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EDITORIAL

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ABSTRACT

In many parts of the globe, the internet is now the main route to discovering hip hop. We borrow the timeless Rakim quote from Eric B. and Rakim's 'In the Ghetto' with a digital twist to point out the breadth of cultural activity related to hip hop that now takes place online. It serves as a reminder that hip hop has gained such a large presence in digital culture that for many people, the web itself, rather than physical scenes, might be where you are at. The work featured in this Special Issue calls attention to hip hop in different global manifestations, specifically in Palestine, South Africa, the United States and India. It is our hope that the articles included here unseat conventional thinking by drawing attention to the complex interactions between online and offline, physical and digital, dominant and marginalized.

KEYWORDS

digital culture
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internet access
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The benefit of online manifestations of hip hop culture is obvious in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling digital participation of various forms while physical restrictions were put in place worldwide. However, there is a long history of intersections between hip hop and the internet as the culture shifted along the contours of digital media globalization. In contemporary digital culture, things such as social media dance crazes (Gaunt 2016), rap memes (Waugh 2020), hip hop discourse on Black Twitter (Gosa 2017), Twitch beat battles (Ng and Gamble 2022) and video game concerts (Stuart 2020) are clear points of contact. Critically, the web has become a geographically diverse entry point for all manner of hip hop activity, so when considering a Special Issue of *Global Hip Hop Studies*, the links seemed obvious. We borrow

the timeless Rakim quote from Eric B. and Rakim's 'In the Ghetto' with a digital twist to point out the breadth of cultural activity related to hip hop that now takes place online. It serves as a reminder that hip hop has gained such a large presence in digital culture that for many people, the web itself, rather than physical scenes, might be where you are at.

We are grateful to have a number of collaborators in the production of this Special Issue. Our thanks go to the journal team and reviewers, as well as participants at the conference *Internet Musicking: Popular Music and Online Cultures* (which we co-organized with Jason Ng in May 2022). We are particularly pleased to include writing from two of the conference presenters – Jabari Evans and Jasmine A. Henry – in this Special Issue.

The work featured here calls attention to hip hop in different global manifestations, specifically in Palestine, South Africa, the United States and India. However, how the culture is communicated on the internet in such places carries complexities. On the one hand, the online mediation of hip hop calls into question the physical situatedness of the music in those countries. Granted, artists are making music from particular places, but they seem to transcend their origins when mediated in online contexts. Such thinking is prevalent in well-connected countries, where it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking every digital aspect of the culture simply floats in the cloud, accessible to all in an endless aethereal archive. Born-digital or 'natively-digital' (Born and Haworth 2017: 603) music cultures and communities, such as SoundCloud rap, persist as purely online phenomena according to popular discourse, as though untethered from traditional geographies and material ecologies (see Devine 2019: 131–35). The thinking goes that the digitalization and networking of musical activity has levelled the playing field, resulting in an openly democratized space which offers everyone equal access and equal say (and it is worth questioning who benefits from thinking this way).

On the other hand, believing the internet to be a placeless, ever-connected network generally underestimates digital inequities, even where people may enjoy improved access to media products (Hesmondhalgh 2019). More importantly, such assumptions conceal how power has been concentrated in particular places, especially in the Global North and the West: New York was a significant site of corporate control in earlier eras of the hip hop record industry and it remains a major player in the online age (as the headquarters for Splice, for instance). The appearance of newly connected spots on the map have not destabilized the economic and cultural dominance of United States overnight nor have they overturned the privileging of traditional identity dynamics, which for example, spotlight cisgender male voices in hip hop culture. It is our hope that the articles included in this issue unseat conventional thinking by drawing attention to the complex interactions between online and offline, physical and digital, dominant and marginalized.

We begin with the case of Palestine, where Polly Withers identifies contradictory feminisms in the online circulation of Palestinian hip hop. Contemporary rappers and artists taking up feminist themes in their work and sharing it on the internet are able to make critiques of gendered expectations and norms in Arabic contexts. However, such opportunities for critical identity work through the digital mediation of hip hop compete with neo-liberal ideas of individual autonomy espoused by popular feminism (itself largely a product of globalized, feminist thinking developed online). Withers's important article therefore questions the effects of internet technologies on hip hop feminism

both in the case of Palestine and beyond, situating it within broader debates around online visibility and women's empowerment.

The autonomy, freedom of expression and digital savviness of women in hip hop are also central to the next article by Jabari Evans. He draws from interviews with a dozen Black women who are video models or musicians and who produce adult content for OnlyFans. His article offers original insights on the relationships between hip hop and online sex work, paying attention to the conditions and processes of digital labour that infuse the contemporary online mediascape. This piece takes a much-needed look at hip hop's intersections with influencer and sexual dance economies, aiming to understand how digital platforms affect the lives and livelihoods of entrepreneurial members of the culture. Evans notes that the Black women getting paid through OnlyFans exemplify an important hip hop trope of adopting and innovating with technology to pursue personal opportunities.

This trope is key to the following article by Alette Schoon. Here, it is the hip hop heads of Makhanda in South Africa who work against significant technological constraints to distribute and promote their music among local audiences. Taking advantage of 'grey' (informal and generally unmonitored) web infrastructure, marginalized artists develop creative solutions to problems of low-bandwidth internet and poor connectivity. Schoon's engaging insights from two years of fieldwork bring to light the uses of file-sharing, media piracy sites and unintended WhatsApp platform features to circulate new music releases among (trans)local hip hop listeners. Despite these innovations, problems persist, such as insecure cloud-based archives risking the loss of recorded music and an inability to penetrate mainstream media distribution platforms in the Global North, where significant concentrations of power appear to hold firm.

Indeed, data-intensive music-making practices in rich, well-connected countries like the United States present a different set of challenges to hip hop musicians. In the final research article of the Special Issue, Alexandria Arrieta draws attention to the music platform Splice, which features the best known sample marketplace among hip hop producers worldwide. Drawing on critical platform studies and a range of interviews with producers who use Splice, Arrieta identifies a range of 'platform effects' (Morris 2020) on music creators. The platform's search engine infrastructure, algorithmic 'personalization' and recommendation system, and cheap and user-friendly access to a large library of sounds resemble other practices of cultural platformization but also create distinct opportunities and challenges for hip hop artists. In particular, producers that draw from a single, centralized sample database need to carefully consider their creative practices in a cultural context that emphasizes artistic lineages, originality and authenticity.

We move from online hip hop production to online hip hop performance in Jasmine A. Henry's media review of NPR's Tiny Desk Concert (TDC) series. Originally a series designed for acoustic indie rock performances, TDC has now featured a number of leading hip hop artists playing short stripped-back sets on YouTube. Henry's take is that TDC offers well-produced online performances of hip hop artistry, self-representation and reception, despite a male-dominated, established, major-label artist roster. She encourages hip hop scholars to take TDC seriously as both a research and pedagogical source.

Another site of hip hop culture only recently receiving serious scholarly attention is Delhi, the focus of Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan's 2020 book *The Globally Familiar: Digital Hip Hop, Masculinity, and Urban Space in Delhi*. Elloit Cardozo closes the Special Issue by reviewing Dattatreyan's monograph in the context of the emerging (and partially online) Delhi hip hop scene as well as its associated scholarship. Cardozo praises the book's originality, reflexivity and rigour, albeit noting that Dattatreyan's earlier ideas around 'aesthetic citizenship' may provide a better-suited framework than his newer term, the 'globally familiar'.

We are confident that these six pieces contribute to the study of hip hop and the internet through their diversity of subject and perspective. However, themes appearing throughout the issue suggest some of the major issues to be broached by further research on the culture's online manifestations. These include novel routes and barriers to creative expression, developments in artists' labour practices, shifting career opportunities, centralized (and centralizing) platforms fuelled by algorithmic logics and catering to userbases in the Global North and a range of digital innovations across the globally uneven spectrum of internet connectivity.

The issue will be of interest to heads around the world, those interested in the latest online innovations as well as folks who regularly engage with the culture on the web but want to dig deeper. Researchers in a range of fields, inclusive of, but not limited to hip hop studies, popular music studies, media studies, communication, ethnomusicology, cultural studies and internet studies will find something of value in the work curated here. In an era where the prevailing principle of cultural optimization means so many online creative practices compete for visibility (Morris et al. 2021), we hope to call attention to a number of inventive ways people are navigating hip hop's intersections with the internet.

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