INTRODUCTION:
HIPHOP STUDIES IS MOVING KNOWLEDGE FORWARD

Joshua Clarendon, Thebe K. Moloko, Savanna Stewart, Hank Tian, and Tessa Brown

What is hiphop? Of course everyone knows of hiphop, as it is among the most popular music genres of our era, but its essence and reach may be too vast to define succinctly. Even calling hiphop simply a genre of music can diminish its impact on modern culture. This general lack of knowledge has naturally drawn many hip-hop founding fathers and mothers, historians, and purists to attempt to find a concise definition for this culture. Most define hiphop in terms of its artistic products, the “5 elements” of rapping, graffiti, breakdancing, producing/DJing, and the more philosophical “dropping knowledge.” While this may succeed in encapsulating part of what hiphop is, critically-acclaimed rapper and hiphop historian Lawrence Parker, better known as KRS-One, summarizes the culture more succinctly when he breaks hiphop down into its two operative words and defines each separately: “hip” meaning “to know,” and “hop” meaning “movement” (qtd. in Khamis). It is on this basic premise of “moving knowledge” that The Word: Tha Stanford Journal of Student Hiphop Research was created.

The Word is an academic hiphop journal based at Stanford University which aims to embody the purpose of hiphop by providing a mode of creative expression as well as a voice to marginalized communities, encouraging open experimentation, and making a way out of no way. We do this through the publication of undergraduate research on hiphop culture, reporting on happenings in the hiphop community, and providing access and mentorship to undergraduates, especially undergraduates marginalized by race, class, gender, and/or sexuality, as they participate in the academic practices of critical discussion, peer review, and revision and publication.
Although short, this first issue was two years in the making. It began when our advisor, Dr. Tessa Brown, moved to create a space where undergraduates could publish the original and current research she had been reading in the courses she taught on hiphop and writing. Hank Tian, Atlanta Rydzik, and TK Moloko joined her as the journal’s two founding Managing Editors and Business Manager, respectively. In group discussions, we decided to create a 2-part publishing space: a blog to keep us current with hiphop’s ever-changing landscape, and a scholarly journal where submissions would move through a more formal process of peer review, revision, and publication. While our original goal was to pay student writers for their work, a year of institutional research led the team to become a Voluntary Student Organization (VSO), or a club, illuminating for us the ways the university defines and constrains student labor. As a team, however, we remain committed to directing our funds toward students and artists marginalized by race, class, gender, and citizenship. As we negotiate the ironies of hiphop moving from a back-to-school party in the Bronx to the most elite, historically white institutions of higher education, we’re committed to centering multiply-marginalized students and artists, and using our resources and social capital to pay and mentor hiphop writers and artists.

In Winter 2020, we debuted our beta website and blog space with an event at Stanford student co-op EBF. At our first event, three California womxn DJs—Fela Kutchii and Fíera from Oakland, and Stanford artist-in-residence DJ Lynnée Denise—discussed their histories and practices in a panel, and then each played an amazing set featuring female-forward hiphop and global sounds. This spring quarter, to launch our updated website and our first issue of student-written research articles, we went big with a 2-part event. The first, an academic panel on “Trap and Hiphop Studies in the Academy,” featured heavy-hitters Dr. Gwendolyn D. Pough of Syracuse University, Regina Bradley of Kennesaw State University, and A.D. Carson of the University of Virginia. These speakers attest to hiphop studies’ growing attention to women and gender within hiphop culture and the growing impact of the hiphop South. The panel was followed the next day by a showcase of Stanford student hiphop artists Lil Seyi, Linda Sol, and VII, with an outro set by Bay Area DJ Fíera. These events
reflect our twin goals of producing hiphop scholarship and hyping up hiphop artists in our community.

During Winter quarter, we also moved through our peer referee process. After soliciting submissions from Stanford undergraduates, and joined by new members, we collectively read through and commented on the submissions we received. Then, as an Editorial Board—composed of our officers as well as other student members—we determined whether we would accept submissions. During this process, we developed our own editorial strategy and also decided to divide journal issues into two sections: “Decoded,” for shorter close-readings, and “Articles,” for full-length research articles. When selecting our full-length articles, we chose pieces that indicated a strong command of relevant research literature in hiphop studies and other necessary fields, and also contributed to that literature through original analysis of primary materials. Though several interesting papers were submitted, we eventually settled upon three which met the standards we set.

In our Decoded section, we present “Reading ‘U’” by Joshua Clarendon, an editorial board member. The piece is an in-depth analysis of critically acclaimed rapper Kendrick Lamar’s song “U,” a track from his 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. In his analysis, Clarendon looks at the story of “U” in connection with the album’s overall narrative, breaking down the lyrics, vocal techniques, and sound engineering Lamar uses to convey his hopelessness.

The first of the research articles, “lofi hip-hop radio: beats to relax/study to” by Stanford undergraduate Justin Wang, is both a synopsis for and an analysis of a subgenre of hiphop which has only recently risen to popularity. In his analysis, Wang discusses some of lo-fi music's greatest influences, mainly anime and jazz. Using an analysis of lofi channel titles, comments, and graphics on YouTube, Wang theorizes the connections between the recent and rapid ascent of the subgenre, young Americans’ mental health, and recent events in the public sphere, including the election of President Donald Trump.

The second article is Krithi Reddy’s “The Exoticization of ASL Interpretation of Hip Hop.” In this paper, Reddy examines sign language interpretation of hiphop performances, shining a light on how interpreters are often described in derogatory
language bred out of ignorance. In her analysis, Reddy not only looks at the ableist implications of the way sign language interpreters of hiphop are framed in the media, but also examines the implications of memeified white interpreters signing Black artists’ expressions of their culture and vernacular.

Hiphop studies has a strong history at Stanford and across the country. Stanford’s Institute for Diversity in the Arts, originally led by historian and journalist Jeff Chang and sociolinguist H. Samy Alim, and now headed by rhetorician Adam Banks and artist A-lan Holt, has connected scholars of hiphop and Black arts from across campus and hosted guests like Joan Morgan, who coined the term “hiphop feminism” alongside practitioners like Wu-Tang Clan’s GZA. Meanwhile, hiphop studies continues to establish itself as a critical site for interdisciplinary cultural studies through courses, archives, and fellowships at schools like Harvard, Cornell, Duke, Tulane, Rice, Georgetown, North Carolina State, Arizona State, and more. We hope The Word’s journal and blog will contribute to the hiphop community at Stanford and to the growing presence of hiphop studies nationally. To that end, we’re pleased to announce that we’re opening submissions for our Fall/Winter 2020 issue to undergraduates from any school—see the Submissions page on our website for more.

We knew our journal would be digital, but we didn’t expect our meetings or our launch events to be. Like you all, we’ve spent the last few months working together remotely under the COVID-19 pandemic and shelter-in-place orders. We’ve watched as the pandemic has reorganized media culture—and as always, hiphoppers have been at the forefront of technological innovation, with notable DJs and artists taking over Instagram Live while emerging artists produce new songs and visuals that improvise on our new reality. Meanwhile, we’ve seen how the pandemic has disproportionately affected the lives of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian Americans, as structures of residential, medical, and cultural racism collide. And in the last few weeks, we’ve watched a series of violent episodes of anti-Blackness, including the police and vigilante murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, McKinsley LaKeith Lincoln, and Houston rapper George Floyd. Hiphop culture continues to exist at the contradictory crossroads of commodity product and revolutionary literacy. In
moments like these, we remember hiphop’s roots as a language of resistance to white supremacy that recenters the subjectivity of Black and other minoritized peoples, often in righteous anger. It was N.W.A. who articulated the radical rallying cry “Fuck the police,” Kendrick who reminded us, “We gon be alright,” and Cardi B who insisted on Instagram Live this week, “I’ve been doing police brutality videos since my teeth was fucked up, and the only thing that’s changed is my fuckin teeth.”

So when going through this journal, we humbly invite you to read these articles not only as a collection of academic papers, but additionally as an extension of a culture opposing these rampant injustices we see now more than ever. We’re proud of our articles’ intersectional attention to the diversity of Black American experiences; commodifications of disability and race; and global influences on and impacts of digital hiphop culture. When reading this journal, we implore you to keep your mind open, and commit with us to a practice of “moving knowledge.”

Works Cited


