

3 | *Beats, Rhymes and Life*

Connecting the Sonic and the Social in Hip-Hop Music Studies

J. GRIFFITH ROLLEFSON

In his 1994 article for *Public Culture*, ‘After the Love Has Gone: Bio-Politics and Etho-Poetics in the Black Public Sphere’, Paul Gilroy issued a strongly worded caution against critics and scholars reducing rap music to text. Writing at the dawn of the dynamically interdisciplinary constellation of critics, scholars, activists, and artists that would become hip-hop studies, Gilroy offered an early course correction, urging us to remember that this music *is music*.

The first adjustment involves querying the hold that this outlaw form exerts on critical writers who see in it a quiet endorsement of their own desire that the world can be readily transformed into text – that nothing resists the power of language. This is a familiar problem that Michel Foucault has stated succinctly in his famous cautioning against reducing the bloody “open hazardous reality of conflict” to the “calm Platonic form of language and dialogue”. It bites sharply in this area especially when the phenomenology of musical forms is dismissed in favour of analysing lyrics, the video images that supplement them and the technology of Hip hop production.¹

Gilroy’s proposed ‘adjustment’ was an important and prescient one, as the academic study of rap music flourished in comparative literature and media studies departments long before notoriously conservative university music departments were forced to play catch-up (there’s a reason for the term ‘conservatory’ after all) and offer a way forward in dealing with rap music and musicking as sonic phenomena and praxis.²

Like most African-American musics in university music departments, hip-hop was caught in a typically racialized double bind at this time. In addition to being at the fraught center of the infamous culture wars of the 1990s, rap music was *too Other* to be of concern to the musicologists of the time and *too Western* to be of concern to ethnomusicologists. A telling index of this odd past is that the first monograph on hip-hop by a music scholar was Cheryl Keyes’s 2002 *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, which took the subtitle: *The Roots and Rhythms of Rap from Its Early Origins to the Twenty-First Century*. Before Keyes’s ethnomusicological study, the most sonically attentive academic study of hip-hop was Adam Krims’s 2000 *Rap*

Music and the Poetics of Identity – a book on the musicology/music theory side but authored by a cultural theorist. In short, it took two decades after hip-hop blew up for the academy's music scholars to take the world-changing musical sound of hip-hop seriously.

This is not to downplay the contributions of those journalists, cultural theorists, sociologists, linguists, African Americanists, Latin Americanists, and others – foremost among them, the artists, activists, and culture bearers themselves – who laid the basis for hip-hop studies. Those first writers and scholars to take up the banner of hip-hop studies laid an invaluable foundation, documenting musical language and discourses about the sound of hip-hop recordings and live performances as well as ear-to-the-ground emic perspectives on the artistry of MCs, DJs, producers, turntablists, beatboxers, singers, instrumentalists, and other hip-hop musicians – Tricia Rose, Greg Tate, Joan Morgan, Juan Flores, and James G. Spady, in particular, come to mind. Because of the severely myopic and limiting ways that university music departments have historically taught music, a look at musical approaches to hip-hop – this chapter's focus – must necessarily think critically about situating rap music within the state of the academic field that we call 'music'.³

Because 'music' remains such a conservative frame in the university – and a fraught cultural concept when regarded in planetary perspective, where music is often inseparable from dance, poetry, ritual, culture, and cultural identity – this chapter will approach the topic with a broadly decolonial, practical, and sound-centred approach to rap music. Such an approach will open us up to the important sonically minded contributions of arts practitioners, journalists, and scholars outside of music departments and conservatories, while focusing in on the recent contributions of scholars bringing to bear methods developed in the increasingly interdisciplinary – and thankfully now less insular – fields of musicology, ethnomusicology, music theory, popular music studies, and sound studies. The discussion will take a chronological tack, attending to the historical emergence of sound-centred approaches – refiguring received histories as necessary – and commenting on the place of those approaches in contemporary hip-hop scholarship.

While this critical survey will not (indeed, cannot) attend to every landmark study, author, or approach, I hope to provide examples from the field to broadly outline historical developments and contemporary approaches and help hip-hop scholars enrich their thinking about how they might make their research and writing more musical. And as a second disclaimer, I have attempted to include scholarship on hip-hop outside of

the United States and discussion of some non-English publications, but because of the history of the music and the field and due to the readership of this collection, I've taken off my global hip-hop scholar hat here to look more closely at the particularly musical approaches that are well-developed in the Anglophone scholarship. I do hope that these approaches will be taken up, further developed, and localized around the world as this manifestly global music enters its second half-century.

'So What?': Connecting the Sonic and the Social

I remember first-hand the 'debates' about whether rap was even *music* as hip-hop blew up in the early 1980s.⁴ This discourse is famously lampooned in a skit from De La Soul's 1996 *Stakes Is High*, wherein the voice of a Southern white man offers his two cents: 'Rap? . . . There's no *music* in it. It's just, you know, [plural racist slur] talking' as honky-tonk music plays in the background.⁵ As such, we might say that Gilroy's 1994 intervention not only calls out the academic discourse around hip-hop as insufficiently sound and praxis-centred but says something more foundational about how we hear and represent this music and its critical power. To be sure, 'music', as applied to hip hop, is a field of human creativity that encompasses everything from rapping, singing, making beats, and playing instruments to writing lyrics, thinking about word shape and diction, creating choreographies, staging shows, recording tracks, designing album art and fashion, and even marketing music and musicians. Music is not *just* sonic phenomena. But sometimes we need to be reminded that sonic practice – crafting sounds, listening to sounds, and moving to sounds – is at the core of rap music and hip-hop culture more broadly.

Thus spawned the title of this chapter: as A Tribe Called Quest put it almost thirty years ago, when you strip everything else away, rap music is *Beats, Rhymes, and Life*.⁶ The title of that 1996 album has helped me sharpen my own thinking about the mutual constitution of music and life over the course of the past decades. The title also speaks to something of the magic in a Ralph Ellison line that I fell in love with twenty years ago: 'the real secret of the game is to make life swing' (1970). I may be preaching to the converted here, but in the next few pages I want to convince you that in taking musical sound seriously and developing our toolkits around how to approach it, we can tear down the wall between art and life a bit and gain insight into how the study of rap music and/as hip-hop culture might hold some new keys to unlocking those 'secrets'.

This brings us to (what I argue should be) a core tenet of musical enquiry – and a guiding principle for the present chapter: any musical approach to hip-hop should seek to connect the sonic and the social.⁷ That is, if you’re gonna tell us about musical sound, you’d better also tell us why it matters. As Jeff Chang recalled in his 2014 ‘new foreword’ to the revised edition of Joe Schloss’s landmark, *Making Beats*, ‘choosing to write critically about hip-hop meant confronting “So what?” every day’ for hip-hop heads like himself and Schloss (ix). This gets to the crux of Gilroy’s early suggestion that hip-hop studies needed a better focus on the ‘phenomenology of musical forms’ that might help us not only take hip-hop’s structures seriously, but understand how rap music’s meaning and value is not (only) to be found on the page and in the abstract, but in the booming and bumping auditory experiences of clubs, ciphers, streetcorners, studios, the binaural headspace between L and R, and the affective (and propulsive) space between mind and heart (and ass).

So, if you’re unsure about how to write about hip-hop’s musical sound and practice or want to develop further your toolkit, please read on. If you’re not sure musical sound matters, get sure.

Music Writing: Hip-Hop Journalism

Before hip-hop entered the academy, a new generation of culturally savvy and plugged-in music journalists established what hip-hop sounded like on the written page. Essays like those from Nelson George, Tracii McGregor, Joan Morgan, and the late, great Greg Tate, put into writing the connections between hip-hop music and its social bonds.⁸ As just one example, in his 1988 review essay, ‘Eric B. & Rakim: Titty Boom-A-Rooney’, Tate introduces us to the sound of *Follow the Leader* thus:

The music on “Follow the Leader” is spooky, a science-fiction score that sounds straight out of the Tangerine Dream songbook. Rakim’s on an elocutionary speed-trip, a black bullet train slitting through hyperspace. The rhymes are telemetric, tracking sucker-soft targets with a monomania more relentless than anybody’s Terminator. In rap’s ongoing war for poetic supremacy, Rakim has metaphoric space he can call his own, though for others it’s a danger zone.⁹

The language not only captures the sound of the album and connects it to its communities, but encodes the linguistic swag, dope rhymes, and ill flows of hip-hop performance within its very arguments. Indeed, Tate epitomizes a sort of gold standard for hip-hop writing that we might render

as ‘hip-hop (studies)’. That is, his work performed for us why this music mattered, implicitly recognizing the mutual implications of the sonic and the social by uniting form and content in his writing, practicing a hip-hop studies that is always already within hip-hop’s questing organic intellectual ethos.¹⁰

The best of hip-hop studies today takes the lead from the honesty and urgency of those early writers, simultaneously keeping ‘the bloody “open hazardous reality”’ of hip-hop’s subject matter in focus and reminding us that *this music is music*. From decolonial scholarship that reminds us of the power of the musician in her role as storyteller, historian, griot, and ‘Black CNN’,¹¹ to political economy research that notes the sonically disruptive potential of hip-hop and its destabilizing and remixing cultural practices,¹² hip-hop studies that centre musical sound open up broader vistas and more elemental soundscapes, reminding us that *stakes is high*.

Black Noise: Sound Studies

Speaking of the griots, it is an oft-forgotten fact that Rose’s conceptual frame in *Black Noise* was sparked by an interest in Jacques Attali’s *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Attali’s 1977 book theorized the prophetic role that music has played throughout history, from shamanic ritual practice to free improvisation. His theory that prophecy comes in the form of sonic disruptions to the social status quo provided Rose with the blueprint for thinking about how hip-hop changed everything – from music, media, and remix culture, to social protest and identity, to language and politics. Notably, his book also paved the way for the field of sound studies.

While the field of sound studies is relatively new compared with the approaches that I outline here, it is important to recognize that Rose’s 1994 *Black Noise* elaborated that nascent field at a similarly important moment for hip-hop studies. While a primary target of Gilroy’s critique of ‘bio-politics’ and the essentialization of hip-hop, it also anticipated Gilroy’s musical challenge and set a new standard in taking sound and sonic praxis seriously. The book perfectly captured the ‘Bring the Noise’ militancy of Public Enemy’s 1988 track and hip-hop’s broader interest in sonic disruption as political action. Further, it kicked the ‘noise’ theme from the apex of hip-hop’s lauded ‘Golden Age’ into the future, inspiring the landmark collection, *Global Noise* (Mitchell, 2001), and the new *Nordic Noise* (2024) – both of

which interrogate the disruptive power of hip-hop in social contexts outside of the United States in sonically attentive ways.

While sound studies approaches are by definition interdisciplinary and generatively ambiguous in scope and method, the field's expanded view of music *and/as* sound *and/as* politics provided the big tent necessary for imagining a thing called hip-hop studies. In this regard it is worth noting that a decade before *Black Noise*, the musician and writer David Toop published one of the first books on hip-hop under the title *Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop* (1984). While Toop did not define his work as sound studies in this era before the field's codification, he, like Attali, presaged the broadened view of environmental sound and sound-scapes that would become central to the field's expansion beyond the potentially limiting frame of 'music'. It was a fitting frame. If conservative commentators were going to dismiss hip-hop as 'not even music', then rap artists would 'bring the noise'. Along with its influential framing of rap music as a political 'attack' – what he theorized as a 'resistance vernacular' – the book also captured hip-hop's command of public space with a sonically attuned imagination of boom boxes on street corners and sound systems wired up to park lampposts.

Today, scholars like Jennifer Lynn Stoever expand the wide-ranging quotidian and environmental approaches of sound studies to examine untold stories about rap musicking and hip-hop social and cultural production. Her article, 'Crate Digging Begins at Home', examines the listening, collecting, and selecting praxis of Black and Latinx women in the era leading up to the dawn of hip-hop's genesis in the South Bronx. Most notably, her *sound* studies approaches attend to *silences* in hip-hop studies – from correcting hip-hop's often dangerously masculinist hagiography to rethinking and enlivening the spaces in which hip-hop was *birthed*. Stoever nicely summarizes what sound studies can bring to hip-hop studies in a 2010 post to her acclaimed blog, *Sounding Out!* Commenting on the continued deficit of attentive sonic approaches in hip-hop studies, she writes:

sound in hip hop studies seems to be taken for granted in the same way that vision is just about everywhere else. Although hip hop is understood to be an audio-visual art, its organizing metaphors are sonic: remixing, sampling, scratching, and Dj-ing all describe sonic phenomena as well as aural frameworks for understanding the world. The way in which hip hop studies take sound for granted presents both a lesson and an opportunity for sound studies.¹³

Stoever's intervention in her thoughtful conclusion is that sound studies can bring to hip-hop studies a methodology that highlights rap music not

as cultural product but as process, focusing on ‘the way in which sound is treated as an active process, a way of thinking and being, rather than solely an object of study’. As Shortie No Mass and De La Soul put it thirty years ago: ‘I am / I be’.¹⁴

Hiphopography: Ethnomusicology and Anthropology

Stoeever’s processual focus recalls Christopher Small’s active frame of ‘musicking’ to highlight musical praxis as well as product. It should also remind us that the fields of cultural anthropology and ethnomusicology have long stressed just such a focus on music and/as cultural production. While a historian and journalist by trade, James G. Spady’s development of a community-engaged, culture-bearer focused, and ethnographically rich method of ‘hiphopography’ set an early standard for culture-centred hip-hop research in his 1991 *Nation Conscious Rap*. As Alim et al. elaborate in *Global Linguistic Flows*, Spady’s hiphopography insists on ‘direct engagement with the “culture creators”’ as critics and scholars in their own right as part of an aim ‘to reinvigorate cultural studies’ commitment to the people and put into practice what cultural anthropology (and, by extension, ethnomusicology) espouses, that is, a nonhierarchical, anticolonial approach that humanizes its subject’.¹⁵

Importantly, ethnographic musical approaches help us to contextualize musical sound and cultural praxis, attending to sonic phenomena and musical forms while offering rich detail about how and why people engage in these sounding and listening practices. In short, hiphopography implicitly asks us to connect the sonic and the social. Keyes’s landmark ethnomusicological hip-hop monograph, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (2002), for instance, helps us situate the music of hip-hop’s African storytelling inheritances in the ‘street feeling’ and call-and-response musical structures of hip-hop – and does so using Western musical notation to help freeze in time and examine salient structural details of hip-hop’s syncopated swing and swag (a set of methods we will investigate shortly).¹⁶ Schloss’s ethnographic study of sample-based hip-hop, *Making Beats* (2004), uses participant observation to study the art and life of beat makers from inside these communities of practice, examining and privileging hip-hop’s own ‘elaborate theoretical frameworks’ along the way.¹⁷ Marcyliena Morgan’s, *The Real Hip Hop* (2009), explores the music and motivations of artists through detailed ethnographic writing from her fieldwork with LA’s Project Blowed.¹⁸ More recently, in her 2018 *In Hip Hop Time*, Catherine

Appert combines analyses of historical musical flows and contemporary sociocultural meaning with ethnographic thick description of hip-hop storytelling in Dakar, Senegal to better understand ‘music’s intersections with speech’.¹⁹

Hiphopographic approaches, broadly defined, help us contextualize musical recordings, music making, music listening, and musical communities in their cultural and historical realities. They keep us honest. Such ‘direct engagement’ with artists and communities forces researchers to struggle through complexity, resist abstraction and overtheorizing, and represent with nuance. That is, hiphopographic methods help us resist reducing hip-hop to the ‘calm Platonic form of language and dialogue’ and avoid flattening the diverse flips and flows of DJs and MCs into facile tropes that suit our own agendas.²⁰ Perhaps most importantly, ethnographic methods – especially sustained, trust building, and slow research methods – help open us up to hip-hop’s organic intellectual ethos and worldviews.

Sounding Race in Popular Music Studies: Musicology and Cultural Studies

Something of a mainline practice today, musicological and cultural studies approaches that centre sound and musical practice take up and broaden the field of popular music studies to connect the sonic and the social. Where the field of popular music studies began with a sociological interest in musical subcultures, it soon began turning towards the primary artefacts of those communities: records. The musicology side of hip-hop studies best typifies this interest in the recorded sonic artefacts of hip-hop culture, the musical ‘works’ of hip-hop artists, and the production, industry, and commerce of hip-hop.

Emerging from the Leftist scholarship of British cultural studies, in its early days popular music studies centered on white artists and subcultural communities. But even a cursory look at organizations like the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) and gatherings like the Pop Conference (formerly Experience Music Project) will attest to the rise of research that focuses on music and race – especially in the realm of hip hop – given the centrality of Black music to the popular music industries. Taking their cues from critical race theory, political economy, gender studies, queer studies, and other social justice-centred theoretical frames, hip-hop scholars in this very active research space have examined a vast array of ways that music making and listening are central

to who we are (and who we are becoming). Importantly, like sound studies (with which these fields overlap regularly), the broadly defined field of popular music studies finds in music an alternative space for self-making, not just in the sociopolitical terms of sub-cultural affiliation and solidarity, but in the music's liminal, artistic, and non-logocentric worlds of listening, dancing, concertgoing, and musicking.

While certainly not the first book to examine hip-hop and race (see Tate, Rose, Keyes, and others listed earlier), Loren Kajikawa's *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (2015) is emblematic of sonically attentive close reading work that helps us better understand how hip-hop tracks and their breakbeats sound racial formations, 'providing an understanding of the aesthetic grounds from which rap's projections of race emerge'.²¹ Importantly, approaches like Kajikawa's situate those aesthetics in the complex, often fraught, interplay between cultural expressions from the street and the capitalist imperatives and niche marketing practices of the culture industries.

As the undeniable artistry of hip-hop's much lauded 'golden age' artists started to sink in by the mid 1990s, articles like Robert Walser's 'Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy' (1995) began to set the standard for academic studies of hip-hop tracks.²² By taking musical sound seriously, connecting it to social meanings and functions, and applying a type of academic rigor heretofore reserved for the 'masterworks' of the Western art music (aka 'classical') canon, Walser theorized 'the intentionality of hip hop's "noise"' through a close reading of PE's 'Fight the Power'. Like Keyes before him, Walser's article (notably published in *Ethnomusicology*, not a musicology journal) used musical transcriptions in Western notation (see Figure 3.1) to represent the carefully layered and densely textured productions – creating something akin to orchestral scores. He uses this notational analysis not only to establish the artistry of this street form, but to examine the sampling, layering, and production techniques which turned these samples and other sounds into the dense, noisy, and destabilizing textures that earned the Bomb Squad its name. This noisy music, Walser suggests, was crafted to propel similarly disruptive lyrics as an immanent critique of the culture industries (see also: 'Burn Hollywood Burn'). Indeed, he then goes on to notate Chuck D and Flavor Flav's polyrhythmic flows and call-and-response lines.

As Walser is quick to point out, using classical music notation to examine hip-hop music 'requires some justification' as a classic 'etic' or 'outsider' analytical approach. Classical music aesthetics centre on pitches and tonal environments, therefore the systems developed to notate (and analyse) this

The image shows a musical score for the opening of the song 'Fight the Power'. The score is written in 4/4 time and consists of the following parts:

- Voice 1:** The first line of the vocal melody, starting with the lyrics "give it gi - gi - gi - give it".
- Voice 2:** The second line of the vocal melody, starting with the lyrics "come on and get down".
- Voice 3:** The third line of the vocal melody, starting with the lyrics "down".
- J.B.:** The fourth line of the vocal melody, starting with the lyrics "uh!".
- Guitar:** The fifth line of the score, featuring a complex, fast-paced guitar riff.
- Synth:** The sixth line of the score, featuring a synthesizer line with a tremolo effect.
- Noises:** The seventh line of the score, featuring a series of short, sharp noise sounds.
- Bass:** The eighth line of the score, featuring a bass line with a strong, rhythmic pattern.
- Cym/Sh:** The ninth line of the score, featuring a cymbal and shaver pattern.
- Snares:** The tenth line of the score, featuring a snare drum pattern with specific directional markings: [center], [right], [center], and [right/left].
- Kick:** The eleventh line of the score, featuring a kick drum pattern.

Figure 3.1 Musical transcription of the opening groove of 'Fight the Power'. (Courtesy of Robert Walser).²³

music do their best work in these areas.²⁴ Rap music aesthetics, by contrast, tend to focus on timbres, textures, and – most notably – rhythms. That said, this set of notational systems is a widely used one and has the potential to let us freeze and visually represent not only pitch, but rhythm, tempo, texture, instrumentation (and therefore timbre in a way), and other features of

musical form and praxis. As such, Walser suggests, ‘if notation conceals, it also reveals. Rhythms and certain other kinds of relationships can be sketched with some amount of accuracy, if we keep in mind that we are looking at static representations of dynamic relationships’.²⁵

We’ll come back to these caveats and related pitfalls – examining visual notation systems that have been developed from more emic perspectives – but for non-music specialists it is important to underscore the concluding point here. Musical notation is not ‘the music’. If anything is ‘the music’ it is the musical sound – or our hearing and conceptualization thereof. Instead, musical notation is simply an analytical tool that can help us symbolize and freeze musical sounds (make a ‘static representation’) to give us a new angle of consideration of our often slippery and ephemeral sonic experiences. Notice too, that I didn’t use the word ‘objective’ in this explanation. Musical notation is no less subjective than our writing about personal experiences of boom bap on the dancefloor, for it too is an analytical practice – the result of human decisions around what questions we’re asking and what we’re looking to represent. While we might rightly question the strategy of *proving* hip-hop’s complexity, artistry, and therefore value through the ‘white racial frame’ and ideological baggage of Western notation (to which we’ll return shortly), as Walser suggested some thirty years ago, such approaches reveal just as they conceal. As such, notation can be a useful addition to our scholarly toolboxes.

Over the past twenty years, scholars like Kajikawa, Mark Katz, and Justin Williams have performed insightful close readings armed with musicological and sound-centered cultural studies tools that help connect the sonic to the social and centre the question, ‘so what?’ Like Stoevers, Justin Burton, Lauron Kehrer, Elliott Powell, and others have built on these tools to theorize how hip-hop sounds intersectionality and in many ways *is* critical race theory, opening up new vistas on rap music’s sound-borne solidarities, affective economies, and much more. While my own scholarship often deploys hiphopographic methods such as interviews and community engagement – and looks to incorporate all of the methods described in this overview – this realm of musicological close reading is my home base. And while the handle ‘close reading’ does the best work at communicating the method, what we’re usually talking about is, of course, ‘close listening’ – a scholarly practice that I call ‘ear work’ in describing this praxis to students. Ear work requires that we listen in and around our subject of study until, as I’ve suggested earlier, we ‘get sure’ that we know how the sound that we’re investigating matters.

Of course, close listening practices encompass not only academic research, but our ethical responsibilities to the artists we're working on or with and the postcolonial Black and Brown communities who birthed this culture and its music.²⁶ As such, in this discussion of close listening to beats and rhymes I must stress the need to listen too for the lives represented on hip-hop tracks – and (re)commit to listening not just for data that supports our respective theses, but to enact an ethics of close listening that might open us up to new worlds and unimagined perspectives – the type of ethically sensitive ear work that Pauline Oliveros dubbed 'Deep Listening'.²⁷

Flow Studies: Music Theory and Graphic Notation Approaches

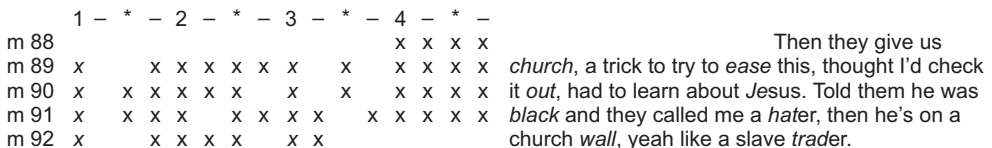
While Keyes and Walser used notation as part of their respective ethnomusicological and musicological studies, the creation of such 'static representations' is at the very core of another academic discipline: music theory. It is this field of musical analysis that has developed the most detailed methods and techniques for examining the sonic details and musical forms of hip-hop – if sometimes at the expense of the social, 'so what?' question.

A model for hip-hop scholarship that connects the sonic and the social is the work of Noriko Manabe, a scholar whose work on Japanese hip-hop is centred in music theory but augmented by sustained ethnographic work and cultural studies methodologies. Her 2013 article 'Representing Japan: "National" Style among Japanese Hip-Hop DJs' is emblematic of this approach, using notation to examine and elaborate how DJs rep Japan sonically while situating those artists in their national and international contexts and highlighting ideas that came up in her ethnographic interviews with the artists.²⁸ As even a cursory overview of the literature will show, however, the DJ, producer, and turntablist remain badly underrepresented in hip-hop scholarship – a fact that suggests: (1) how hard and time-consuming ear work is to do, (2) how difficult it is to represent the slipperiness, multivalence, and ephemerality of sonic phenomena, and (3) how much easier it is to focus on and interpret hip-hop's eye-catching lyric and video 'texts' that Gilroy noted. There are wonderful studies that situate the art of the DJ and producer within the broader context of hip-hop arts practice and social life, but it is curious to note the small handful of influential monographs that delve into hip-hop production – a line

running from Joe Schloss's groundbreaking *Making Beats* (2004), to Mark Katz's *Groove Music* (2012), to Dan Charnas's *Dilla Time* (2022). It is true that books are less common in the field of music theory (indeed, neither Schloss, Katz, nor Charnas are theorists per se), but the continuing dearth of beat-centered monographs in the field is nonetheless remarkable. With a few exceptions, these books remain the exceptions that prove the rule.

An area that has gotten increased attention from music theorists in recent years is the sound of rapping – the sonic substance and phenomenology of performed lyrics and rhymes. This impressively active field of 'flow studies' has mounted an impressive intervention into the racist discourses that devalue hip-hop production by suggesting it is 'noise' and MCs are 'just . . . talking'. Further, through their nuanced sonic analyses, the field of flow studies also issues a potentially powerful corrective against, to refigure Gilroy, 'reducing the bloody "open hazardous reality of"' sound to text. At their best, flow studies can remind us that rappers are not just writers, reporters, authors, and poets, but storytellers, griots, and musicians. Indeed, the very need for this corrective is ironic considering that written lyrics are something of a historical aberration – the exception to millennia of poetic praxis, not the rule.

Two scholars that laid the groundwork for this area of research are Adam Krims and Felicia Miyakawa. In his 2000 *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, Krims expertly details and theorizes the need for us to pay closer attention to sound in hip-hop studies (and popular music studies more broadly) before laying out his 'Genre System for Rap Music' – a 'vocabulary of flow' schema that helps us think more systematically about how rappers rap. In her 2005 *Five Percenter Rap*, Miyakawa builds on Krims's schema, offering numerous musical examples in both standard Western notation and a new bespoke form of 'flow maps' (see Figure 3.2) developed for notating hip-hop rhythms and emphases.



Poor Righteous Teachers, "Ghetto We Love," mm. 88–92.

Figure 3.2 Flow map of Poor Righteous Teachers' 'Ghetto We Love'. (Courtesy of Felicia Miyakawa). The map shows measure numbers at left (y-axis), subdivisions of beats at top (x-axis), x-marks within the resultant grid, and the lyrics under consideration (with stressed syllables in italics) at right.²⁹

Most notably, both of these landmark monographs in flow studies are keen to underscore how their detailed sonic analyses help us better understand how musical form is of central import to lyrical content.

In his influential 2009 article ‘On the Metrical Techniques of Flow in Rap Music’, music theorist Kyle Adams built on Krims and Miyakawa’s work to codify a new standard in flow mapping. Using a modified form of Time Unit Box System (TUBS) – developed by ethnomusicologist Mantel Hood – the system sidestepped standard notation’s focus on pitch, instead highlighting rhythm and rhyme. Developing Miyakawa’s side-by-side system, this now standard mapping technique doesn’t require familiarity with standard music notation and uses spreadsheet software to map rhythmic patterning with the words right in the grid. Further, this notation system based on widely available software allowed researchers to colour code, bold, or italicize other salient details such as rhyme (as in Figure 3.3).

In addition to showing us the rhythm and rhyme schemes at play, Adams’s publication of this article in the journal *Music Theory Online* allowed him the game-changing option to include a digital musical excerpt with the visual notation – here a 41-second clip of ‘Wu-Gambinos’. This type of notation with sound will be a key aid in foregrounding the sonic substance of hip-hop music as we enter a multimodal digital publishing environment. Today, such work in flow studies is also beginning to use computational analytical methods, extending our understanding of rhythm, meter, and groove through corpus techniques that augment our own ear work. The landmark monograph in this area is Mitchell Ohriner’s 2019, *Flow: The Rhythmic Voice in Rap Music*.

While hip-hop researchers like Adams and Ohriner are breaking important new ground in this emergent area of ‘flow studies’, here we also run into the inherited traps of armchair ‘etic’ (non-insider) approaches and their structural myopia. As such, I want to issue a caution that such music theory and computational approaches also need to be grounded in the lives and cultures of the hip-hop community lest they risk misrepresentation, flaneurism, cultural appropriation, implicit bias, or ‘reducing the bloody “open hazardous reality”’ of rap musicking (from bedroom producers to ‘THUG LIFE’ in full bloom) to academic exercise (from humanistic overtheorizing to dehumanizing algorithms, graphs, and charts).

As music theorist Ewell has eloquently and forcefully argued, the discipline has both passively and actively sustained and promoted a ‘white racial frame’ through its construction of the Western art music canon and its (dead, white,

Example 1d. Lyric chart for “Wu-Gambinos,” third verse, showing accented and rhyming syllables

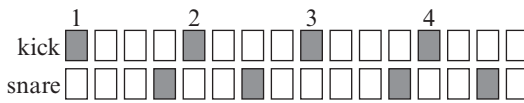
1	x	y	z	2	x	y	z	3	x	y	z	4	x	y	z
1															
2	CROWN		is			we're						Sol-	id	gold	
3	CLI-	nin'	in	SHIN-		in'	BLIND-		din'	like	some	DIA-	monds		re-
4	BREAST-	ed			on	a	cloud		with	sil-	ver	LIN-	ings	dou-	ble
5	The	heart	the	rib-	let-	proof	VEST-	ed		well	pro-	TEC-	ted		
6	STONES					the	chest		and	so-	lar	PLE-	xus	cast-	in'
7	yo'	ass		get	in'	two	hun-	dred-	and	six		BONES		and	watch
8		How	dare	you		to	a sea	FIRE		and	brim-		STONE		
9	like		no-	ah	it	with	DIM	souls	poems			ov-	er	fiend	
10	the		grand	ex-	bean	green			ri-	al	a	sol-	dier	mean	
11	za	rec-	tor	come	qui-	im-	pe-	a	vi-	wiz-	ard	is	it	the	R[ɪ]-
12	chem-	i-			to	your	ass	ant	the	sit		Lo-	cal	bi-	o
13	shots	to			un-	ver-	gi-	on	the	black		ge-	ne-	Lick-	in'
14		mil-	Da-	um		CROCK		mic-	the	bi-	cen-	tenn-	i-	al	py
15	i-	cil-	len-	burst	two	thou-	sand	lin	ro-	chips		two	shots		pen-
16	It's	a	lin	age	out	pure	a-	na-	son	it's	time	for	bou-		tin'
17	Trapped	in-	mile-	you're		re-	sem-	blin'	gaz	who	like	fol-	low-	in'	
			side	your	pro-	duct	like	a	nle	in-	the	bot-	tle	and...	

Figure 3.3 Flow map for ‘Wu Gambinos’ showing rhythmic patterning as well as rhyme schemes (color coded). (Courtesy of Kyle Adams).
Note that the system here also includes the musical excerpt under consideration.³⁰

male) ‘masters’ – and through myriad other institutional, pedagogical, and intellectual structures. For our purposes here, it is music theory’s positivist inheritance and claims to empirical objectivity that pose the most immediate danger (claims not unique to music theory, but to musicology, ethnomusicology, and beyond, as well). Indeed, the flip side to the much-needed focus on hip-hop’s musical sound that I’m stressing here is a lost-in-the-weeds myopia that smuggles in a tautological art-for-art’s-sake ideological bent inherited from the Western art music tradition. Valuing and studying hip-hop for its complexity and artistry can be a fruitful and transformative exercise, but not without the context and perspectives of hip-hop communities of practice – and definitely not using the master’s ~~tools~~ terms.

Indeed, I’ll point the finger at myself in the ‘humanistic overtheorizing’ category, and it must be noted that many of the approaches to hip-hop studies emanating from music departments I’ve outlined here have been pioneered by white cis male scholars. In the interest of decolonization, my aim here is thus to foreground where we’re at – noting all the important progress in the field along with all the dangerous and potentially violent pitfalls. Apropos of this aim, it is worth pointing out that such work is important and paradigm-changing, but that we need to have a robust and honest conversation about what these empirical, quantitative, and computational advances mean vis-à-vis questions of perspective and community legibility regarding hip-hop arts, practice, process, content, and form – just as we need to interrogate established cultural studies and ethnographic approaches like my own.

Judging from Adams’s 2019 ‘Hip Hop in the Golden Age’ and Sina Nitzsche’s recent European Hip Hop Studies Network conferences that are bringing artists into sustained conversation with scholars, this conversation already seems well underway – and increasingly open about the politics of representation.³¹ Indeed, practitioner-based music theory approaches like those of Kjell Andreas Oddekalv are emerging, and are indebted to the analytical rigor of Adams, Ohriner, Oliver Kautny, and others, suggesting that sound-centred and performative approaches to hip-hop are in the midst of an exciting and generative diversification. As just one exemplary case in point, ethnomusicologist Wayne Marshall has found common ground between music theory and hip-hop musicking perspectives in his analytical work in ‘technomusicology’, composing emically satisfying audiovisual analyses³² and using the very DAW visual interfaces that hip-hop producers use to craft his visual examples (see Figure 3.4).



1. A skeletal sketch of reggaeton's boom-ch-boom-chick.

Figure 3.4 Notation of a basic reggaeton beat using DAW-style tick boxes. (Courtesy of Wayne Marshall).³³

Arts Practice Approaches: *Owning My Masters to What Makes It Dope?*

This brings us to the leading-edge approaches to hip-hop in the burgeoning area of arts practice research. At the vanguard of this movement is A. D. Carson, the MC and Professor of Hip Hop and the Global South at the University of Virginia who also performs and records under the name Aydee the Great. Carson set a new standard in hip-hop studies when, in proposing his PhD dissertation in Rhetoric at Clemson, he insisted on submitting the document, not as a traditional written document, but as a recording in itself. While it is increasingly common for hip-hop artist-scholars to augment written scholarship with artistic outputs, Carson's move inverted the relationship in submitting his thirty-four-track album, *Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes and Revolutions* as the dissertation. The move proved a conceptually and artistically savvy one, earning Carson a great deal of media coverage and, more importantly, establishing hip-hop as a form of scholarship in its own right in the hallowed halls of academia.³⁴

In 2020, Carson went on to publish the first academically peer-reviewed hip-hop album, *i used to love to dream*, with University of Michigan Press. This album, that Carson dubs a 'mixtap/e/ssay,' 'performs hip-hop scholarship using sampled and live instrumentation; repurposed music, film, and news clips; and original rap lyrics' – a set of organic scholarly processes grounded in hip-hop's own 'emic' ethos, ethics, concepts, and citational practices.³⁵ Furthering this hip-hop mode of scholarship, the mixtap/e/ssay is open access, like the freely circulating hip-hop 'mixtapes' that give the hybrid arts practice research form its name.

Today, hip-hop artists, like DJ Spooky (That Subliminal Kid), 9th Wonder, and others, increasingly teach and lecture in university departments and a new generation of artist-scholars are earning doctorates in their respective creative fields. Just two with whom I am personally familiar are the MC, Dave Hook, who performs and records as Solareye and the DJ, Michail Exarchos, who performs and records as Stereo Mike. The Scottish

MC, Solareye, earned an international reputation for his witty and honest raps with the live hip-hop band Stanley Odd before writing an autoethnographic analysis of his work for the PhD.³⁶ His arts practice work took a page from Carson's rap as research methodology, recently resulting in the track 'Rap Academics' – a literature review of hip-hop studies in the form of a rhythmically animated YouTube lyric video (see Figure 3.5).

On the DJ side of things, the Greek hip-hop producer, Stereo Mike, has recently published his PhD research as a book on hip-hop music production and the techniques that beatmakers use to avoid running afoul of copyright laws. Notably, his book *Reimagining Sample-Based Hip Hop: Making Records within Records* (2024) includes a companion album that essentially *is the research* in recorded form.

Such ingenious and generative arts practice research methods inspired my own PhD supervisee, the established Irish MC, vocalist, and producer, Ophelia (Ophelia McCabe), who is exploring hip-hop freestyle ciphers as healing spaces in her PhD study, *Healing in the Cipher: From Ego to Knowledge of Self*.³⁷ That study uses audiovisual recordings and filmmaking methods to document the musical magic that happens when MCs come together to 'show and prove', making themselves vulnerable to become part of something greater. There are even arts practice research methods grounded in music

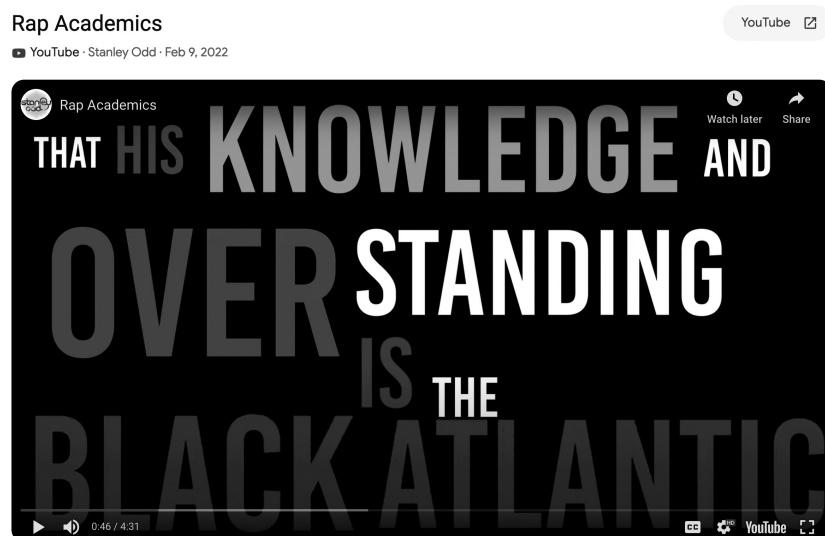


Figure 3.5 Screenshot of Solareye's hip-hop 'literature review' from the lyric video 'Rap Academics', 2022. (Courtesy of Solareye). The line here links hip-hop's Afrodiasporic 'knowledge of self' discourses to Rasta 'overstanding' and Paul Gilroy's landmark, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993).³⁸

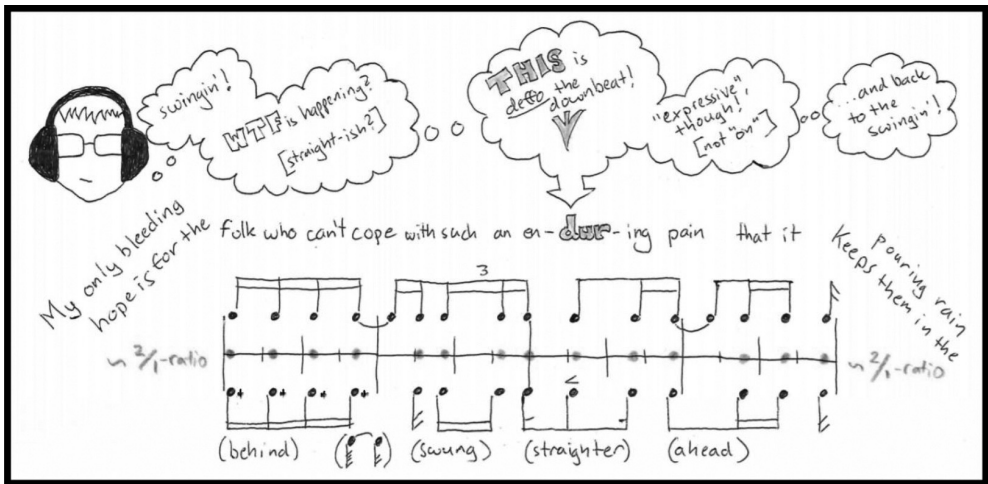


Figure 3.6 Hand-drawn visual analysis of Lisa ‘Left Eye’ Lopes on ‘Waterfalls’, 1994. (Courtesy of Kjell Oddekalv). For a more detailed version of this figure please visit www.cambridge.org/9781316515266 and navigate to the Resources tab.

theory and cognition, as spearheaded by the Norwegian MC and instrumentalist, Kjell Andreas Oddekalv, who performs with the Oslo crew, Sinsenfist. Oddekalv’s PhD dissertation put the ‘so what?’ question front and center in flow studies with the emically titled ‘What Makes the Shit Dope? The Techniques and Analysis of Rap Flows’, not only developing new theory and methods for the field, but doing so with the performative flair of a hip-hop artist and student of the culture who both understands and cares deeply about how MCs develop their art. As just one illustrative case in point, the static representations developed by Oddekalv’s music theory run the gamut from flow boxes and waveform sonographs to hand-drawn visual analyses (see Figure 3.6) that call to mind doodles in an MC’s lyric book.

Conclusions: ‘Thinking of a Master Plan’

Suffice it to say, hip-hop studies has come a long way since Gilroy issued his 1994 corrective imploring scholars to take musical sound seriously. I hope the overview of the preceding pages has given readers with less experience in thinking and writing about musical sound some workable tools to take their research to the next level. For just as those first hip-hop writers like Morgan, George, and Tate brought the swing and swag of hip-hop music alive on the written page, our current generation of arts practice scholars

like Aydeé, Solareye, Mike, Ophelia, and Kjell are breaking new ground and exposing us to whole new worlds of possibility – not just for hip-hop studies, but for university scholarship and creative and intellectual life more broadly. Indeed, by starting with the basics of journalism, sound studies, and music studies and then getting into some of the newer and more niche fields like music theory and arts practice research, my hope is that we might take the lid off the current conditions of possibility and imagine what's next. How can we develop even more radical and community-centred ways to explore and understand how the sonic and the social are intertwined, mutually constituted, and inextricable?

I think we can start by working collaboratively *on the regular*, learning from each other's methods by researching, co-creating, and co-authoring on topics of shared interest. This way, we can build hip-hop's own multi-disciplinary, multi-element culture into a truly interdisciplinary academic arts field that sees the connections, not only between the sonic and the social, but beyond, into the kinetic and the visual and so on. So, of course we can't do all this alone. We can't all be expert DJs, MCs, *and* scholars, *and* breakers, *and* graf writers, *and* beatboxers, *and* fashion designers. We need to rely on the cipher – our fellow hip-hop headz.

If we as hip-hop scholars – whether artists, activists, fans, or academics – can take on Gilroy's suggestion that we think and feel beyond our own desires and comfort zones, not only will we be able to see, hear, and understand hip-hop in all its manifestations, we will be a model – a 'blueprint', as Tricia Rose put it back in 1994 – for the decolonial, organic intellectual university – the 'pluriversity' as Achille Mbembe put it.³⁹ As I suggest, it all starts by connecting the sonic and the social – taking sound seriously. As A Tribe Called Quest put it on the title of their fourth album, when you boil it down, hip-hop is about *Beats, Rhymes, and Life*. Let's start there, build our cipher, and see where we can take it in the next fifty years.

Notes

1. Paul Gilroy, 'After the Love Has Gone: Bio-Politics and Etho-Poetics in the Black Public Sphere', *Public Culture* 7 (1994) p. 52.
2. To learn more about the entrenched eurocentrism and white supremacy of the conservatory/music department model, see Philip A. Ewell, 'Music Theory and the White Racial Frame', *Music Theory Online* Vol. 26, No. 2 (September 2020). <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.ewell.html> [Date accessed: 10 November 2023].

3. Deborah Wong, 'Sound, Silence, Music: Power', *Ethnomusicology* 58/2 (2014); Loren Kajikawa, 'The Possessive Investment in Classical Music' in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness across the Disciplines*, edited by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019). Ewell, 'Music Theory and the White Racial Frame'.
4. Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about when We Talk About Hip Hop – and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).
5. De La Soul, 'Long Island Degrees' on *Stakes is High* (Tommy Boy 1996).
6. A Tribe Called Quest, *Beats, Rhymes, and Life* (Jive 1996).
7. In my construction, 'connecting the sonic and the social', I'm extending and refiguring an approach I first learned from Wayne Marshall. See Wayne Marshall, 'From Música Negra to Reggaeton Latino: The Cultural Politics of Nation, Migration, and Commercialization' in *Reggaeton*, edited by Raquel Z. Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 19–76.
8. See Dean Van Nguyen, 'How a Group of Journalists Turned Hip-Hop into a Literary Movement: Looking Back at the Golden Era of Rap Writing', *Pitchfork* (12 March 2018). <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/how-a-group-of-journalists-turned-hip-hop-into-a-literary-movement/>.
9. Greg Tate, 'Eric B. & Rakim: Titty Boom-A-Rooney', *Village Voice* (3 September 1988). www.villagevoice.com/2020/11/20/eric-b-rakim-titty-boom-a-rooney/ [Date accessed: 1 May 2024].
10. Indeed, it's worth noting here that in addition to Tate and other journalists' work prefiguring scholarship about hip-hop, rap artists like Phife of A Tribe Called Quest ('hip hop scholar since being knee-high to a duck'), Large Professor, and PE's Professor Griff had imagined themselves as 'hip hop scholars'. The naming practice should help remind us and our university research machines that arts practice is also a form of research and scholarship.
11. Halifu Osumare, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop: Power Moves* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007); Cheryl Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).
12. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
13. Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, 'Ill Communication: Hip Hop Studies & Sound Studies @ Show And Prove'. <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2010/09/20/ill-communication/> [Date accessed: 1 May 2024].
14. De La Soul, 'I Am I Be' ft. Maceo Parker, Fred Wesley, and Pee Wee Ellis, *Buhloone Mindstate* (Tommy Boy 1993).
15. Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahim, and Alistair Pennycook, *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 18.

- For more on hiphopography, see Quentin Williams and Jaspal Naveel Singh eds., *Global Hiphopography* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023) and J. Griffith Rollefson et al., 'Networking Global Hip Hop Knowledge: The CIPHER Method', *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 67, No. 3 (Autumn 2023), pp. 430–464.
16. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, p. 124.
 17. Schloss, *Making Beats*, p. 6.
 18. Marcyliena Morgan, *The Real Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
 19. Catherine M. Appert, *In Hip Hop Time: Music, Memory, and Social Change in Urban Senegal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 19.
 20. Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power' in *Power/Knowledge*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: 1980), p. 15.
 21. Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), p. 9.
 22. Robert Walser, 'Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy', *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 39, No. 2 (Spring – Summer, 1995), pp. 193–217.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 199. See also Kyle Adams, 'The Musical Analysis of Hip-Hop' in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2015).
 25. Walser, p. 199.
 26. See conclusion to Rollefson et al., 'Networking Global Hip Hop Knowledge', 457–459.
 27. Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* (Lincoln, NE: Deep Listening Publications, 2005).
 28. Noriko Manabe, 'Representing Japan: "National" Style among Japanese Hip-Hop DJs', *Popular Music* 32, no. 1 (2013), pp. 35–50.
 29. Felicia Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 74.
 30. Kyle Adams, 'On the Metrical Techniques of Flow in Rap Music', *Music Theory Online* Vol. 15, No. 5 (October 2009). www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.09.15.5/mto.09.15.5.adams.html [Date accessed: 10 November 2023].
 31. Kyle Adams (organizer), Hip-Hop in the Golden Age Conference (with Keynote Speaker Prince Paul (Paul Huston) of De La Soul), 16–17 February, 2019. <https://intranet.music.indiana.edu/departments/academic/music-theory/hip-hop-golden-age.html>; Sina Nitzsche (founder), European HipHop Studies Network Annual Meetings (2018–2024). <https://europeanhiphopstudiesnetwork.wordpress.com/>.
 32. Wayne Marshall, 'The Dembow Variations' sonic visualisation mix on Vimeo. <https://vimeo.com/69325906> [Date accessed: 1 May 2024].
 33. Wayne Marshall, 'From Música Negra to Reggaeton Latino: The Cultural Politics of Nation, Migration, and Commercialization' in *Reggaeton*, edited by

- Rivera, Raquel Z., Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 23.
34. Ashley Young and Michel Martin, 'After Rapping His Dissertation, A. D. Carson is UVa's New Hip-Hop Professor' on *All Things Considered* (15 July 2017). www.npr.org/2017/07/15/537274235/after-rapping-his-dissertation-a-d-carson-is-uvas-new-hip-hop-professor [Date accessed: 1 May 2024].
 35. A. D. Carson, *i used to love to dream* (University of Michigan Press, 2020). www.press.umich.edu/11738372/i_used_to_love_to_dream.
 36. Dave Hook, *An Autoethnography of Scottish Hip-Hop: Identity, Locality, Outsiderdom and Social Commentary* (PhD thesis, Edinburgh Napier University, June 2018). <https://napier-repository.worktribe.com/OutputFile/1255225>.
 37. McCabe's study is previewed in excerpt in the last section of Rollefson et al., 'Networking Global Hip Hop Knowledges', pp. 453–457.
 38. Solareye (Dave Hook), 'Rap Academics' (2020). www.solareye.co.uk/rapacademics.
 39. Achille Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive." *Africa is a Country*, contributed by Angela Okune, *Platform for Experimental Collaborative Ethnography*, 2015. Last modified 14 August 2018, accessed 17 November 2023. <https://worldpece.org/content/mbembe-achille-2015-decolonizing-knowledge-and-question-archive-africa-country> [Date accessed: 1 May 2024].