

Ill Communication: Hip Hop Studies & Sound Studies @ Show And Prove

Jennifer Stoever 

Blog post published September 21, 2010 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/apjdn-mx606>

Abstract

This past Saturday, I got up before dawn and bussed it into New York City to attend Show and Prove , a conference on “the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities of hip hop studies in practice,” organized by my friend and colleague, Imani Kai Johnson. The conference was excellent—intense, earnest, and busting at the seams with ideas—and was one of the few in recent memory that left me energized and ready to put pen to paper ASAP.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Music History and Culture (Topic), Aesthetics, Article, Black Studies, Conferences, Diasporic Sound



Recommended citation

Stoever, J. (2010, September 21). Ill Communication: Hip Hop Studies & Sound Studies @ Show And Prove. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/apjdn-mx606>

Copyright

Copyright © Jennifer Stoever 2010. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

"The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself" –bell hooks, quoted by d. Sabela Grimes at Show and Prove, 9.18.10



This past Saturday, I got up before dawn and bussed it into New York City to attend [Show and Prove](#) , a conference on “the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities of hip hop studies in practice,” organized by my friend and colleague, [Imani Kai Johnson](#). The conference was excellent—intense, earnest, and busting at the seams with ideas—and was one of the few in recent memory that left me energized and ready to put pen to paper ASAP. In fact, I scratched out the rough draft of these lines in my notebook on the bus ride home, all Eminem *8 Mile*-style. So embedded somewhere in my words will inevitably be the thick chug of the engine, the squeaky bounce-bounce of the shocks, the ocean-like roar of (the)17, and the steady tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk of hip hop pumping from my fellow commuter’s earbuds. Across the bus aisle, this secondhand beat called to me and challenged me to think about ways that sound studies can reach across the (inter)disciplinary aisle to hip hop (and vice versa). So that’s where my head’s at right now: what does sound studies bring to hip hop’s platform? And what does hip hop offer in return?

I should say first off that I don’t necessarily see an intellectual conflict between these two fields—although [Norma Coates’](#) 2008 [Cinema Journal](#) piece, “[Sound Studies: Missing the \(Popular\) Music for the Screens?](#)” makes a compelling case for institutional turf wars on the horizon between sound studies, media studies, and popular music study writ large—I actually came to sound studies through hip hop, and obviously haven’t left hip hop behind (and neither has *Sounding*

Out!: peep [Liana Silva](#) and [Scott Poulson-Bryant's](#) recent posts). Among the many things that hip hop has done for me and to me—personally, socially, and politically—was to open my ears to all sorts of amazing and important sounds, which eventually translated academically into frustration with the limits of popular music study back in the early 2000s. I found many texts that deconstructed hip hop lyrics and visual imagery, parsed MC's personas, dropped some socio-historical science, and traced capitalist networks like you wouldn't believe, but when it came down to the constitutive element of the medium itself, the sonic art through which it devoted itself to moving heads, hearts, *and* butts simultaneously, there was silence (and not because [Doug E. Fresh](#) said so).

Outside of [Tricia Rose's](#) landmark chapter on “flow, layering, and rupture” in 1994's *Black Noise*, I found precious few texts that were willing or able to engage with the primary way in which hip hop put in *work* “if not in the word, in the sound” as [Frederick Douglass](#) once put it a long time ago. Hip hop was, true to its word, bringing the noise, and traditional music studies wasn't making meaning of it in even part of the way that hip hop audiences were. To signify on [Shante Smalls's](#) comment at Show and Prove in reference to trying to teach Murs's “*Dark Skinned White Girl*” to an NYU class, hip hop sounded to popular music scholars just like a guy talking over some beats—all flattened out. So I strapped on my headphones night after night, trying to fill this void by listening and writing, writing and listening. You can read my early attempts in a discography of Los Angeles hip hop called “[Audible Angels](#)” I published online in 2004, in which I tried to capture the sonic signature of each artist I wrote about, integrating it with their vocal style, lyrical themes and historical and regional context. The fact that one of the artists in the discography sent me a remastered version of their record based on some of my commentary not only suggested that I did a halfway decent job, but also that the artists themselves are clamoring for scholars to take their sound as seriously as they do.

Because of the bus, my experience at the conference was shorter than I would have liked, so I can't remotely claim full coverage (I am especially sorry to have missed [Antonio T. Tiongson, Jr.'s](#) talk on Filipino DJs and contemporary U.S. racial formations, which I know would have (re)mixed sound, race, and hip hop, hamster style), so I will have to sample the bits and bytes that I did hear.

In a panel on “Methodology, Pedagogy, and Educational Practice,” [M.C. K-Swift](#) talked about the sonic differences between standard English, Black English, and Hip Hop English and what it means to code switch between all three. [Johan Söderman](#) discussed similar issues about hip hop in Sweden, especially the way in which hip hop enables marginalized Swedish youth to sound and signify differently in the same language.

In the panel I moderated, “Aesthetic Dimensions of Hip Hop”—in which there were amazing papers by [Naomi Bragin](#) on [popping](#) in Northern California's East Bay and [Jessica Pabón](#) on the “feminist masculinity” of [female graffiti in Brasil](#), Mexico, and the US—sound was largely a shadow presence, animating limbs, accompanying film, and being punctuated by muscle pops and krypton hisses. Jens Althoff discussed 1970s samples briefly in his talk on the influence of blaxploitation cinema on hip hop but there was really only one paper that explicitly addressed sound, [Joshua Bennett's](#) “I Love it When You Call Me Big (Poppa).” Bennett used Barthes' “[The Grain of the Voice](#)” to give an evocative and nuanced reading of the “palpable sense of surplus” in Notorious B.I.G.'s voice, the

way in which his heavy timbre comes together with his “wheezing undertone” to re-present his corporeal body as superabundant rather than substandard.

Finally, in the afternoon, I was fascinated by [Nicole Hodges Persley](#)’s exploration of the sound of cross-racial appropriation both in her paper, “People in Me” and in her performance, in which she used both voice and gesture to represent a white suburban teen, a young Asian graffiti writer from Silverlake, and a Senegalese student drawn to the U.S. by hip hop. Persley raised important questions about who has “the right to talk black” while addressing the pleasures and the politics of using the body as a remixing agent and translator of hip hop, accent, culture and immigrant experience.

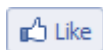
So of course I came to Show and Prove eager to take in some talk about sound—and I wouldn’t say I was disappointed. Surprised (slightly) and challenged (totally), but not disappointed. Sound wasn’t as center stage as I expected, but it certainly wasn’t marginalized either. Instead, it was ubiquitous; sound in hip hop studies seems to be taken for granted in the same way that vision is just about everywhere else. Although hip hop is understood to be an audio-visual art, its organizing metaphors are sonic: remixing, sampling, scratching, and Dj-ing all describe sonic phenomena as well as aural frameworks for understanding the world. The way in which hip hop studies take sound for granted presents both a lesson and an opportunity for sound studies.

While I had been hoping to hear more papers that brought the conversation back around to the beat, I felt that all the papers spoke through it, even if the topic reached beyond it to bodily movement, visual culture, theatre, and pedagogy. And that is where I think hip hop studies asks sound studies to step up its game—to take seriously sound’s intersection with the other senses, using sound as a jumping off point and not always a final destination. In [Jeff Chang](#)’s *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip Hop*, dancer [Rennie Harris](#) described bodily movement as “just the last manifestation of sound,” which blew my mind, because even though sound and motion are so fluidly entangled, we usually talk about them as if they are separate entities.

On the flip side, one of the things that distinguishes sound studies from popular music study is its methodology—the way in which sound is treated as an active process, a way of thinking and being, rather than solely an object of study. And this methodology is what I think sound studies can offer hip hop studies—a sustained conversation on listening in a multiplicity of forms. Listening practices are what knits the different elements of hip hop together, what links artist to producer to audience, sometimes in the very same body at the very same time. What happens when we think of hip hop artists as listeners? What if we viewed them not only as producers of tracks but also of listening practices? Is there such a thing as hip hop listening? If so, what are its ethics and aesthetics? How might hip hop listening practices impact and feed into the various modes of hip-hop performance in music and beyond: dance, cinema, theatre, literature, graphic design?

So, while hip hop studies and sound studies have quite a bit to show and prove to each other, I can’t be the only one eager for the collabo.





Featured Image by Michael Coughlin, [CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED](#)