

## Opening Talk—3/31/12

Imani Kai Johnson

Good morning!

It's your fault that I'm here this early on a Saturday morning. I blame everyone in this room my longest day of conferencing this year. And for that I say, thank you! "Show & Prove" is a labor of love. Nearly 3 years ago, the initial vision for the first conference in 2010 was for a small symposium, a handful of papers featuring some unpublished work, maybe 75 graduate students and junior faculty for a day of discussing ideas and talking about theory or something. Little did I know, you all—who submitted papers and came with ideas about what more could be done—just made it impossible for me to be so narrow in my thinking. The first conference was 200 strong, a beast of a day that ran from 8am to 11pm, featuring concurrent sessions, photography exhibits, roundtables, and lots of socializing. People began talking to me about the next conference... And I thought, WHAT next conference? So fast forward a year and a half, and I'm in a room with three other women reviewing the nearly 80 submissions from the call for papers. So once again, we are here, and we have another full and exciting day ahead of us. Those of you here today will get to hear original, unpublished work from nearly 40 scholars from around the world and across disciplines. You will be able to see original films, hear from featured artists, and participate in discussions about the direction of the burgeoning field of Hip Hop Studies.

I guess I should have started with a proper introduction. My name is Dr. Imani Kai Johnson, and I am a Faculty Fellow here in Performance Studies. And for most of you here who might not know much about my work, I write on b-boying cyphers— or dance circles. I am in the process of completing a manuscript exploring the invisible force of cyphers, their spirit or energy as it's sometimes described, and its capacity to draw people into its folds. This force helps to facilitate Hip Hop's global circulation. It drew me in, even though I was never the b-girl in the center of the circle. And I suspect, some variation of that force is precisely why there are students, practitioners, artists, and die-hard-true-blue Hip Hoppas here today. I didn't start my graduate work anticipating being a Hip Hop scholar, but I ended up as one because I found a place for my creativity, my interests, and my strengths in Hip Hop. And as a result, I developed a responsibility to the community as a scholar. This conference is one way that I can make good on my commitment, and to paraphrase my favorite MC— Posdonus, Plug 1 of De La Soul—my aim is to clock out covered in quality Hip Hop...scholarship.

For those who feel the same, this conference helps us find each other. Those of us who do work on Hip Hop might find ourselves in disciplines that don't understand our primary questions. We write about topics that are underrepresented and maybe even outright disregarded, or thought of as a fun but otherwise not particularly rigorous—that's an academic dis. Our research might entail working against our training, or the language of the academy, or the expectations of our respective fields in order to honor Hip Hop cultural imperatives. OR to research in untraditional spaces because conventional archives, or official research sites, or methods of distancing yourself from "your

research subjects” just don’t cut it in a community where Hip Hop isn’t just what people do, it’s how they live. While this may not be the case for everyBODY in every instance, there are institutional challenges to this work that can leave many of us feeling isolated at our respective campuses. This conference allows us to have the kind of necessary audiences to progress our work, and to collectively begin to consider the stakes of Hip Hop’s inevitable institutionalization and academization.

We here know that Hip Hop changes every space it enters, and the university system is no different. Hip Hop culture pushes against the power structure of the proverbial ivory tower, shifting the paradigm of institutions like this one by centering the voices, experiences, and cultures of those that are more traditionally held outside of its walls. This culture undermines hierarchies of knowledge that *want* to relegate what Hip Hop communities do to the bottom rung, and flips it instead. These are the boundaries that Hip Hop can trouble. To put it more simply, there’s a politics to doing this work precisely because it has the potential to expose and even undermine institutional forces that otherwise render the vast majority of Hip Hop communities invisible.

And here’s a key contradiction: in our efforts to operate against the grain of academia, we still leave with a degree that warrants us a pass in society denied those we write about. We’re never outside of the power we might push against; and in the ways that we are unavoidably complicit, we have the added responsibility to recognize our privilege and use it to the advantage of our communities. Ultimately, there is an ethics to doing this work. And I believe that keeping this ethics in mind is crucial to the field.

This conference is, for me, an exciting opportunity to gather together people who understand and respect that, and who are down to build a network of scholars schooled in the ways of Hip Hop and the academy, and prepared to make the latter adapt to the former. We all have a stake in what Hip Hop Studies is and what it can become, and I hope that what we do here today has an impact on that outcome.

In an effort to ensure that happens, I encourage everyone to listen to each other, offer praise and critique in the most generous way possible, because in the end this is for all of us.

Thank you for being here. I hope we can continue to build with each other throughout the day and well beyond. And because this is the start of a great day, I'll end with a greeting: GOOD MORNING!