

U.S. Hip-Hop Studies: Formation, Flow and Trajectory

Interview with Murray Forman

by Séverin Guillard

How did Hip-Hop Studies emerge as a legitimate field of study? This interview with Murray Forman, who has contributed to the development of this field, shows the links between the recognition of rap and related artforms and the rise of academic analyses.

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Murray Forman is a professor in Media and Screen Studies at Northeastern University, Boston, and a prominent figure in U.S. Hip-Hop Studies. In 2002, he published a touchstone book (*The Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, Wesleyan University Press) in which he analyzed the history of U.S. rap via representations and discourses on spatiality and cultural geographies. With Mark Anthony Neal, he co-edited *That’s the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (2004, Routledge, 2nd edition in 2012), the first anthology of its kind. In 2014–2015, he was one

¹ It is also an extension of a keynote Murray Forman presented at the “Conçues pour durer: perspectives francophones sur les musiques hip-hop” 2017 conference.

of the two inaugural recipients of the Harvard University Nasir Jones Hip-Hop Fellowship, which enabled him to develop new research on age and aging in hip-hop.

Books & Ideas: With various books and projects on hip-hop over the years, you have been in a prime position for observing the structuration of Hip-Hop Studies in the U.S. Before asking further questions, could you tell us about your current position in this field, and how it may influence your take on it?

Murray Forman: At the outset I should acknowledge that my perspective is but one among many views on the formation and evolution of Hip-Hop Studies in the U.S. and mine will differ from other—smart, kind, and committed—colleagues who have long been at the core of the field and who work in it today. My position is also inflected in ways both known and, presumably, unknown by my race and gender and by my class status. I can't deny or ignore the social privileges that accompany these variables even as I try to conduct rigorous research that ideally reinforces and elevates hip-hop culture. Further, in offering my account of the development of Hip-Hop Studies in the U.S., it is not intended to be prescriptive. It's more of a recounting of what transpired, how I make sense of the evolution—past, present, and future—of Hip-Hop Studies. But to adopt a hip-hop discourse, I guess I can describe my position as that of a veteran or an OG² in the game. This becomes much more evident as the years accumulate and it has come to inform some of my current research on age and aging in hip-hop. Longevity gives a unique vantage on anything and in this case, I've been fortunate to witness many changes in the field as new branches of research and modes of theoretical analysis have emerged.

The rise of an academic field

Books & Ideas: In the U.S., the current status of Hip-Hop Studies stems from analyses which have now been produced over several decades. How did we see the

² Abbreviation for "Original Gangster". The term is often used in hip-hop to qualify someone who has been in the movement for a long-time period.

rise of academic knowledge on hip-hop in this country? What would you say have been the various steps in its development?

Murray Forman: Even before the rise of Hip-Hop Studies, the idea of Hip-Hop knowledge has been crucial within hip-hop culture itself. It can be addressed in relation to the Universal Zulu Nation³ (UZN) which has always addressed a so-called 5th Element involving *cultural knowledge*, along with the traditional four elements that everyone is familiar with (MCing, DJing, graffiti and hip-hop dances). According to the [UZN Green Book](#), there are multiple knowledge regimes, including Black diaspora and colonial/post-colonial knowledge; African-American cultural knowledge; reflexive knowledge of self; knowledge of State laws, policies and civil rights; and knowledge of hip-hop's own history, formation and trajectory across the arts and culture. These overlapping categories give a good array of entry points into this thing that we call Hip-Hop Studies.

Hip-Hop Studies as a field or area of academic study can be tracked relatively easily in one sense. In 1984-1985, a number of books came out, explaining the emergent hip-hop phenomena. These books aimed to cover a movement which, since its beginning in New York in the early 1970s, had now spread around the country, with various artists featuring in the music charts. Among these were *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-Hop* by David Toop; Steve Hager's *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti*; *Breaking and the New York City Breakers* by early hip-hop impresario Michael Holman; and *Fresh: Hip Hop Don't Stop* by Nelson George, Sally Banes, Susan Flinker and Patty Romanowski. These aren't exactly scholarly books but they stand out in the sense that they took hip-hop seriously and didn't treat it as a mere fad. There were also a bunch of popular press books that offered breakdance instructions (such as a British book, *Street Dance: Body-Popping and Breakdancing* by Yonina Knoppers, 1984). Despite their light-weight approach, these added to a certain momentum and, along with news articles and other published writing, they indicated that the printed word, and not just the music, dance, and graffiti, was exceedingly important to the circulation and expansion of hip-hop *culture*.

³ Created in the 1973 in the Bronx by DJ Afrika Bambaataa, the Universal Zulu Nation is one of the founding organisations of the hip-hop movement. It is especially renowned for having conceptualised hip-hop as a movement composed of four elements (MCing or rap, DJing, graffiti, and hip-hop dances), as well as promoting its association with values such as the ones mentioned in the motto of the organisation: "Peace, Love, Unity and Having Fun". Along its history, the UZN has spread in many other cities of the US and in the world through the creation of affiliated local branches, and Murray Forman was a member of the now-defunct Boston chapter.

Dick Hebdige's *Cut 'n' Mix* (1987) addressed hip-hop's Caribbean connection and its debt to the Jamaican sound system scene⁴ as well as touching on some of the appropriative elements of juxtaposition and textual remixing, just as sampling was becoming a more common practice in hip-hop. Even though he wasn't focused specifically on hip-hop, Hebdige showed that a more sophisticated analytical approach was possible. But the game changed significantly in 1994, when books by Houston A. Baker and especially Tricia Rose⁵ were published. I can't say enough about how important Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* was and is for hip-hop studies. She set the bar high for analytical rigor and demonstrated how hip-hop can be celebrated *and* critiqued with intellectual intensity, maintaining an objective analytical stance without fully sacrificing the love of a hip-hop head. Influential Black scholars like Henry Louis Gates Jr., bell hooks, Cornel West, Michael Eric Dyson, and Mark Anthony Neal also engaged with hip-hop through the 1990s. They connected hip-hop with earlier precedents within Black art, music, literature, politics, performativity, identity formation, and cultural expression while probing such facets as poetics, gender issues, religion, and the issue of Black nihilism in the face of systemic racism.

Through the mid-to-late nineties, hip-hop was also showing up with greater frequency at scholarly conferences and in academic journals, especially in fields like American Studies, African-American Studies, Cultural Studies, Popular Music Studies, and Sociology. There was an emergent emphasis on critical engagements with social power, the cultural production of knowledge, and the ways in which creative arts provide modes of articulation among aggrieved and subaltern communities. The intellectual move throughout this period was steadily from description to theoretical analysis.

In terms of the historiography of hip-hop scholarship, it's worth noting that there was a point when those who really followed what was happening—knowing who was doing what kind of academic work on hip-hop-related themes—all seemed to be aware of what was “out there.” This was not at all unlike what people experienced with hip-hop music and art in the early stages, whereby one could stay more or less abreast of what was going on, aware of who had a new album dropping, what artists were coming through on a tour, or what new hip-hop film was being

4 Strong Caribbean connections infused the early days of hip-hop in New York: while several “founding fathers” of the movement were of Caribbean descent (DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa included), practices linked to the sound systems of Jamaica, such as talking over a music beat (or “toasting”), inspired the rapping techniques developed by the first hip-hop MCs.

5 Respectively *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* and *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*.

released. But fairly quickly in hip-hop scholarship as in the culture more widely, the output and production accelerated. What scholars experienced (and this has only become more true) was similar to something Paul Gilroy wrote in 1992 pertaining to rap music: “I can’t keep up with the volume of hip-hop product anymore. I don’t know if anyone can. There is simply too much of it to be assimilated, and the kinds of judgments we make have to take that volume into account. It’s a flood—it’s not a flow, it’s a flood, actually—and just bobbing up and down in the water is not enough.” Responding to the wealth and volume of hip-hop scholarship was part of the inspiration for *That’s the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* as Mark Anthony Neal and I attempted to pull together some of what we considered as the most insightful and valuable essays about hip-hop up to that point.

Books & Ideas: While the multiplication of research work on hip-hop has progressively brought a visibility to hip-hop-related issues in the academic world, the growth of Hip-Hop Studies is also linked to the support that hip-hop scholars have received from various research institutions and networks. How advanced is this institutional recognition of Hip-Hop Studies in the U.S. today and what factors have been key for this legitimization process?

Murray Forman: Hip-Hop Studies has never been more established in the U.S. academy than it is today. Countless universities and colleges across the country either now offer full hip-hop courses or include modules on hip-hop in one form or another. There are also a couple of institutions that offer a Hip-Hop Studies minor, something that was only a dream about twenty years ago when people first started having some of these types of discussions about deepening hip-hop’s institutional academic footing.

One factor for this recognition has been a simple matter of numbers: attaining a critical mass of professors in the field of Hip-Hop Studies who can not only teach undergraduate courses on various hip-hop topics but also serve as graduate advisors *and* liaisons with the local hip-hop scenes and communities. In the U.S., as more people who are bona fide hip-hop heads or who are artists themselves—whether DJs, MCs, dancers or graffiti artists—pursued primary research on hip-hop-related themes and issues, university departments slowly opened to the concept. Gradually, it became possible to point to certain professors or institutions that were quite open to the study of hip-hop and they, in turn, started to advise graduates who extended hip-hop’s reach into academic circles.

The roles of various academic associations can't be overlooked either. With the rise of Hip-Hop Studies, conferences such as those of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, American Studies Association (which were two important associations as I was developing my ideas), and many others provided a space where emergent hip-hop scholars could introduce their research and make academic connections. With more hip-hop scholars on the program and selection committees for these conferences, their influence has expanded.

Finally, as hip-hop conscious professors serve as journal reviewers and editors, they help to form a knowledge base within which the work of hip-hop scholars will receive learned and fair assessment. On this level, I am proud to be part of the team that has just mounted a new journal, *Global Hip Hop Studies*, which has a very strong international editorial board and is the first online and paper academic journal dedicated to the study of global hip-hop in all of the elements.

Books & Ideas: With this increased recognition of Hip-Hop scholars and works in academia, where would you say Hip-Hop Studies is positioned in the U.S. academy nowadays in terms of disciplines and methods? Could it be considered as a coherent research field?

Murray Forman: Today, hip-hop is taught across a large multidisciplinary span. While this is important, it also means that there are a lot of different approaches that conform to the disciplinary norms of each respective field. The theoretical concepts and social and cultural urgencies that bear on, for example, African American and Black Studies, Ethnic Studies, Women and Gender Studies, Media Studies, Sociology, Music, and the STEM [Sciences, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics] fields all differ substantially and how hip-hop is taken up and positioned within each of these will shift accordingly. These debates also extend to other sites which, while not necessarily housed within the university, contribute to the advancement of Hip-Hop Studies: this includes research and historical archives, the publishing industry, and TV news networks where hip-hop scholars frequently freelance as media pundits. Yet, if no single discipline, department or program can lay claim to the study of hip-hop today, it *does* matter where hip-hop courses and scholars are situated within academia, especially as some departments or programs are more highly valued or better resourced than others within the institutional system. For example, in the U.S., the emphasis on STEM programs often coincides with decreased emphasis and funding

for Humanities and Liberal Arts programs where Hip-Hop Studies is most often located.

This also thwarts that notion of coherence of the field. There is no clear and distinct methodology guiding Hip-Hop Studies, no necessary line to follow. That said, I do think that in introducing hip-hop to students it is essential to identify some of the key hip-hop foundations no matter what the disciplinary approaches may be before launching into more discipline-oriented or field-specific projects. This would include first teaching such aspects as the history and formation of the culture in general and its relationship to an even longer history of Black and Latino creative and cultural expression and the socio-political contexts at different junctures in hip-hop's eventual trajectory. Students may be aware of what hip-hop is and what its cultural position is *today* but in my experience, the past is largely unexplored territory for them, and here, the past to them might mean the early 2000s. So, without being overly celebratory of hip-hop's earlier phases and associated artists (i.e., not singling out and celebrating a former "Golden Age",)⁶ addressing the past can be quite productive to offer a better perspective on the scene and culture today.

One main thing that emerges from this transdisciplinary situation, however, and that I think can be a serious problem, is that in some contexts, hip-hop becomes what I call *decultured*, which is to say it can be easily dislocated from its Black and Latino roots, culture, and politics as it is rearticulated toward such things as teaching poetry, the study of media and communication theories, teaching formal musicological lessons, etc. It's easy to lose hip-hop in the mix when it is turned toward other purposes; this is especially true if professors and instructors are interested in making scholarly points more than they are committed to bringing the culture into the classrooms for the dual (and at times dueling) purpose of building academic knowledge while building hip-hop cultural knowledge. This all has to be carefully calibrated and balanced. Building the culture is crucial. Otherwise, it starts to smell like academic exploitation or opportunism.

⁶ The idea of "Golden Age" refers to a judgement often formulated in rap music regarding a period where the number, quality and creativity of the music productions would have been particularly strong. The precise dates associated with this period in the U.S. vary depending on the authors, although it is often associated with a time period extending from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s.

Books & Ideas: Considering this diversity of perspectives, could we say that there is such thing as a “literary canon” that could be specific to Hip-Hop Studies, and that scholars could refer to when starting research in this field?

Murray Forman: The idea of a hip-hop canon is interesting and at times vexing. I’m not sure that anything resembling a formal canon has evolved in Hip-Hop Studies. There are probably some crucial books, chapters, and journal essays that hip-hop scholars should be aware of (and I remain mindful that “should” can be a heavy and prescriptive term) and this was part of what Mark Anthony Neal and I had in mind with the two editions of *That’s the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* that we edited. But with the trans-disciplinary nature of the field, it’s a lot to expect that people would dutifully turn to the same foundational texts rather than working within the dimensions that speak more directly to their own research projects. This is especially true as the field evolves and younger hip-hop heads enter the academy.

It might, however, be more interesting to remain conscious of who is doing what kind of work and what their research oeuvre represents in the larger frame. For instance, Christopher Emdin is a key figure in the study of hip-hop and its relationship to the STEM (Sciences, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) fields of scholarship; H. Samy Alim is renowned for his work on hip-hop and linguistics; Gwendolyn Pough or Bettina Love write with insight and vigor about women and girls in hip-hop; Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn explore the dynamics of hip-hop and religion; Adam Haupt writes about post-apartheid hip-hop in South Africa and hip-hop in the context of digital internet culture; Lester K. Spence examines hip-hop in the context of a neoliberal economic regime; Tricia Rose, Mark Anthony Neal, William Jelani Cobb, or Reiland Rabaka align hip-hop within a panoply of Black cultural forms and socio-political histories; Emory Petchauer or Marc Lamont Hill address hip-hop, education and pedagogy; J. Griffith Rollefson explores European manifestations of hip-hop across national and cultural structures and under conditions of post-colonial histories, and on and on.

Overcoming barriers

Books & Ideas: If the study of hip-hop has become more established in the U.S. now, legitimatizing this topic has also required hip-hop scholars to fight against reluctance among academics and university administrations. Would you say that some barriers still exist for the inclusion of hip-hop in academic programs and departments in the U.S.?

Murray Forman: The conditions for establishing Hip-Hop Studies in the universities have changed over the years. Today, the common reluctance among administrators and department heads to engage hip-hop has largely dissipated and there is a general acceptance—if not necessarily robust support—of hip-hop courses, guest speakers and other hip-hop oriented events on campus.

Yet, a few barriers can remain for the integration of Hip-Hop Studies within universities. For one, tensions can emerge in the top-down dismissal by conservative faculty and administrators who still question hip-hop's relevance or appropriateness in the academy. Also, for students, there may be a difficulty in finding supportive *and* knowledgeable advisors under whom to carry out research in and on hip-hop culture. I submit that this is changing, but even well-intentioned professors or members of doctoral defense committees may pose serious challenges due to their indifference or unfamiliarity with the topic area.

Students and faculty (and parents) who subscribe to the vocational aspects of university education and seek direct career placements may also undervalue Hip-Hop Studies, asking “but how will this get you a job?” It's not an irrelevant question but it can still be posed from a position of skepticism about the culture. And further, attempts to maintain political critique in and through Hip-Hop Studies may meet opposition by faculty who fail—or refuse—to recognize hip-hop as anything other than mere entertainment.

Finally, the lingering suspicion and critique among non-university members of hip-hop scenes cannot be ignored. Despite sometimes displaying distinct anti-intellectual attitudes, the suspicions can be understood as an elaboration of longstanding discrepancies between the academic “ivory tower” and “the hood.” But it is also often legitimately a mistrust based on a racial and class history of cultural appropriation and thievery, with hip-hop scholars constituting “culture vultures.” This is a serious and relevant charge and for scholars of any discipline the question should be asked: who is studying whom to what end? Who stands to benefit and how? U.S. scholar Mickey Hess takes this up in interesting and important ways in his latest book, *A Guest in the House of Hip Hop*.

Following from that last point, universities and colleges—and the professors who work there—often have their own reasons for offering Hip-Hop Studies courses. When it's not regarded negatively, hip-hop can often be seen as hip, cool and trendy and there are many examples of administrators offering support and encouragement to hip-hop scholars, not necessarily because they see the value in the research, but because they recognize the financial benefits that can accrue from offering such courses, especially at private institutions. "Butts in the seats" is not an inconsequential concern for budget-minded administrators and the economic bottom line can emerge as a determining factor of whether hip-hop courses get offered or hip-hop scholars are hired. Moreover, hip-hop's relationship to Black culture is often opportunistically exploited by universities. In my college, for example, there are specific core curriculum requirements that students must attain as they complete their degrees. Among them is a Difference and Diversity requirement that, on its surface, is not a bad thing at all. Yet the hip-hop course I offer was, in part, accepted by administration for its capacity to resolve an issue of too few course options; approving my course had nothing to do with hip-hop and nothing to do with Black culture and politics.

Furthermore, with its apparent appeal and benefits to universities, Hip-Hop Studies potentially conflicts with more politically engaged and radically informed Black studies departments or courses. The administrations of most universities are often either uninterested, dismissive, or outright afraid of the political potency of activist scholarship and political radicalism. In the U.S. this is only more true when the thorny issues of race are added to the mix. Hip-hop is, in many instances, taught in ways that are more palatable to university administrators (especially with an emphasis on performance or textual form and content) and is encouraged in ways that more politically informed and radically engaged Black studies course are not.

Books & Ideas: One specificity of Hip-Hop Studies in the U.S. is the fact that it is not just analyzed in academic research, but also taught as part of many academic programs. On this level too, there has been an evolution in the conditions of reception of hip-hop, especially from the perspective of students. How have these changes affected the ways hip-hop is taught today in U.S. universities?

Murray Forman: The context in which hip-hop is taught nowadays is quite different compared to when I entered the academic game, in the mid-1980s. First, hip-hop is now a standard aspect of student life. The music and art are ubiquitous in popular culture (ads, soundtracks, street art, etc.) and even marginally engaged students have

plenty of hip-hop and rap music on their personal playlists. They may not know who Grandmaster Flash, KRS-One, Rakim, or A Tribe Called Quest are but they do know Eminem, Drake, Cardi B, Chance the Rapper, Brockhampton, and Migos, and that's a start. Also, as more academics write their dissertations on hip-hop themes and then find jobs in universities, they'll bring that research with them into their institutions and classes. This opens up spaces where hip-hop can exist within the university and maybe bring new frames of knowledge, allowing for a deeper dive into social issues that might otherwise be overlooked or ignored.

I'd also mention here that hip-hop artists across the elements have become much more savvy about the ways in which their experience and skills can be harmonized with the universities, whether as featured speakers at conferences or as guest lecturers in classrooms. They are very aware that they have something powerful to offer and, with the right connections and responsive university faculty, they can bring this wealth of insight directly to the students and share it firsthand. Artists like 9th Wonder in Raleigh-Durham and Cambridge, MA, Bun B in Houston or Akrobatik in Boston are experienced in university classrooms, and they are not alone. It's not just artists either; in San Francisco, the long-time hip-hop journalist Davey D is a college instructor. In my own classes and campus events, I've had Edo G, Tef Poe, Professor Griff, NYOIL, Akua Naru and various other local and national hip-hop artists and activists in to share their knowledge and experience to great effect and student response.

Another aspect of evolution is the rise of enhanced classroom technologies and explosion of online resources. As more and more materials are made available online, including film documentaries, oral histories, and scholarly essays along with other hip-hop-oriented content, instructors have at their disposal a vast array of information that can help elucidate points while students can access these same materials for their own course papers. In fact, when I first started seriously studying hip-hop in the late 1980s, the problem was that there were virtually no scholarly resources to work with. And the further away from New York or other major hip-hop cities one was, the more difficult it was to get access to the pioneers and veterans who could personally fill in some of the blanks about hip-hop's formation. This has obviously changed over the ensuing years and today the opposite is true; that initial condition of sparseness is now one of plenitude—even overabundance—which makes it difficult to sort through all the studies and research materials, and to evaluate their rigor and quality.

The bottom line of all this, however, is what I've always maintained: academia needs hip-hop more than hip-hop needs academia. Within certain approaches and variable mindsets, Hip-Hop Studies can potentially be the conductor of insurgent knowledge, of liberatory knowledge. But it mustn't be cut off or alienated from its roots and culture, it mustn't be academically sold out. So whenever I see a course on hip-hop, the first question I ask is "how does it define and engage and reinforce the culture?"

Projected futures: from national consecration to global expansion

Books & Ideas: How do you see the future of the field? What do you think are the new opportunities and challenges that will face the next generation of hip-hop scholars?

Murray Forman: I think Hip-Hop Studies has a rich future awaiting it. The evidence indicates that the number and range of Hip-Hop Studies courses is expanding and there is notable effort and discussion about introducing Hip-Hop Studies minors such as those that already exist at Columbia College and University of Arizona. In recent years, there has also been a rise and proliferation of hip-hop archives at university libraries in the U.S. These include Ivy League institutions like Cornell and Harvard, the federally funded Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of African American History and Culture, and various sites such as the University of Massachusetts, Boston; University of Houston; University of William and Mary; and Tulane University, among others. With a notable emphasis on hip-hop history, archives offer original artifacts as well as oral history recordings, personal papers, photographs, and material artifacts to aid researchers. These archives are not only important research sites but, as they evolve, they also comprise new sites where committed hip-hop scholars may find gainful employment. Among the challenges in this regard is the need to develop adequate and sustained funding and infrastructure to ensure successful collection, cataloguing, preservation, digitization (when viable) and access provision for the archival artifacts. Further to this is the need to ensure that archival institutions, including universities, engage and mobilize their efforts directly with the communities and the individuals that provide the materials, which is to say the hip-

hop and Black and Latino communities that are historically at the core of hip-hop creativity and vibrancy.

This discussion about future opportunities for hip-hop scholars is also, I think, very much associated with where in the world one is located. The U.S. is further along in this than a lot of other countries due to the longevity of the culture and the accompanying interactions between universities and local scenes. But I am seeing encouraging changes in places like Australia, France, the U.K., Germany, and the Scandinavian and Nordic countries as well. This global expansion of hip-hop is, however, an opportunity and a challenge for emergent hip-hop scholars. It is an opportunity in the sense that there are so many new iterations and nuances in hip-hop's expanding universe and this means that there are myriad new forms of art and expression to explore and to theoretically engage, illuminating to a greater degree how hip-hop both influences worldwide cultures and is in turn influenced by these same cultures. The challenge lies in the complexity of understanding the global circumstances that give rise to hip-hop and make it meaningful and important on the ground where affect and emotion and politics and labor, etc., are most strongly experienced.

This I think also requires folks in their respective locales to take up the study and to bring to their research their own knowledge of the specific cultural codes and symbols that define their society. They'll know best what urgencies and priorities demand research attention and they can frame hip-hop in ways that ideally capture the deeper values and meanings of a hip-hop way of life in relation to, say, their media institutions, their educational, religious or political institutions, and other social factors across racial or ethnic differences, class divisions, gender relations, or intergenerational relations. In places where Hip-Hop Studies are explicitly unwelcome, unsupported or treated with indifference, developing academic projects can be very difficult. So as hip-hop scholars, we must share ideas, best practices, resources, whatever we have at our disposal to ensure that people are able to do their best, most rigorous, and most creative work possible.

Finally, I want to emphasize the importance of the work we do in Hip-Hop Studies while remaining mindful of our own individual objectives. We embark on scholarly studies of hip-hop for many reasons that are not always necessarily tied to the love and respect for the culture; we embark to complete course requirements, to get university degrees, to get tenure and promotions, to advance our careers but we

do all of these using the creative work of other people, often Black and Brown folks of systemically marginalized communities. As I have already noted, there is a responsibility that accompanies hip-hop scholarship. I believe we have a necessary obligation to advance social justice and equity issues (especially pertaining to oppression and persecution of Black, Latino, and poor citizens or citizens in depressed regions of the Global South) in a manner that is consistent with some of the best hip-hop culture expression (i.e., Public Enemy, Dead Prez, Rebel Diaz, Immortal Technique, Paris, La Rumeur, and many others). Dead Prez were exactly right when they proclaimed, “It’s Bigger than Hip Hop.” And we are obligated to try to build hip-hop, to try to reinforce the culture itself, ensuring, to quote Grandmaster Caz, that future generations “understand where hip-hop came from and how it got to this place today.”

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