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The Global Drumbeat: Permeations of Hip Hop Across Diverse Information Worlds

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Abstract

This article outlines the scope and significance of a special issue of The International Journal of Information, Diversity & Inclusion (IJIDI) dedicated to exploring the intersections of hip hop and the field of library and information sciences. The co-guest editors, Kafi Kumasi and André Brock, describe their respective research trajectories to help illuminate what constitutes a hip hop epistemology of LIS knowledge. This issue demonstrates that there are many robust conceptual access points for better understanding the LIS field through the lens of Hip Hop including areas like computational neuroscience, copyright, and data science. The research articles are complimented by: two reports from the field; a creative section, which includes three poems; and a book review of two hip hop themed texts.

Keywords: computational neuroscience; copyright; data storytelling; editorial; hip hop; library cultural programming

Publication Type: editorial

Introduction

The title of this special issue employs the terms “global drumbeat” and “information worlds” to connect hip hop to the field of library and information sciences (LIS). First, global drumbeat recognizes the liberatory, spiritual, and celebratory African roots of hip hop, an American-born music form that has become global as the most revenue-generating genre of all music types (McIntyre, 2017). Historically, a drum’s beat signifies a primal cultural response that traditional societies worldwide use to privilege sound as an informational tool to heighten communication, knowledge, and kinship. In Africa, drums hold a deeper, more symbolic and historical significance than other cultures (Gaines, 2018). The drum heralds home-coming and home-going; drums accompany religious rites and rituals, calling ancestral spirits. The drum also heralds political activity. A case in point, following the 1739 Stono Rebellion, American colonial governments, fearful of enslaved rebellions and uprisings, outlawed enslaved Africans from using drums for ceremonies, entertainment, or communication (Stanley, 2020).

Second, the term “information worlds” connects hip hop to LIS because hip hop was birthed in a similar “small world” information context that Elfreda Chapman (1999), an African American LIS scholar, discussed in her “life in the round” theory that she developed from her study of the everyday information behaviors of prison populations. Indicative of a life in the round, hip hop represents a small information world that contains its own unique cultural norms which have

been codified into nine elements: breaking, emceeing, graffiti art, deejaying, beatboxing, street fashion, street language, street knowledge, and street entrepreneurship (e.g., trade and business) (KRS-One, as cited in Charoun, 2018). To be sure, hip hop means much more than rap music in today's society. As pioneer rapper KRS-One noted, "hip hop is not just a music, it is an attitude, an awareness, a way to view the world" (KRS-One, as cited in Charoun, 2018).

Although hip hop started within the informal, small world information contexts of day parties in the Bronx (New York, U.S.) during the 1970s, the genre has developed a much broader border-crossing capacity than suggested in Chatman's theory. The crossover appeal of hip hop as "Black Cool" (Walker & Gates, 2012) permeates everything from mainstream television advertisements like The Kroger Company's playing of Flo Rida's song "Low" to tell customers how to get the lowest prices on fresh products, to President Barack Obama gesturing to "brush his shoulders off" to give a nod to an urban colloquialism popularized by rapper Jay-Z. The imprint of hip hop can be found in every major modern culture well beyond Urban Black America, from Asia to Europe, South America, and every corner of the earth. In this sense, hip hop's ability to permeate and permute diverse information worlds in an amoeba-like fashion speaks to its powerfully compelling message about agency and aesthetics. In the scientific sense, amoebas do not form into a single taxonomic group; instead, they are found in every major lineage of eukaryotes. Like an amoeba, hip hop has a unique ability to extend, retract, and to most notably reshape the normative behaviors that occur in diverse information worlds.



Figure 1. "The Global Drumbeat." Ghanaian Drums. Source: Africa Travel Times, 2020. [Used with permission.]

Scope and significance

As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, there are multiple entry points for understanding the intersections of hip hop and the field of LIS. Our goal with guest editing this special issue is to illuminate how hip hop, as a cultural art form, can afford LIS scholars fresh new ways of constructing knowledge. This call is especially pertinent in areas that have grown stagnant due to the same theoretical lenses being applied to study the same kind of research problems in the LIS field. In short, we call for LIS scholars to leverage hip hop as a way to bring a “brand new flava in ya ear,” as the late rapper Craig Mack said in his hit record, *Flava In Ya Ear* (1994).

We are considering the question: What constitutes a hip hop epistemology of knowledge in LIS? To help understand this phenomenon, we offer examples from our respective points of entry as guest editors of this special issue.

Kafi Kumasi’s recent work, “Getting INFLOmation” (2021), connects hip hop culture to a range of understudied yet highly creative youth information behaviors that are often overlooked within mainstream scholarly discourse. Kumasi contends that this oversight mirrors how hip hop’s contribution to humanity has been undervalued, mainly due to systemic racism. Only recently have hip hop’s Black and Latinx founders begun to receive proper recognition for the many technological advances they pioneered in music (e.g., sampling, breakbeat engineering techniques) and the broader impact that hip hop’s Black cultural aesthetic has had on mainstream America’s collective identity formation (Chideya, 1999). To that end, Kumasi’s research affirms and celebrates the culturally specific literacies that hip hop culture has spawned within Black and brown youth communities. Looking forward, her work aims to show how new media takes on hip hop culture’s Black aesthetic, discourse, and technical infrastructure—not the reverse.

Kumasi’s InFLOmation model is an analytic framework that features three descriptive categories: Rhythm, Rhyme, and Remix (R3). The R3 categories capture a range of creative information practices that contemporary youth engage in during their everyday lives and especially in digital spaces. Kumasi argues that these practices can be better understood by juxtaposing them to one or more of the nine elements of hip hop. As Kumasi explains in her 2018 article, “InFLOmation: A Model for Exploring Information Behavior Through Hip Hop”, this framework was developed in response to the cultural blind spots detected within a report of youth digital media practices called HOMAGO- *Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media* (Ito, 2010).

In particular, Kumasi (2018) suggests that HOMAGO’s descriptive categories “hanging out” and “messaging around” are culturally incongruent with the racialized realities of being a youth of color. Many youths of color are not granted the same presumption of childhood innocence and naiveté as their white counterparts when they are “hanging out” or “messaging around” (Groenke et al., 2015). Instead, youths of color are disproportionately killed by police or other so-called “authority” figures with impunity despite being unarmed and in spaces they have every right to occupy. Therefore, Kumasi intentionally chose language derived from hip hop culture (e.g., vibin’, flowin’, jammin’) to describe the information behaviors outlined in her R3 framework. In this sense, a hip hop epistemology of LIS might entail scholars intentionally using culturally congruent naming conventions in their analytic frameworks that fall within Black English Vernacular (BEV) to study youth information behaviors.

Further, what distinguishes some of the most renowned rappers is their ability to weave complex concepts together with a level of verbal dexterity that simultaneously uses BEV combined with clever literary devices while telling a story with an engaging vibe that moves the crowd. Harnessing this sort of engagement was one of Kumasi's goals in her recent book chapter (2021) entitled, "Getting InFLomation": A Critical Race Theory Tale from the School Library," which is featured in the groundbreaking book *Knowledge Justice Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory* (Leung & Lopez-McKnight, eds., 2021).

With "Getting InFLomation" (2021), Kumasi leveraged one of hip hop's most endemic practices—storytelling—to connect K-12 school library pedagogy to the academic body of knowledge known as Critical Race Theory (CRT). Influenced by hip hop's appropriative ethos, Kumasi samples a literary technique from a fictional text that uses artifacts to construct its narrative. The protagonist in Kumasi's story, Jamal, is a high school senior who wears locs, listens to hip hop music, and is a Harvard-bound scholar-athlete. The artifacts Kumasi used to build Jamal's story ranged from text messages and tweets to official K-12 and college-level correspondences. These popular artifacts of communication speak to hip hop's ability to reflect what is happening in contemporary times. Kumasi foregrounds Jamal's voice to disrupt stereotypes that suggest Black males who embody hip hop sensibilities could not also unpack dense CRT concepts such as "whiteness as property" in their everyday interactions with teachers, school librarians, family, and friends. Kumasi's chapter was well-received among her LIS graduate students and colleagues, leaving her confident that hip hop epistemologies can enrich and enliven LIS scholarly discourses into the future.

Andre Brock's research has recently turned towards theorizing Black informational identity, specifically through Black digital and cultural expertise. In his book, *Distributed Blackness* (2020), Brock contends that there are a set of beliefs, or "technoculture", powering Black identity formation through technology use, design, and dissemination: Blackness, intersectionality, invention/style, America/the African Black Diaspora, modernity, and the future. For this issue, invention and style directly reference hip-hop's capacity for aesthetic invention, innovation, and information transfer. The matrix element of invention/style comes directly from Brock's research into Black digital cultures; invention is as essential to Black technoculture as it is to Black culture's aesthetic influence in the West overall. Black aesthetics are intensely libidinal and performative, drawing as they do on Black sociality, the communitarian ethos of diasporic Blackness, and the libidinous concept of "excess of life" as redress for the depredations of modernity and labor capitalism. These qualities also distinguish Black technological practice from Western technological practice—that is, for Black technoculture, utility and efficiency are not the ultimate aims.

In the Black technocultural matrix, there is a close analogue between Black technoculture and Black music genres. For example, Brock cites Ronald Walcott's explanation that the music genre, the blues, is a genre that is "a struggle to order that space into a distinctive and comprehensive style, a style all the more distinctive for its unstinting generosity of spirit and unflinching faithfulness to the complexities of human experience; and comprehensive because it is the product of a vision that accommodates a tragicomic sensibility" (Walcott, 1972, p. 10, as cited in Brock, 2020). If this sounds nothing like the rationalistic and imperialist aims of Western and American racial ideology, that is no accident. The blues are in dialogue with Western aims not as resistance or accommodation but as relation. Hip hop functions in a similar fashion. Walcott's definition of style also includes how persona and style can become understood as a control over space and time: style is "to inhabit so completely the space one does have, and to inhabit it so

individually, that one does not need to go outward toward the corridor of time to discover possibility. For one has found it, in one's own depths" (Walcott, 1972, p. 11, as cited in Brock 2020). Brock finds that same blues spirit and style as the essence of hip hop.

Roadmap to the Issue

In this issue, three authors (Kakimoto, Lund, and Eglash) contribute conceptual papers that “flip the script” of the traditional approach of studying the user in the life of the library towards, instead, analyzing “the library in the life of the user” (Weigand, 2003). Together, Kakimoto, Lund, and Eglash make unique connections between hip hop and domains of knowledge that are more tangentially tied to LIS, such as copyright (Kakimoto), data storytelling (Lund), and perhaps most peripherally, computational neuroscience (Eglash). By contrast, Anderson et al. and Kabongo et al. represent reports from the field that make explicit connections between hip hop and LIS, focusing on library programs that take place within brick-and-mortar spaces and fit within the traditional “library as place” concept (Buschman & Leckie, 2007). As guest editors, we deliberated on how to classify the conceptual articles and whether the designation of “research” would be fitting since they do not report on the results of research conducted in a traditional scientific fashion. However, due to the fact that hip hop has its own rich onto-epistemological knowledge construction process that is rooted in ethnoknowledge and cultural practices that are not often sanctioned in mainstream scholarly venues, we reasoned that these articles merit the designation of “research” as a way to further deconstruct disciplinary barriers to build new knowledges around the study of hip hop and LIS.

For example, in Brady Lund's article, “The Art of (Data) Storytelling: Hip Hop Innovation and Bringing a Social Justice Mindset to Data Science and Visualization”, he contends that the beauty of the art of data storytelling is its power to promote social justice themes by reflecting on the effectiveness of narrative in hip hop music. Despite data science being a nascent field within LIS, Lund points out that LIS scholars have numerous means to analyze the data they work with (e.g., patron statistics, finances, subscriptions) in more informative and creative ways. Using hip hop lyrics to bolster his claims, Lund addresses the hidden bias that can easily creep into data storytelling as information organizations become increasingly data-driven and certain narratives emerge above others due to the systemic inequities among those who are analyzing the data.

Ron Eglash's article, “Hip Hop as Computational Neuroscience: How the Hood Hacked our Global Rhythmic Nervous System”, conceptualizes several complex concepts that bring a unique information science approach to understanding music and the analog versus digital division that hip hop artists experimented with in deliberate ways. Eglash draws from the field of computational neuroscience to unpack how hip hop innovators pioneered new sounds (e.g., breakbeats, scratches, and remixes) such that the artists effectively rewired the world's global rhythmic nervous system for new cognitive, cultural, and political alignments and (notably Afrofuturistic) sensibilities. Eglash presents a variety of mathematical models as evidence to support his thesis that hip hop independently created a set of cognitive-acoustic practices and terminologies that merged left-brain digital communication and right-brain analog communication in ways not previously performed.

Third, and finally from the set of conceptually oriented pieces, is Krystal Kakimoto's article, “Copyright Remix (It's Tricky): Sampling to Revitalize U.S. Copyright Law”. This article brings a necessary perspective to ongoing conversations about music ownership and sharpens the critical analysis around hip hop's methodological investments. The article reads as both a brief primer

on copyright law and a call to action for readers to reimagine the existing copyright laws in music, which require payment to create new work in relation to art, which has different reuse standards.

In the *Reports from the Field* section, we feature two articles that bring a hip hop flair to the idea of fieldwork, which is traditionally defined as work done outside of a lab or classroom setting. The Anderson et al. and Kabongo et al. articles advance the idea of fieldwork by highlighting the different ways formal and informal learning can happen in third spaces that center around notions of community building, entertainment, and lifelong learning. Jill Anderson, Ralph McDaniels, and Kim McNeil Capers' article, "The Power of Hip Hop and the Library: Narrative, Echoing the Global in the Local, and Connection", explores the value and complexities of hip hop beyond the music by presenting three new themes in relation to Queens (NY) Public Library hip hop programming. Notably, one of the authors, Ralph McDaniels, is a legendary DJ, VJ, producer, and pioneer hip-hop personality known as "Uncle" Ralph McDaniels (Braiker, 2022). Uncle Ralph is currently serving as the inaugural Queens Library Hip Hop Coordinator.

Moving from the public library to the academic library, Jonathan Kabongo, Craig Arthur, and Freddy Paige's article outlines a program called *Dusty & Digital Media Literacy Workshops: VTDITC's Replicable Approach to Teaching the Hip Hop Arts*. Kabongo, Arthur, and Paige provide a sample lesson from a large, extensive set of more than 150 community-based media literacy workshops designed, taught, and assessed with the VTDITC community in the past half-decade. The authors share their equipment choices and annotations for the lessons shared that can help demystify teaching hip hop arts for non-practitioners and practitioners alike. Embedded in the VTDITC model is the idea that one's personal interests are worthy of academic study. This article complements the conceptual pieces in this special issue nicely because it provides entry-level coverage of key concepts such as digital and analog formats, which lend towards greater accessibility in understanding hip hop applications to lifelong learning initiatives in libraries. Moreover, the authors list the technologies used to carry out the lessons and invite correspondence from readers to keep the metaphorical global drumbeat of hip hop flowing in the LIS scholarly community.

Because hip hop is such an intertextual art form, this special issue would not be complete without text being expressed as the artistic contributions of three poems and a compelling book review of two recently published hip hop themed texts. The poems are an essential contribution because street language and street knowledge are two of the nine elements of hip hop. Poetry in hip hop is a street language that communicates and translates street knowledge in such a way that one's being is expressed as agency and identity in rap, lyrics, cipher, song, and literature. Poetry threads an intersectionality between hip hop and LIS; poetry is an essential knowledge-based literary form that articulates identity, experience, and story. For example, Vanessa Irvin, a career-long public librarian, LIS scholar, and author of the award-winning LIS text, *The Readers Advisory Guide to Street Lit* (ALA Editions, 2012), contributes the poem "This jawn right here called street lit" which paints a vision of what text feels like when lived. The poem "here" is a powerful, quiet storm contributed by akua naru, an American Black woman who has made a name for herself as Europe's premier female hip hop MC with four albums (produced 2012-2018) to her credit thus far. naru has served as a Nasir Jones Fellow, Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, Harvard University (2018-19), a Race and Media Fellow as well as Artist-in-Residence at the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America, Brown University (2019-2021), and is currently serving as the 2022 Mellon Artist/Practitioner Fellow at the Yale Center

for the Study of Race, Indigeneity, and Transnational Migration. Michelle Jones, the Head of Reference Services and Professor of Library Science at Columbus State University in Georgia (U.S.), contributes a very meaningful piece entitled “Hood Dreams: Literacy 4 Survival”, which is an apt punctuation to the theme of our special issue. Jones’ poem encapsulates the intimate connection that hip hop has with literacy practices in libraries, highlighting the importance of information being represented fairly and correctly in Black life.

Jose Guererro, a cataloging librarian from California (U.S.), reviews two books that deal with sampling, rap, and hip hop writ large. The first book is Jarett Kobek’s *Do Everything Wrong! XXXTentacion Against the World* (We Heard You Like Books, 2018) described by Guerrero as “a short but challenging book on a very challenging individual.” The second is Zach Schonfeld’s *24-Carat Black’s Ghetto: Misfortune’s Wealth* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), which is the story of an obscure band and album that are now staple-sampling material. Readers can glean insights from these texts on issues of race, economic exploitation, and ethical concerns around digital archives.

Additional Resources

While editing this special issue, we came across several hip hop and LIS resources that leave us feeling confident that cross-fertilization is happening between these seemingly disparate knowledge domains (e.g., Leach, 2008; The hip hop Library Consortium, 2017; Boston, 2020). We are especially pleased to see the work happening at the Library of Congress (LOC) with the Innovator in Residence Program (see <https://labs.loc.gov/about/opportunities/innovator-in-residence-program>). Namely, in FY 2020, data visualization artist, Brian Foo, was named Library of Congress’ *Innovator in Residence*. During his residency, Foo created the application Citizen DJ, which enables the public to discover and create from the LOC’s free-to-use sound collections (Library of Congress, 2020). Also, Marcyliena Morgan, founder of the Hip Hop Archive and Research Institute (HARI) (which currently lives at Harvard University) is currently featuring a new collection, the Classic Crates collection. This collection features 200 of the most influential hip hop albums in their original vinyl format (see <http://hiphoparchive.org/projects/classic-crates>).

Georgia (U.S.) Tech’s Digital Integrative Liberal Arts Center houses the *Hip Hop 2020 Makerspace*, which is “an interactive hip hop inspired digital archive that guides users through a series of ‘storied spaces’ representative of hip hop’s cultural impact, its transglobal sociopolitical influence, its canonical contributions to Black media studies and its pedagogical sensibilities in K-12 and post-secondary humanities instruction” (see, <https://dilac.iac.gatech.edu/dilac-projects/hip-hop-archive>). Makiba Foster, manager of the African American Research Library and Cultural Center (AARLCC) for Broward County (Florida, U.S.) Libraries, secured grant funding for a project called *Archiving the Black Web*, which, as a national forum, “is an urgent call to action to address these (access) issues with the goal of establishing a more equitable and accessible web archiving practice that can more effectively document the Black experience online” (see <https://archivingtheblackweb.org/>). Readers might also consult a bibliographic resource entitled “Hip hop & Libraries”, curated by a LIS graduate student, Wes Schumaker, Wayne State University (Detroit, MI, USA) (see <https://sites.google.com/view/hhlsitedraft042621/home>).

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André Brock is an associate professor of media studies at Georgia Tech. He writes on Western technoculture, Black technoculture, and digital media. His scholarship examines Black and white representations in social media, videogames, weblogs, and other digital media. He has also published influential research on digital research methods. His award-winning book, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*, theorizes Black everyday lives as Black joy, mediated by networked digital technologies.