EDITORIAL

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Droppin' knowledge: An introduction to the Special Issue: 'The Fifth Element in Hip Hop Culture'

ABSTRACT

The aim of this Special Double Issue of Global Hip Hop Studies (GHHS*)
is to present an expansive view of knowledge about, of and within global hip
hop culture: in the music itself, in education and pedagogy, through the four
elements, across inter-generational communities, and inside or outside the acad-
emy. In their introduction, editors Darren Chetty, Sina A. Nitzsche and Justin
A. Williams discuss the origins of the term 'knowledge' as the fifth element of
hip hop after DJing, graffiti, breaking and rapping, and the challenges around its
varied meanings. The editors introduce the method for selecting material, as well*

as a breakdown of themes and topics covered, such as urban knowledge regimes in Brazil, occult knowledge and didactical strategies in Mongolian and American rap music, hip hop and dance pedagogies at French schools, Japanese and Indian universities as well as positionalities of educators in hip hop education settings around the globe. Reflecting on the editing process themselves, Chetty, Nitzsche and Williams address cases of censorship and potential dangers in printing certain forms of knowledge (e.g. Horton; Bienvenu) and scrutinize ways to tackle such gaps and silences academically. They also consider the journal editing process as a pedagogical experience, including the ethics and power imbalances of peer review. The introduction concludes with an overview of the different articles, reviews and interviews, and explains the context of the graffiti cover of the issue, which was provided by Cardiff-based artist Unity.

While hip hop contains multiple elements beyond its core of DJing, emceeing, breaking and graffiti, many hip hop artists and fans worldwide understand and recognize a 'fifth element' as knowledge. With roots in the Universal Zulu Nation in the 1970s (Chang 2005) and in the Nation of Islam (Abdul Khabeer 2023), hip hop's fifth element includes aims of self-realization ('knowledge of self'), empowerment, and information about the history of the genre and its key practitioners (Gosa 2015). It also often refers to the fact that practitioners and fans understand the importance of the history, values and artistry of the culture beyond their own temporal-spatial borders.

This Special Issue of *Global Hip Hop Studies* (*GHHS*) addresses questions about the role of knowledge in global hip hop culture: does hip hop constitute a form of knowledge in and of itself? How is knowledge passed on from one hip hop generation to another? What does it mean to teach hip hop in settings removed from where it originated? The aim of this Special Double Issue is to present an expansive view of knowledge *about*, *of* and *within* global hip hop culture: in the music itself, in education and pedagogy, through the four elements, across inter-generational communities, and inside the academy.

We understand hip hop culture as a form of rhizomatic knowledge community (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 2004; Humphreys 2013) that originated outside the academy and takes place on the street. Today, hip hop can no longer be taken to solely exist outside of the academy. This shifting of boundaries as a result of the culture's enormous global success in the past five decades challenges fixed notions of inside and outside. We follow Travis Gosa (2015) in his understanding of hip hop knowledge as an approach to understand one's own subject position in the culture which is in itself situated in a world marked by cultural, economic and social inequalities as well as means of transgression, empowerment and self-realization.

As an Afrodiasporic community practice, we understand the idea of hip hop knowledge to be broader, in terms of time, space and format, than pedagogy in hip hop studies. Hip hop education is 'focused on the culture of young people of color whose realities are often discredited and disconnected from notions of success both in and out of the classroom' (Wells 2019: 1). While hip hop education is concerned with formal and informal teaching and learning (and interrogating the boundaries between such distinctions), hip hop knowledge has the potential to go beyond these boundaries altogether.

In addition to knowledge flowing in and out of universities, Murray Forman makes the point that it is also flowing into archives (such as the Hiphop Archive & Research Institute at Harvard University, founded by

Professor Marcyliena Morgan; see Campbell and Forman 2023). The canonical hip hop studies resource *That's the Joint!* now features a new section on 'Academia, Pedagogy and Institutionalized Knowledge' as part of its new third edition (Forman and Neal 2024). To point to one of many current examples of hip hop becoming disseminated in official institutions. Artists, such as Questlove, Ninth Wonder and Lupe Fiasco teach at American universities (Aydin et al. forthcoming). Renowned museums, such as the Philharmonie de Paris, the Shirn in Frankfurt/Main and the Fotografiska museum in Stockholm show exhibitions on hip hop histories, cultures and artistic expression. While much hip hop is still on the streets, on recordings and performed on stages, it is also in classrooms, art galleries and scholarly publications. It has negotiated these worlds for decades, and its presence shows no signs of decreasing.

THEMES AND CHALLENGES: MEANINGS OF KNOWLEDGE, CENSORSHIP AND THE ARTIST'S VOICE

One of the main challenges editing this Special Double Issue is that knowledge is a chronically elusive, ambivalent element, which can take on different meanings in different contexts. Knowledge as the fifth element itself as a concept is largely invented and initially disseminated by the Universal Zulu Nation and its founder Afrika Bambaataa (one of the triumvirate of founding DJs of hip hop music).[1] While these perspectives are important for global hip hop solidarity and other forms of 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak 1996: 204) to help mobilize marginalized communities through hip hop in particular, it is not the only way to discuss and teach the culture's history.

Artists like KRS-One have done a lot to solidify somewhat fixed notions of what hip hop is, its elements, and even how to spell it (complete with its foil of 'hip-hop' which represents a more watered down, culturally or academically appropriated version which can act as the villain to the more heroic variants).[2] In the song '9 Elements' (2003), KRS-One puts 'street knowledge' as the eighth element: 'Street knowledge, common sense/ The wisdom of the elders from way back whence'.[3] This emphasis on the 'street' we would argue is one form of hip hop-inflected knowledge: the importance of passing down knowledge of hip hop, through hip hop and elsewhere (such as the classroom) are facets of hip hop knowledge that are less accounted for in KRS-One's taxonomy of elements. The journal of *GHHS* gives us valuable opportunities to explore multiple forms of knowledge formation in hip hop, different values, flows, in the spirit of acknowledging that *The Gospel of Hip Hop* according to KRS-One are not the only codes and indices of authenticity in hip hop's milieu.

Another issue that we unanticipated was in regards to censorship and the artist's voice. While we wanted to foreground the artist's voice as much as possible, there were some cases where artists speaking out was too dangerous given the political situation of their home. To give some detail without revealing the identity of the rapper, this person was from the Uygur population in China, where freedom of speech has been shrinking recently. Documentaries and global attention to this social group has meant there has been more sensitivity around censorship and freedom of speech over the past few years. Using Chinese networks to conduct an interview means that such digital platforms are directly linked to one's personal ID and could potentially be monitored and so there would be no anonymity. For these reasons, the emcee was unable to provide an interview with our contributor, fearing imprisonment from the authorities. This would also be a risk for our author, who may be forbidden

1. Bambaataa has been the subject of allegations of sexual abuse of minors. While there are no trials to date, the Zulu Nation issued a statement that he is no longer part of the organization. We think it necessary to acknowledge these allegations. Some journalism includes 'Afrika Bambaataa sexual abuse allegations: What's been said, disputed & what's next' (https://www.billboard.com/pro/afrika-bambaataa-abuse-allegations/, accessed 23 September 2024) and 'Afrika Bambaataa sued for alleged child sexual abuse' (https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/sep/10/afrika-bambaataa-sued, accessed 23 September 2024).

2. The spelling of the term 'hip-hop' is complex. To quote from KRS-One's *The Gospel of Hip Hop:* '*Hiphop* is the name of our creative force in the World. It is our lifestyle and collective consciousness. *Hip Hop* is the name of our culture and artistic elements. *Hip-hop* is Rap music product and its mainstream activities' (2009: 63, original emphasis; see also Iglesias and Harris 2002). This journal uses the term hip hop as house style, but we have let authors choose their preferred spelling. The issue is more complicated than KRS-One's characterization: hip hop intellectuals such as Greg Tate have spelled it 'hip-hop' as does Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, and foundational scholar Tricia Rose has spelled it 'hip hop' in *Black Noise.* Others may be at the mercy of their publisher's style guide or have less of an invested

preference, but we do acknowledge the political implications for some preferences of the spelling.

3. KRS-One puts beatboxing as the fifth element, street fashion as sixth, street language as seventh and street entrepreneur realism ninth.

to access China if a paper was published. We therefore decided to replace the interviewee with another rapper.

This issue raised the question of how to study, and how to account for 'silence' and silencing in hip hop scholarship. Does one leave a blank box? A black box? And would a scholarly journal, such as *GHHS*, allow for this? While we may not have come up with a solution that is fully satisfactory, it is an issue that some of us had not encountered before, and opened up a productive discussion amongst editors and authors. We hope that others can take issues like this forward.

Another challenge we had was in problematizing the assumption that knowledge creators want it to be shared by and disseminated to the largest number of people. But should all knowledge be shared with everyone? Is it perhaps dangerous to do so? If it is cultural gatekeeping, are there valid reasons to keep the gate closed? In the case of the American rap crew Bone Thugs-N-Harmony (Horton), their coded messages may be for other artists wishing to be careful about the dangers of the music industry. This is a feature of the African diaspora going back to songs of enslaved people in the United States like 'follow the drinking gourd' which gave coded directions to follow the Underground Railroad to freedom. In our preliminary cypher to kick-off the editing process of this Special Double Issue and to share ideas among all authors, we discussed thinking carefully about ethics around studying knowledge – potentially spreading some knowledge farther than it was intended to be shared and whether or not there is an extractive element to such an activity.

The romanticization of mainstream US hip hop knowledge communities, a third challenge, has arguably been foregrounded in hip hop studies research over other, more local scenes. We try to maintain a balance between what might be called canonical perspectives from the United States (Adjapong and Allen; Horton), and lesser known case studies, such as Brazil (Leal), China (Bienvenu), France (Souyri), India (Cardozo et al.), Japan (Tan), Mongolia (Szczap), United Kingdom (Mensah et al.; Unity). Many of the articles in this volume (e.g. Tan; Souyri) advocate a community-centred approach (Campbell 2021: 82) rather than a 'great men' approach to history, teaching and education which might help redress some of the imbalances around the more vs. less visible scenes and knowledge communities.

A fourth theme that occurs in many of the articles is inter-generational conversations between teachers and students (see also Rawls and Petchauer 2024). Many teachers come from a particular era of hip hop, often around the so-called 'golden age' (late 1980s/early 1990s) in the US context, and a moment when US-based hip hop reached unprecedented international attention in the 1990s. In the articles we included in this Special Double Issue, many of the educators, some in their 40s have encouraged students (some as young as teenagers) go with their own hip hop choices out of their own generation even if it is less understood by the older generation. We could argue that this is also similar to a community-based approach rather than a top-down one.

PEER REVIEW AND JOURNAL EDITING AS PEDAGOGICAL EXPERIENCES

With regards to the peer-review process for this Special Double Issue, a necessary fact of academic publishing, it is worth mentioning a few issues we encountered which we haven't necessarily seen discussed in print. For one, there are

a number of studies around bias in peer review (Jefferson et al. 2002; Shatz 2004; Kaatz 2014; Helmer et al. 2017; Squazzoni et al. 2021). Many of these have to do with gender power relations, as well as power relations between early career researchers and senior scholars. We did see some of this play out in blind peer review, and tried to redress it by supporting earlier career scholars and judiciously editing some of the reviews. Language turned out to be an issue as well. Reviewers in double-blind peer-review processes made different assumptions around 'native' vs. 'non-native' English speakers. The bias around English being the lingua franca of much mainstream hip hop studies scholarship (as well as many other academic disciplines) has been discussed in various international societies (such as IASPM listserv), and scholars should think of ways we can diversify the languages covered in edited volumes and journals.

There have also been discussions of the 'free labour' around peer review and precarity of early career scholars. We also acknowledge that female colleagues often do the invisible labour of peer review, while male colleagues retreat from it given it is not as visible and prestigious as other activities. Some peer reviewers also advised that certain senior figures in the field be cited, which might also replicate a certain form of power relations. In one case, we were unable to find peer reviews and invited nine potential reviewers over the course of a year and so we had to drop one potential article from the issue. Increasingly aware of these issues, we have aimed to give authors as much flexibility as possible within the confines of an academic journal.

What can we as editors, researchers and artists learn from the multi-faceted knowledge practices presented in this Special Double Issue? In the spirit of Adjapong and Kelly's article we would like to briefly mention our own positionality as important to how we have conceived and envisioned this issue. Rather than three individual positionality statements, we have opted to provide a community reflexivity statement:[4]

- We recognize hip hop as a culture that has its origins in working-class Black and Latinx communities in The Bronx that are not part of our immediate experiences.
- We take seriously the need for listening and reading for guarding against complacency that this resolves problems related to knowledge construction.
- We recognize the insights offered by standpoint epistemologists and view our social locations as significantly informing, but not completely determining, how we come to know the world.
- We have attempted to edit this Special Issue in the spirit of epistemic humility and reflexivity.
- We have viewed the editing process as dialogical and sought to remedy poor expression on our part swiftly.
- We have attempted to work with the tensions inherent in our work and encouraged others to do likewise.
- We recognize that the 'traditional' academic essay is time-consuming and convention-heavy. Furthermore, the decision to include only work written in English disadvantages many potential contributors.
- We view positionality statements as having some usefulness but also some limitations in that they are inevitably self-selecting and can often assume identity to be static.
- We recognize that knowledge constructions in the form that this journal takes privilege those for whom academic publishing is useful for their

4. We choose not to provide individual positionality statements in terms of ethnicity, nationality, gender or class not out of ignorance of their importance, but because these things can be easily found elsewhere, such as in the bio section at the end of this introduction, and for the other reasons stated above. The idea of a reflexivity statement is broader than a positionality one, and incorporates a more thorough methodology that often includes statements about positionality.

career and that academics are typically drawn from relatively economically privileged classes and that this disproportionately impacts racially minoritized people globally.

- We have sought to take some steps to address this through the format of pieces and in being as flexible as we can and being open to a range of forms of contribution in the spirit of the journal *GHHS*.
- We acknowledge that this knowledge work benefits us as editors in the following ways: payment, prestige and academic credibility.

Finally, the nature of unpaid work in academic publishing is derived from a time when 'traditional' permanent full-time academic posts were the norm, complete with protected time for writing; this is increasingly rare, however, and thus contributors are less likely to have means of income that support time for unpaid writing.

GETTING THE CREW TOGETHER: THE PROCESS OF SELECTING ITEMS FOR THE SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE

Following a call for papers, we received a large number of submissions for the volume which far exceeded our expectations. We have selected seven articles, three artist pieces including an interview with the cover artist Unity. Our aim was to cover the vast geographical scope of global hip hop studies, the range of interdisciplinary approaches and methods, and cover the four elements while focusing on issues of teaching, learning and sharing knowledge. We have taken care to select scholars from diverse backgrounds, at different career stages, and in topics that also cover a wide range of ethnic and gender diversity.

The Special Double Issue uses a wide range of topics, methods and approaches in hip hop studies, such as pedagogy (Cardozo et al.; Souyri; Szczap; Adjapong and Allen; Tan), cultural studies (Horton), critical race theory (Adjapong and Allen), knowledge regimes (Leal), ethnography (Bienvenu; Mensah et al.) and philosophy (Mensah et al.). Besides knowledge, the contributions address the elements emceeing/spoken word (Mensah et al.; Bienvenu; Horton; Szczap; Souyri), graffiti (Unity; Leal), dance (Tan) and DJing (Unity). This is in line with our desire (in the Special Issue and the wider AHRC-DFG grant project around 'The Fifth Element') to ensure that artists and scholars, and the spectrum of those in between these categorizations, are sharing space in whatever we do.

The contributing authors possess multiple positionalities as artists, educators, commentators, scholars and businesspeople, a multiplicity which is also apparent in hip hop culture and knowledge. At times, these positions complement each other, and at other times they are in tension with each other which points to new scholarship around these subject positions. Selecting a wide range of contributions provides enough material to tease out crucial themes and through-lines for our introduction and provide a springboard for future academic investigations.

STRUCTURE OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

This editorial is followed by a 'Show & Prove' section, an interview with the cover artist of this issue. It was commissioned as part of the AHRC-DFG 'The Fifth Element' project, and we were grateful to have graffiti artist and breaker Unity agree to do a piece in Cardiff City Centre, Wales. Justin A. Williams was able to interview Unity about the piece as well as about education in hip hop.

After the interview, we have the seven research articles. The structure of those articles move outward from articles about the culture itself to contributions which explore hip hop culture in other (educational) settings. The articles are divided into two broad categories: (1) 'Culture' and (2) 'Education'. What we mean by culture is that it is hip hop knowledge that is *embedded in* the artworks themselves: for Dana Horton it is about occult knowledge in the music of Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, for Pola Szczap, she looks like didacticism in Mongolian hip hop, and Gabriela Leal investigates autoethnography and urban knowledge regimes in Brazil's graffiti culture.

For the 'Culture' section, we open the research articles with Adjapong and Allen's writings on education as a centrepiece of the Special Issue. Theoretically, it deals with positionality and how this is crucial to important educational relationships, and provides frameworks and decolonial methodologies for researching the self, and researching the self in relation to others. The chapter ends with reflection questions, which will be useful to educators, researchers and perhaps even artists.

For the 'Education' section, these articles look at pedagogy more broadly, and the use of hip hop to teach other subjects in various educational contexts. For Beng Hwee Tan, it is the use of hip hop dance to help teach English in Japanese universities. For Emilie Souyri, it is hip hop as a pedagogical tool in French schools. Lastly, Cardozo, Dafre and Singh investigate the legitimacy of knowledge in a university hip hop classroom in India.

Lastly, the two 'In the Cipher' interviews add to the conversation with more artist-centric ways: the first centres on Chinese rapper Wang Yitai around his upbringing, hip hop in China and where knowledge can be found outside the classroom. The second interview is a philosophy of hip hop education called 'Mum's House', as pioneered by the UK-based poet/rapper Otis Mensah.

We hope that this Special Issue contributes to growing interest around knowledge and hip hop culture, and the myriad ways that they flow, transform, adapt and perform within hip hop scenes around the globe.

FUNDING

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