

Emcee Ethnographies: A Brief Sketch of U.S. Hip-Hop Ethnography

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Too often in scholarship on Hip Hop Culture, Hip Hop artists and practitioners are talked about, but very seldom are they themselves talking. It may seem extreme, but this can be seen as both tragedy and tyranny. How have we as scholars reproduced the hierarchies that we are trying to dismantle? How has our methodology silenced and disempowered the very folks we claim to be giving voice to and empowering?
- H. Samy Alim, 2016

Hip-hop has become a popular subject of academic discourse, serving as a medium through which members of several disciplinary communities can engage issues of race, representation, aesthetic, gender, class, and performance, to list some of the most frequently evoked topics. Scholars whose work demonstrates a close engagement with hip-hop quite frequently use the fruits of their research to advocate for marginalized American black youth by humanizing the hip-hop community, thereby disempowering what intersectional feminist discourse refers to as “white supremacist patriarchal ideologies” which frequently renders behaviors, performances, and symbols aligned with black youth in the public imagination as antisocial and/or pathological. From roughly the mid-1990s onward, a generation of hip-hop scholars have risen to points of prominence in their respective fields, forming a canon of interdisciplinary work aimed at addressing the bumpy terrain encompassed by hip-hop.

Hip-hop is frequently theorized in terms of African-American youth countercultures. As such, hip-hop has been the frame around which arguments are made about the politics of racial authenticity and racial representation within the youth subset. While some scholars are critical of modern hip-hop with accusations of antisocial politics, misogyny, homophobia and/or unfulfilled political potential, many of those who engage in hip-hop scholarship have indicated that the genre is a central means through which black youth articulate their sociopolitical and aesthetic perspectives. While some hip-hop scholars centralize discussions of performance methodologies and materiality, most engage extensively, if not exclusively, in a broader discussion about the sociopolitical underpinnings of hip-hop; i.e. hip-hop as political intervention rather than hip-hop as music.

Despite the strong connotations of activism and empowerment in hip-hop scholarship, few have centralized ethnography as a primary methodological approach for the analysis of American hip-hop. As H. Samy Alim

asserts in the epigraph to this article, the omission of diligent ethnography molds the ways in which critical discourse surrounding hip-hop takes shape; in essence, the dominant methodologies reinforce the positionality many hip-hop scholars hold academically, politically, and personally in debates surrounding hip-hop. A discussion of the aims and procedures of contemporary ethnographies in conjunction with those of traditional hip-hop studies highlights the potential a more ethnographically driven branch of hip-hop scholarship would have on the field as a whole.

One of the most basic concerns when approaching a sociomusical phenomenon critically is understanding the parameters of the subject one wishes to engage; many hip-hop scholars emphasize the work hip-hop does (or should do) without clearly defining what hip-hop encompasses. That the readers understand and agree with the author's definition of hip-hop is taken for granted, leaving some of the higher theoretical concepts ungrounded or particularly open to misinterpretation, as readers apply them to their own, potentially disparate definitions of the genre.

For example, in *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (2004), Imani Perry includes analyses of folk/blues/neo-soul artist India Arie, soul-pop darling Alicia Keys, and funk-jazz fusion phenom Meshell Ndegeocello, among others, in her exploration of hip-hop, drawing these performers under the genre's umbrella. The music, visual presentations, and audiences to which these artists are marketed are distinct from one another, and each largely contrasts those of artists topping hip-hop popularity charts. For Perry, hip-hop seems to encompass all of what Nelson George refers to as music of the (implicitly black) post-soul generation, including most of the music produced by people too young to have intimate memories of popular music in the era before the popularization of hip-hop.

The parameters of hip-hop set by Perry are different from those set forth by Tricia Rose in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994) in which the author conflates rap with hip-hop throughout much of her argument, thereby centralizing the commercial rapper as the impetus of hip-hop. Still, some of the artists she includes within her hip-hop parameters might be excluded by other scholars. For example, she identifies Haitian-American Jean-Michel Basquiat as a rapper and graffiti artist (35), even though his graffiti fits more of the technical definition of the term (usually unauthorized writing or drawing on a public surface) than the stylistic definition generally affiliated with hip-hop, and his "rap" manifests more as spoken/sung words over avant-garde electro-acoustic jazz. Such an inclusion indicates that Rose's construction of early hip-hop focuses more on the dissenting creative acts of black and Latino youth than

any particular aesthetic expressive style.

Rose, who begins her most recent book on hip-hop, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—And Why It Matters* (2008) by plainly stating “hip-hop is in crisis,” has a much narrower view of what is included in hip-hop than Perry. She goes on to argue that manifestations of hip-hop that embrace “regressive politics” become detrimental to both the communities that embrace it and hip-hop itself, hence the crisis (ix-2). From this, one can glean that according to Rose, hip-hop is meant to do certain progressive work and that any hip-hop, or derivative thereof, that doesn’t meet this standard is relegated to the realm of internal malignancy: a literal, internal, anti-hip-hop force. She grounds this by providing a list of progressive artists containing the likes of Outkast, Talib Kweli, and Tori Fixx, to be contrasted with examples of regressive artists, like the Ying Yang Twins and D4L (Rose 2008; 218, 247). Singers, or to borrow John L. Jackson’s term “sincere singers,” lie outside of Rose’s conception of hip-hop.

Public intellectual and socio/musical commentator Greg Tate has stated that *true* hip-hop is a manifestation of urban folk culture and “New World African ingenuity,” which he asserts has ceased to exist since its conformance to “global hyper-capitalism” (Tate 2004). Sociologist and proponent of hip-hop pedagogy Greg Dimitriadis is equally pessimistic about the state and form of modern hip-hop. In his chapter “Hip-Hop: From Live Performance to Mediated Narrative” he argues that, with the onset of the mass commercialization, hip-hop has lost several elements central to its coalescence, specifically the diminishing space offered to dance and graffiti traditions (2004). For both these thinkers, hip-hop is defined by social function and style, but most importantly, by a specific temporal moment. Both suggest that hip-hop as it exists today is only a shell of a more authentic former self, and therefore, might exclude most mainstream music in recent years from the realm of hip-hop.

These represent only a few of the ways in which scholars apply the term hip-hop. Sometimes, even within a single text, hip-hop is evoked as a musical genre, as a cultural movement, as an aesthetic, and more abstractly, as a feeling or vibe. While these parameters are not inherently problematic, they highlight the ways in which different scholars apply the term hip-hop with differing significations.

The application of ethnography neutralizes some of the tensions around setting the parameters for hip-hop, both for the reader and for the author. To begin with, the work of coaxing a fruitful interview with interlocutors necessitates a close interrogation of diction and meaning, through which one might discover multiple definitions, contexts, and implications that fans of the genre conjure in discussing hip-hop. It allows the scholar

to bypass the burden of theorizing all manifestations of hip-hop by offering the term (and by extension the analysis) a specific context. This also provides a space for the interrogation of the multiple levels of negotiation that fans and artists engage in when talking about and participating in practices they align with hip-hop. The scholar is freed from relying solely on a singular construction of hip-hop identity by allowing interlocutors to offer their own definitions of hip-hop, how they see that engagement with the genre manifesting communally, and the extent to which such engagements impact their perceptions of self.

Another parameter to contend with is the question of who is included/excluded when discussing “hip-hop communities.” Most scholars define hip-hop as urban black youth culture, a position that reflects the racial, spatial, and generational demographic of the spaces where hip-hop took shape in the late 1960s and early 1970s; however, in the years since, hip-hop has expanded to include people outside of the subset of black youth who, undoubtedly, feel intimately aligned with hip-hop identity. This is not to negate the idea that hip-hop and black youth are symbolically linked. Arguably, the two are inextricably bound in the popular imagination. Discourses that assume the black youth/hip-hop conflation make vital contributions to discourse of race, generation and representation; however, the focus in such research is on hip-hop as it is imagined rather than hip-hop as it exists in the world, and that distinction often goes unarticulated.

Hip-hop is predominantly theorized as being in opposition to the aesthetics and socio-political positionings of proximal adult demographics. While for many scholars the hip-hop demographic is decidedly a youthful subset, musical references often extend back to the 1980s with no sense of irony or generational self-awareness, even given that many of these artists and their original audiences are parents or even grandparents by the time the research is conducted. There are many ways in which the implications of this trend can be interpreted. One interpretation is that all hip-hoppers, after reaching a certain age and level of maturity, move on from hip-hop and associate with the musics embraced by *their* parents’ generation. Another is that older hip-hoppers have no investment, emotionally or culturally, in newer formats of hip-hop, with the suggestion being that they, in a sense, remain aesthetically and politically frozen in the era of their youth. One further conclusion is that the adult demographic’s only pro-hop-hop engagement is financial; that is, confined mostly to businesspeople in the music industry who reap benefits from the popularity of hip-hop and have little or no aesthetic or affinitive investment in hip-hop. Scholars who study hip-hop usually place themselves in a liminal category, which I will return to later. Black youth are similarly homogenized in these studies, with little

recognition of the diverse ways in which black youth interact with and through hip-hop.

Engaging in prolonged ethnographic fieldwork forces scholars, especially those focusing on urban fields, to contend with heterogeneity. The hip-hop community now encompasses multiple generations and spans the gamut of socioeconomic strata in this country. Even domestically, hip-hop transcends political, racial, and linguistic affiliations. Engaging with self-identified hip-hoppers in a specific field allows greater opportunity for understanding the complex negotiations of identity and belonging in conjunction with hip-hop as it manifests in a single location. Furthermore, such a study allows for the scholar to interrogate what manifestations of hip-hop arise in a given space, the different ways people in that space relate to hip-hop in a broader sense and to each other, and how those interactions impact their relationships with people outside of the space.

One of the primary objectives of the first wave of hip-hop scholars was to assert hip-hop as a valid subject of academic interest and to give scholarly voice to disenfranchised hip-hoppers who lacked adequate cultural capital to self-advocate in popular and academic discourse. Tricia Rose illustrates this struggle in an anecdote that introduces the third chapter of *Black Noise*. She recounts being told by an established music scholar that hip-hop had no musical value after she shared her research interest in the genre (1994, 62-65). The inclusion of this anecdote stresses the notion that the general academy (read adult, white, and socioeconomically privileged) stands in opposition to hip-hop (read black poor/working class youth), which contributes to the disenfranchisement of hip-hop communities. Michael Eric Dyson opens *That's The Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (2004) with a similar anecdote, replacing the condescending academician with an elder African-American activist who, as the story develops, comes to represent the oppositional force that the parent generation poses against the hip-hop generation (xi-xiv). In this way, hip-hop scholars present themselves as activists, using their cultural capital as adults and scholars to articulate the perspective of the hip-hop community. Despite numerous scholars offering decades of work introducing academic communities to hip-hop and its increasingly normalized presence in American culture, there is still a need to actively advocate for hip-hop validity. In July of 2018, Dr. Gerald Benjamin, a professor of political science and the leader of the Benjamin Center of State University of New York (SUNY) New Paltz, publicly declared that he did not consider rap “real music” and that it did not reflect the values of “people like us, people in rural New York” while challenging the legitimacy of congressional candidate and former rapper Antonio Delgado (Simonton 2018). Even though his institution quickly

denounced the statement and Benjamin later expressed regret in his choice of words (his recantation markedly stopping short of disavowing the sentiment of the statement), this incident highlights the various ways in which hip-hop continues to be constructed as something antithetical to the values of the academy. This tension, omnipresent if not always articulated as explicitly as in Dr. Benjamin's proclamation, prompts hip-hop scholars to incorporate arguments that affirm the academic worthiness of hip-hop music and culture. The need to declare a subject of study as worthy of the academy's attention undoubtedly has an impact on the way it is framed.

Additionally, many of hip-hop studies' most active and vocal contributors identify as advocates for other marginalized communities. Such overtly political motivations manifest in the arguments and conclusions forged in scholarly works on hip-hop. A close reading of these works reveals multiple points of authority upon which these authors base their claims in order to produce a persuasive argument; however, the absence of critical self-reflexive work allows the line between the objective and the subjective to be severely blurred. This section explores the ways in which applied tactics in hip-hop studies impact the presentation of information.

There is irony in the marginality of ethnography in hip-hop scholarship given that advocacy is a central impetus for the growing field; the very scholars working to give voice to hip-hop communities in some ways centralize methodologies that perpetuate their voicelessness. While these scholars are assuredly sympathetic to hip-hop and deeply invested in the music and the affiliated communities – even to the point of including hip-hop inflected language into the minutiae of their scholarly arguments – fans of hip-hop, especially those who are not themselves famous hip-hop performers, are rarely called upon to articulate their interpretations of hip-hop or their philosophical perspectives, let alone to have their thoughts put in direct discourse with those of scholars, artists, and detractors. Instead, the author often speaks for the everyday hip-hopper when such opportunities arise. A prime example would be Rose's *Hip-Hop Wars*, in which the author deconstructs ten arguments, five for and five against, surrounding hip-hop. She asserts that the ten selected arguments represent the most important and recurrent in hip-hop discourse, but never clarifies the basis upon which that claim is made. As she moves through the arguments, Rose deconstructs both sides of “the hip-hop wars,” again never clarifying from whence she extracted these positions. She only references specific persons when citing quotes from celebrity interviews as secondary resources. The silent implication throughout is that Rose is more adept in articulating points for the hip-hop community than its members could be; in other words, she uses her authority as an academician to speak *for* hip-hoppers

more so than having them speak *through* her work. This approach also allows Rose to maintain a neat pro/anti hip-hop dichotomy throughout the book. While the framing is effective and the arguments persuasive in their outlining of hip-hop discussions, the text eschews the task of centering how members of the hip-hop community relate to the subject matter.

One reason Rose and other hip-hop scholars are able to speak for hip-hop communities without explicitly articulating the nature of their engagement with hip-hop or arousing a great deal of skepticism from outsiders is because they often identify as members of the hip-hop community. Very few of them came of age before the late 1970s, making them a part of what music and culture critic Nelson George refers to as the “post-soul generation”: the generation of hip-hop. Many of them grew up listening to hip-hop and were/are, in some capacity, part of the scenes that they study, engaging in informal discourse with their peers and elders about the merit and function of hip-hop. They also built vocabularies of aesthetic criteria by which qualitative assessments of hip-hop songs and artists are forged, made friendships and connections through hip-hop, and likely continue to engage with hip-hop recreationally. They are active members of the hip-hop community, or more accurately, socially and culturally engaged in specific hip-hop networks.

These personal experiences are compounded with scholarly experiences, allowing these scholars to simultaneously speak from both the authority of the academy and the authority of the insider. This approach to musical research clashes with the inclusion of ethnography as a central method because, as an extension of the aforementioned logic, any interlocutor’s perspective represents a less informed position than that of the scholar. To engage in extensive ethnography, one must concede that the interlocutors’ perspectives are worthy to be centrally engaged in critical discourse. Reverence for (facets of) hip-hop and its (imagined) community does not translate to the inclusion of positions as they are analyzed and articulated by members of that community. That said, since these scholars are members of the hip-hop community, the exclusion of ethnography does not produce a full negation of the hip-hop community, but rather a heavy emphasis on a single hip-hop perspective.

Another point of note is that, while these scholars are often members of hip-hop communities, they do not fully represent the hip-hop demographic as it exists in the public imagination or how it is most frequently theorized in academia. To begin with, the youngest of these scholars can only marginally be considered members of the youth subset and the privileged positions they hold as scholars with top accreditations complicates the widely held association of hip-hop with the urban working class. This

allows many of these scholars to boast a position just outside of the hip-hop community, or, more appropriately, as a bridge between two worlds. In this way, many hip-hop scholars have been able to claim the ambassadorial role that some early ethnographers held, even without engaging in extensive ethnographic fieldwork.

There is a niche for the upwardly mobile, socially aware, politically active individual in hip-hop; the purveyor of what Adam Krims calls “knowledge rap” (2003, 147). The demographic that most directly represents this archetype is generally either left unexplored in academic discourse, or is produced in juxtaposition to the gangsta rap archetype, which Krims refers to as “reality rap.” Class is rarely explored as an impetus for differing politics between these two archetypes; rather all hip-hop is cordoned off in terms of progressive and regressive. As Krims points out in his article “Marxist Music Analysis Without Adorno: Popular Music and Urban Geography,” the differences between the two subsections of hip-hop Krims offers, “reality rap” and “knowledge rap,” manifest on multiple levels, with one end seeking to represent the harsh realities of life in poor urban neighborhoods and the other articulating an aspiration toward middle class values (2003, 142-147). This is extremely pertinent to understanding recurrent arguments in hip-hop analysis. That scholars frequently reference “knowledge rap” as the most aspirational manifestation of hip-hop is tied to the fact that this manifestation of hip-hop, more than any other, reflects the socio-economic stratum to which they belong.

Inclusions and exclusions of songs in current analyses are generally made with little explanation of the selection process, suggesting that the themes explored through these selections represent patterns that go beyond the scope of the song itself; that analyses thereof represent a case study that can be applied broadly to the entirety of “hip-hop” however the author wishes to apply the term. Again, such an analytical tactic is not inherently flawed, but by not offering the reader insight into why some pieces are chosen as worthy of closer analysis or of status as an archetype, such a strategy forces the reader to yield to the author’s subjectivity, not only as scholar, but as listener. The inclusion of ethnographic work, in short, allows for the exploration of qualitative assessments of hip-hop songs without relying exclusively on the author’s aesthetic biases.

Thus far, I have explored the absence of critical ethnography from the hip-hop studies canon. There have been, however, diligent ethnographic works that either contribute directly to hip-hop studies or focus on subject matter that coincides with some of the central concerns of hip-hop studies. Additionally, ethnographies that focus on unrelated or marginally related

subject matter provide useful models for hip-hop ethnography methodologies. This section explores a few works that contribute to an understanding of hip-hop through ethnography.

Ann Arnett Ferguson's book, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* (2001), focuses on perceptions of raced and gendered difference that become infused with the core of American institutions, ultimately resulting in an overarching association of black males with violence. Her field work was conducted from 1990 to 1993 at a school she calls Rosa Parks Elementary School, acting as a participant (teaching) observer in the classroom setting. She interviews students, parents, faculty, administration and staff in order to tease out why black males constituted a disproportional subset of students against whom disciplinary action was taken. Ferguson coins the term "the adultification of black youth" to explain her point. Innocence, particularly childlike innocence, is subconsciously affiliated with whiteness, so when black children and adolescents exhibit delinquent behaviors, authorities are less likely to receive their actions as the mistakes of children and more likely to receive them as a sinister, intentional step toward realizing a criminal potential (2001, 83).

As a result, black youth, particularly males, are often given harsher punishments than their white counterparts for similar offenses, a trend that was replicated during Ferguson's field research. Ferguson also found that many of her young black male interlocutors conflated the experience of being punished (and surviving punishment) with assertions of racial authenticity, a trope paralleled in gangsta rap narratives. She asserts the importance of rap music to her young interlocutors and notes parallels between black masculinity as it was constructed and articulated in her field site and recurrent themes in hip-hop. She astutely notes that while she had not had much exposure to rap music before conducting her research and her initial reaction reflected shock and offense at the lyrical content, she "was delighted to find that the lyrics articulated some of the very ironies and contradictions that [she] observed as a researcher" (Ferguson 2001, 16). She does not spend much time analyzing hip-hop, but uses some of her interlocutors' favorite rap songs as framing devices throughout the book, thereby allowing the students' hip-hop aesthetic to be articulated throughout. While her ethnography focuses primarily on the boys that were most frequently subjected to disciplinary procedures during her field research, she presents the field as a heterogeneous tapestry of social interaction. Such an approach would dismantle, or at least complicate, many of the homogenizing and dichotomizing arguments found in hip-hop studies.

Another text that takes on an explicitly youth-centered ethnography is Kyra Gaunt's *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-*

Dutch to Hip-Hop (2006). In her book, Gaunt offers a girl-centered ethnography, wherein she argues for a shift in the accepted genesis narrative of hip-hop culture. Whereas hip-hop is often thought of as an outgrowth of male-centered party cultures in the 1970s Bronx, Gaunt offers double dutch and handclapping games as specifically girl-centered homosocial methods of rhythmic and language play that helped lay the aesthetic foundations for contemporary black music, notably hip-hop.

John L. Jackson, in *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (2005), proposes the notion of racial sincerity as an alternative to racial authenticity; in essence, he holds that the discourse surrounding racial authenticity must expand to include the ways in which racial authenticity are performed and the sincerity with which that performance is carried out. He also asserts that application of the term “authenticity” implies a subject evaluating an object, while “sincerity” entails evaluations made between subjects. Sincerity, in that way, reasserts the subjectivity of black people in the negotiation of what blackness signifies (2005, 15). He conducted fieldwork in New York City, focusing primarily on black men in Harlem. Jackson includes a section where he describes the internal process he undergoes in preparing to engage in fieldwork. He describes himself as shy and awkward, needing to evoke his inner superhero, Anthroman, to produce useful engagements with his interlocutors. Furthermore, he inserts himself into the discussion of performing racial sincerity, informing the reader of times when his own black authenticity (and sincerity) were challenged. He chooses an uncomfortable encounter with his primary interlocutor to introduce the book, wherein Jackson is berated for his decision to be an academic, “sucking wind up under the white man” (2005, 1-9). He responds with frustration.

Throughout the book, Jackson offers insight into his feelings and methods in conducting fieldwork to serve as a pedagogical tool for budding ethnographers. He dedicates a full chapter to hip-hop, which he entitles “Real Emcees.” This is the only chapter in the book without an extensive ethnographic element; rather he focuses primarily on analyzing hip-hop lyrics. He also focuses specifically on male “knowledge” rappers with special emphasis on Mos Def. Jackson argues for heterogeneity in hip-hop, asserting that (“knowledge”) rappers transform hip-hop performance and, by extension, the ways in which hip-hoppers sincerely perform black masculinity. Despite not extending his ethnographic methodology to his study of hip-hop, Jackson provides a foundation for ethnography in hip-hop studies by virtue of the theoretical arguments he asserts and his methods for ethnographic fieldwork exploring race, identity and performance among working class African-Americans in an urban setting.

In *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture*, H. Samy Alim takes on the multivalent task of theorizing the binds of hip-hop culture through language, Islamic faith/philosophy, and global countercultural positionalities. The religious discussion of the text grounds hip-hop's socio-political work in the ethos of Islamic faith via Alim's discussion of "verbal mujahidin", a term that expresses the moral imperative to use the spoken word to affect change (Alim 2006, 33-38). Alim applies sociolinguistic analysis to support his thesis that the contours of hip-hop language (which he refers to as hip-hop nation language) manifests a distinct deviation from African-American vernacular English (or black language) through which hip-hoppers build a sense of global community/nationhood. With a docket of interlocutors that includes nationally recognized hip-hop artists and poets, Alim puts analyses of casual speech in conversation with rap lyrics, which allows for a discussion of the fluidity with which hip-hoppers apply dominant and subcultural linguistic convention. In her article "'Keepin' It Real': White Hip-Hoppers' Discourses of Language, Race and Authenticity," Cecilia Cutler extends Alim's discussion to explicitly address white, affluent hip-hoppers' evocation of hip-hop nation language in asserting (or performing) a connection to hip-hop and the poor black communities most symbolically aligned with it (2003). While Cutler shies away from Alim's contention that the syntactic idiosyncrasies that mark hip-hop represent a distinct language system, she nonetheless maintains that close analyses of hip-hoppers' methods of articulating (metalinguistic analysis) explicates the nebulous, yet pronounced, contours of the hip-hop community.

Kiri Miller's *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance* (2012) provides a vital ethnographic frame for scholars who wish to engage popular culture. This book, which focuses on the ways in which people come to embody and perform in tandem with various digitally based stimuli, asserts digital space as a legitimate field site. Popular culture is increasingly articulated through digital media, such that notions of aesthetic communities are less reliant upon physical presences than ever before. Hip-hop studies must account for the ways in which hip-hoppers create digital communities and how they impact the exchange between hip-hop creators and hip-hop appreciators. Applying Miller's fieldwork methodologies to hip-hop studies would complicate many of the distinctions previous research has been reliant upon. For instance, the Internet offers even unsigned underground rappers the potential to build international hip-hop networks, a near impossibility in the time before the Internet boom. This means that distinctions like "underground" and "mainstream" must be revisited and re-theorized. Miller's work also ex-

plores the interaction between physical bodies and imagined bodies, an increasingly important concept for hip-hop scholars because most interactions audiences have with hip-hop artists occurs through recorded music and accompanying videos.

Dawn Norfleet's dissertation (1997) offers an ethnographic study aimed at discovering the ways in which notions of culture, community, and identity are forged and solidified through "live verbal music performance" – Norfleet's term for live rap performances. This dissertation is one of the first studies of hip-hop to incorporate extensive ethnography; as such, Norfleet provides insight into how one might manifest traditional ethnographic concepts, like "the field" and "participant-observation", in hip-hop. "The field" has to account for the fact that hip-hop networks remain in constant flux and are not defined by place or identity. To counter this issue, Norfleet casts a broad net in defining her field, New York City, and allows her interlocutors to define sites of importance where fieldwork might be concentrated. By providing an ethnographic work that explores the very concept of a hip-hop community, a concept that is frequently taken for granted in academic discourse, Norfleet provides foundational research for future hip-hop ethnographers.

Marcyliena Morgan offers another ethnography centered on an underground hip-hop scene in her book, *The Real Hip-hop: Battling for Knowledge, Power, and Respect in the LA Underground* (2009). In this text, Morgan provides an ethnographic account of underground hip-hop ciphers connected to Project Blowed, a hip-hop workshop that focuses on linguistic and performative practices in freestyles that represent ideologies and power dynamics and shore up notions of authenticity. Morgan's focus on performing language brings to light the construction of new centers and margins within the underground hip-hop community that nonetheless are impacted by, and in dialogue with, the greater hegemonic structure; the spontaneous linguistic performance of freestyle, Morgan argues, presents this phenomenon. Her focus on language, wordplay, and audience interpretations thereof provides a theoretical framework for understanding lyricism in hip-hop as a metadiscursive performance that represents a multivalent articulation of political positionalities.

Bettina Love's *Hip Hop's Li'l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South* (2012) stands out as one of the only book-length ethnographies that focuses on the hip-hop and youth culture in Atlanta. Love conducts a qualitative ethnography in Atlanta in which she seeks to discover how Southern girls use hip-hop in the construction of race, gender, generation, region and sexuality. Her project focuses on the many nuances required to navigate spaces charged with seemingly

paradoxical ideologies that define Southern hip-hop feminist space. Love makes sure to contextualize her interlocutors' lives by looking at the ways that gendered and raced respectability politics impact their values and observations, taking special time to note how and when these stances defied or complicated her expectations. This ethnography contributes to the political work of offering female hip-hoppers a platform from which to voice their subjectivity. She argues against notions of passive consumption of hip-hop culture, arguing not only that the girls of her study interrogate the images they consume, but that they also make space to inject their own subversive (read anti-hegemonic) stances. Further, Love uses this ethnography to argue for the inclusion of critical media literacy directives in school curricula in order to ensure that youth are offered support in their navigation of media representations of raced/gendered identities.

This work explicitly falls in line with a greater movement in the field of pedagogy defined by the inclusion of hip-hop (Alim et. al. 2011; Hess 2018; Petchauer 2011). In Love's case, ethnographic methodology works to allow the scholar to delve into the work that hip-hop does for its audience while not relying primarily on the intention of the artist. Ultimately, Love is able to effectively imply that much of the crisis rhetoric surrounding hip-hop consumption, especially with regard to (re)producing regressive or violent politics, ignores the complex web of values and representations that black youth navigate as they construct a sense of self and a sense of community. At the very least, Love's research suggests that hip-hop audiences, and possibly Southern hip-hop audiences in particular, engage language play and specially marked performances in ways that complicate the question of how meaning is conveyed in/through hip-hop.

For the first several years, hip-hop studies were dominated by attempts to assert hip-hop as a valid subject of study and diligent work producing theoretical frames for understanding hip-hop. While these works have contributed greatly to current understandings of hip-hop and have provided the foundations for further research on hip-hop in a litany of fields, the marginalization of ethnography has allowed reductive constructions of the very intricate patterns of interaction and processes of negotiation to persist in the canon. Herein is a short list of ethnographic works whose breadth of subject matter and methodologies help clarify what hip-hop ethnography might look like. Conducting ethnographic research forces scholars to confront and ponder the nuances of human experience, thereby contributing to a general understanding of sociocultural phenomena; hip-hop studies would benefit greatly from a greater ethnographic presence in the canon. There's one more thing to consider. If, as many hip-hop scholars have asserted, part of hip-hop's power is in its capacity to serve as a social

and political platform for disenfranchised communities and if hip-hop advocacy is part of the role of the hip-hop scholar, then the inclusion of ethnography allows the scholar to extend the platform into the academy, where, in addition to confronting hip-hop as a subject, scholars will be forced to acknowledge the subjectivity of hip-hoppers.

Notes

1. Definition taken from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/graffiti>
2. Jackson notes two stages in the (male) rapper engaging in sung vocal performance: the insincere, or the rapper who purposefully evokes "bad" singing for comedic effect, and the sincere, the rapper makes a genuine attempt to produce an aesthetically pleasing vocal performance.
3. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/suny-professor-apologizes-for-racial-remark-about-black-house-candidate-antonio-delgado>
4. Krims' dichotomous take on hip-hop leaves no room for subgenres of hip-hop that focus primarily on the party scene.
5. This book is the public version of Ferguson's dissertation for the completion of her PhD in sociology from University of California at Berkeley.
6. Early in the book, Ferguson indicates that the name of the school and the people she interviewed were altered to maintain the confidentiality of her interlocutors. She does share that the school's racial demographic is roughly 50% black, 33% white, 10% Asian, 4% Hispanic, and the remainder identified as Other. She also notes that the teaching staff is primarily composed of women who identify as white.
7. His use of "sincerity" here is unrelated to his exploration of rappers who sing sincerely. A distinction is made between the sincerity of performing one's identity, thus creating a sociocultural truth through performance, and the sincerity of singing earnestly.
8. Jackson's term sincerity is an outgrowth of one of his interlocutor's assertion that "We're [the interlocutor and his wife] too sincere and it's killing us."
9. The artist referred to here as Mos Def has since changed his stage name to Yasiin Bey. The decision to use Mos Def rather than Yasiin Bey reflects how the name appears in Jackson's book.

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