Most people were sleeping. The others of us were cocky youngsters who had snuck out back doors and cracked windows while our parents dozed off to the syndicated flicker; undeclared majors who had concocted excuses to wriggle free of the caffeinated, claustrophobic dorm room cram sessions; clockwatching nine-to-fivers who had napped for half a measly hour since having abandoned our ill-fitting cubicles, only to return streetside, streetwise with rolled-up sleeves and stained white collars; and seasoned slang and head-nod junkies, copiously crunk(ed) and baggily clad in the uniform of the region, who had all been casually killing time toward this explicit purpose. From the hinterlands of Monday night came an eclectic grouping of devoted souls to converge upon the good site hallowed and habitual. Record sellers, who began the sale of Tuesday releases at the stroke of midnight, saw us congregate about the scrappy storefront with the dingy interior and queue up between rows of dilapidated bins that had held vinyl then cassettes and now CDs. Giving dap, squabbling, and eavesdropping on the latest news-cum-conjecture, heads assembled for the weekly ritual, to procure a choice item from that limited and anxiously anticipated stock (sometimes at a slight discount). You move, you lose.

We were brought together in an amalgamation of aggregate desire and consumerist inclination, marking a line of distinction between those who could wait until later in the day and those who had to have it right then. There were familiar faces and some new ones as well—another meeting of the minds whose effort was to be ahead of the game, a virtual cross-section of American cultural consciousness, all hungry for the new release, all eager to advance the dialogue and to contribute our own critique. Romantic, I know, but it is also a scene that has become more rare in the past several years as quicker, more efficient routes of acquisition have become quite commonplace. Recently, many of the physical lines have dwindled, replaced by an increased accessibility of bootleg copies and of tracks downloadable as mp3 files. New sound is now just as likely heard first through the earbuds of an iPod as through a rattling car trunk or a home entertainment system. And the listener has less direct interaction with his or her community of counterparts who are as likely to encounter one another in an online chatroom as in the aisles between the racks, altering the ways that hip_hop culture is being processed and conceived.

Embedded in the discourse around hip_hop as an intellectual project is an ongoing argument about exactly how we should be arguing about hip_hop and about how we should interpret its prominence as a topic in critical circles. The current discussion engages hip_hop at the line of transition, in a moment of crisis in public culture and cultural studies. The turn of the millennium witnesses hip_hop being mediated by big industry
and marketed globally to an unprecedented extreme. A new core group of entities and individuals is deciding for us what hip_hop is and what hip_hop means. To the extent that hip_hop is referenced synonymously with black culture, we also see particular conceptions of blackness being mediated and marketed as well. (That hip_hop remains, in many respects, a sign for blackness is in part why its cultural products are marketable in the first place.) We are challenged to remark upon the ways in which what have been until now relatively privately constructed subjectivities are being regulated in nontraditional spaces. There is a new level of public access to the agency of identity. This circumstance is nuanced, however, by hip_hop’s situation as a major American (not exclusively African American) export to the rest of the world. The narrative arc of mainline hip_hop (especially rap music) production and distribution demonstrates the constant efforts of entities and individuals who are well-devoted to the disassociation of hip_hop from any particularizing blackness with regard to claims about authentic artifacts and cultural property, but who remain heavily invested in trafficking in the commercially alluring conventions of black suffering and black mortality, while facing little in the way of substantive critical rebuke. What this means is that selected images of racialized crime and gendered violence are being consumed steadily without stern comment or material censure. It is impossible to have a comprehensive discussion about race or Americanness, about class or gender or sexuality, without incorporating a principled discussion of the state and ramifications of hip_hop culture today. And the character and content of its appropriation and commodification make the current condition of the text a veritable human rights concern.

Most people were sleeping. Particularly since the early 1990s, we have seen a proliferation of fine art, literature, and scholarship that has furthered the establishment of hip_hop studies in what might be called unlikely venues. In the past few years especially, we have witnessed the development of university courses, academic conferences, museum exhibits, and collaborative research initiatives devoted to an investigation of the culture and its practice. Until lately, hip_hop studies has been, in large part, a legitimizing project—to prove that hip_hop is worthy of institutional attention. From this endeavor has arisen much thoughtful, pioneering work that has pressed the parameters of discipline and intellectual convention, but, as with any area of study, the relative quality of the contributions has been varied, with many scholars and artists approaching hip_hop culture from outside a comprehensive reading of the text, in a manner that has seemed to suggest a lack of seriousness about the subject matter. Significantly, a critical mass of hip_hop heads—producers and consumers of the culture—and many individuals who have otherwise come of age with hip_hop are now also coming of age as intellectuals, and we can expect to see an advanced degree of informed criticism around topics in contemporary popular culture.

This special number of Callaloo exemplifies a collective foray in this direction. A few familiar faces but mostly newer ones, the contributors represent a range of disciplinary perspectives from the arts to the humanities to the social sciences. Many if not all of these individuals have taught classes or curated shows or participated as community organizers in ways specifically referent of hip_hop culture. Perhaps because hip_hop finds its origins among the socially and economically disenfranchised, it has been understood widely as an outlet for practical protest by progressives younger and older who want to see hip_hop active “on the ground.” We have arranged here a compilation of current work that would inform in no small capacity the ways that hip_hop—read holistically as...
a cultural text—is represented in public discourse. Hip-hop studies, done conscientiously, argues for the necessary development of a mechanism to attend to the present crisis in the representation of people of color, of women, of nonheterosexuals, and of the poor. And I would propose the implementation of an appropriate and effective grammar of critical redress that speaks to hip-hop’s present function.

Hip Hop, Hip-Hop, HipHop, Hiphop, hip-hop, hip hop. Each of these formations of the term comes with its own suggestion of theoretical orientation—if not ideological perspective—as pertains to its respective selector. For this reason I have pushed the decision to maintain each author’s spelling choices regarding this term and others. My own choice of formulation is intended to indicate the broad variety of interpolative approaches at work. Formerly a mere typographical tool, devoid of real grammatical significance, the underscore is a diacritical mark that has found a new phase of its utility in the age of email and the Internet. The placement of the underscore works to establish spacing between words as signs while simultaneously indicating connections between even ostensibly conflicting ideas. We might understand it to signify space that is actually not a space at all. We are in effect underlining an open conceptual area to be engaged at the writer’s or reader’s discretion. (Think fill-in-the-blank test.) This pronouncement of the emptiness might be said to reify the cognitive gap in some sense, reminding us, for instance, of the supposed dichotomy of hip-hop as an aesthetic moment and hip-hop as a social movement, but the deliberate application of the device emphasizes simultaneously the vastness of hip-hop’s potential function in (and as) culture. The underscore, as I employ it here, is not about phonetics (necessarily), but rather about the location of meaning—or, more specifically, the identification of a site for the negotiation of meaning. For me, the underscore serves to indicate hip-hop’s usefulness as a repository of discursive matter to be inserted and dislodged at will. The consistent exchange of these conceptual deposits operates to frontload the liminal character of a set of cultural practices that transforms frenetically and to acknowledge other semantic issues (e.g., rapper, MC, emcee) and apparently loose associations that could have important repercussions in terms of the many conversations happening inside hip-hop today.

In order to do competent and compelling hip-hop scholarship, one must be present and active in the places where hip-hop happens. And one must often work while the majority slumbers. You snooze, you lose. Peel back the night, and find us hungry still, occupied in that tireless effort to remain relevant in our study while cultivating our willingness to be critical of self. Our sharpest thinking occurs when we are able to realize the reasons that we are focused in what we do. We continue to anticipate the new release, the interstitial dialogue, the shifting location of hip-hop now.