
Remixing the Historical Record: Revolutions in Hip Hop Historiography

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Abstract

While the academy has seen a flourishing of Hip Hop scholarship in recent years, the field of History has yet to make substantial contributions to this interdisciplinary dialogue. In this article, I argue that James G. Spady's body of work on Hip Hop, which spans more than two decades, offers one of the most important sources for rethinking and rewriting the history of the cultural movement. As the largest published collection of oral history interviews with Hip Hop artists, Spady's work represents an unparalleled documentary source base, while also proposing a methodological paradigm, "hiphopography," that empowers researchers to systematically study Hip Hop's everyday dynamics and deep historical roots. In other words, his body of work is helping remake—or, remix—the historical record to more fully reflect the rich experiences and perspectives of participants in the Hip Hop cultural movement.

Four decades removed from Hip Hop's emergence in 1970s urban African America, the cultural movement is now the subject of innumerable academic studies, university courses, and library and museum collection efforts, while also representing a global multi-billion dollar industry. The academy has produced substantial work on aspects of Hip Hop's cultural politics (Dyson, 1993; Rose, 1994; Kelley, 1994; Potter, 1995; Dyson, 1996; Forman, 2002; Quinn, 2005; Ogbar, 2007, among others), linguistic features and innovations (Alim, 2002; Alim, 2004a; Alim, 2004b; Alim, 2006, among others), literary lineage and merits (Baker, 1993; Gladney, 1995; Alim, 2000; among others), and global impact (Mitchell, 2001; Basu and Lemelle, 2006; among others). As the field currently stands, however, history has been the last discipline to take up Hip Hop as an area of serious intellectual inquiry. This is, in part, a reflection of the discipline's insistence on (temporal) distance from one's object of study, but also speaks to a certain hesitance to engage in the complicated, often difficult work of writing about people and communities lacking a vast written historical record. As historian Benjamin Quarles (1988) once perceptively noted, "Many historians have a built-

in skepticism concerning innovation, particularly when it comes to a new field of inquiry or a new viewpoint about a low-status minority (p. 185)." He added, "Some historians almost unconsciously believe that society was and is characterized by a high culture and a low culture, and the less said about the latter the better (p. 185)." As historians are now beginning to make sense of the 1970s (Carroll, 1982; Schulman, 2001; Berkowitz, 2006; Stein, 2010; Cowie, 2010), 1980s (Ehrman, 2005; Collins, 2007; Troy, 2007; Borstelmann, 2011; Rodgers, 2011), and 1990s, Hip Hop will be increasingly unable to ignore since it forms a key part of the cultural, political, and economic histories of these various periods.

Already by the time of Houston Baker's *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (1993) and Tricia Rose's seminal *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), a well-worn narrative of Hip Hop's history had begun to take hold: a cultural movement born amidst the rubble of a burnt out, postindustrial 1970s South Bronx, fusing African American and Caribbean cultural traditions, that ultimately transformed the rampant gang violence into vibrant creative expression. This narrative—although with varying

degrees of accuracy, and also rife with myths and unexamined assumptions—has only hardened over time, becoming a continually recycled and well-established archetype. In ways that resonate deeply with the body of scholarship on Hip Hop, Scott Deveaux (1998) once remarked that jazz historiography had become overly simplistic and one-dimensional, resulting in a stultified narrative: “To judge from textbooks aimed at the college market, something like an official history of jazz has taken hold in recent years. On these pages, for all its chaotic diversity of style and expression and for all the complexity of its social origins, jazz is presented as a coherent whole, and its history as a skillfully contrived and easily comprehended narrative (p. 485).” This now holds for Hip Hop historiography as well, which like Jazz, is guided by a “conventional narrative [that] is a simplification that begs as many questions as it answers (Deveaux, 1998, p. 486).”

Spanning more than two decades, James G. Spady’s body of work represents one of the most important sources for the rethinking and rewriting of Hip Hop history. As the largest published body of oral history interviews with Hip Hop artists (Spady, 1991; Spady, 1995; Spady, 1999; Spady, 2006), Spady’s work offers historians an unparalleled documentary source base, which has proven (and will continue to be) indispensable in a field where much scholarly work has relied on secondary and tertiary sources. Moreover, Spady’s work draws on a range of rich intellectual and cultural traditions in proposing a methodological paradigm, “hiphopography” (Spady 1991; Spady 1995; Spady 1999; Alim 2006), that empowers researchers to systematically study Hip Hop’s everyday, contemporary cultural dynamics and deep historical roots.

When Spady’s first volume on Hip Hop, *Nation Conscious Rap: The Hip Hop Vision*, appeared in 1991, only a few such books existed (Toop, 1984; Hager, 1984; Holman, 1984; George, Banes, Flinker, & Romanowski, 1985) and likely no full-scale university courses were being offered at that time. Now more than two decades later, the field of Hip Hop Studies is becoming increasingly institutionalized, with hundreds of university courses across the United States and the world, as well as initiatives at museums, libraries, and archives to document, preserve, and (re)present the cultural movement’s history, such as the Hip-Hop Archive Project at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harvard University’s Hiphop Archive, the Cornell University Library’s Hip Hop Collection, the College of William & Mary’s Hip Hop Archive, and the National Museum of American History’s “Hip-Hop

Won’t Stop: The Beat, The Rhymes, The Life” collection effort, among others.

Long before arriving at Hip Hop, however, James G. Spady was researching and writing about a range of topics in African and African American intellectual history (Spady, 1974b; 1978a; 1971), social and political history (Spady, 1985), and cultural history and biography (Spady, 1987; 1989; 1992). He authored studies of Black Arts Movement figure Larry Neal (1989), radio personality and civil rights activist Georgie Woods (1992), pan-africanist Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (1985), Senegalese intellectual and activist Cheikh Anta Diop (1986), and countless others. He also edited collections of poetry, as well as scholarly anthologies and tributes – for instance, in honor of composer William L. Dawson and poet/professor Sterling Brown (Spady, 1981a; Black History Museum, 1982).

In May 1968, he and colleagues founded the Black History Museum/Library in North Philadelphia, which eventually housed “three thousand volumes, pamphlets, brochures, slave tracts, papers, correspondences, paintings, musical instruments, recordings, unpublished manuscripts, news clippings, and other materials,” including the personal papers of philosopher and University of Pennsylvania professor William T. Fontaine, pioneering Black sociologist Bishop R.R. Wright, Jr., and college president and pioneering Black banker Major Richard R. Wright, Sr. (“Commentary,” 1972). Although this library/museum closed its doors in 1972 (after facing repeated challenges), it preceded the present-day “African American Museum in Philadelphia” by a number of years. The Black History Museum committee also published the hugely important (but since, sorely overlooked) Black History Museum *Umum* Newsletter, which covered many dimensions of the global African diasporic experience, with issues on “Black Music,” “Blacks in South America,” “Black Health,” “Blacks and Computers,” “Black Religion,” “Unexplored Topics in Black History,” and much more.

The work of James G. Spady could be found in scholarly journals, newspapers, radio, television, books, and film. He also spearheaded the organizing of public colloquia and seminars that explored aspects of Afro-diasporic culture and history and which featured scholars, visual artists, writers, and musicians. At these very unique gatherings, artists presented alongside scholars, suggesting an emphasis on having cultural actors be the narrators and theorists of their own experience, a characteristic that would later define Spady’s work on Hip Hop. Featured at these events were

such luminaries as: musicians James Mtume, Milford Graves, E. Parker McDougal, Reggie Workman, and Charles Tolliver; visual artists Lois Mailou Jones and Selma Burke; photographer Roy DeCarava; writers June Jordan, Ishmael Reed, Robert Hayden, and Sonia Sanchez; and scholars Dr. Irene Diggs, Samuel Allen, Sterling Brown, Dr. Lawrence Reddick, and Dr. Vincent J. Harding, among many others ("UMUM: Black Music Seminar"; "Swarthmore Has 4th UMUM Rites"; "Black Arts and Literature"; Washington, 1976; Spady, 1977).

This background of research, writing, and public scholarship in Afro-diasporic cultural history provided Spady with a rich framework through which to understand Hip Hop when it was still a little-known, local cultural movement. As early as 1979, the year of Hip Hop's first commercially successful records (e.g. Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight," Kurtis Blow's "Christmas Rappin'," and others), Spady was "calling for and advocating for a major shift in what we considered literature" in the Black History Museum Committee's *Indigené: An Anthology of Future Black Arts* and in a related *Black Scholar* article entitled "Indigené = Folkski Equations in the Black Arts" (Spady, 1978c). In the broadest sense, he was invested in "moving the everyday mass experience [of Black people] to the center" of cultural studies, such that analyses of an artist's work would be thoroughly contextualized to reveal its roots in a collective, community experience (James G. Spady, personal interview, September 24, 2012).

Historiography and Oral History

In the years leading up to Hip Hop's emergence in the early mid-1970s, the historical profession—and the academy at large—was faced with fundamental challenges to its claims of objectivity and neutrality from student protest movements across the country, particularly the Black Studies movement (Biondi, 2012). Historian John Blassingame captured this moment of crisis in a paper he delivered at the 1969 annual meeting of the American Historical Association. He wrote, "Blacks have charged, and rightfully so, that American historians have either willfully distorted or ignored the role the Negro has played in American history," adding that "the sins of omission and commission represent a forceful indictment of the historical profession (Blassingame, 1971, p. 208)." Only several months prior, Blassingame's dissertation advisor, C. Vann Woodward, gave the Presidential Address to the Organization of American Historians and argued, "Negro history seems destined to remain the moral storm center of American

historiography... Since white historians have written most of American history, including the part assigned the Negroes, it was inevitable that they should have determined the concepts, priorities, values, and interpretations of American historiography... This situation calls for correction (Woodward, 1969, pp. 6 & 15-16)." Blassingame, in his conference paper (1971), also spoke to the issue of historical methodology: "Given the bias inherent in literary sources, the paucity of records left by Negroes, and the gaps in the training of most American historians, the surprising thing is not the way white historians have written about blacks, but that they wrote about them at all (p. 216)."

These attacks on the epistemological, methodological, and ideological underpinnings of the historical profession reverberated widely. In the face of this crisis, historians of the African American experience sought new ways of thinking about and researching the past. Benjamin Quarles (1988) noted: "With no vested interest in one type of documentation, the researcher in black history can be eclectic in his selection of ways and means. In order to ferret out the true dimensions of the black past he may have to run some methodological risks (p. 191)." One such type of documentation that became increasingly important was oral history, since it could enrich the primary source base with new narratives of the past from the perspective of those who lived through it, and thereby also de-center the privileged subjects who left large paper trails and had theretofore dominated most histories.

This was apparent to Spady, who organized what he called "the first annual black oral history colloquium" as a session for the October 1974 convention of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History. He invited several figures to share their oral narratives of key moments in Black Philadelphia history, including Thomas W. Harvey, successor to Marcus Garvey as President-General of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, Emanuel C. Wright, pioneer Black banker, and Samuel Brown, pioneer Black visual artist. Spady opened the panel session by arguing that "oral history is certainly one of the most vital things for the new scholarship in black historiography (Spady, 1974a)." The lack of oral sources, he continued, "explains clearly why the focus [of Black History] has been on particular personalities rather than on institutions and the masses of people at large (Spady, 1974a)."

More recently, in reflecting on how he came to oral history as a practice, Spady recalled: "The African historians, quite honestly, were in the forefront of using oral history as an integral part of historical writing.

They were really the models in terms of oral history methodology,” noting particularly the influence of S.O. Biobaku, Bethwell A. Ogot, Amadou Hampâté Bâ, and Jan Vansina on his work (James G. Spady, personal interview, September 24, 2012). Writing in the *Journal of Negro History* a year-and-a-half after the 1974 ASALH conference, historian Thomas Holt (1976) pointed out that “historians of the black experience must be more sensitive to methodological and theoretical problems and open to methodological innovations than most historians (p. 163).” And reflecting this changing intellectual landscape, Spady explained, “This was at a time when historians were in conversation with anthropologists... The historical narrative form was changing, in part, because there were these ‘unconventional’ sources that were now an integral part of the historical narrative... It was [S.O.] Biobaku and [Bethwell] Ogot who pointed out—just sort of reminded us—that so much of what we took for granted as being the written historical past of ancient Greece were based on poems, scenes, myths, and the like. What we took conventionally took as being Western history was so much constructed based upon these narratives, many of which were oral. And they became written one hundred years after the fact (James G. Spady, personal interview, September 24, 2012).”

Writing Hip Hop History

The first wave of Hip Hop historiography—appearing in 1984 and 1985 with books by Steven Hager, David Toop, and Nelson George, among others—had done important work in trying to make sense of a cultural movement which was still largely unknown to a mass public. Even as Hip Hop was beginning to reach a wider audience, particularly with the nationally-touring 1984 “Swatch Watch NYC Fresh Festival,” Hollywood films like *Beat Street* and *Breakin’*, as well as with the increasing popularity of groups like Run-DMC, these early writers sought to document Hip Hop’s emergence in the neighborhoods of the outerboroughs in the 1970s and its penetration into the downtown Manhattan arts scene of the early 1980s. They were capitalizing on the growing interest in Hip Hop and introducing this hyperlocal phenomenon to a broad, uninformed audience. They laid important ground for future historians, even if their analytical and historical frames were sometimes lacking in nuance. Most of these writers proposed an overly simplistic understanding of Hip Hop as encompassing only “break dancing, rap music, and graffiti”

(as the subtitle of Steven Hager’s *Hip Hop* suggested), while some added “fashion” to that formulation. And collectively, they constructed a neat, tidy narrative of Hip Hop that posited its “birth” in the South Bronx, and credited this development to a group of “founding fathers” (Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash). This obscured far more complex cultural realities, just as it put in place an archetype that would dominate Hip Hop historiography for a long time to come.

The release in 1991 of James G. Spady and Joseph Eure’s *Nation Conscious Rap* signaled the beginning of a second wave of Hip Hop historiography, which included Brian Cross’s *It’s Not About a Salary: Rap, Race, and Resistance in Los Angeles* (1993), S.H. Fernando’s *The New Beats: Exploring the Music, Culture, and Attitude of Hip-Hop* (1994), and Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), which was the first major academic tome on the subject. But Spady’s *Nation Conscious Rap* stood out in many important regards. Applying to Hip Hop what he had applied to his previous work in African American history—and in ways that reflected the shifts in African American historiography of the previous decade—Spady reframed Hip Hop as a rich site for intellectual inquiry on historical, literary, philosophical, and linguistic grounds, while also acknowledging it as an incredibly funky, forceful, and contentious cultural movement. This represented a major departure both from the previous body of work on Hip Hop, as well as from the very public and often hateful (and ill-informed) dismissals of Hip Hop that found voice in much mainstream media of the day, best embodied by the infamous March 1990 *Newsweek* cover story (“The Rap Attitude”). Dave Marsh, then editor of *Rock and Roll Confidential*, said to the *Los Angeles Times*: “It was a nakedly racist story, with the inherent assumption that these are barbarians in our midst. It perpetuates the stereotype of rappers as dangerous black male youth.” And Steve Morse, pop critic for the *Boston Globe*, called it “a tabloid-style, right-wing commentary full of absurd generalizations and titillating nonsense that had no business in a supposedly serious newsweekly (Goldstein, 1990).”

It was in this social and political context that Spady insisted on placing the voices of Hip Hop’s historical actors at the center of the narrative, allowing them to shape the contours and content of their own history. Spady explained, “We had to find a way to assure the voices and ideas of the new historical actors from the Hip Hop generation found a place in History. We knew that the benefits of using oral history in Hip Hop historiography

were many. We also accepted the fact that the use of interviews as a source of documentation was perfectly compatible with scholarly standards. It proved useful in exploring their feelings, their experiences, memories, and recollections even as it constructed vital historical documents from within the Hip Hop cultural movement itself (James G. Spady, personal correspondence, December 15, 2005).” He also, however, employed the very language of the community about which he was writing, centering the linguistic practices—and hence cosmologies—of Hip Hop in his work. The opening page of *Nation Conscious Rap* (1991) outlines how the text “not only has the creators of the Hip Hop Cultural Revolution telling their own stories in their own nation language, it also combines oral narratives and written documents to provide a distinctly modern Afro-American narrativity of power and vision. Here is Hip Hop History in the Nation language of young blacks whose compelling metaphors and similes of reality and surreality are def (Spady, 1991, p. V).”

Drawing on historian and cultural critic Kamau Brathwaite’s notion of “nation language,” Spady pays tribute to the rich language practices in Hip Hop in conceptualizing what he terms “Hip Hop Nation Language,” and then using it to narrate the cultural movement’s history (Alim, 2004b). Writing in a narrative mode that is grounded in African American English (AAE) was not new for Spady, but was new in Hip Hop scholarship. This shift in his writing style can be traced back at least to 1979 when, as he remarked, “My writing began to change drastically” (James G. Spady, personal interview, September 24, 2012). He dates “the turning point” to “a Stevie Wonder essay I did in ‘79, which is the same year Hip Hop recordings were coming out [“Little Stevie, I Wander, Wonder What You’ve Seen,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, November 30, 1979]. And I remember it distinctly because Stevie Wonder was coming to appear at the [Philadelphia] Academy of Music. I had written this piece which was really very similar to stuff that you see later on in *Nation Conscious Rap*, but even more so in *Twisted Tales* and other forums... I did the piece to come out the very day he arrived in Philly.” Spady described the article as “memoir”-like, as “a coming-into-consciousness piece.” He explained, “I’m writing about my experiences growing up hearing Stevie Wonder and I’m using the language [of our community]—by the way, which was not just Hip Hop: it was urban Black expressivity... So much of the language used in Hip Hop is what we used already. When people say, ‘We never heard this. We don’t know what they’re talking about.’ They weren’t people who were hip to

the streets. You gotta realize, so many of the [so-called ‘Hip Hop’] terms were from an earlier generation. But we weren’t using it in conventional narratives, in historical narratives, you see? We were using it conversationally... But you wouldn’t use it in a formal piece. And I remember, the editors at the [news]papers, man... The editors, they thought I was bugging out: ‘But, you write so well. Why are you using this language?’... ‘This is the language within our community. So that’s the language I want to write in.’” Spady continued his narrative about this article and its importance: “Stevie asked his brother [who traveled everywhere with him] to read it out to him. He asked his brother to read it two times. Then Stevie turns to me and says, ‘This is how you write all the time?’ I said, ‘No, this is the first time I’ve really written that way.’ He says, ‘Well, that’s your style, man. That’s yours. Keep writing that way!’ That was like, for me, coming from Stevie, man... That was so meaningful (James G. Spady, personal interview, September 24, 2012).”

What may have begun as merely a stylistic shift, eventually also became a critically important methodological shift. The linguistic and narrative possibilities offered by the use of Hip Hop Nation Language, along with the centering of the voices of the historical actors, helps address what historian Elsa Barkley Brown (1992) described as the challenge of capturing “history [as] everybody talking at once, multiple rhythms being played simultaneously. The events and people we write about did not occur in isolation but in dialogue with a myriad of other people and events... As historians, we try to isolate one conversation and to explore it, but the trick is then how to put that conversation in a context which makes evident its dialogue with so many others—how to make this one lyric stand alone and at the same time be in connection with all the other lyrics being sung (p. 297-298).” Barkley Brown lamented, “Unfortunately, it seems to me, few historians are good jazz musicians; most of us write as if our training were in classical music. We require surrounding silence—of the audience, of all the instruments not singled out as the performers in this section, even of any alternative visions than the composer’s (p. 298).” In *Nation Conscious Rap* and subsequent volumes, Spady brings us closer to accurately rendering the multiplicity of voices and experiences that shape our collective history.

The importance of *Nation Conscious Rap* as a groundbreaking exploration of Hip Hop lies not only in its linguistic and narrative innovations, but also in its systematic approach to the study of Hip Hop’s everyday dynamics. As Spady would later explain in his second

volume on Hip Hop, *Twisted Tales: In the Hip Hop Streets of Philly* (1995), "It was in early 1988 that we began a two and a half year study of hip hop culture. There are some 57 major informants, including 30 rap artists, DJ's, producers, dancers, and visual artists that appear in *Nation Conscious Rap* (p. 302)." He continued, "Interviews with these artists were conducted on basketball courts, in penthouses, hotel suites, recording studios, restaurants, stadiums, limousines, on planes, in cars, on street corners, executive office[s] of recording companies, barbershops, religious and recreation centers, at nine conferences, and in their homes or spots... Interviews ranged from 1 hour to 9 ½ hours in a single session. Some artists were interviewed more than once [and the interviewees] ranged in age from 10 to 33 (Spady, Dupres, & Lee, 1995, p. 302)." This resulted in more than 220 hours of recorded interviews, and nearly 1300 transcribed pages, eventually narrowed down to the book's 500. This methodological approach, which Spady termed "hiphopography," represented a tremendous leap in the Hip Hop scholarship.

With new insights from African American historiography and from the self-reflexive turn in anthropology, Spady not only laid out but also put into practice a framework through which to carefully study Hip Hop. Combining elements of the "new social history," oral history, socio-linguistics, and historical ethnography, the resulting "hiphopography" methodology was responsible for the now-classic essay, "Grandmaster Caz and the HipHopography of the Bronx" (Spady, 1991). This essay carries the reader through the Bronx spaces that Grandmaster Caz—one of Hip Hop's most talented, pioneering emcees—once called home, from playgrounds to nightclubs, as he recounts his participation in the early cultural movement. Alongside Caz's narrative oral history are sharp photographs by Leandre Jackson that contextualize and make real the historical sites that shaped the young man that became known as one of the leading members of the rap crew, the Cold Crush Brothers. So much new historical detail is revealed in the essay, including what Caz described as "an industry secret to this day," referring to the story of how his lyrics ended up in the Sugar Hill Gang's 1979 song, "Rapper's Delight," the first rap record to find commercial success (a story that has since become more widely known).

This filmic narrative exemplified some of the best of what the "New History" had to offer. Historian Jeanne Marie Penvenne tracked some of these developments, noting that "language, placement, assignment of meaning, authority, forms of knowledge, and the nature of

historical methods are major markers in what is being called 'New History' (Penvenne, 2000)." In detailing the methodological import of these new approaches, Penvenne described what sounds remarkably like Spady's "hiphopography": "Historians have begun to recover the ways in which ordinary men, women and youths inscribed and performed their historical experience by revisiting the spaces and apprenticing with the tools that historians of my generation had largely ceded to ethnomusicologists, linguists, literary scholars and anthropologists... Once historians began to look and listen in the appropriate places they quickly became aware of a deep and rich tapestry of historical experience and explication scripted by precisely the people they had formerly deemed silent."

After *Nation Conscious Rap*, scholars could no longer claim that Hip Hop artists were silent in their own historical narrative. This book featured many of the most important voices coming from the Hip Hop community—including Chuck D., Sister Soujah, KRS-One, Sister Harmony, Big Daddy Kane, Paris, Q-Tip—sharing their thoughts on their history, their music, their lives, and their futures. As a primary source collection, *Nation Conscious Rap* offered new possibilities for scholars interested in beginning to (re-)write the history of Hip Hop. In subsequent volumes, such as *Twisted Tales: In The Hip Hop Streets of Philly* (1995), *Street Conscious Rap* (1999), and *The Global Capha: Hip Hop Culture and Consciousness* (2006), Spady and collaborators only further expanded the possibilities for the writing of Hip Hop history, importantly de-centering New York in the historical narrative and offering transnational and global perspectives on the cultural movement.

In the more than two decades since the publication of *Nation Conscious Rap: The Hip Hop Vision* (1991), Hip Hop Studies has become an increasingly institutionalized field with a rather substantial body of scholarship. Even having achieved far greater methodological and analytical sophistication than most early scholarship on Hip Hop, the field still has tremendous work to do, particularly for historians. James G. Spady's body of work will prove crucial for future scholars looking to understand, write, and rewrite the history of this now global cultural movement. And although there have been recent efforts at building Hip Hop archival collections at some institutions across the United States, we would do well to heed Spady's call—dating back to at least 1994, when he presented a paper entitled "Umum Notes On An Inquiry Into Hip Hop Culture and Archival Oral Records" at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives

Conference (Spady, 1994)—to push for serious, sustained efforts by our local, national, and university libraries to archive and preserve the history of Hip Hop through traditional written records (correspondence, lyric books, contracts, etc.), oral histories, photographs, and audio and video recordings.

Although historians face significant challenges in writing about Hip Hop, only when we begin applying a critical methodological approach in large-scale studies (Meghelli, 2012) will we have a much richer body of narratives, and thereby, a more robust historiography on which to build. Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. addressed the challenges of writing contemporary history when working in the 1950s on his three-volume *The Age of Roosevelt*, remarking: “we are always in a zone of imperfect visibility so far as the history just over our shoulder is concerned. It is as if we were in the hollow of the historical wave; not until we reach the crest of the next one can we look back and estimate properly what went on before (Schlesinger, 1957).” We may very well be at that crossroads now, with great possibilities for (re)writing Hip Hop history, especially in collaboration with the historical actors themselves. This is, as Schlesinger noted, one of the “compensating advantages in writing so soon[:] the opportunity to consult those who took part in great events and thus to rescue information which might otherwise elude the written record (p. xi).” We are fortunate that James G. Spady has offered us a strong model with which to carry out this very work.

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