

HIP - HOP ARCHIVES

THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF
KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

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Introduction: “An Archival State of Mind”

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This collection of essays serves as a starting point to consider the emergence of hip-hop archives and preservation activities encompassing public institutions and exhibitions as well as private collections. Hip-hop archives and collections have emerged across the United States, in cities such as New Orleans, Seattle, Houston, Boston, and Ithaca in the past two decades. Simultaneously, in several regions of the world, exhibitions have been mounted that share public and private collections of hip-hop art and objects. We have reached a moment in which hip-hop is being recognized as cultural heritage and preserved by multiple cultural institutions, including libraries, museums, and universities.

Major curated exhibitions focused on hip-hop culture have been mounted since 2000 when the Brooklyn Museum mounted, *Hip-Hop Nation: Roots Rhymes and Rage* (Forman 2002).¹ In New Zealand, the 2003 exhibition *Respect – Hip-Hop Aotearoa* toured the country for two years while in the United States, *Hip-Hop Won't Stop: The Beat, The Rhymes, The Life* opened in 2006 at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, breathing new life into the country's largest cultural institution. On a smaller scale, in Canada, in 2010 I curated *T-Dot Pioneers*, an exhibition focused on Toronto hip-hop history, and the following year the GRAMMY Museum in Los Angeles hosted *Hip-Hop: A Cultural Odyssey*. Less than a decade later, *Hip-Hop, from the Bronx to the Arab Street* launched in Paris in 2015 while in Havana, *Cuba Hip-Hop, Collection and Memory of a Culture (1980–2018)* opened in 2018—the same year that the photographic exhibition *Beat Positive* premiered in London, England. By 2022, the scale and breadth of such exhibitions, best exemplified in the Musée De La Musique at the Philharmonie de Paris' ambitious, yet seriously depoliticized show, *Exposition Hip-Hop 360: Gloire À L'Art De Rue* demonstrate significant investment by France's Ministère de la Culture and many other sponsors.

These exhibitions explore hip-hop's impact in creative ways, as seen with South London's photographic show *Futur Noir* in 2020 and Houston's *Slowed and*

Thrown: Records of the City Through Mutated Lenses in 2021. For example, the *Slowed and Thrown* exhibition focused on artistic interpretations of the late DJ Screw's creative legacy, commissioning visual artists to produce new works that engaged with Screw's innovative chopped and screwed technique. This curatorial strategy simultaneously honors Screw, showcases his decades-long influence, provides an outlet for new artistic talent, and presents rich narrative detail about the history of the Houston hip-hop scene.²

Offering evidence of an archival turn in hip-hop, these exhibitions signal the continued importance of the culture's fifth element: knowledge. As hip-hop's earliest artists and participants age, they increasingly reflect on what they know and understand about hip-hop culture, merging history and memory in thoughtful contemplation. These exhibitions indicate the emergence of an "archival state of mind" with increased attentiveness to the preservation of hip-hop culture through lived, embodied, and affective practices. Such a state of mind emphasizes repertoire—the oral, physical, and ephemeral aspects of hip-hop culture in preservation efforts.

Hip-hop artists and scholars are determining how, what, why, and when hip-hop culture will be archived, both within and beyond traditional preservation protocols and official heritage institutions and discourses. Those that have participated in the culture and built formidable legacies are walking repositories of dance moves, DJing techniques, graffiti writing, and innovative lyricism. These hip-hop artists stand side by side with students, scholars, curators, and archivists to envision and build approaches to preserving hip-hop culture that opens up, rather than close down, the possibilities for ethical and nuanced archival methods and descriptive practices. Such a collaborative effort has yielded vast collections of photography, posters, objects, and documents, while also stimulating preservation activities around oral histories, production techniques, and hip-hop battles. *Hip-Hop Archives: The Politics and Poetics of Knowledge Production* is populated by dancers, DJs, emcees, producers, graffiti artists, scholars, museum curators, and archivists, all of whom draw on their experiential knowledge and affective experiences to mobilize an archival turn in the study of hip-hop culture.

In academia, an archival turn³ has touched multiple disciplines and fields, bringing into sharper focus what is at stake in a moment when technological shifts enhance our abilities to endlessly save and store ephemera and memories. Archivists, scholars, curators, and artists across a range of disciplines and fields have made clear that the archive, with all of its colonial ambitions and postcolonial entanglements, is anything but a neutral site (Cook and Schwartz 2002; De Kosnik 2016; Drake 2016; Mbembe 2002; McKittrick 2014; Mereweather 2006; Stoler 2009). Since the late Okwui Enwezor's 2009 exhibition, *Archival Fever*, reflecting and refracting Derrida's (1996) book of the same title, a plethora of academic inquiries, discursive positionings, and opportunities to engage the archive have emerged. Hip-hop culture is not

isolated from this archival turn, as university libraries and collections focus on one of America's most powerful cultural exports. Yet, as we approach close to two decades of collections, exhibitions, and archives focused on hip-hop culture, there remains a paucity of publications that specifically engage this important turn to preserve our culture. This collection of essays is designed to fill this gap in scholarship.

In the art world, across several academic fields and amongst online fan communities, deep-seated—maybe even unconscious—anxieties have become part of this archival turn. In her 2010 lecture, “Save as ... Knowledge and transmission in the age of digital technologies,” Diana Taylor suggests, “perhaps the current rush to ‘archive’ has less to do with place/thing/practice and more with trying to save and preserve a sense of self as we face the uncertain future” (15). The pace of technological developments, combined with our very real mortality, produces such present uncertainty which, in turn, fuels the impulse to archive and preserve. While the existence of digital platforms partially sutures these anxious impulses by offering ways to easily collect and display digital files, archival activities on platforms such as Instagram and Twitch are precariously positioned by either the frequent flexing of algorithmic muscle by any given platform which can make your project more difficult to find or by the threat of obsolesce with the constant innovation of companies fueled by venture capital funds.

There exist rich and thoughtful discourses around community archives, popular music, and cultural heritage that offer relevant pathways to begin exploring hip-hop archives (Baker et al. 2015; Baker and Collins 2017; Bennett 2009, 2010, 2018; Leonard 2010). Still, scholarly literature on the archiving of hip-hop has been slow to emerge, despite a global vitality in archival and museum studies. In this book, the authors capture the emerging and salient issues and concerns pertaining to the archiving of hip-hop culture in multiple global settings, mirroring hip-hop's now international ubiquity. We know that across the globe, hip-hop archives and collections are deeply imbued with a sense of locality and are rife with conflictual and nostalgic memories; they produce and frame heritage discourse as much as they collect and store objects and materials. The archiving of hip-hop offers us a window into the economic, cultural, geographic, and political forces that intersect with the culture's efforts to celebrate forebears and their communities. To archive hip-hop is to attempt to preserve the attitudinal force by which this bold and brash culture dynamically negotiates power, space, and art.

Time to build

Hip-Hop Archives: The Politics and Poetics of Knowledge Production provides a necessary push to develop a critical body of literature concerned with the

preservation of hip-hop culture. It is situated in a historical nexus in which, for example, popular music scholars analyze how various musical genres become heritage (Baker 2017; Bennett 2009; Brandellero and Janssen 2014). These developments, while significantly intertwined in their own right, converge with new museology and the archival sciences' attempt to decolonize their practices and move beyond the field's colonial histories and Eurocentric foci. As museums today actively respond to demands from governments of formerly colonized nations by returning stolen colonial booty and the archival sciences attempt to reckon with the ways in which metadata and descriptive practices can hide and preserve racist practices, a massive shift in perspective and methodology is underway (Ramirez 2015; Drake 2016, 2019; Caswell 2017). Decolonization is the movement to rid our contemporary world of the harm of European colonial legacies, introducing new paradigms within which the full humanity of Indigenous, Black, and other non-White populations might flourish. When Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) powerfully assert that "decolonization is not a metaphor," they clarify a need to center Indigeneity in resisting settler colonialism while exposing the discursive moves that attempt to make innocent the colonial project.

Today in the museum world, tense discussions about the repatriation of previously looted art objects indicate tectonic shifts in the arena of culture. Cultural institutions, including art galleries, archives, and museums, are more frequently held accountable for their historical transgressions and for being neither neutral nor objective in their practices of knowledge production; rather they are seen as players in the extension of the colonial enterprise (Fairchild 2017; Gray 2019). Critical archival studies attempt to redress the harms of the archive's coloniality, and as Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand explain, this critical turn is "emancipatory in nature, with the ultimate goal of transforming archival practice and society writ large" (2017: 2). The uncovering of museums' and archives' complicity and culpability in colonial plundering carries important lessons for hip-hop archives. These lessons encourage the field of archiving to take seriously the contexts of positionality, north-south relations, and institutional power, which the authors in this collection address, in order to arrive at critical perspectives about the archiving of hip-hop culture.

From where I am positioned in the Global North, as a child of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, an archival turn in hip-hop cannot be fully explored without taking into account our neo-liberal present soberingly exemplified by Sotheby's 2020 auction of American hip-hop memorabilia. Years in the making, the online, globally accessible auction, occurring in the midst of a worldwide health pandemic, made clear the presence of a powerful reductionist neo-liberal logic and profit-seeking motives. The world-famous auction house obtained 120 lots and sold more than 91 per cent of the items offered. With more than 400 registered bidders

(25 per cent of them new to Sotheby's) and online interest from more than nineteen countries, the auction offers a sobering reflection of the state of contemporary hip-hop culture in the United States (DeMarco 2020). When an auction house, in operation since 1744, decides that hip-hop culture is something that can be auctioned and works closely with former record label executive Monica Lynch⁴ to do so, a critical transformation is occurring. Auctions make clear the transformation of hip-hop history from subject to object, by valuing memorabilia at "what the market will bear," auctions, especially with their global reach, obscure the other forms of value, such as pedagogical value, we might assign to hip-hop artifacts. Auctions also fragment and globally disperse hip-hop's historical artifacts, especially in the case of the items Cindy Campbell and DJ Kool Herc amassed. The 2022 "DJ Kool Herc & The Birth of Hip-Hop" auction by Christies sought to sell 169 items, including Polaroid photographs, promotional event flyers, clothing items, and most significantly Herc's booming 300-watt per channel sound system. While many outlets reported the dollar figure amassed from the sale, we cannot know the identity of the buyers and the future possibilities of these items being brought together or shown in public ever again.

We cannot ignore the impact of commercial auctions, private collections, and wealthy collectors on the preservation of hip-hop culture, as they have no public accountability nor relationships with the public. Without the public mandate of responsible cultural institutions to provide access to cultural artifacts, hip-hop's pedagogical possibilities are significantly eroded. In a sense, auctions and the plethora of private collectors generated by these online auctions pose a risk to the future production of knowledge about hip-hop culture, particularly when private collectors wield the power to withhold artifacts from educators and the general public. The objectification of hip-hop history not only risks a rapid decontextualization of these artifacts in the hands of collectors but also rests in an inverse relationship with access to the public. Our abilities to produce knowledge about hip-hop culture precariously lay in the hands of those not necessarily concerned with educative purposes or the scholarly production of knowledge.

A decolonial approach to hip-hop's archivization presents nuanced frameworks and approaches to confront, mitigate, or eradicate the inherited coloniality that underpins cultural institutions and the production of knowledge in the Western world. Such an approach can mean focusing on the lives and well-being of humans and the earth while deprioritizing reductionist uses of quantitative data and the siloed thinking that informs the supremacy of profit margins and corporate interests. Such an approach must reckon with the increasing relevance of digital platforms which flex algorithmic muscle to influence our access to information and reproduce existing societal bias (Noble 2018; Coleman 2021; Steele 2021). The hip-hop archival state of mind we seek to usher in then is steeped in decolonial

desires to evade the hegemonies of neutrality, objectivity, and tradition, what Mario H. Ramirez calls “semantic markers” of Whiteness (2015: 352).

The authors in this collection concentrate on knowledge production in relation to hip-hop culture globally. There is an investment here in focusing on artists, their objects, and memorabilia, and a commitment to influencing the methods, frameworks, and theories that apply to the archiving of hip-hop culture. Throughout this collection, chapters address practical aspects of the archival process, including modes of preservation, item acquisition, and digitization while also critically analyzing institutional power, community engagement, political leadership, public access, and the more ideological implications associated with hip-hop culture’s enduring tensions with dominant social values. Across the chapters, readers will find that the authors differentiate their spelling of hip-hop; we are intentionally fluid with our approach to the spelling, notwithstanding KRS-One’s concerns in this regard, as articulated in the *Gospel of Hip-Hop* (KRS-One 2009: 42). We would be remiss if we failed to mention the centrality of the February 2020 symposium *Documenting History in Your Own Backyard II: Archiving & Preserving Hip-Hop*,⁵ held at New York University, in providing context and background in the development of this book by bringing together a cross-section of artists, scholars, curators, and archivists.

This project was conceived before the global COVID pandemic transformed our daily lives and its completion during this tumultuous period reflects the resilience and enthusiasm of hip-hop scholars who persist despite upheavals in labor, family relations, and finances, and the pandemic’s uneven impact across communities and nations. For some, the global pandemic signaled seclusion, possibly quiet writing time, whereas for others it ushered in a new sense of precarity with the loss of work, increased screen time on Zoom calls, and decreased childcare supports associated with school closings. With the authors in this collection representing multiple countries and continents, we strived to adapt to their differing constraints and conditions, including the closing of libraries, archives, and museums that form the basis of their research. We are deeply grateful and ecstatic to have the authors in this collection weather the storm of uncertainty that began in early 2020. To paraphrase Nas (2006), the book may not *be on schedule but it’s definitely on time*.

Breakdown

Section 1: Doing the Knowledge

Knowledge, understood as a foundational element in hip-hop culture, is outlined by the Universal Zulu Nation in “Infinity lesson one” of *The Green Book* as “the

foundation of all things in existence” and it is “to know thyself and know others” (Queen Saphire 2000: 14). The concept of knowledge of self, popularized in the late 1980s and early 1990s, involves a potent mixture of street knowledge, spirituality, and political consciousness that heightens one’s awareness to forms of oppression and empowers socially and politically marginalized groups to analyze their social realities and to act with a greater agency (Gosa 2015: 57). If knowledge is the fifth foundational element of hip-hop, who will develop knowledge about hip-hop culture using archives? The artists and authors in this section distinguish how they approach collecting, teaching, curating, and archiving hip-hop, drawing on decades of living within the culture.

Many artists themselves have been prominent in advancing ideas about the culture as some became high school teachers, university professors, or educators in the community, ensuring that hip-hop remains a critical aspect of a learning environment. In this section, educator Kulsoom Anwer Shaikh, youth worker and artist Sergey Ivanov, and archivist-educator Khalid El-Hakim illuminate what is at stake as we take hip-hop’s archival materials into pedagogical settings. Scholars and breakers Mary Fogarty and Jason Noer, while also educators, highlight for us the importance of the experiential and embodied knowledge of dance in the construction of more inclusive archival practices.

In her chapter, Anwer Shaikh explores her high school students’ reflections and writing about various hip-hop exhibitions in Toronto, Canada, explaining how students actively participate in knowledge construction both within and about hip-hop culture. Sergey Ivanov analyzes the unique ways that Russia’s State Library for Young Adults includes hip-hop as a focus in its programming within the contexts of post-Soviet philosophy and culture. Mary Fogarty and Jason “J-Sun” Noer rely on their background as breakers and scholars, assessing the importance of video cassette collections for the historical memory of “B-people” whose histories are largely underrepresented in hip-hop archives. In his chapter, educator and former artist manager Khalid El-Hakim, founder of the Black History 101 Mobile Museum, defines his approaches to archival acquisition, display, and pedagogical strategy, detailing his process of engaging school students and the general public in discussions about Black cultural history from the antebellum period to the hip-hop era.

Section 2: Challenging Archival Forms

One cannot deny the importance of technological change and its impact on curation and archiving. Digital platforms can present serious challenges to aspects of continuity, access, ownership, and the recovery of digital files, even as contemporary digital technologies offer greater speed and storage possibilities when utilized

in online archives. Digital platforms also allow for collaborative efforts in the creation and co-production of rap battles, as Sean Robertson-Palmer explains in his chapter. Robertson-Palmer analyzes how members of the battle rap community collaboratively use digital platforms for online preservation, debate, and community building, exploring the resultant historical narratives and hip-hop knowledge.

Confronting established institutional frameworks, disciplinary limits, and dominant discourses is characteristic of archiving hip-hop, especially when collaborating with institutions that have scaled up, not only in terms of their size but also in their hierarchical formations. Deep community engagement, however, exemplifies the “slow archives” approach (Christen and Anderson 2019) that is intimately connected to local scenes, artists, and other hip-hop stakeholders. In his chapter, Pacey Foster articulates his own ethically conscientious methods for stewarding hip-hop history within a localized context, critically analyzing the transformation of a hip-hop tape collection featuring many of Boston’s pioneers into an archive that is grounded in institutional partnerships with the University of Massachusetts and the Boston Public Library, America’s oldest public library system.

James Gabrillo’s chapter chronicles his ethnographic encounter with legendary Filipino emcee,⁶ Grandmaster PH. Gabrillo analyzes how local Filipino communities have endeavored to keep alive the narrative of the reclusive Grandmaster PH. In this analysis, Gabrillo demonstrates how, in the absence of an official archive, lore, rumor, and oral histories emerge to allow for specific kinds of memory work around the Philippines’ hip-hop history.

Shifting to hip-hop’s visual culture, Jacob Kimvall provides an analytical method to examine and reimagine the politics of archiving graffiti within the contexts of urban renewal and gentrification in Stockholm, Sweden. Kimvall’s use of the notion of a “visual ecology” widens our understanding of archiving hip-hop culture’s graffiti artworks by examining how the ephemerality of the art form affects our thinking about preservation, duplication, and originality.

Giuseppe Pipitone’s personal collection of recorded interviews with various hip-hop pioneering artists, activists, and writers is the focus of his chapter. He takes us through the creation of his “accidental archive,” reinforcing the centrality of orality and oral history as a methodology in shaping emerging notions of the non-traditional archive.

Section 3: Beyond the Nation

The essays in this section more intensely interrogate how nations, as hegemonic geopolitical formations, differently impact hip-hop archives. Owen Kohl and Dragana Cvetanović bring into focus how the dissolution of a nation—in this case, the former Yugoslavia—can influence the formation of an archive or impact

the tangible memory of hip-hop culture. They prioritize the cultural labor of DJs, record digging, and sampling, revealing how microarchives and the dynamic artistic energies of hip-hop practitioners operate within and beyond the contractions and constrictions of the nation (and its crumbling fragments, in this specific context).

Turning to the German context, Leo Schmieding interviews four B-boys from the former German Democratic Republic, elucidating the complexities of political economy, cultural practices, and nationhood under communism and into the unification era. Schmieding's approach privileges the experiences of hip-hop dancers as they make and share public history, in the process constituting a "living archive" by infusing historical artifacts with meaning, especially in the absence of an official archive or museum. As Schmieding's interviewees illustrate, an archival sensibility offers insights about contemporary cultural production and the intricate workings of collective memory.

Within a communist/socialist state formation, Pablo Herrera Veitia analyzes Cuban hip-hop history and its archivization. A key figure in the emergence of *rap Cubano* and a keeper of the nation's hip-hop cultural knowledge, Herrera Veitia finds himself negotiating amongst diverse institutional forces in two vastly different sociopolitical environments in the formation of a Cuban hip-hop archive. His analysis bears witness to the myriad forces in motion, accommodating elements of ideology, political agendas, cultural memory, technology, and institutional access.

Section 4: Institutional Alignments: Interviews and Archival Reflections

The final section brings together the reflections of hip-hop archival professionals who are directly involved with larger institutional archives. In a series of interviews, they provide insights into archival methods, practices, politics, and the details of working with material artifacts as they relate to hip-hop knowledge, memory, and meaning.

Nwaka Onwusa, vice president of curatorial affairs at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (formerly of the GRAMMY Museum), discusses in detail the processes by which hip-hop's historical artifacts are marshaled into prominent institutional exhibitions. She further outlines the intimacies of working with rare artifacts associated with high-profile artists, moving beyond the artists' celebrity status to amplify hip-hop cultural knowledge.

Ben Ortiz, who is a hip-hop practitioner under the name DJ ha-MEEN, brings his lived experience into his work as assistant curator at the Cornell Hip-Hop Collection. As a central figure in framing the Collection's mission and developing it as an important research site, Ortiz details the processes of institutional outreach and archival acquisition among some of hip-hop's earliest pioneers and veterans.

Eschewing traditional town and gown discrepancies, he offers a guide for how to maintain local community engagement while utilizing items directly from Cornell's collection in university course design and instruction.

Working both alongside and outside of traditional archival institutions, Martha Diaz recounts her impressive trajectory of becoming a bonafide trained hip-hop archivist, outlining the acquisition of hip-hop knowledge from her early experience working behind the scenes at *Yo! MTV Raps*, to organizing the first hip-hop film festival, The Hip Hop Odyssey (H2O) International Film Festival in 2002, to her more recent work heading Archives, Education, and Curatorial Affairs at the Universal Hip Hop Museum. Diaz describes navigating between the realms of hip-hop and academia, building bridges, and establishing networks that assist in the education and professional training of future hip-hop archivists.

As hip-hop heads across the globe continue to evolve as archivists, scholars, curators, and collectors, a hip-hop archival praxis is rendered eminently more tangible. We hope that this collection of critical essays and reflections on the early phase of hip-hop's archival turn might ignite further intimate and ethical commitment, fostering an archival state of mind in academia and throughout hip-hop communities worldwide.

NOTES

1. See the Brooklyn Museum's website pertaining to the 2000 exhibit *Hip-Hop Nation: Roots, Rhymes and Rage*, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/746>.
2. See the press release for the *Slowed and Throwed: Records of the City Through Mutated Lenses* for further details, https://camh.org/wp-content/uploads/Slowed-and-Throwed_Press-Release_January-2021.pdf.
3. The turn I refer to here involves the academic attention and abundant scholarly publications that focus on archives across a number of fields, such as heritage studies, performance studies, popular music studies, cultural studies, philosophy, and visual arts.
4. Monica Lynch's career began at the fledgling rap music label Tommy Boy Records when it was founded in 1981. She became president in 1985, a position she maintained for thirteen years, and was key to the career successes of some of hip-hop's most influential acts, including Afrika Bambaataa, Queen Latifah, De La Soul, and Naughty by Nature.
5. The program for the 2020 symposium *Documenting History in Your Own Backyard II: Archiving & Preserving Hip-Hop* can be found at: <https://hiphopeducation.com/events/documenting-history-in-your-own-backyard-ii-a-symposium-for-the-advancement-of-archiving-preserving-hip-hop-culture>
6. Throughout the book both emcee and MC/M.C. are used by chapter contributors in relation to Master of Ceremonies. Likewise, deejay and DJ are used in relation to disk jockey.

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