

Straight Outta English

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What's really good, 'Straight Outta English' readers?

I begin this special issue of *Changing English* on hip-hop culture and pedagogy with a story, followed by a set of connections that lead us to where we need to be in reading.

A couple friends of mine named Furqan and Takbir started an informational gathering that we would refer to as 'The War Report'. In these moments, you could find the two or three of us getting one another up to speed on the happenings of our lives. This tradition dates back at least 10 years, and has manifested itself in a variety of ways: personal visits, group sessions, phone calls, video chats, etc. In relaying to one another the events that any one of us was confronting daily, we have found 'The War Report' to be a way to keep each other healthy, happy and sane through the various difficulties we may be experiencing at any given moment. It has also been a way to share in the joys of life. 'The War Report' has always been a 'report': sometimes bad, but sometimes good. What has brought us together in these moments as family and what has also stood in the background of 'The War Report' is our connection through hip-hop. The title 'The War Report' stemmed from two different hip-hop locations. The first was the Capone N Noriega album entitled *The War Report* (Capone N Noriega 1997). The second was a line from the classic Mobb Deep hip-hop record 'Survival of the Fittest' in which Prodigy states that there's a war going on outside from which no man is safe (Mobb Deep 1995). Thus, the impetus for the title of our connection has been hip-hop. Hip-hop has joined, sustained and bound us in a particular type of brotherhood.

Why discuss this moment around ‘The War Report’? Because it very clearly emphasises the idea of how hip-hop culture has grown to connect and bind us across sands and seas, space and time. In thinking about ‘The War Report’, I wanted to reflect on my understanding of hip-hop at this time. We are in a moment where Chance the Rapper recently won Grammy awards for an album that’s strictly streaming; the first season of the Netflix hip-hop-influenced series *The Breaks* is under way, and I have recently seen the second half of *The Get Down*; Fat Joe and Remy Ma’s album *Plata o Plomo* dropped a few months ago; Remy has also released a record called ‘Shether’, which may very well become a critically important moment in a possible shift of femcee dominance in hip-hop; during the NBA All-Star Weekend, the creator of ‘We The Best’ music – DJ Khalid – performs ... with his own DJ. Both ALL AMERIKKKAN BADA\$\$ and DAMN. are undeniably dope albums driven by the current political climate in the United States. Just Blaze and Swizz Beats put on a beat battle for the people, and strictly for the culture we know and love called hip-hop. Jay-Z shifted the way we listen to hip-hop albums yet again with latest release *4:44*. And hip-hop culture came to a screeching halt upon hearing the news that one of the architects of the New York sound, Prodigy of Mobb Deep, passed away at the young age of 42.

‘The War Report’ also makes me think of N.W.A’s emergence on to the hip-hop scene with ‘Straight Outta Compton’ (N.W.A 1988). I remember first hearing that record by seeing the video early one Saturday morning on Yo! MTV Raps. There was a dark and gritty element that was different from what I was used to in my neighbourhood in Queens, New York. In that visual, these Black dudes wore all black and showed an adverse reaction to and disdain for the police. The sonics and visuals were starkly different from typical East Coast hip-hop at the time. Yet the message was crystal clear from the very second you heard Dr. Dre explain this new type of understanding he called ‘street knowledge’. My mom didn’t realise I was watching this video. She only knew this ‘rap’ stuff was happening and – like most other parents at the time – I think she banked on ‘rap’ dying down like the ‘fad’ people called it back then. But people of my generation were ecstatic when almost 30 years later, the hip-hop group’s biopic *Straight Outta Compton* grossed record movie sales in the telling of the group’s story. What it also did was (re)usher in the idea that anyone could come out of their issues, out of their circumstances, and out of their surroundings to be successful. Anyone could come ‘Straight Outta’ just about anything. Thus, out of a long summer of ‘Straight Outta’ monikers, the impetus for ‘Straight Outta English’ was borne.

In thinking about this special issue for *Changing English*, the initial call for proposals asked scholars to use this space to refer:

to the ways in which hip-hop pedagogy and historical scholarly work in the field has and continues to push forward the way(s) we approach hip-hop scholarship in the 21st century. We always say it is important to take a look back before we take a step forward. Therefore, how does looking back at hip-hop scholarship help us to shape contemporary theory and research moving forward? The goal here is to capture a myriad of viewpoints and voices that speak to the importance and critical relevance of hip-hop scholarship in academia ... thus, ‘Straight Outta English’ will be a journalistic third-space for writers and artists, thinkers and scholars to interrogate and document the rendering and (re)rendering of their entrance to and through hip-hop in relation to the academy.

I am excited that we have been able to offer what we originally set out to do with this special issue. Here are the elements that allowed us to pull it off...

We start off the issue with a walk down hip-hop’s illmatic memory lane with Timothy Welbeck, who guides us through the African-centred roots of a culture that popped off in a Bronx party that no one ever anticipated to be the start of this thing we call ‘hip-hop’. Keenly drawing the lineage between such elements as African dance movements and breaking; Jamaican yard culture DJing and KOOL Herc’s ‘Merry Go Round’ technique; African verbal tonality and the intonation of the contemporary MC to West African and Caribbean influences, ‘People’s Instinctive Travels and the Paths to Rhythms: Hip-Hop’s Continuation of the Enduring Tradition of African and African American Rhetorical Forms and Tropes’ evokes a classic album that also takes us on a journey, travelling through the historical roots and legacy of this culture to get us to where we

are today. Making the historical connections for the culture is important, as it also helps us to evoke the oft-debated fifth element of hip-hop culture: knowledge, or overstanding.

If you ask the first generation of hip-hop practitioners, one of the first things they will tell you is what they were doing wasn't 'hip-hop' when they started. They will also tell you there are a set of 'foundational beats' (a term shared with me by Breakbeat Lou) and sounds that helped to mould the culture we know today. When discussing the origins of hip-hop, one cannot help but to reflect upon the 'breakbeats', original records and rare grooves that have fuelled the culture's soul through sampling. One of those foundation beats that sparked the forest fire we call hip-hop was 'Apache'. It is one of the most recognisable breakbeats ever; you can catch Carlton Banks rockin' out to it on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (25Robbo25 2012). So it seems appropriate that in 'Upon Watching *Sample This*', Tara Betts reviews the documentary that keenly discusses the making of the record 'Apache' by The Incredible Bongo Band. The visual moment of a song that has fed hip-hop samples from artists such as Nas, Missy Elliott and others, is one that requires reflection, but also allows for a deeper understanding of what Breakbeat Lou would call a 'foundational record': a song played by Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and Grand Master Flash at the initial parties of the culture in the Bronx.

The beats were always used by the first Sound Shaman of hip-hop: the DJ. With this in mind, the co-authored article by Carmen Kynard and me entitled 'Sista Girl Rock: Women of Colour and Hip-Hop Deejaying as Raced/Gendered Knowledge and Language' introduces and situates a seldom-tread subject: the role and contribution of women DJs in the testosterone-filled genre called hip-hop. Grounding the analysis in the interviews of six women DJs – Spinderella, Kuttin Kandi, Pam the Funkstress, Reborn, Shorty Wop and Natasha Diggs – 'Sista Girl Rock' privileges the words and ideas of these visionary cultural practitioners as foundational knowledge. The primary text becomes the knowledge these women present and (re)present, and is paramount in (re)envisioning the ways we view participants of hip-hop culture as the purveyors of knowledge. From this source, we connect various locations of scholarship that exemplify the ways these women operate, flourish and maintain as twenty-first century multimodal thinkers and scholars in a mostly male-dominated industry. These women DJs help us to make sense of how we construct and validate knowledge from a specific perspective and through the particular lens they have constructed.

As the sound was coming to life, so too was the artistic and visual landscape of the culture. In the mix, the soundtrack truly inspired and invigorated the aura around visual creations. In 'Counter-buffing: A Visual Criticism of Guerrilla Advertising', Robb Conrad Lauzon and Laquana Cooke address the various ways corporate culture covertly and overtly takes cues – and in some instances, blueprints – from the visual aesthetic of graffiti and hip-hop culture. What happens when graffiti-style visual marketing presents itself as a means of 'counter-buffing': the subversive erasure – or even overwriting – of the dominant images and inscriptions to reclaim space, images and messages, and to 'cut through the noise' of the dominant corporate culture?

While graffiti was the large-scale visual of the day, a more localised partnership was being forged between soundsmith and wordsmith. As the idea of the emcee emerges, one of the first categories that hip-hop heads gravitate towards is 'flow'. In visualising the complexity of flow by examining Mos Def, Nas and Beyoncé alongside Smitherman, Gilyard and McCourt, David Green's 'Flow as a Metaphor for Changing Composition Practices' strives to understand students' investment in seeing themselves as more fluid writers by unpacking the variety of ways in which one's 'flow' can manifest through both one's cultural and academic voices.

The remaining articles in the issue move towards a futuristic hybridity and forward-thinking position. Often during hip-hop's early years, the sub-culture was labelled as a fad, a passing phase, or this 'thing that'll be around for a moment or so. They'll get tired of it soon...' Forty years later, we can clearly see hip-hop's twenty-first-century presence is both profound and expansive. It is so far-reaching that we find an avid hip-hop head crafting a musical to tell the story of one of the founding fathers of the United States: Andrew Hamilton. Thus, in 'Who Tells Our Story: Intersectional Temporalities in *Hamilton*, an American Musical', Andie Silva and

Shereen Inayatulla engage in a conversation rooted in various aspects of scholarly discourse. 'Who Tells *Our Story*' talks about a hip-hop-based musical that doesn't even argue its legitimacy as 'hip-hop-based'; it simply assumes that it is functioning within American culture, so that the hip-hop musical becomes 'the American musical'. This 'American musical' is then opened up to critiques around race, class, gender, sexual orientation and immigration from a historic as well as a contemporary perspective.

Moving off the stage and on to the screen, 'Black Feminist Hip-Hop Rhetorics and the Digital Public Sphere' finds Regina Duthely navigating how Black female cyber-forward hip-hop heads are making sense of Gwendolyn Pough's idea of 'catching wreck' in the posts, comments and cyber-manoeuvring of the Crunk Feminist Collective (CFC). The ways in which the members of the CFC dialogue to combat, defuse and even annihilate hetero-discriminatory norms confirm the presence of a movement – whether face-to-face or virtual – through which Black feminist ideals challenge racist and misogynist cyber-culture.

As the culture started with a beat and a soundsmith, it comes full circle and ends with the ideas presented to us through soundsmith techniques. Kyesha Jennings and Emery Petchauer are truly rockin' in the mix. 'Teaching in the Mix: Turntablism, DJ Aesthetics and African American Literature' demonstrates how strategies like blending Malcolm X from his visual and sonic past to our multimodal present and dropping K. Dot (aka Kendrick Lamar) right on beat with Ralph Ellison makes the journey the DJ takes with a crowd a critical and poignant framework for how African American literature classes can be (re)structured, (re)contextualised and (re)claimed in 2017.

While we are excited to look at the ways that hip-hop is living and breathing in the academy, it is vital that a hip-hop-centred journal issue includes the voices of cultural practitioners who live hip-hop daily. I spoke with veteran visual and graffiti artist Maria 'TOOFLY' Castillo, party-rockin' Krystal 'DJ Shorty Wop' Baez, and the supreme wordsmith Sharif 'Reef the Lost Cauze' Lacey. Each of these artists represents an element of the culture that interweaves a conversation throughout this special issue entitled 'Straight Outta English'. In many respects, that was and continues to be the goal: to create a space both outside and within the academy where we may join in conversation about our beloved culture. Special shout out to all the authors, contributors and submitters. Good lookin' out to homie A. Vee on the 'Straight Outta English' image – and an extra special thanks to Susan Fischer and John Yandell for the opportunity to make this issue happen.

That's 'The War Report', my friends. Enjoy the read with all the sounds, the sights and the words. Until the next go-round...

Peace and Love.

Acknowledgements

'Straight Outta English' Image by Alix Val for VeesignsGraphics.

This Special Issue is dedicated to Albert 'Prodigy' Johnson. We miss you, Science.

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