

# INTRODUCTION: HIPHOP STUDIES IS MOVING KNOWLEDGE FORWARD

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What is hip-hop? Of course everyone knows of hip-hop, 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 hip-hop 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 hip-hop 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 hip-hop is, critically-acclaimed rapper and hip-hop historian Lawrence Parker, better known as KRS-One, summarizes the culture more succinctly when he breaks hip-hop 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: The Stanford Journal of Student Hip-hop Research* was created.

*The Word* is an academic hip-hop journal based at Stanford University which aims to embody the purpose of hip-hop 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 hip-hop culture, reporting on happenings in the hip-hop 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 hip-hop 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 hip-hop'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 hip-hop 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 hip-hop 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 Fiera 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 hip-hop 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 Hip-hop 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 hip-hop studies' growing attention to women and gender within hip-hop culture and the growing impact of the hip-hop South. The panel was followed the next day by a showcase of Stanford student hip-hop artists Lil Seyi, Linda Sol, and VII, with an outro set by Bay Area DJ Fiera. These events

reflect our twin goals of producing hip-hop scholarship and hyping up hip-hop 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 hip-hop 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 hip-hop 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 hip-hop 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 hip-hop 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 hip-hop and Black arts from across campus and hosted guests like Joan Morgan, who coined the term "hip-hop feminism" alongside practitioners like Wu-Tang Clan's GZA. Meanwhile, hip-hop 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 hip-hop community at Stanford and to the growing presence of hip-hop 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, hip-hopers 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, McKinley LaKeith Lincoln, and Houston rapper George Floyd. Hip-hop 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**

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