

Global Hip Hop Studies  
Volume 5 Numbers 1 & 2

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Published Online October 2024

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# Meditations on Mum's House Philosophy

**ABSTRACT**

*Mum's House Philosophy is a concept created by Otis Mensah in his debut EP Mum's House, Philosopher (2018). It derives from Mensah's desire to challenge conventional ideas around legitimate knowledge production and assert the accessible, intellectual and communal qualities of hip hop. Below, Mensah discusses Mum's House Philosophy with Dr Alex Mason and Parise Carmichael-Murphy who co-organized the 2021 Hip Hop & Higher Education Conference, following Mason and Mensah's collaboration on a hip hop lecture and seminar series, and Artist in Residency at the University of Sheffield.<sup>1</sup> Together they unpack the principles of Mum's House Philosophy, consider the value and challenge of bringing it into university, and how it enriches their individual and collective approaches to artist-scholar collaborations. Drawing from this discussion, they pose important questions for the reader to reflect on as they seek to incorporate hip hop into higher education.*

**KEYWORDS**

hip hop  
higher education  
race  
gender  
knowledge  
community

1. *Hip Hop & Higher Education Conference*, 15 July 2021, online.

**Alex Mason (AM):** Where did the concept for Mum's House Philosophy come from?

**Otis Mensah (OM):** When I thought about Mum's House Philosophy I thought about a quote from LA rapper, Busdriver, who said 'I can run the world from my mama's house' (2015). He's proposing releasing music, sharing art; affecting and connecting to a vast world of minds beyond the home space; transcending his social geography to something expansive and universal. The origins of Mum's House is about hip hop being an accessible art form potentially in juxtaposition to an inaccessible art world. The birth of hip hop came from old records, turntables and community spaces sparking new technological innovation(s); creating the extended loop from the breakbeat and new languages of dance that followed. There was no financial or institutional backing in the creation of the art form. So, something that is aesthetically and technically excellent in its form, poetry that embodies jazz and other musical predecessors of hip hop can be created in home spaces.

Mum's House became an artistic statement: I don't need to be tied to any one specific form or institution in order to be a philosopher or to be an intellectual. I studied philosophy during my college days and what I came to understand was that I was always going to need a qualifier in order to demand authority or credit. My ideas would always need to be validated by an institution. Where does that leave art and discourse that isn't validated by an institution? Does that make it any less meaningful or artistically astute? No. I'm already a philosopher and the ancestral knowledge, cultural information, that can be relayed to me, simply through my experience of home, experience of family, of faith and spirituality in community and the home environment, is much more than what an academic certificate can give me. With Mum's House, I wanted to steer away from the narrative that the poetry we create as people of colour is anything other than philosophy or high intellectual discourse.

**Parise Carmichael-Murphy (PC-M):** What is the significance of using the word philosophy in this new context?

**OM:** Using the word philosophy breaks the word philosophy. We can feel the need to pressurize ourselves by saying hip hop is inherently philosophical in a western philosophy lens. But I think, by using those words, in a way that they weren't supposed to be used, breaks the definitions of philosophy and allows us to reclaim it and reshape it. I think that is what hip hop does by nature.

**AM:** So it is more than just saying: I recognize that what constitutes philosophy in academia is present in hip hop, so I am going to use that same term. Instead you're seeking to create something different. So how exactly are you looking to reshape the practice of philosophy?

**OM:** It's putting less weight on the space in which intellectualism takes place traditionally. It's reclaiming home spaces. Not just meaning habitat, but also meaning the spaces that we carry inside us that are closely linked to our family, our heritage. It is also about giving power back to the idea of the oral spoken word. Hip hop was never concerned with theorizing for theories sake. It was concerned with the philosophy of people and how to make an immediate impact. This is the philosophy of hip hop. When

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an emcee, a poet speaks something, you aim to encourage emotional life, emotional activity.

**PC-M:** This makes me think about the 'Hip philosophy: love of wisdom' session we hosted Alex, where we invited people to listen to *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998) album and discuss it; almost like a listening party but really trying to unpack the knowledges that we each take from the album. What I did like about that, was how we were really trying to resist the emphasis on the written word as a source of 'knowledge' or wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

**AM:** And trying to highlight the fact that wisdoms are evident throughout hip hop albums. The only reason we don't consider hip hop a philosophical form is because of what Otis is saying about legitimated sites of knowledge production and preconceived ideas of 'high art'. What I immediately like about the framework of Mum's House is that it recentres the site of knowledge production. It's not in the university, it is in the domestic space. This in turn draws attention to knowledge producers who are typically excluded from academia, such as Black women. Black women were the focus of our first Hip Philosophy series too. We wanted to draw attention to those who are typically dismissed in discussions of philosophy despite the wisdoms they produce. I remember you saying previously, Otis, that one of the reasons you settled on the term Mum's House is because it was through your mum that you became connected to your Black culture and heritage.

**OM:** Not only is my mum my Black parent, but Mum's House was my sanctuary. There were conversations around Black culture and our proximity to Africanness and a lot of this was facilitated by going to church with my mum which influenced the concept as a whole. Mum's House (a *home* space for connecting to my Africanness through sound and poetry) is like a church for me.

**AM:** This suggests to me that as well as democratizing knowledge, Mum's House is also about roots. I'm reminded of that skit on Jay-Z's *Black Album* (2003) where his mum talks about a young Shawn Carter sitting in the kitchen, drumming on the table and rapping; essentially the dawn of one of hip hop's most successful creative careers. Similarly, you hear about the pioneers of Grime setting up their first pirate radio sets in their Mum's kitchens. Perhaps Mum's House is about returning to roots. Or at least remembering them. Both in regard to hip hop generally but also specifically the Black culture and history that underpins it.

**PC-M:** I think that's right. Not everyone lives with or is raised by, a biological parent or a mum, so this might be less about emphasizing the biological mother but instead the person who feels like 'home'.

**AM:** And there's something about intimacy here as well. I think that's inherent in the phrasing of Mum's House. The colloquialism connotes a certain closeness and care between the speaker and the owner of the house. Again, this is reflected in that Jay-Z skit where his mother goes on to say that the reason she buys her son a boom box is because she wants to protect him from outside harms. Moving beyond the idea of mother as a fixed biological role, we can, maybe, say that Mum's House is a space of care and community.

2. This session was in part inspired by Mixtape Madness's 'Drillosophy' (2020) series which explored the relationship between drill music and philosophy through a critical analysis of lyrics and sound production. Other work that examines the philosophical underpinnings of hip hop includes Julius Bailey's *Philosophy and Hip Hop: Ruminations on Postmodern Cultural Form* (2014) and Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby's *Hip-Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason* (2005).

**OM:** Yeah, I was thinking of Mum's House as a space of nourishment; a nurturing space that allows for growth. A space in hip hop that is safe, existing outside a hypermasculine presence and the things that can be birthed from that: misogyny, sexism, homophobia, transphobia.

**PC-M:** So is Mum's House a physical space or is it more metaphorical?

**OM:** I would say that the physical acts as a launch pad for the metaphysical. What happens in the physical space, how do we internalize it and replicate it throughout our lives, our network, our power roles, our creative ideologies? Whatever that safeness is for you, you carry it with you wherever you are. That's the full manifestation of Mum's House.

### **EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MUM'S HOUSE AND HIGHER EDUCATION**

**AM:** Can you map this framework of Mum's House onto the university. Are we looking to harness the essence of Mum's House within the Master's House or is it better to leave it alone and create something completely separate?

**OM:** To adopt Mum's House Philosophy is to continuously reclaim the narrative around what is meaningful. Once that is activated by the community, university spaces cease to be because we are no longer in need of qualification. However, the university is never going to be a ship that we can completely capture and win over and to say the ship is just going to dissipate and disintegrate is unrealistic. I like to think of the university as purgatory. We've got a lot of people stuck in there but once you take a rooted ancestral understanding of creativity into that space – say, through Mum's House – you bring spirit to it. We can invigorate and inspire tools to assist those inside the institution.

**PC-M:** Since the last time we spoke about this essay, my feelings have really changed. I think part of that might be like okay, we've done the hip hop conference, this feels great to show the value of hip hop in these spaces. But it was tarnished by having to be a Ph.D. student to do that. Everything I say and do about hip hop hasn't really changed; I just think people are more willing to listen because I'm close to finishing a Ph.D. It's not bittersweet even, just uncomfortable. After the conference it felt great. This is the space I want to be in and I feel comfortable here. But since then, I've been thinking about why I should be the person to put hip hop in this space. Why me?

I don't really think people are checking themselves in this way. Really questioning whether they should be responsible for introducing hip hop to academic spaces. I just don't think people truly recognize what hip hop is. They don't see it as a movement that needs to be respected. They don't *really* respect the community attached to it.

**AM:** There's something about accountability here. You (Otis) said something interesting after our hip hop conference last year. You said that we had to be careful going forward because we were going to get a lot of praise for the work we were doing, so we could end up replicating harms without realizing it or without being called out for it. There seems to be a lack of accountability when it comes to utilizing hip hop in the University. Anyone is free to have a go and anything that uses hip hop is perceived as an inherently progressive thing. What do you make of this?

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**PC-M:** Nathan Geering is a breaker I have previously connected with and he makes several good points about the cypher. He says that it is an exchange of energy. Every person on the edge is as important as the person in the centre. And anyone can step in and call you out. I think that's such a good metaphor for accountability. Hip hop is a cypher itself. It's a community, it doesn't happen on its own. If you're stepping into the circle, stepping in to the front, and you've decided that you're the 'right' person to introduce hip hop to the university, you have to be prepared to be called out and challenged at any moment. That might sound cliché but I think it's true. You've got plenty of people stepping up and taking up space and stopping other people from getting involved. Ultimately, they are prohibiting the participatory element.

**AM:** I wonder if we can see Mum's House as a framework for accountability. Mum's House is a reminder of where hip hop comes from, who it is supposed to serve and ultimately who hip hop educators, operating within the university, are accountable to. We can't claim ownership over anything or centre ourselves. This is Mum's House, though we may be tethered to it by an intimate connection to what Mum represents: historical and cultural roots, community, emotional openness. We must absorb and abide by Mum's House rules. In some ways then, Mum's House is an orientation. It orientates us around hip hop's living room, rather than the university's lecture theatres.

**PC-M:** It is almost a reminder to look outside the university, because we, well the majority of people it feels like, spend so much time emphasizing the university and the Ph.D. as the ultimate goal. So in a sense, Mum's House reminds us to remember where we came from? Or even where knowledge is coming from; it's social, historical, political roots. Possibly even thinking about knowledge in terms of 'space and place' – where is the knowledge coming from?

## MUM'S HOUSE AND ARTIST-SCHOLAR COLLABORATION

**AM:** As a group we occupy different social positionalities and professional roles, and each of us has a different proximity to the university. Parise and I are principally researchers working within higher education, though we produce art outside of it as well, whilst Otis you are principally an artist who also produces knowledge and educates people in both schools and universities. Reflecting on our collaborative work together, what are some of the key principles that have helped us navigate this complicated artist-scholar dynamic?

**PC-M:** Maybe what has helped us work together, and keep wanting to work together, is that none of us are fixed or particularly loyal to the same physical space or the same university. I feel like that means we are a lot less motivated to promote or advance the interests of the university. I think that all three of us want to concentrate on being accountable to people, not places.

**OM:** When you have an academic coming from the side of the institution and they understand the importance of the work that's being done outside of the institution, and how it can enhance the institution, and the people stuck in the institution, that's key. You know for my lecture, you brought me in to talk my truth, rather than saying 'this is what you need to talk about, maybe you can fit some ideas around this'. So, give people the keys to use the resources and create as much impact as they can, rather than projecting institutional standards.

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**AM:** I do a lot of work facilitating projects between researchers and artists. One of the things I'm always trying to battle is this impulse for the researcher to impose their pre-existing idea of what they want to achieve and how they want their research to be centred within it. So it isn't genuine co-creation. This is particularly a problem with hip hop, where really all the crucial history, knowledge, practice, etc., derives from outside the institution.

**OM:** So many people are attracted to working their way up in academia, rather than attempting to abridge knowledge between community and people in higher spaces.

**PC-M:** Personally, I think good practice is being accountable to a community and you just can't do that without being in dialogue with them. I have worked with children and young people for my whole career across early years, schools, further education, youth, and am not afraid to talk to them to see what they think of my ideas. You really need to be prepared to be called out at any time. I think that's what most people are trying to resist by not having open channels for communication with any of the communities they write about.

**AM:** Some academics working with communities have ulterior motives. Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Impact, which nobody outside of the university cares about, are all important in assessing the quality of what is being researched and produced. To demonstrate Impact you are encouraged to work with people outside of the university. There is also an emphasis on equality, diversity and inclusion. So now more people want to work with people of colour specifically, perhaps Black people especially, which can lead them to hip hop. Even the well intentioned come at it like a missionary and try to fix things, doubling down on exploitation and extraction. This conviction and solipsistic idea that your research is going to be the thing that fixes things. It means you don't actually engage with what people want and how your research might benefit them. People try and push their own agenda without trying to engage.

**OM:** When people go in with the wrong motivations, when they centre their own appearance (*I want to appear anti-racist, I want to appear inclusive*) they use, extract and create more harm and then abandon ship. Rather than asking the question, how am I myself a player in this broken ecosystem of appropriation or keeper of a one-sided racist cannon. I think the important thing for specifically white members of academic institutions to then consider is, how can I decentre myself as gatekeeper of knowledge and intellectual currency.

## **FURTHER MEDITATIONS**

**AM:** So we need to provide some key principles for Mum's House...

**PC-M:** Specific principles or could it be a series of questions that we've developed? So it's like we're ending with things people are to think about rather than being prescriptive. Otis, this is your idea. Would you like there to be some kind of toolkit for this? Being critical, are you okay with someone reading this and saying: 'I'm going to do this 1 to 10 and now I have done Mum's House Philosophy'?

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**OM:** Yeah, probably not.

**AM:** I think you're right Parise. Too often the approach to anti-racism and racial justice is to try and get a set list of things that you should do. But it's more difficult than that and more purposeful and impactful to ask reflective questions. So what considered questions can we present that will make people think in a different way about hip hop and its academic relationship?

## QUESTIONS

1. How are you fostering spaces that nurture growth and encourage emotional life?
2. How do you resist the university's impulse to institute qualifications and accreditations? Is it possible to avoid these practices of exclusion and (de) legitimization?
3. What does reclaiming the home space mean to you? How might you internalize and replicate it through your life, network, power roles and creative ideologies?
4. How might you make space for ancestral knowledge, cultural information, faith, spirituality and community within the university?
5. How do you acknowledge and honour the historical and cultural roots of hip hop?
6. How do you hold yourself accountable to those who pioneered and continue to produce hip hop?
7. What is your reaction when someone steps to you in the cypher?
8. How do you connect with the hip hop community beyond the university?
9. What are your motivations for connecting to the hip hop community?
10. How do you decentre the university and academics as the key sites and sources of wisdom and knowledge?

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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