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SHOW & PROVE

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Interview with Amelia Thomas (Unity), cover artist of this issue

ABSTRACT

Justin Williams interviews street artist Unity (Amelia Thomas) who did the graffiti art for the cover of this Special Issue. The article discusses Unity's background as breaker and ideas around education and knowledge within hip hop culture.

KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION

Lyricist and graffiti writer with a background in DJing and breaking, Unity (Amelia Thomas) grew up in Mid Wales and now lives just outside Cardiff, travelling the United Kingdom and worldwide to paint with others. She set up Cardiff's Millennium Walkway and Gabalfa tunnels legal graffiti walls, the grassroots paint festival Love Where You Live and collaborated on setting up Cardiff City Kings bboy jams. Founding member of the award-winning Ladies of Rage (LOR) network, her lyrical journey started with a win at Swansea's Poetry Slam 2018.

Unity is recognized for her knowledge and understanding of hip hop culture. She has contributed to hip hop discussion panels in Cardiff, Bristol and Hong Kong, and is 'thinking very progressively about the application of graffiti as a means of community engagement'. She began her lyrical journey via spoken word and has supported artists including Kae Tempest, Blak Twang and Jam Baxter, featured as guest Master of Ceremonies or mic controller (MC) for hip hop–jazz fusion band Dirty Alex, performed at festivals including BBC Radio 6 and New Skool Rules Rotterdam and painted at festivals across the United Kingdom and as far afield as Bangkok.

In this interview, Unity touches on a number of themes around graffiti and knowledge, and also discusses the commissioned piece for the cover art of this Special Issue. We discuss the 'institutionalization' of graffiti (legal vs. illegal walls), how she started learning the elements, the importance of safe spaces for women, materiality and ephemerality of the art, eschewing a canon of 'great artists' in favour of a community-based approach, process vs. the final output, generational differences and younger artists on social media, and the importance of those in power and in positions of influence to have this knowledge as well.

This interview with Justin A. Williams (University of Bristol) took place on Zoom on 24 May 2022. Unity's work can be found on https://www.millimagic.com.

Justin A. Williams (JAW): *Unity, tell us about yourself, and what you do?*

Amelia Thomas (AT): I am a mural artist, a lyricist, a once-upon-a-time breaker and occasional DJ.

JAW: *A little bit of all the elements, that's beautiful. Can I ask how you first got into hip hop culture, in one or any of those elements?*

AT: My introduction would have been a record lent to me by my friend Mike, which was the Beastie Boys's *Paul's Boutique*, and at that time I was probably only listening to guitar music and that was my crossover. I just heard this and thought 'what the heck are these people doing?', mixing things up like sampling, dropping in funk, I just loved that. And then I just gradually found my way into hip hop music through groups like De La Soul, Jurassic 5, that kind of vibe, and then eventually found my way to UK hip hop, which blew my mind a bit.

And then I heard Welsh hip hop which blew my mind even further. Hearing Fleapit was like, 'oh, my God, what are these guys doing? Rapping in a Welsh accent', and the Headcase Ladz as well. And then with regards to breaking, that was through going out to hip hop nights, going to the DMC Championships and stuff that was happening in Cardiff, and I met some of the breakers. At the time I was teaching DJing in a youth centre, and that was the same place where the breakers were practising, so there was that crossover. So, I just started training with them. And then I was buying records in a shop, Oner Signs, in Cardiff, which also sells paint, and they told me of a place where you were allowed to go and paint. I got into painting and meeting people that way as well. So yeah, it all just sort of happened.

JAW: *In terms of how you learned, would you say that it was one mentor or a few mentors around then? In other words, how was the knowledge of hip hop spread to you?*

AT: It was more a collective learning, and was the thing that drew me to it, so like just learning by doing, together. I never really had any one person take me under their wing. Obviously, I linked with individual people and vibed with them more strongly.

But yeah, when I first started painting, I was painting with a lady called Pyklops, who was also a DJ. Also, I didn't find out until years later, she was an MC, Lil Miss, too, and she was a massive inspiration to me. At that time I was painting with her and a few other people, including Rens who I still paint with now, as a crew, TLC. And then, Nerve (R.I.P.) and Best, who actually gave me constructive criticism which I really appreciated. Also Skroe (R.I.P.), who really helped me with my lettering. And then my main mentor later on when I was quite a few years in was Resh. I've learned so much off him, and that's just from painting alongside him rather than anything, you know.

In breaking it was a guy called Dan Jose, who first gave me that constructive criticism, because I think people sort of tend to be very 'oh, yeah, yeah, that's great', and I'm not looking for that, I'm looking for like 'what am I doing wrong?'.

So I respect those people that actually were willing to put themselves out and let me know how to improve rather than just telling me I was doing great when I knew that I could improve. Musically, the main mentor, probably would be Stagga, Rest in Peace, whose studio myself and two other friends and I are running and I feel like that's a really nice progression. We're able to carry that on and actually have people in to learn with us together. It's all about learning together for me, sharing that knowledge and experience, and building off what each other has done. Also musically, Ess Louise was massive in like just giving me the confidence to produce, and to just sort of go all out with lyrics. I would also like to shout out Bboy Laces and Mike for being solid support before I even really knew I had anything to say musically.

And then also Cara Elise (Baby Queens) and Missy G., and then obviously LOR (Ladies Of Rage) and then with the breaking, I want to mention Kwamikaze and all the Cathays breakers who were around at that time. Another name for music and painting would be Zee Rock, he was the first person who produced music for me, and he is also a graffiti writer.

JAW: *It's so true, what you say about the criticism. Some people just want to give pleasantries, and yet we're all musicians trying to better our craft. Or with masterclasses with highly technical classical musicians where some non-musicians don't see the point in small improvements, but you always want to improve.*

AT: And you know with breaking, the foundation step of breaking is a six step, yeah? I knew I was doing something wrong with it, I just knew I was. And I asked every single person in the training hall, like 25 people, and I asked, 'what am I doing wrong?', and all of them were like, 'no, nothing, nothing'. Finally, I got to one person and they were like, 'Yeah, you need to be up on your heels and like this'. And I was like, 'finally!'... because, if you don't get that right, everything else is wrong. And I don't understand why, maybe people didn't know or I don't know what.

JAW: *And also credit to* your *openness, as not everyone takes criticism well. So, when you mention the training hall were there moments of 'formal' (e.g. school, university) vs. more 'informal' education or would you put it all under informal, collective things?*

AT: I remember there was a couple of sessions where it was someone leading and teaching, but I wasn't ready to learn at that point. I was like,'who are you to tell me what to do?', and just being obnoxious, and not open to learning. And I think that probably stems from that relationship with school and formal learning which is not for everybody.

I was always really academic in school but I didn't want to be doing that in my free time, but once I was ready to learn I did attend one-off masterclasses for breaking taught by visiting breakers and judges from around the world who were here for the B-Boy Championships in Newport and I got a lot out of them. People like Machine, Dyzee, loads of people, they (B-Boy Championships in 2005 and 2009) used to bring over amazing worldwide breakers to teach. And that was fab, because it just injected that wider knowledge, and like deeper understanding of the dance. It was a way of bringing people together as well, and all of us learning together and improving together. And the scene was really, really strong at that time.

JAW: *Fast-forwarding to you passing the knowledge on, in terms of your teaching now, can you talk a little bit about some of the things you've been involved in, formally, informally, whatever we want to call it, in terms of passing on various forms of knowledge?*

AT: I work in loads of different settings, from just being around other people on the street and learning together to working with schools, different youth provisions, housing associations and care services, and then my own projects as well on which I've led. I recently worked on a project with an organization that works with young people at risk of going into the care system. The way they are doing things is groundbreaking because they were just open to the process rather than the finished product. Not so much now, but in the past a lot of organizations had been all about 'what's the final thing going to be' like working towards something and also, I think I'm now more solid in my approach to negotiating those kinds of interactions, for example, now I push for community projects to set up a legal wall where people are allowed to paint when they want.

JAW: *On the subject of knowledge and hip hop, did anything particular initially come to mind?*

AT: So the thing that first came to mind was knowledge of self. And where you fit into the wider scheme of things. But yeah, I mean that thing of knowledge is so broad and could go in all sorts of directions.

JAW: *We're definitely grappling with the broadness on our project as well. A lot of the things you have discussed thus far are live, in person. Do you see a place for recordings, whether that be a YouTube video or films as a medium for spreading knowledge or perhaps as a different food in the buffet of hip hop education?*

AT: Yeah, definitely. It can open up different doors and conversations. I recently did an interview with BBC Horizons/Gorwelion and I didn't even really think about what I was saying or where it was gonna go or how it was gonna be put out. But since then, I've had a few people come to me and say thank you for speaking openly, because it was about mental health, and it is an opportunity for conversations to be triggered by the documented stuff which allows you to

go a bit deeper into thinking about things. And then, it also allows you to talk about stuff that you wouldn't talk about on a day to day like this. Like, this conversation wouldn't happen if it wasn't for you documenting stuff. It goes a bit deeper with that understanding of myself but also of the wider picture, you know.

JAW: *Yeah, that's really cool and speaking of something I found very amazing was when you lead the safe spaces for women event at the European Hiphop Studies Network meeting here in Bristol in 2019. Some of the questions from the audience in particular just really opened up some valuable discussion. Regarding these women-only events and safe spaces, if you could just say a little bit about that as a strategy, and maybe how that relates to knowledge or maybe how creating a space like that helps to maximize knowledge exchange?*

AT: Yeah. So, before LOR was born, I feel like I was like in the dark about that fact that there are so few women in music, in graff, all the elements, and it's only by people speaking on it and coming together to share stories that I realized that actually it's a thing, and it's not right. It doesn't have to be like that. That sharing was a real eye-opener for me and it feels like it set me on a path to actually have some kind of purpose of trying to rebalance things which is still a hell of a long way to go. Most hip hop and grime nights in Cardiff still have very few women on the line-up. A regular night which made a promise to be 50–50 gender split on the line-up when they first started put on their most recent event with zero women or non-binary folk on the line-up. Paint jams are usually still either fully male or only one or two women participating.

But yeah, it is needed, safe spaces for women and gender minorities is really important because the masculine energy is so strong and it is finding ways of balancing that without alienating anybody, which is the tricky thing. The masculine energy needs to be balanced in order to create the safe spaces that are needed.

JAW: *Yeah, I mean, I think you all successfully made the case that night, for sure, certainly for me. I was wondering if you've seen how the hip hop scene has changed over time? I guess I'm thinking specifically of social media, but how have you seen in your career, things changing over time, perhaps, how the distribution of knowledge changes over time?*

AT: So I guess things are way more accessible now. Thinking specifically about graffiti, in the past you'd have to walk the streets to see pieces, to meet people. And it still is like that to a certain extent like there's a lot of people that I only see and communicate with when I'm out painting or like walking around.

So it has changed things in that way. You can now see a lot of graffiti on social media – you don't need to be walking the streets to see what's going on across the city. People are aware of what is going on in the wider picture, but it's also a little bit overwhelming. There's so much information out there, there's so many images, it's sort of like you're bombarded with it like in in the past you'd have to have a magazine and sort of slowly look through and take things in properly, and revisit pieces like looking at pieces, and go back and like re-walk to see that piece in the park, or wherever but now you're just scrolling and see a new one, new one, new one like amazing things that you could never dream of doing. And it's just, it's overwhelming for me.

Generally, I don't really take in information unless I've met that person, and then I'll sort of be a bit more able to process it. For me the real world is very, very important and I find it difficult to engage just online.

JAW: *Yeah, it seems like it's not a wholesale shift or an either or but that the two are co-existing, it seems.*

AT: And the good thing is that you can link with people in different cities so much more easily. You can be going abroad and go to another city, and find another person to link up with or just have a jam with.

JAW: *And in the graffiti world, are there people everyone has to know or know their work? I mean, comparatively, for classical music, right, it's like Beethoven and Bach. Is that sort of thing in graffiti too?*

AT: There probably is, but I don't think I would know them. Like, I'm not very good at that kind of stuff. I feel like this is a massive difference at least in the people I know – because I'm in the minority as a woman, it maybe stands out more that I'm not into 'geeking out' about records/names of artists, etc. I deffo know other women that are, but in a room full of guys where maybe a few are into the geeking of it is more apparent that me, as a woman, don't have that knowledge and am maybe judged as a woman for this…

But yeah, there's obviously very well-known graffiti writers that will be known worldwide, but yeah I'm not the one for that. I'm more about the local, the face-to-face stuff. And yeah, that's what excites me is who's doing what in my local area.

JAW: *I now want to pivot to the graffiti piece (on the cover of this issue): the knowledge is power which looks awesome and we'll just open by having you say whatever you want to say about the piece, and we can go from there.*

AT: So obviously you've asked me to do a piece which was around knowledge, and straight away the phrase 'knowledge is power' comes to mind. I wrote the piece on an open wall in Cardiff City Centre, and it relates to anyone and everyone, not just hip hop, doesn't it? It is about self-betterment and understanding of the world.

JAW: *Yeah. And it sounds like through some of the work you were mentioning earlier in schools and places, and safe spaces for women, it's about empowering people through hip hop giving them confidence.*

AT: I think it also works for the people who are already in power who also need that knowledge to come at it from the other direction. If you're in a position of power where you're controlling the money or the system or the things that happen, you *need* to be opening your mind to the knowledge that is coming from like *way* the other side of the social spectrum to yourself because otherwise things are just stagnant, and nothing is gonna change for anybody.

JAW: *That's a really good point. You mentioned a little bit about access and about seeing things online vs. in person but I also remember, you know, when you came to Bristol, did a piece during Upfest, which got written over quite quickly the next day.*

AT: The same day! The same day, I think.

JAW: *Okay, I don't want to revise history. (laughs) But yeah, it was too quick for me to come out and see it, unlike the elements one. (Another graffiti piece from Unity during the* European Hiphop Studies Network Conference*). But what do you think about the need for archiving or documenting artistry or history? And I guess there's the kind of legal vs. illegal ways of doing it, too. Do you see it as a challenge? How long do we expect the 'knowledge is power' piece to last, for example?*

AT: Someone asked me that when I was painting it and I was like, 'who knows?', I don't know. I'm really fortunate that the people that I learned to paint with just drummed into me: 'Do your piece, say goodbye to it and just leave it there'. Because yeah, recently I've had that hammered home a little bit, and I just have taken it as a sign that, yeah, just nothing is permanent and it's all about the process. It's just to enjoy the moment. When I first started painting, I wouldn't even have taken a photo. But now, get the photo there you go, yeah, you've done your thing. It is really nice when something lasts. But I'm not expecting anything to last forever. It's not the way of the world, you know.

JAW: *Do you see it more important to document these things, you know, whether it be a photo or maybe try and contribute things down the line too or is that just as you say that's the way it goes?*

AT: I'll always try and get a photo but it's not the end of the world if you don't. The painting is more about other people who are painting seeing that you're being active and appreciating what you're doing. That's the heart of it. That's why people paint on the street, for each other, not for the general public, not for documenting it.

It's like a conversation between the people who are doing it, in my opinion. But yeah, it teaches you to let go of stuff, it teaches you that whatever you're doing in that moment, when you're creating, it's a release. It's a letting go same with lyrics and creating music. You're releasing something, you're healing yourself and processing stuff and yes, like therapy really. And yeah, you're leaving a mark but the more important is what you're pulling out of yourself.

[On the ephemerality of graffiti pieces], it just teaches you about letting go of stuff, and not holding onto material things. You shouldn't hold onto material things. There's way more important things happening in the world than holding on to something solid. But that's the battle with councils and institutions. It is the case that, quite often, what they want is something permanent and something finished and that's where I'm always pushing to have people understand that it needs to be constantly changing. This is because the people doing it are constantly changing and if you can't give artists the freedom and ownership *to* constantly change it, then you'll get a mess everywhere else. There is pushback against that desire to have it fixed. They wish to keep everything pristine and life is not that way.

JAW: *It's a great point and obviously we could say other things about museums, university curricula and these things that keep trying to be fixed when, as you say, you know it does a disservice to the living artists.*

AT: They have an urge to create and if you can't constantly create, then it's painful.

JAW: *And a need to be well compensated, valued, I would say. What projects are you currently working on?*

AT: I'm working on two long projects at the moment. One is with LOR which is called Y Cam Nesaf which means 'The Next Step' which is to help women who are not yet at the point of having released music to get a step closer towards being able to do that. So hopefully, by the time this is out there'll be some releases out from some of those women which would be nice.

And then the other one is a Cardiff-wide paint festival. So probably by the time this is out that will have happened. And there'll be some commissions going up around the city, there'll be some jams happening, some workshops, and the aim of that project is to diversify the people who are being represented on the walls.

So, to have more Black and Brown people, more women, more LGBTQ+ people, so yeah I'd be interested to see what happens with both of those because they're both quite early planning stages.

JAW: *Keep me posted with those. My last question dovetails with your great comment about those in power needing that knowledge. If you were the one in power…*

AT: (laughs) No, I'd hate to be in power.

JAW: *I'll phrase it in a different way – what are the best ways to value and support hip hop culture in your estimation?*

AT: I guess it would be to embrace the new ideas and the younger people because those are the people who are coming up next in society. If you're not embracing those ideas and those people then you're just gonna stagnate and the older hip hop heads will say 'it's not like it was back in the olden days'. Like, well, no it's not, but that's because we're not there. We're here now. Just to fully reach out to younger people, reach out to newer people coming through because it's them who are shaping things and you need to give them the freedom to shape things the way they want to, and to make their own mistakes and not like, tell people how to do things.

JAW: *Going back to you discussing those who mentored you, there's an ethics of citation in academia that's currently being discussed, you know, basically on whose shoulders you exist, and sometimes there's debate around who should be getting the shoutouts, you know what I mean, if that makes any sense.*

AT: Yeah, definitely, it's so important to acknowledge the people that you've learned from. But I mean the list is endless, there are so many other people, and it's like, where do you stop?

It's so important to shout out the people who have made your journey possible – none of us do anything alone, and hip hop is built on respect – respecting the people who came before us but also respecting the people who have helped us become who we are. It's only because of those people that we have something to build on.

It also encourages us to pass on knowledge and skills to others, that acknowledgement of the support highlights the support that we are giving, and encourages those who will come after us to continue the 'each one teach one' ethos of hip hop.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Justin A. Williams is professor of music at the University of Bristol, United Kingdom. He is the author of *Rhymin' and Stealin': Musical Borrowing in Hip-Hop* (Michigan, 2013) and *Brithop: The Politics of UK Rap in the New Century* (Oxford University Press [OUP], 2021). He is also editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop* (Cambridge University Press [CUP], 2015) and principal investigator on 'The Fifth Element' project (2021–25) funded by the AHRC and DFG.

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