, the torch that was initially lit by Grandmaster Flash was passed on and flamed by other Hip Hop artists who further validated the collective marginalization of Blacks in the inner-city. Case in point: Years before the Los Angeles riots that immediately ensued upon the acquittal of the four white Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers that physically assaulted the late Black motorist Rodney King, Hip Hop artists such as Public Enemy (“Fight the Power”), N.W.A. (“Fuck the Police”), Bodycount’s (“Cop Killa”), Dr. Dre (“The Day Niggaz Took Over”), Ice Cube (“Black Korea” and “We Had To Tear This Motherfucka Up”), and the Geto Boys (“Crooked Officer”) collectively expressed strong disdain, frustration, and anger for the

⁴ The civil unrest in Libya, Egypt, and Paris had Hip Hop at its core voice and used U.S. artists such as KRS-One, The Roots, Tupac Shakur, Lauryn Hill, and N.W.A. (among many others) as social templates for social revolutions.

⁵ It could be argued that Hip Hop became mainstream when DJ Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince won the first Grammy Award for Best Rap Performance in 1989 for the song “Parents Just Don’t Understand.” From that point, rap music was considered “music.” In 1992, Dr. Dre releases *The Chronic* and it made a “mainstream” sensation with record sales being made well outside the borders of the urban context. It was within these years that Hip Hop gained much traction in Hollywood and the public sphere with films such as *Juice* (1993), *Boyz In The Hood* (1991), and *Menace II Society* (1993) all giving Hip Hop a much larger platform in which to operate and a never before had audience capitulating to its music to operate.

recurring, wanton, chronic, and systematic abuse experienced by themselves and members in their neighborhood communities. Although the documented footage of King's beating on videotape provided irrefutable proof to cynics that questioned the validity of the claims made by Hip Hop revolutionaries against law enforcement in the years prior to the beating of King, in the wake of this national tragedy, Hip Hop became the cultural bullhorn by which the experiences of the "nameless," "faceless," and "voiceless" have received national and international attention.⁶

The study of Hip Hop spans, now, over two decades. Scholars such as Tricia Rose, Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West, Anthony B. Pinn, Jeff Chang, Nelson George, Bakari Kitwana, and Murray Forman, among others, were among some of the first scholars to give Hip Hop academic "feet" and legitimacy. Rose's work *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, discussed the context and cultural attributes of Hip Hop culture and gave insight into the contextual elements of the culture and musical genre. Dan Charnas produced one of the most exhaustive books on how Hip Hop developed into a commercial, trans-global, multi-billion dollar entity and gives direct insight into how Hip Hop "lost its soul and went corporate" over the last thirty five years; a powerful historical account of the culture from a socio-economic posit.⁷

Using Black popular culture as a backdrop, much of Hip Hop scholarship engages the historical and socio-political areas of Hip Hop. Jeff Chang and Nelson George give accurate social portraits of the historical settings which gave rise to Hip Hop. Chang and George lay out Hip Hop's historical ontology and argue for the legitimacy of Hip Hop within the American pop culture scene.⁸ While author's such as Bakari Kitwana describes what the Hip Hop generation is, including attention to white youth and their inclinations toward the culture. Yvonne Bynoe continued this conversation and asserted both the political leadership within Hip Hop and the growing need for it within the young Black community.

These works provide a firm academic foundation to the field of Hip Hop studies by legitimizing Hip Hop as a rightful academic endeavor – that is, this data is just as good as any other academic data set and worthy of serious consideration and reflection.⁹ Hip Hop studies, as coined by many by the mid 2000's, is a field which

⁶ Aloï, Daniel. "Hip-hop's global culture 'affects everyone,' pioneers say." *The Cornell Chronicle*, 20 Apr 2011.

⁷ Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop* (New York, NY: New American Library, 2010).

⁸ The mid to late 1990s gave rise to a multitude of scholarship focused around Hip Hop culture. Scholars such as Russell A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: State University of New York Press / Sunny Series, 1995); Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap : Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough for You? Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997); Mark Anthony Neal, "Sold out on Soul: The Corporate Annexation of Black Popular Music" (*Popular Music and Society* 21, no. 3 (1997), all gave treatment to the multi-levels of Hip Hop within communication, cultural, and African American studies. These works were critical in understanding Hip Hop beyond its historical aspects.

⁹ This of course is arguable, but in the last decade of Hip Hop scholarship, most academic professional associations have had a section/ quad/ group on Hip Hop studies, and the growth of doctoral candidates doing their

encompasses sociology, anthropology, communication studies,¹⁰ religious studies, cultural studies, critical race theory, missiological studies, and psychology in a multi-disciplinary area of study—much like the polyvocal and multiplicative culture of Hip Hop – it is not one, but rather, many things – a conglomerate of diversity that continues to grow in both scope, content and form.

Accordingly, over the last decade, the scholarship surrounding Hip Hop has grown exponentially, making its way into the disciplines of gender studies, critical race theory, communication and rhetoric studies, psychology, sociology, anthropology, ethnomusicology, popular culture studies, and religious studies. Given the complexity of issues involved in Hip Hop studies, more and more disciplines are beginning to take up Hip Hop for academic reflection; the birth of Hip Hop studies is now and it precisely why a journal like this exists. For too long Hip Hop scholars and practitioners have not had a space and place to engage with and dialogue about their work. Scattered among the various academic journals and professional conferences, Hip Hop scholarship has not had a “home” to call its own and a dedicated team of peers who know and understand the field who can give serious attention to their ongoing scholarship; until now.¹¹ *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies (JHHS)* exists to fill this void – to create a space for scholars and practitioners working in and around a wide variety of Hip Hop data. Our hope is that this journal offers a place for concise and critical scholarship that contributes to the scholarly field of Hip Hop Studies. *JHHS* is published primarily for scholars seeking a deeper and more analytical understanding of Hip Hop culture and for those working in the fields of religious studies, communication studies, cultural studies, American studies, sociology, social psychology, and urban missions. But, the journal might also be of interest to scholars in related fields such as philosophy, history, social and political science, social and political theory, pop culture, Black and Latino(a) popular culture, Black and Pan African studies, biblical studies and those who practice the art and aesthetics of Hip Hop.

In the face of historical and contemporaneous forms of prejudice, discrimination, bigotry, intolerance, and oppression, Hip Hop has created a critical social mass of individuals that have unapologetically challenged the status quo and validated the voluminous experiences of marginal people in America and abroad. As an interdisciplinary teacher, Hip Hop has taught those who are ignorant of the marginal experiences why it is important to possess and develop an earnest desire to learn about the joy, pain, and resilience of people on the underside of the American Project. By

dissertations on or around a Hip Hop issue is grounds to suggest that Hip Hop has, in fact, grown from just a sub-cultural study.

¹⁰ A little known work published by Russell Potter examines the rhetorical aspects of Hip Hop culture from a communications point of view. 1995. *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*. New York: State University of New York Press / Sunny Series, was the first to argue that Hip Hop vernacular might in fact be part of the postmodern language.

¹¹ There have been academic journals that have been both sensitive and open to Hip Hop Studies which need mention: *Journal of Black Studies*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, *Journal of Pan African Studies*, *The Bulletin for the Study of Religion*, *Souls Journal*, *Black Theology Journal*, *Culture & Religion Journal*, *Religion & Popular Culture Journal*, and *The Journal of Negro Education*—to name just a few, have been allies for Hip Hop Studies.

speaking candidly about our past, validating our present, and looking optimistically to our future, Hip Hop has encouraged its pupils to become better individuals, partners, family members, and community partners. There is room at the table for anyone who has something to say and has a strong desire to say it. For almost four decades, Hip Hop pioneers such as Grandmaster Flash and Run DMC have paved the way for other notable Hip Hop contenders such as A Tribe Called Quest, Coolio, EPMD, Tupac Shakur, The Notorious B.I.G., 'Lil Kim, Jay-Z, Kanye West, Nate Dogg and Warren G, Snoop Dogg, Nas, 50 Cent, Eryka Badu, Common, Lauryn Hill, Eminem, Joell Ortiz, Talib Kweli, and more recently 'Lil Wayne, 2 Chainz, Nicki Minaj, and Kendrick Lamar (to name a few). Given the current strength of Hip Hop's position in the world, there is also room at the table for up-and-coming Hip Hop artists who want us to experience their distinct way of viewing the world. For those who have ignored the many lessons that are inherent in historical and contemporary Hip Hop, *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* is a forum by which to listen and learn. Hip hop can no longer be ignored; it is now time to pay attention.

JHHS seeks to give that field a voice and a body of work in which to draw from. Our mission is to publish critically engaged, culturally relevant, and astute analyses of Hip Hop. Work that emphasizes Hip Hop's relationship to race, ethnicity, nationalism, class, gender, sexuality, justice and equality, politics, communication, religion, and popular culture are at the center of the scholarship. *JHHS* also explores the intersections of the sacred and profane for a better understanding of spirituality and religious discourses within the Hip Hop community. And, with this growing field, work around therapy and counseling with Hip Hop is also an area of study. *JHHS* has five broad aims, each of which adds a new and distinctive dimension to the academic analysis and study of Hip Hop:

1. The religious discourse and rhetoric of Hip Hop and rap
2. Culture, structure, and space within Hip Hop and rap
3. Race, ethnicity, identity, class, and gender in a Hip Hop and rap context
4. The sociology of religion in Hip Hop and rap
5. Hip Hop's influence and reach in other culture industries (fashion, sports, television, film); within the political sphere, and within educational spaces

All of these aims are addressed in the works that constitute this inaugural issue. For starters, Lillian-Yvonne Bertram's "Epic: An EP" resonates due to its fragmented and decentered yet buoyant qualities. The poem sashays across the page as confidently as a classic Hip Hop refrain and in the process manages to string together five numbered stanzas that cleverly use imagery of musical performances along with suggestions of bar room gossip and references to Christmas-season "love" as connective tissue. More specifically, words such as "Fingerplucking," "Band," "sways," "hat high" relate in interesting and unexpected ways. Similarly, the poem's final line, "rising home," not only possesses rich sonic quality, but manages to usher readers away from the bar and performance on a high note.

In a decidedly more sacred vein, Travis Harris explores the metaphysical underpinnings of Lecrae, a Grammy award-winning rapper (Best Christian Album, 2013) who may be unfamiliar to many Hip Hop scholars and fans, in “Refocusing and Redefining Hip Hop: An Analysis of Lecrae’s Contribution to Hip Hop.” Harris argues that Lecrae and other “Christian” artists possess the requisite talent and aesthetic appeal to help return Hip Hop to its community-centric roots. However, Harris makes clear that the sacred elements of the art form must first be acknowledged and embraced by the broader Hip Hop community and that the sacred/secular divide which is commonly used requires more attention.

For Samuel T. Livingston, Hip Hop is part of a more expansive and global community, one that stretches back to the Afro-Kemetic oral tradition. In the essay “Speech is My Hammer, It’s Time to Build: Hip Hop, Cultural Semiosis and the Africana Intellectual Heritage,” Livingston asserts that a Diasporic approach grounded in an African semeiotic system of analysis can help facilitate our understanding of the cultural history and political potential of Hip Hop.

Two controversial aspects of our cultural history figure prominently in Dustin Coleman’s “Baadasssss Gangstas: The Parallel Influences, Characteristics and Criticisms of the Blaxploitation Cinema and Gangsta Rap Movements.” Coleman explores the socio-economic conditions that made both movements possible and later critiques the parallel artistic elements that made the two genres culturally significant. Coleman also examines the critical reception of each movement, especially the lively and often contentious dialogue that ensued within the African American community.

Graffiti art and rap take center stage in Duri Long’s essay “Listen to the Story: Banksy, Tyler the Creator, and the Growing Nihilistic Mindset.” Long addresses the presence of nihilistic tendencies and sentiments in contemporary urban environments. Specifically, Long examines how those tendencies inform the cultural productions of graffiti artist Banksy and rapper Tyler the Creator. Furthermore, the essay broadens its scope in an effort to explain why disillusionment and nihilism are becoming more and more ubiquitous in suburban as well as urban areas.

The last essay in our inaugural issue, “Typologies of Black Male Sensitivity in R&B and Hip Hop,” comes from Cassandra Chaney and Krista D. Mincey. The two scholars conduct a qualitative content analysis of nearly eighty Rhythm and Blues and Hip Hop songs from the mid-1950s to the present in order to identify how emotion, especially sensitivity, is expressed by Black male performers. Chaney and Mincey seek to determine under which conditions the artists feel comfortable to unburden themselves from traditional and socially constructed expectations of masculine, if not hyper-masculine, modes of expression.

Thus, enter with us as we explore the study of Hip Hop and seek to broaden the academic study of Hip Hop. The works presented here in the journal you hold mark the beginning of a much needed area for focused scholarship.

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