

Isaiah Colton Thompson

*Widen the Cypher:  
Hip Hop Studies in America and Its Relevance to Historians*

**ABSTRACT:** *This essay explores the utility of history for the field of hip hop studies. It positions early hip hop scholarship as narratives from below, investigates the role of hip hop as a means of communicating memory, and offers insights for future research possibilities. It surveys the works of Patricia Rose, Jeff Chang, Derrick Alridge, and Pero Gaglo Dagbovie. Collectively, these authors suggest the potential for viewing hip hop through history and history through hip hop. The essay argues that historians are largely absent from the developing field of hip hop studies but that their voices would only enrich this already vibrant area of research.*

**KEYWORDS:** *modern history; United States (U.S.); Civil Rights movement; South Bronx; DJ Kool Herc; African American history; hip hop; rap music; cultural history; hip hop studies*

*Introduction*

The beat of hip hop is marching to its own drum, stomping through every border, barrier, and brogue. It fills the airwaves of FM stations; it appears on youth culture playlists; and it is performed at highly attended and celebrated events.<sup>1</sup> Hip hop is a global phenomenon. As a genre, its reach is pervasive, influencing nearly every culture and finding expression on every continent. From Polish hip hop to Ukrainian rap, from Brazilian rhymes to London freestyles, from Turkish raps performed in Berlin to lyrical flows emerging from Canada, even from Chinese songs to African rhymes, hip hop is widespread, and it shows no signs of halting its progress anytime soon.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to say how it will further develop, but scholars are beginning to explore just how it began.

The study of hip hop is certainly gaining academic traction. The established *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* and the recent *Global Hip Hop Studies* journal reveal the growing academic interest in the culture of hip hop. What began as a subject of investigation for a few scholars trudging off the beaten path has now expanded to a wide trail, attracting many travelers. Ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, and

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<sup>1</sup> The 2022 Superbowl half-time show consisted entirely of hip hop performances from Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Eminem, Mary J. Blige, Kendrick Lamar, 50 Cent, and Anderson .Paak.

<sup>2</sup> For global hip hop studies, see Alena Gray Aniskiewicz, "Cultural Remix: Polish Hip-Hop and the Sampling of Heritage" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2019); Adriana N. Helbig, *Hip Hop Ukraine: Music, Race, and African Migration* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014); Derek Pardue, *Ideologies of Marginality in Brazilian Hip Hop* (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2008); Richard Bramwell, *UK Hip-Hop, Grime and the City: The Aesthetics and Ethics of London's Rap Scenes* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Ayhan Kaya, *Sicher in Kreuzberg: Constructing Diasporas: Turkish Hip-Hop Youth in Berlin* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2001); Rebecca J. Haines, "Break North: Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture in Canada," in *Ethnicity, Politics, and Public Policy: Case Studies in Canadian Diversity*, ed. Harold Troper and Morton Weinfeld (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 54–88; Xuan Wang, "'I Am Not a Qualified Dialect Rapper': Constructing Hip-Hop Authenticity in China," *Sociolinguistic Studies* 6, no. 2 (2012): 333–372; and Birgit Englert, "Africa Raps Back: Reflections on Hip Hop from Tanzania and South Africa," in *Crossing Borders: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Africa*, ed. Anne Schröder (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2004), 77–97.

academics of critical theory are all probing the meaning, occurrence, and cultural significance of hip hop. But like the genre—which has its own foundational contributors—the scholarship of hip hop studies has an original cast of thinkers that have highly influenced the now maturing field.

### I. Scholarship

The most widely praised work in hip hop studies, though by no means the earliest, is *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994) by Tricia Rose, a professor of Africana Studies at Brown University. The work itself is highly interdisciplinary or “polyvocal” in nature, according to the author’s description.<sup>3</sup> In her introduction, Rose outlines the multiple theoretical tones contributing to her unique voice. Her work’s underpinnings include “Black cultural theory, urban history, personal experiences, Black feminism, and theories that explore working-class oppositional practices.”<sup>4</sup> In addition to these applied theoretical lenses, Rose presents a diverse range of aims. She remarks that “*Black Noise* examines the complex and contradictory relationships between forces of racial and sexual domination, Black cultural priorities, and popular resistance in contemporary rap music.”<sup>5</sup> Although Rose explores various subtopics, she never strays from her prime concern—hip hop.

*Black Noise* is a foundational work for scholars investigating the genre of rap music, but it lacks a strictly historical take on hip hop. This is no surprise. Rose generously admits that she makes “no claims to offer a complete history of rap music.”<sup>6</sup> Scholars often cite another work alongside *Black Noise* that provides a more thorough history. *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (2005) by journalist and historian Jeff Chang is the leading history of hip hop in America to date.<sup>7</sup> However, this work is somewhat of an anomaly in academic circles. The book is a popular history, regularly assigned for high school reading. But it also appears on the personal library shelves of hip hop academics, and for good reason. Chang’s work is mostly built upon interviews with foundational hip hop influencers. As a journalist with a graduate degree in Asian American Studies from the University of California, Los Angeles, Chang has written a history of hip hop that has gone unquestioned and unrivaled—even by academics—since its debut. In fact, there is no other work of comparable extent that covers the early developments of hip hop.<sup>8</sup> Any serious historiography of hip hop must include

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<sup>3</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and the Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, xii.

<sup>6</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, xii.

<sup>7</sup> Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Derrick P. Alridge and James B. Stewart, “Introduction: Hip Hop in History: Past, Present, and Future,” *The Journal of African American History* 90, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 190–195, here 191,

this work, even with the unique challenges presented to scholars who recognize Chang's work as nonacademic.

In addition to *Black Noise* and *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, several journal articles present informative studies on hip hop. In his work titled "From Civil Rights to Hip Hop: Toward a Nexus of Ideas" (2005), Derrick Alridge, professor of Education at the University of Virginia, examines the historically complex relationship between Civil Rights leaders and hip hop pioneers.<sup>9</sup> He articulates how both generations hold similar values but offer divergent expressions and commitments. His work is suggestive of bridging the ideological gap that often leaves either group on oppositional terrain. In the same journal, Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, a historian at Michigan State University, presents a study exploring hip hop's connection to the legacy of Black history (also 2005).<sup>10</sup> He demonstrates how Black history is reimagined in the time stamps of rap songs and hip hop culture. Surveying lyrics and magazines, he highlights themes of Black history presented in the creative production of rap music, revealing how admired artists often assume the role of public or popular historian.

Collectively, these four distinct works (i.e., by Rose, Chang, Alridge, and Dagbovie) contribute to the developing discourse within hip hop studies, and they demonstrate the relevance and resourcefulness of engaging this genre through history. As a diverse area of inquiry, hip hop studies usually lends history a contributing role, but it rarely takes center stage in the scholarly discussion. In what follows, I provide a historiographical review of these four works, detailing the emergence and historical significance of this globally evolving genre – hip hop. But before anything can be said about its international reach, one must first appreciate its initial rise. Those early figures who sparked a global movement from the Black and Puerto Rican Bronx culture of the 1970s are captured in the works mentioned above, the works to which I now turn.

## II. From Urban Ruin to Artistic Rumbles

The history of hip hop is often presented as a history from below. Rose's scholarship and Chang's historical narrative describe hip hop's genesis as a cultural response emerging from the dark social reality of a New York urban setting – the South Bronx, the original "home of hip hop culture."<sup>11</sup> Chang alludes to this dim existence with his description of New York City's 1977 blackout. He writes that "after dark on July 13, as if an invisible hand were snuffing them, the

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praise Chang's monograph as a historical contribution, stating that "Chang's work offers an oral and narrative history of hip hop and is destined to become a classic in the field of hip hop studies."

<sup>9</sup> Derrick P. Alridge, "From Civil Rights to Hip Hop: Toward a Nexus of Ideas," *The Journal of African American History* 90, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 226–252.

<sup>10</sup> Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, "'Of All Our Studies, History Is Best Qualified to Reward Our Research': Black History's Relevance to the Hip Hop Generation," *The Journal of African American History* 90, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 299–323.

<sup>11</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 30.

streetlights blew out. The city had plunged into a blackout.”<sup>12</sup> The result was complete disarray, especially in the South Bronx. Vandalism, fires, and public disorder swept through the neighborhood. Residents suffered losses; onlookers voiced concern. Rose writes that, “in the national imagination, the South Bronx became the primary ‘symbol of America’s woes.’”<sup>13</sup> The Bronx borough emerged as a dead-end road of social breakdown in the minds of America. According to Rose, “depictions of Black and Hispanic neighborhoods were drained of life, energy, and vitality. The message was loud and clear: to be stuck here was to be lost.”<sup>14</sup> The South Bronx, according to Chang and Rose, was perceived as a backward urban center with little hope for social or economic revitalization.

The 1977 blackout brought national light to the lower-class miseries of the Bronx, but it failed to expose the ties between the spiraling urban situation and the upper-class interests of city planners. Between 1930 and 1960, city officials restructured the Bronx. As Rose explains, Robert Moses, “a very powerful city planner,” introduced a Cross-Bronx Expressway that “cut directly through the center of the most heavily populated working class areas in the Bronx.”<sup>15</sup> During its implementation, over 50,000 homes were demolished and 170,000 residents relocated.<sup>16</sup> Business owners closed their shops and moved with the northward flow of “white-flight” migration.<sup>17</sup> Rose states that “Black and Hispanic residents in the South Bronx were left with few city resources, fragmented leadership, and limited political power.”<sup>18</sup> The construction of the expressway—imagined to connect wide populations—served to isolate the South Bronx and dismantle its social, economic, and political resources. The pathways of upper-class planning hampered the highways of lower-class mobility.

The reordering of the South Bronx stunted the social capital of its youth culture. The younger generation witnessed the deindustrialization of their neighborhoods, inherited communities drained of economic relief, and lived in a dizzying reality of urban decay. Few options for upward mobility existed. As a result of the fractured climate, many joined gangs in the hopes of finding stability. The South Bronx morphed from a topographic order of streets and landmarks to a concrete jungle of gangs and in-group territory. From the Savage Skulls in the south to the Turbans in the east, the Bronx was a gang landscape structured according to rivalry and power.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 31.

<sup>16</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 31.

<sup>17</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 31.

<sup>18</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 43.

Hip hop surfaced in response to the deteriorating urban setting brought on by New York City planners, and it served as a vehicle for reconfiguring the possibilities of urban reality. According to Rose, “life on the margins of postindustrial urban America is inscribed in hip hop style, sound, lyrics, and thematics.”<sup>20</sup> Hip hop created new social pathways that transformed the seemingly stagnant setting of the South Bronx. Rose writes that “hip hop replicates and reimagines the experiences of urban life and symbolically appropriates urban space through sampling, attitude, dance, style, and sound effects.”<sup>21</sup> She further states that “hip hop gives voice to the tensions and contradictions in the public urban landscape during a period of substantial transformation in New York and attempts to seize the shifting urban terrain, to make it work on behalf of the dispossessed.”<sup>22</sup> Hip hop, according to Rose, transformed the Bronx from a borough of ruins to a canvas of artistic possibility.

### III. Hip Hop's "Seven-Mile Cipher"

Hip hop was expressed visually, physically, and sonically throughout the South Bronx. More than a genre, it developed as a sub-culture consisting of several artistic features. Rose identifies hip hop as an “African-American and Afro-Caribbean youth culture composed of graffiti, breakdancing, and rap music.”<sup>23</sup> She argues that these “central forms...developed in relation to one another and in relation to the larger society.”<sup>24</sup> Chang presents a similar perspective on the elemental forms of hip hop culture when writing about an early hip hop influencer, Afrika Bambaataa, who perceived hip hop as consisting of “DJing, MCing, b-boying, and Graffiti Writing.”<sup>25</sup> These separate expressions coalesced to transform the urban setting. Graffiti writers decorated abandoned buildings with unique designs; b-boys clothed concrete slabs with flattened cardboard to perform innovative dance maneuvers; and DJs plugged in sound systems to the once darkened streetlights, powering their speakers, and performing new musical expressions using turntables and techniques of sampling, scratching, and looping.<sup>26</sup>

The DJs were the earliest champions of the hip hop movement. Chang describes the DJ as “the king of the party.”<sup>27</sup> They served as a communal rallying

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<sup>20</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 27

<sup>25</sup> Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 90.

<sup>26</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 51, writes that DJs plugged their equipment directly into street lights: “early DJs would connect their turntables and speakers to any available electrical [sic] source, including street lights, turning public parks and streets into impromptu parties and community centers.”

<sup>27</sup> Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 132.

point, bringing together the hip hop conglomeration of rap, graffiti, and breakdance. As Rose asserts, “in the earliest stages, DJs were the central figures in hip hop; they supplied the break beats for breakdancers and the soundtrack for graffiti crew socializing.”<sup>28</sup> DJs soon emerged as public figures, and they altered the concrete terrain. Rose states that “DJs battled for territories.”<sup>29</sup> The once gang-defined zones of Bronx neighborhoods were revised into a map of DJ influence. DJs came to represent the north, south, east, and west Bronx.

The king of the block was the master of the turntable, and the first musical monarch was a Jamaican-born DJ—Kool Herc. Clive Campbell, eventually known for his stage name Kool Herc, had arrived in New York in 1967 at the age of twelve.<sup>30</sup> As an immigrant from Kingston, Jamaica, Herc was influenced by the tunes and culture of reggae. Chang tells how “DJ Kool Herc spent his earliest childhood years in the same Second Street yard that had produced Bob Marley.”<sup>31</sup> This supports Chang’s claim that Jamaica’s “story is the prelude to the hip-hop generation.”<sup>32</sup> Herc embodies the transition from reggae to hip hop. In the context of Bronx culture, he pioneered new musical performances. His claim to fame stems from his innovative technique called “the Merry-Go-Round.”<sup>33</sup> As Chang describes, “Herc began to work two copies of the same record, back-cueing a record to the beginning of the break as the other reached the end, extending a five-second [instrumental beat] breakdown into a five-minute loop fury.”<sup>34</sup> The beat break became the rhythm of the break dancers, the music of the rappers, and the soundtrack of the graffiti artists.

Herc’s influence sparked a wave of postindustrial art from the underside of cultural influence. As Chang observes, “an enormous amount of creative energy was now ready to be released from the bottom of American society, and the staggering implications of this moment eventually would echo around the world.”<sup>35</sup> But before hip hop went global, it first extended beyond its “seven-mile cipher.”<sup>36</sup> Hip hop pushed against its confinement, creating new pathways of cultural and social exchange. The previously isolated Bronx morphed into a hub of artistic export. Chang describes how live performance cassette tapes of DJ parties “passed hand-to-hand in the Black and Latino neighborhoods of Brooklyn, the Lower East Side, Queens and Long Island’s Black Belt.”<sup>37</sup> The music was

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<sup>28</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 51.

<sup>29</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 53.

<sup>30</sup> Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 72.

<sup>31</sup> Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 79.

<sup>34</sup> Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 79.

<sup>35</sup> Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 82–83.

<sup>36</sup> Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 127.

<sup>37</sup> Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 127–128.

spread by “OJ Cabs that took folks across the city,” according to Chang.<sup>38</sup> Rose also charts the dispersion of hip hop, stating that “it was not long before similarly marginalized Black and Hispanic communities in other cities picked up on the tenor and energy in New York hip hop.”<sup>39</sup> What had begun in the South Bronx was soon witnessed in Chicago, Atlanta, Miami, Houston, and all the way on the other end of the country in Los Angeles.<sup>40</sup> In the short span of a decade, the South Bronx not only transformed itself; it also altered the artistic tone of the nation.

#### *IV. Hip Hop’s Prelude: Black History and Civil Rights*

Hip hop certainly presented new creative expressions, but some rejected this artistic cultural phenomenon. Activists from the Civil Rights era challenged the hip hop trend. According to Chang, “the elders spend a lot of time talking about the glories of the Civil Rights movement, while dismissing the hip-hop generation.”<sup>41</sup> Derrick Alridge’s work on hip hop and the Civil Rights movement considers the divide between the two generations. Like Chang, Alridge asserts that “some activists and scholars of the Civil Rights era criticize the hip hop generation for failing to carry on the struggles of the [Civil Rights movement].”<sup>42</sup> He further suggests that “the two generations have, for the most part, been skeptical, if not outright suspicious of one another, and scholars have tended to portray them in opposition and conflict.”<sup>43</sup> Civil Rights activists perceive hip hop artists as dismissive, and hip hop artists view Civil Rights activists as out of touch with present concerns.

Regardless of their differences, the two generations share many similarities. In his work, Alridge’s expressed aim is to “help the hip hop and Civil Rights generations recognize their common ideology and goals and help facilitate a discourse grounded in a history of ideas found among both generations.”<sup>44</sup> Alridge presents several points that unify the two generations, but his strongest argument centers on African-American self-determination. Stretching back to the transatlantic African diaspora, the author argues that “historically, African Americans’ desire to control their own destinies can easily be traced to the first Africans who resisted enslavement during the Middle Passage and later in North and South America.”<sup>45</sup> This unique self-determination is historically articulated musically. Alridge points out how Blacks used Spirituals and secular music to voice critique against societal structures of injustice. The Blues also served a

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<sup>38</sup> Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 127.

<sup>39</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 60.

<sup>40</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 60.

<sup>41</sup> Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 215.

<sup>42</sup> Alridge, “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop,” 227.

<sup>43</sup> Alridge, “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop,” 227.

<sup>44</sup> Alridge, “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop,” 228.

<sup>45</sup> Alridge, “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop,” 234.

similar function. He argues that this musical form “developed into an epistemology for understanding and articulating Black oppression.”<sup>46</sup> Alridge draws a direct link between the self-determination sung in the Spirituals and Blues and its appearance in hip hop. As he puts it, “hip hop, like the Spirituals...and the Blues emerged from the oppression of African Americans and people of color.”<sup>47</sup> The Spirituals of the Civil Rights movement and the hip hop of youth culture both serve as rallying points for protesting structures of power and racial inequality, and they both stem from the tradition of Black history.

Hip hop is not merely an extension of Black history; it also operates as a reflection and expression of historical memory. Pero Gaglo Dagbovie’s work on history and hip hop highlights this reality. As he claims, many rap artists “make passing references to Black history in their rhymes, videos, and self-presentation.”<sup>48</sup> Their music serves as a cultural touchpoint, inviting youth to interact with history. Musical themes generally revolve around individuals and broad ideas instead of specific events. According to Dagbovie, Black activist Malcolm X (1925–1965) receives extended attention from the hip hop community. Dagbovie suggests that the 1992 Spike Lee film on Malcolm X likely generated this widespread historical interest among American youth.<sup>49</sup> The film’s influence resulted in increased references to Malcolm in rap music, curating a particular hip hop historicity. Malcolm is not the only figure appearing in rap lyrics. Songs and music videos include references to other figures and groups relevant to Black history,<sup>50</sup> including Rosa Parks,<sup>51</sup> the Black Panthers,<sup>52</sup> Harriet Tubman,<sup>53</sup> Frederick Douglass,<sup>54</sup> Clayton Powell, Jr.,<sup>55</sup> and Marcus Garvey.<sup>56</sup> Hip hop provides a unique cultural form of memorializing the past. While history certainly shaped hip hop, rap artists are using their music to mold historical memory.

#### *V. Particular Beginnings and Universal Ends*

Hip hop scholars generally interpret rap music as a cultural and historical response to hegemony. This musical movement is thus distinguished as a form of protest against America’s prevailing trends of power. As Rose articulates, “rappers are constantly taking dominant discursive fragments and throwing them

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<sup>46</sup> Alridge, “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop,” 234.

<sup>47</sup> Alridge, “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop,” 235.

<sup>48</sup> Dagbovie, “Of All Our Studies,” 301.

<sup>49</sup> Dagbovie, “Of All Our Studies,” 304.

<sup>50</sup> Alridge, “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop,” 229–230.

<sup>51</sup> Civil Rights activist (1913–2005).

<sup>52</sup> Black Panther Party (founded 1966).

<sup>53</sup> American abolitionist (unknown date of birth; died 1913).

<sup>54</sup> American abolitionist and preacher (1818–1895).

<sup>55</sup> American Baptist pastor (1908–1972).

<sup>56</sup> Activist and Black nationalist (1887–1940).



into relief, destabilizing hegemonic discourses and attempting to legitimate counterhegemonic interpretations.”<sup>57</sup> Hip hop is the counternarrative to American self-perception. It speaks out against the accepted norms and structures of society. According to Alridge, some forms of hip hop “critique U.S. capitalism, imperialism, racism, and globalization” while also presenting lyrical scrutiny against “discrimination, prejudice, and oppression.”<sup>58</sup> Hip hop is the soundtrack of the underprivileged, the underappreciated, and the historically underrepresented populations of America.

Hip hop is the song of protest, but hip hop scholars voice their own objections against the genre. Instead of offering a purely descriptive work, Rose often comments on hip hop’s shortcomings, especially relating to its crude chauvinism. She writes, “I am thoroughly frustrated but not surprised by the apparent need for some rappers to craft elaborate and creative stories about the abuse and domination of young Black women.”<sup>59</sup> She traces the roots of lyrical misogyny in the broader music industry. The “corporate culture of the music business” encourages sexism.<sup>60</sup> According to Rose, women in the music industry often require support from male “superiors,” without which they are dismissed, receive less pay, and gain little respect.<sup>61</sup> Rose’s style of open critique is witnessed in later hip hop scholarship. Dagbovie advocates for increased historical awareness among hip hop artists, asserting that the overall genre of hip hop is failing to educate the general audience on Black history.<sup>62</sup> He predicts generational transformation through collaborative work between historians and artists.<sup>63</sup> For both Rose and Dagbovie, hip hop is more than a subject of study. It is a landscape of creative opportunity and open appraisal.

Hip hop is also Black. Arguably, Rose’s most impactful contribution to hip hop scholarship hinges on her claim that “rap music is a Black cultural expression that prioritizes Black voices from the margins of urban America.”<sup>64</sup> According to Rose, the cultural and artistic expression of hip hop flows out of the experience of Black humanity. Rose explicitly assigns the ownership of hip hop to Black culture. She perceives rap music as “Black America’s most dynamic contemporary popular cultural, intellectual, and spiritual vessel.”<sup>65</sup> The historical context and emergence of hip hop merit this claim. However, hip hop is not confined to the Black community alone. Rose points out hip hop’s collective implications for society. She

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<sup>57</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 102.

<sup>58</sup> Alridge, “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop,” 226.

<sup>59</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 15.

<sup>60</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 16.

<sup>61</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 16.

<sup>62</sup> Dagbovie, “Of All Our Studies,” 318.

<sup>63</sup> Dagbovie, “Of All Our Studies,” 318.

<sup>64</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 2.

<sup>65</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 19.

states that hip hop has both the ability to “unnerve and simultaneously revitalize American culture.”<sup>66</sup> Rap music emerges with a particular start but advances toward universal inclusion.

### *Conclusion*

Scholars of hip hop reveal optimism for the genre’s overall possibilities. Rose interprets hip hop as a corrective against American hegemony; Chang conceives it as the overcoming expression of disadvantaged voices; Alridge conveys it as the bridge unifying generational division; and Dagbovie suggests its unique function for displaying the very history from which it emerged. These perspectives reveal enthusiasm for hip hop’s functionality. But hip hop is a universal channel, open to any interpretation, ideology, and creed. While it certainly began as a Black and Puerto Rican vehicle of creative expression, it has morphed and expanded. Hip hop includes privileged voices, ultraconservative messaging, and even nationalist sentiment. Further historical research might consider case studies of hip hop’s use in specific localities tied to specific themes. For instance, an in-depth historical study on hip hop and politics, culture, or religion would prove useful in exploring the significance of hip hop. Rap music and identity formation in the present global context might also provide helpful insight. Given that hip hop is tied to history and culture, historians with interdisciplinary interests might apply old lenses of thought to new topics of interest on a local and global scale. What began at South Bronx block parties is now witnessed internationally. And scholars have only recently expressed interest in the topic. Whatever might be said about hip hop scholarship, one thing is certain: the field would benefit from further robust historical investigation. It is time for historians to enter the cypher of hip hop studies.

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<sup>66</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 185.