

Stepping your game up

Technical innovation among young people of color in hip-hop

by

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ABSTRACT

Hip-hop is a competitive form of popular culture characterized by an on-going process of aesthetic renewal and reproduction that is expressed through carefully selected media and communications technologies. Hip-hop is also a segment of the pop music industry that manufactures a wide range of commercial products featuring stereotypical images of young black people. These stereotypes disproportionately mark young black men and rarely reflect the technical sophistication and cultural literacy mobilized in hip-hop expression. This thesis begins with a reading of hip-hop culture through its use of media technologies, moves on to a historical examination of the hip-hop mixtape economy, and concludes with an analysis of the "Crank Dat" online dance craze. Foregrounding expressive deployment of media and communications technologies in hip-hop challenges damaging stereotypes with compelling narratives of young black men driven by a spirit of competition, creativity, and technical innovation.

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Edward, Mary, Mark, and Sam (RIP) Driscoll

Every single member of the Comparative Media Studies class of 2009

This project is dedicated to the students, families,
faculty, and staff of Prospect Hill Academy Charter School
for changing my life.

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Chapter 0

Introduction

"50 Cent, Soulja Boy, learning, and literacy? Never thought I'd hear those words in the same sentence!"

The quote above came from a colleague after hearing the topic of this paper. He, like many of my peers, self-identifies as a hip-hop fan. As such, he does not question the value of hip-hop culture in general but expresses skepticism of its contemporary manifestations. For many older fans, especially those concerned with the lives of young people, artists like 50 Cent and Soulja Boy represent the decline of hip-hop from a popular culture of nuance, complexity, and progressive politics to a commercial culture concerned primarily with conspicuous consumption, radical individualism, and the reproduction of destructive stereotypes.

Nostalgic selectivity aside, this prevailing sense of the culture's regression is informed largely by commodities transmitted via traditional media channels like cable TV and commercial radio. Evidence presented here suggests that the dominance of these channels is fading as hip-hop

discourse moves into participatory online spaces. Unfortunately, prevailing images of young hip-hop practitioners rarely reflect this creative use of media technologies.

Hip-hop dance in the classroom

"This beat is...
Automatic, supersonic, hypnotic, funky fresh
Work my body, so melodic
This beat flows right through my chest
Everybody, Ma and Papi came to party
Grab somebody, work your body, work your body
Let me see you 1, 2 step"
- "1, 2 Step", Ciara, 2004

This project began five years ago when I started teaching math and computer science to middle and high school students from the metro Boston area. Each morning in my homeroom, a group of eighth grade girls gathered around their desks to dance the one-two step while chanting Ciara's lyrics at the top of their lungs. Eighth grade is not an easy time and the relationships among these girls were often strained but hip-hop always provided a common space for them to laugh, sing, and dance together.

In 2004, these students learned Ciara's choreography by waiting for her video to come on BET after school. They would memorize her movements, practice at home, and compare notes the next day. After a few weeks, they not only knew all of Ciara's steps but had also created their own variations of the dance. During that year, they performed whenever the opportunity presented itself: in the hallways between classes, at lunch recess, at teen dances, and during the occasional school talent show. Summer vacation eventually came and, like many artifacts of middle-school life, I rarely saw it again once the students entered high school.

The dancing culture at my school changed subtly but substantially over the next two years. Kids still disrupted homeroom activities daily with spontaneous dancing but the proliferation of cameraphones and advent of YouTube connected them to young hip-hop dancers

all over the world. Every afternoon after school, I supervised the computer lab as students came in to browse the hundreds of new homemade dance videos posted each week. Whereas my eighth graders had to piece together Ciara's dance from her official music video, the students now learned new dances by watching other teens performing on YouTube.

Digital dance culture features two important characteristics: regional specificity and creative competition. My student dancers could explain with great nuance the distinctive movements of various cities and dance crews. Classic pop-lockin' joined countless new regional hip-hop styles like snap, crump/krump, lite feet, hyphy, juking, jitting, and footwork. The comment threads accompanying these videos provided a rich discursive space for sharing knowledge, critical feedback, boasting, and trash talking. Frequent and friendly competition among cities provided endless demand for innovation.

Engaged in online competition, dancers communicated most effectively by posting their own videos. To have a voice in this community, my students had to negotiate several different media systems. First, they had to find a device that could capture video. For some, this might be a cellphone or webcam; for others, a camcorder borrowed from a parent or the video function on a still camera could suffice. Second, they transferred the captured video to a personal computer for editing and post-production. Finally, they converted the edited video into an appropriate compressed format and uploaded the resulting file to YouTube.

At the time, my school did not offer classes in video production. We did not have video cameras for the students to borrow. The only editing software available in school was Windows Movie Maker, a simple program that ships with the Microsoft operating system. These young dancers, many of whom did not have regular access to an internet-enabled computer in their homes, not only found all the tools they needed to produce their videos but developed a highly technical understanding of the affordances and constraints of various video formats and web video platforms.

To outside observers, including most of my fellow teachers, the dance culture of my school might have appeared unchanged from 2004 to 2006. The novel technological practices were all but invisible, occurring after school, outside of class, and in ephemeral spaces online. Though they might not have had the historical perspective to see it, these students were revolutionizing the way that popular dances are shared, learned, and spread. How might their high school careers have been different if adult mentors were able to help them recognize the innovative qualities of their hip-hop practice and build bridges to other areas of their academic lives?

That most of my colleagues did not see the complex technological processes at work in the students' dance culture would not have been a problem were they not accompanied by other persistent misconceptions about the students' hip-hop fandom.

Young black hip-hop fans

In 2006, sociologist Orlando Patterson published a provocative op-ed in the New York Times detailing the "failure of social scientists to adequately explain" patterns of self-destruction among young black men. Dissatisfied with socioeconomic explanations, he turned his attention to young black men's culture. Patterson found anecdotal evidence that young black men who performed hip-hop's "cool-pose" garnered such esteem from their peers that they were not motivated to pursue traditional avenues of achievement. Though whites also deeply engage with hip-hop culture, he says, they know when to drop the pose and "get out the SAT prep book." Black men on the other hand, appeared to have more difficulty moving past the "immensely fulfilling" experience of pop vanguardism. (Patterson)

While Patterson's critique recognizes the gratification and pleasure of hip-hop culture, vocal hip-hop critic John McWhorter dismisses it out of hand as a "soundtrack [to] antisocial behavior." McWhorter credits the content of rap lyrics with nihilism and anti-intellectualism

among young black men. His argument is based on lyrics selected seemingly at random and ignores the context in which rap lyrics are written, performed, recorded, and consumed but his assumption that hip-hop forms a "bedrock of young black identity" is worth our attention.

(McWhorter 2003)

In conversations with teachers, parents, and students, many of whom identified as hip-hop fans, I heard many variations on Patterson and McWhorter's arguments that hip-hop culture leaves young black men ill-prepared for adult life and encourages anti-intellectualism. Tricia Rose offers a powerful alternate reading of the young black man's cool-pose as "feigned disengagement." In her view, the cool-pose is deployed strategically for survival "in the face of crushing oppression[,] violence," and limited economic opportunity. (Rose 2008 80) Though she defends hip-hop's empowering potential, Rose's enthusiasm is tempered by concern about the preponderance of what she calls "the gangster-pimp-ho trinity" in the most visible forms of hip-hop culture.

Although the arguments of Patterson and Rose engage thoughtfully with hip-hop culture, I struggle to see representation and recognition of my dancing students in their analyses. As was true of many of my fellow educators, their critiques focus primarily on lyrics, language, and music videos: the content of hip-hop's pop industrial output. My experience with the high school dancers, on the other hand, foregrounds a critical engagement with media and communications technologies as tools of expression. For these students, hip-hop music, for all its problematic lyrics, was neither nihilistic soundtrack nor survival strategy but a cultural catalyst for innovative practice and production.

Nearly every artifact, story, and example in this paper concerns the lives and labor of young black men. Though they come from diverse backgrounds, they are often lumped together, their differences blurred by all-encompassing imaginaries such as "the millennial generation", "the hip-hop generation", or simply "black youth culture." But young people constitute an open-

ended, "highly heterogeneous" group and do not represent any unified set of racial, political, aesthetic, nor moral values as is suggested by "generation"-based discourses. (Watkins 2009)

Among their peers in the U.S., young black people are unusually beset by muddying, totalizing social categorization. Hip-hop culture is so widely perceived to be the culture of black youth that nearly all "young blacks [...] are unjustly profiled [by] rap's stigma." (Asante Jr.) Though hip-hop's aesthetic tradition is one of rich complexity, dynamism, influence, and innovation, it is also associated with the worst kinds of violence and ignorance. (Peterson) Young black men thus benefit from their association with hip-hop at the same time as they are unfairly marked by it. (Rose 2008 xii) Furthermore, highly visible investment in hip-hop among black youth leads outside observers to make conclusions about real young black people based on nothing more than a few trace artifacts of hip-hop culture. As a result, even black youth who do not invest themselves in hip-hop culture are bound by its implications. (Watkins 2009)

Santogold, a contemporary recording artist and young black woman, recently confronted this collapse of blackness into hip-hop when she discovered that music retailers were consistently filing her multi-faceted album under their Hip-Hop/R&B category,

"It's racist (laughs). It's totally racist. Everyone is just so shocked that I don't like R&B. Are you shocked that [white rock band] Good Charlotte isn't into R&B? Why does R&B keep coming into my interviews? It's pissing me off. I didn't grow up as a big fan of R&B and, like, what is the big shocker? It's stupid. In the beginning I thought that was funny. I'm an 'MC', I'm a 'soul singer', I'm a 'dance hybrid artist'. And some guy said I looked like Kelly Rowland!" (Nicholson)

As long as outside observers fail to distinguish between them, young black people, especially young black men, will remain bound to stereotypes constructed by hip-hop outsiders.

McWhorter's vague familiarity with a smattering of rap lyrics leads him to characterize hip-hop culture as "thuggish," anti-family, and anti-education. Furthermore, by tying joblessness to investment in hip-hop, critics deny that participation requires valuable technical skills; exactly the opposite of what I observed in my students.

Slippage between young black men and peculiar manifestations of hip-hop culture is widespread and will take considerable effort to dismantle. However, the durability of this transit between hip-hop stereotypes and black youth provides an opportunity for injecting alternative cultural narratives into the outsiders' discourse. By foregrounding the history of technological innovation in hip-hop, we can alter the prevailing hip-hop stereotype and, by virtue of the persistent slippage, provide new models for black youth beset by that stereotype. This modest strategy does little to challenge the self-destructive imagery embedded in the dominant hip-hop industry and will not dissuade outsiders from totalizing views of young black people. But alternate narratives about the development and practices of hip-hop culture will challenge the racist assumption that young black men are less technically capable than their non-black peers.

The three chapters to follow present considerable evidence to argue that technological innovation is a fundamental characteristic of participation in hip-hop culture. First, I will examine hip-hop as a culture of practice using theoretical frames provided by John Fiske, Lawrence Lessig, and Henry Jenkins. Next, using the vocabulary developed in the first section, I will trace the history of the hip-hop mixtape with special attention to the recurring role of new media technologies. Finally, I will analyze closely the "Crank Dat" dance craze of 2007, a phenomenon that revealed to outsiders the wildly creative hip-hop culture flourishing on the web.

Notes on research methodology

Much of the evidence in this project is drawn from digital ephemera found in public spaces on the web. Chapters 2 and 3 rely in particular on mp3 files, fan archives, YouTube videos, blog posts, and the temporary discursive communities that surround them. The nature, volume, context, and circulation of this material demonstrate the intimate links between hip-hop culture and media and communications technologies. Unfortunately, it also presents some thorny issues for the curious scholar.

Although ease of reproduction and low storage costs afford digital media an uncommon staying power among other types of cultural ephemera, its long-term availability remains highly unstable. In December 2008, for example, a failed advertising agreement between YouTube and Warner Music Group led to the effective loss of thousands of videos from the popular media-sharing site. Called a "fair use massacre" by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, this sudden removal of large amounts of video especially affected fan, amateur, and semi-professional practitioners. (Von Lohmann) Intimidated by the legal risks, some authors will never return these videos to the web.

The very same complex understanding of authorship, ownership, and permission that brings liveliness to hip-hop culture complicates documentation of its practices. Shifting usernames, email addresses, and the common habit of "re-upping" and mirroring material produced elsewhere occasionally make it difficult to identify a single source for a given artifact. Wherever possible, I have done my best to properly attribute the young people whose creativity forms the foundation upon which this work is built.

Chapter 1

The hip-hop approach

Hip-hop music is not characterized by certain instruments, tempos, or timbres. Rather, it is an approach to the organization of sound that permits the integration and layering of recordings from many sources. Hip-hop culture, likewise, is not limited to a single bounded set of aesthetics but is an on-going process of aesthetic renewal and reproduction expressed through carefully selected media and communications technologies.

This chapter explores the ever-present role of media technologies in the construction of hip-hop culture. It begins by suggesting an understanding of hip-hop culture through John Fiske's construction of popular culture. Next, the discussion shifts to hip-hop's relationship to law and technology by calling on some helpful concepts introduced by Lawrence Lessig and Henry Jenkins. Throughout this chapter, I rely on specific artifacts and phenomena to demonstrate the centrality of technological innovation in expressions of hip-hop culture.

Hip-hop is a culture

Hip-hop is a competitive culture. Its practitioners value an uncommon originality best expressed as "freshness." Fresh does not necessarily mean new. In fact, it frequently indicates a re-freshing of something old, familiar, or forgotten by way of a new use or contextualization. S. Craig Watkins further elaborates the characteristics of hip-hop's freshness as "dialogue with the past, remixing, appropriation, communal ownership, [and] creative chaos." (Watkins 2007)

Much of the past from which hip-hop draws is encoded in the material history of mass media industries. Hip-hop practitioners must literally find ways to open these read-only artifacts for transformative reuse. As such, hip-hop treats media and communications technologies with the same creativity as it approaches fashion, music, and dance. The competitive demand for freshness requires fresh tools and hip-hop practitioners are consistently among the earliest adopters of new media technologies.

Hip-hop culture is the result of highly productive modes of consumption and maintains little distinction between producer and consumer. Fans scour the field of available hip-hop commodities in search of texts relevant to their day-to-day lived experience. As the long dominance of hypermasculine images of black men suggests, relevance should not be confused with realism. Racist stereotypes still resonate in social contexts that support such destructive imagery. Even the most progressive hip-hop artifact must contain traces of injustice if it is to be found relevant by hip-hop participants living in unjust societies.

The products and practices of hip-hop culture provide common vernacular for a large, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-generational group of fans. As this group grows, the culture strains to contain its vast diversity. It is simultaneously commercial and non-commercial; professional, semi-professional, and non-professional. Hip-hop artifacts similarly circulate through a variety of cultural, legal, and technological circumstances. Out of this diversity emerges

an unusually nuanced permission culture that exemplifies changing understandings of authorship and ownership across the media industries.

Hip-hop's social norms are also subject to constant regulation by law and commerce. Recent changes to copyright legislation affect hip-hop creative practice more strongly than other artistic forms because of hip-hop's dependency on media technologies. In addition to changes to copyright law, a dramatic deregulation of U.S. media industries accompanied the rising visibility and capitalization of hip-hop productivity in the 1990s. As this legislative change resulted in corporate consolidation and reduced professional opportunities for hip-hop practitioners, hip-hop culture turned its innovative attention to the internet.

The hip-hop approach is a way of thinking and making that accepts and refreshes old, disparate, and seemingly incongruous fragments of material culture. In practice, this approach demands an unusually creative relationship to media and communications technologies. Considering Fiske's assertion that "popular culture is found in its practices," hip-hop represents a deeply innovative technological culture. (Fiske 1989 45)

Note on my hip-hop exceptionalism

For the purposes of this argument, I use an expansive, unbounded understanding of hip-hop but the phenomena identified herein are not necessarily exclusive to hip-hop culture. Dancehall, disco, hip-hop, house, and techno all share technical practices, aesthetic priorities, and a commitment to repetition with roots in earlier African-American forms. (Rose 1994) Nevertheless, the commercial success, high visibility, and inclusive aesthetics of hip-hop uniquely position it among complimentary musics in the popular imaginary. As a result, damaging stereotypes of young black men in the U.S. are explicitly linked with hip-hop and not those other musics, despite the many rich interrelationships among them.

Popular culture

Hip-hop is a form of popular culture not contained within a single description. It is large and diverse, containing a dense web of interrelated practices, objects, economies, stakeholders, and communities. Hip-hop culture will always evade us if we look only at industrially produced commodities - although they offer a nice tangible place to begin. John Fiske affirms this difficulty in his own attempts to locate popular culture, "in that ill-defined cultural space [which exists in] constant circulation among texts and society." (Fiske 1989 6) With this mobility in mind, the artifacts explored in this chapter include practices and discourses as well conventional media commodities.

To study a popular culture like hip-hop, we look not at objects but at how objects are used to express meanings. In this sense, we are going to have to sift through warehouses full of hopeful artifacts in search of those that resonate with a popular audience. In the hands of an empowered consumer, the resonant artifact ceases to be simply an object and becomes, through use, "an agent and a resource." (Fiske 1989 124) Like DJs selecting and sequencing industrially produced recordings to meet the needs of a unique living, breathing audience, all people negotiate day-to-day social expression through the tactical selection and sequencing of expressive cultural artifacts.

Mass culture

Commercial/indie, mainstream/underground, gangsta/conscious. Fans and critics alike share a sense that there are distinctions to be made in hip-hop culture but no one is quite sure where and how to identify them. As a result, we struggle with temporary structures that can be easily undermined as the sheer breadth of hip-hop culture provides a transgressive example to violate every proposed boundary. Fortunately, earlier studies of popular culture indicate that this

problem is not unique to hip-hop but that this slippery lack of distinction is a feature common to all post-industrial popular cultures.

Henry Jenkins refines a model first developed by Fiske for dealing with this ambiguity when he distinguishes between "mass" culture and "popular" culture. Although it is common to hear these words used interchangeably, the difference between them is significant. In Jenkins' words, mass culture is a "mode of industrial production" while popular culture "describes a mode of consumption." (Jenkins 2006 136) Theories of mass culture suggest that because industrial production methods can replicate media artifacts in large volume, the consumption of those artifacts produces a monoculture. Although we are right to be concerned with mass production, this view obscures the active role of the consumer. Dominant industries have the capacity to mass manufacture artifacts but they cannot mass manufacture meaning.

Fiske addresses justified anxiety over the industrial production of media artifacts when he writes that "all the cultural industries can do is produce a repertoire of texts or cultural resources." Once these texts are released into the media ecology, it is up to the people to "use or reject [them in] the ongoing process of producing their popular culture." (Fiske 1989 24) Concern over the mass production of artifacts is better directed to the tools and modes of consumption available to the people who create popular culture. While mass industrial production does not yield a single mass culture, the systematic reduction of chance encounters with a variety of media artifacts constrains the development of a diverse popular culture. This is evident in the transition from multipurpose media-sharing environments like MySpace or YouTube to unconnected niche sites like Hulu, MTV Music, and Vimeo. Although each of the smaller sites better serves its niche stakeholders, their isolation necessarily restricts the type of popular culture that users will create by reducing the chance that they will incorporate unexpected artifacts from another niche.

One thing to keep in mind about Fiske's analysis is the technological context in which it was written. Regarding the use of industrially produced artifacts, Fiske points out that, with few exceptions, "people cannot and do not produce their own commodities, material or culture, as

they may have done in tribal or folk societies." (Fiske 1989 27) By the mid-1990s, however, Fiske began to document the roots of today's everyday digital creativity in his writing about the use of video and radio in progressive black citizen media. (Fiske 1996) He foresaw the possibility for networked personal computing to enable access and distribution of knowledge in a manner that challenges entrenched "domains of the powerful." (Fiske 1996 227) In 1996, when internet connectivity had just begun to reach North American homes through the mass mailing of AOL diskettes, Fiske imagined a future in which "cultural and political participation" would "inevitably involve technology." (Fiske 1996 238) Unfortunately, it would be nearly another decade before large volume reproduction and distribution of media artifacts escaped the exclusive privilege of those with access to industrial manufacturing and shipping.

Hip-hop culture is unique among other popular cultures in the pre-internet era as its popular productive practices were tightly interwoven with the mass production of media artifacts. In some popular cultures, participants respond to industrial, high-volume artifacts like television shows with popular, low-volume artifacts like fanzines. In hip-hop, however, the same practitioner who contributes directly to and profits from the circulation of the mass artifact could be responsible for producing popular artifacts through entirely different channels. By acquiring a variety of technical skills, the hip-hop participant can effectively play both sides, making the distinction between popular and industrial artifacts quite blurry.

Dual life of a commodity

In the same sense that popular culture must be differentiated from the massive production of media artifacts, Fiske suggests a useful terminology for distinguishing the circulation of artifacts within a capital economy from their use in the creation of popular culture. In one sense, media artifacts operate like commodities to "ensure the generation and circulation of wealth" that keeps the market economy of late capitalism in motion. (Fiske 1989 11) Compact discs are

manufactured, packaged, shipped, marketed, stocked, purchased, played, and resold. Along the way, money changes hands and the economy is sustained. In the hands of consumers, commodities serve two types of functions: material and culture. Material functions tend to be easily observed - e.g., a compact disc stores digital information - but the cultural functions, "concerned with meanings and values," exist only upon consumption. (Fiske 1989) Consumers actively use certain commodities as resources to construct and disperse meanings about themselves, as individuals, as members of groups, and in relation to their social surroundings.

Fiske's distinction between the use of a cultural resource and the consumption of a commodity has intriguing implications for conventional understandings of power within post-industrial society. For the same act, power is balanced differently along multiple axes. On its face, picking out a new ringtone is a simple purchase. I select from a menu of songs, a small digital audio file is transferred to my handset, and \$1.99 is added to my monthly phone bill. But selecting a ringtone is also a nuanced act of self-expression. (Otherwise, why not use one of the generic ringtones bundled with the phone?) People do not buy ringtones because they enjoy listening to five seconds of a particular song before answering a call. Rather, ringtones are personal theme music. When my phone rings in my pocket, the ringtone emanates outward from my body and draws attention to me. Consumption is just the start of my relationship with the ringtone. Beyond the exchange of capital, I use the ringtone to express meaning about myself to the people around me the same way I might with a necktie, a haircut, a bicycle, or, to cite Fiske's example, a new pair of jeans. For some cellphone users, even the decision to use a ringtone at all - never mind a specific ringtone - carries significant meaning within their social environment.

Excorporation

In one view, consumers of industrial commodities validate and invigorate a capitalist economic arrangement that exploits and oppresses them. Fiske argues that the commodity is

"ideology made material" and that every commodity "reproduces the ideology of the system that produced it." (Fiske 1989 14) By purchasing a ringtone, I validate not only a system that regulates my use of digital media in very specific ways, but also a media industry in which relatively few voices are afforded visibility and distribution. One way to interrupt this cycle and the reproduction of problematic ideology is suggested by the consumer's ability to use industrial artifacts in unexpected, unintended, undesigned ways.

Fiske uses the term "excorporation" to describe a process by which people redeploy the resources provided by industrial production to create their own culture. (Fiske 1989 15) Although the commodities reproduce the ideology of the processes by which they were produced, their excorporation is beyond the control of the dominant system. People are free to build a popular culture that resists, undermines, and parodies the dominant industry out of the cultural resources it provides. This does not mean necessarily that avid fans of Beyoncé are on the verge of overthrowing the pop music industry but it does mean that neither Beyoncé nor her record label can control which pleasures and meanings that fans will make out of her music.

The artifacts and practices that emerge from excorporation do not permanently disfigure or *détourn* the commodities they use. In fact, quite often, the emergent practices are incorporated back into the dominant system and recirculated as commodities. (Fiske 1989 16) These commodities are then subject to the same active process of popular consumption and may themselves be excorporated. The cycle of selection, excorporation, incorporation, and commodification of media artifacts engages multiple stakeholders in a lively negotiation of power relations.

Beyoncé's 2008 music video for "Single Ladies" is an homage to 1960s Broadway dancer Gwen Verdon. (Griffin) The black and white video depicts Beyoncé flanked by two female dancers. All three women are wearing high heels and sheer body suits that emphasize their legs, hips, waists, and breasts. "Single Ladies" is explicitly coded: female, heterosexual, black, sexy, powerful, and mature. The lyrics further assert these social allegiances as Beyoncé taunts a

former lover for missing the opportunity to wed her, "If you liked it then you shoulda put a ring on it."

But many audiences first encountered "Single Ladies" by way of a widely circulated home video of a young man performing Beyoncé's choreography in his bedroom. Posted to YouTube just four days after the official video's release, Shane Mercado's version features the 26-year old dressed in a wisp of nylon, hair styled in a dyed "faux-hawk", perfectly imitating Beyoncé's every movement. Shane Mercado's lithe masculine physique and decidedly queer performance not only subvert heteronormative readings of "Single Ladies" but also provide a model for reimagining the video as a cultural resource ripe for further excorporation.¹

Mercado performance is so compelling that it outshines the technical details of its production. The short time lapse between the release of Beyoncé and Mercado's videos is as much a result of Mercado's mastery of video technology as it is evidence of his skill as a dancer. Using his bedroom for staging, a desk lamp for lighting, and home stereo for audio, Mercado's home video may not be flashy but its low-tech apparatus never distracts from the content being presented. Furthermore, unlike many other homemade dance videos, neither the video nor audio distorts in playback and is thus able to be rebroadcast later on traditional television channels. By virtue of his careful management of technical details, Mercado affords his video mobility across multiple social, media, and technological contexts.

Approximately a month after the release of Mercado's "Single Ladies" video, pop star Justin Timberlake appeared in a sketch with Beyoncé on Saturday Night Live dressed in a leotard and heels. In its highly visible deployment of cross-dressing parody, the "Single Ladies" sketch demonstrates the limitations of industrial incorporation of popular culture. Though Timberlake's cross-dressing acknowledges Beyoncé's rising status as a gay icon, it only does so within the conceit of Timberlake's heterosexuality. Whereas Mercado's performance is one of queer

¹ "The Advocate: I would assume, dressed like that and doing that dance, you knew everybody was going to instantly know that you're gay. Mercado: Of course." (Von metzke 1)

virtuosity in a social space coded fiercely feminine, Timberlake's is a clowning joke about an awkward straight man in heels. Despite the clipped queerness of Timberlake's incorporation, the commodification of Mercado's performance contributed to the proliferation of homemade "Single Ladies" videos online. Among these performances, videos featuring other types of bodies like "Single Ladies (BIG GIRL REMIX)" take a cue from Mercado and subvert the normative ideology present in the original.

My emphasis on pleasurable transformation of "Single Ladies" should not obscure the multiple histories that converge in Beyoncé's own video. The Gwen Verdon routine that provided inspiration for the video's staging previously experienced renewed visibility in 2007 by way of a remix phenomenon centered on DJ Unk's song "Walk It Out." (Ovalle) In their downtime at work, employees of a design company in Los Angeles synchronized archival footage of Verdon with DJ Unk's audio. The resulting artifact, posted to YouTube and circulated through a variety of blogs, revealed otherwise unseen connections between the confidence and physicality of Verdon's performance and the contemporary hip-hop dance craze. (Diamond) In addition, other observers connect the dance style of "Single Ladies" to a Southern tradition called "j-setting."

User Jessika859's comments on YouTube indicate the obscuring of history that can occur when popular practices are incorporated by the pop media industries,

"Beyonce did not make J-setting popular. Anybody who plays in [marching] band knows about j-setting. Just cause some people were living under a damn rock doesn't mean that the rest of us weren't well aware of the dance [...] for some of us j-setting has always been 'popular'."
 Jessika859 (UCID)

J-setting, as seen in countless YouTube videos, is a flamboyant, competitive dance performed by two or more people in tandem. Although j-setting is increasingly performed alongside marching and pep bands at college athletic events, it is a celebrated fixture of gay dance clubs in and around Atlanta, GA. (Lee) Beyoncé's video may have brought nationwide visibility

to j-setting but it is Mercado's excorporation, expressed through a savvy deployment of media technologies, that returns it to a place of queer performance.

The "Single Ladies" phenomenon embodies the back-and-forth process by which commodities serve the occasionally divergent interests of their industrial producers and popular consumers. In hip-hop culture, the distinction between stakeholders in this cycle of production, consumption, excorporation, and incorporation is blurred as the same people may perform all four acts. Whereas Beyoncé's video was excorporated by Shane Mercado, it is not entirely uncommon for hip-hop practitioners to circulate unauthorized transformations of their own commodities.

Fiske borrows a military metaphor from De Certeau to describe the resistant excorporating activities of popular culture as "guerilla warfare." When we consider hip-hop, I prefer a more playful imagining of the interactions between the producers of a commodity and its user/consumers. Rather than guerilla fighters attacking a massive fleet, imagine that these groups are engaged in an endless game of Exquisite Corpse.² In the military metaphor, incorporation by dominant stakeholders obliterates all traces of past excorporation efforts. In Exquisite Corpse, however, the entire project is bound by the creative decisions of each player. Even though some participants may have access to a box of markers, while others must draw with stubby pencils, they are all empowered to affect the direction that the drawing will take.

The type of excorporation identified in the above examples rightfully frustrates observers with radical agendas. Subtle resistance through the creative use of commodities has the potential to be radically transformative but will not lead to large-scale revolutionary action. The transformative potential in popular culture manifests instead in a slow process of chipping away or abrading dominant systems. Over time, countless such small changes may result in radical

² Exquisite Corpse is a drawing game invented by Surrealists. In one variation, players fold a piece of paper into portions equal to their number. The first player draws in the first portion, the second in the second portion, and so on but during a player's turn, he or she may only view the immediately preceding segment of paper. The game continues until each player has had an opportunity to contribute to the drawing.

structural revision. In the moment, however, these resistant practices have the appearance of complicity. (Fiske 1989 20)

Hip-hop's most visible commodities frequently concern despicable, indefensible performances of homophobia, misogyny, and hyper-masculinity. The consumption of these commodities may reproduce that oppressive ideology at the same time as it is used to generate meanings that may be counter to them. For example, if DVDs of 50 Cent's shirtless performances are played in nightclubs frequented by gay men, hyper-masculinity is called forth to express a very different meaning from what, we presume, 50 himself might have intended. Although images of violence and self-destruction in hip-hop commodities are alarming, attacking only their content is a limited strategy when there is such potential for change in the creative deployment of them as popular cultural resources.

Who is the popular?

Who are these activators, architects, and builders of popular culture? What do they look like? Where do they live? How old are they? What color is their skin? What languages do they speak?

Like the culture itself, it is not possible to easily identify the people who embody a popular culture. Popular culture is "characterized by its fluidity." Depending on the circumstances, one person may ally strategically with "different, not to say contradictory, social groups." Living in a "complex, highly elaborated social structure," very few people adhere to a single group at all times. Instead, we move between several different group-based identities depending on the social moment we presently inhabit. (Fiske 1989 30)

Hip-hop celebrities frequently demonstrate and attest to their difficulty navigating and negotiating multiple interrelated social categories. Kanye West concisely expresses the anxiety

and possibility contained in this multiplicity of allegiances in his 2004 song "Breathe in, Breathe out." He describes himself as the first rapper with "a Benz and a backpack," calling forth charged symbols of a powerful tension in hip-hop culture. The blinged-out commercial rapper proudly drives an expensive car, the socially-conscious underground MC carries his rhyme notebooks in a backpack, but both exercise the same expressive use of commodities to construct their presentation of self. Describing his own oscillation, West collapses the Benz into the backpack and shines light on the anxiety and complexity that undergirds the deployment of either artifact in a hip-hop cultural context.

Working with high school students, I frequently used the term "code-switching" to describe the nuanced negotiation of social spaces that I expected of them. Fiske describes this tactical approach to nomadic, shifting allegiances as a matter of "coping" with diversely elaborated everyday lives. (Fiske 1989 30) Hip-hop provides numerous rich examples of code-switching in figures like Jay-Z, the former crack dealer who, through his savvy exploitation of the pop music industry, is now among the most visible black businessmen in the U.S. Nevertheless, when Jay-Z makes rap records, he deploys the same street signifiers as he did a decade earlier. Jay-Z's transit between boardroom and street corner is not always smooth, however. In a 2006 dis song, rival Cam'ron criticized Jay-Z for wearing "open-toed sandals" in paparazzi photos.³ By identifying Jay-Z's use of sandals, signs of wealth and leisure, Cam'ron hopes to create a sense of incoherence in Jay-Z's code-switching that will rupture the authenticity of his street rap performances.

As men who became wealthy through the exploitation of hip-hop industry, Cam'ron, Jay-Z, and Kanye West must skillfully navigate wildly divergent social spaces and allegiances. Cam'ron's approach appears to have been one of eccentricity. He wields his capital power to create absurd spectacles of wealth by, for example, appearing in public wearing pink fur and

³ "Who can fuck with me? No mammal / But we tote handles atcha open toe sandals" - "Gotta Love It", Cam'Ron, 2006

driving a pink Range Rover. Jay-Z, on the other hand, has created distinct performances of self that selectively and strategically express various aspects of his personality depending on his perceived audience. Forbes magazine gets one Jay-Z, Vibe gets another, and USWeekly, still another. Of all three, Kanye appears to have incorporated contradiction most fully into his negotiation strategy as he regularly wields atypical combinations of charged artifacts in unexpected social environments - e.g., the Benz, the backpack.

Contradiction

Contradiction is one of the key characteristics of hip-hop culture. Fiske saw society divided by relations of power in which one group is necessarily dominant in every relationship. He wrote that popular culture is the culture of the "disempowered" and because of this subordinated status, it will always contain traces of power imbalance and oppression. (Fiske 1989 24) Hip-hop culture complicates this clear division between dominant and subordinate social groups. While some black hip-hop practitioners have exploited the pop music industry to access positions of capital power traditionally unavailable to people of color in the U.S., they are not simply or essentially subsumed into the dominant group. Structural racism continues to bear upon these few and, as the examples in the previous section illustrate, the power afforded by access to highly visible media channels is not wielded without tension.

The mass manufacture of hip-hop commodities is not the same as the creation of hip-hop culture. Though the sale of commodities has generated enormous wealth in a very few cases, culture can only result from the selection and deployment of these commodities. Even the most capitalized hip-hop industrialist is constantly at risk of rejection by the popular culture with which he or she identifies. It is not in their power to control the use of hip-hop commodities, even if they prove skillful at anticipating which ones will resonate popularly.

Nevertheless, for most of the last two decades, hip-hop's pop industrial manifestations rarely reflected the diversity of its popular participation. Despite receding street violence and a deflated drug trade, the gangsta pose pioneered by NWA, Schoolly D, and the Geto Boys in the late 1980s gave way to ever more concentrated iterations over the years, culminating in the finely-tuned hyper-masculine performance of 50 Cent. (Coates) Notably, the continued proliferation of gangsta images attended a rising capitalization of the hip-hop industry. The staggering CD sales of artists like DMX in the late 1990s indicated a white fascination and resonance with performances of threatening black masculinity and stories of black-on-black violence. (Rose) But as CD sales began to fall precipitously in the decade to follow, new trends in the hip-hop industry suggest fading interest in the gangsta narrative among fans, white and black.

50 Cent is the culmination of the New York / Los Angeles gangsta aesthetic yet his arrival marked the saturation point for those two cities in the pop imaginary. With a few notable exceptions – New Orleans, for example – artists from New York and Los Angeles solely represented hip-hop on television throughout the 1990s. The attention paid to these two hubs was at the expense of vibrant regional sounds and styles in other parts of the nation – not to mention the rest of the world.

Left to develop outside of the dominant pop industry, cities like Houston, Oakland, and Memphis developed their own aesthetic priorities and modes of consumption. The eventual incorporation of regional styles by the dominant hip-hop industry in the 2000s significantly expanded hip-hop's sonic palette. Though the most visible hit songs from hip-hop variants like screw, snap, hyphy, and crunk did not stray far lyrically from gangsterism and partying, they still differed greatly in terms of tempo, instrumentation, and arrangement. Furthermore, they revealed a diversity in hip-hop culture that was largely invisible in its dominant pop industrial manifestation. People were dancing, speaking, driving, and wearing hip-hop differently in every city.

At first glance, Jody Breeze's 2005 "Stackin Paper" describes a life of guns, drugs, and fast cars, more of the same stereotypical imagery for which the typical 50 Cent record is criticized. On paper, there may be nothing lyrically novel about Breeze's track but there is something thrilling in the way that his Georgia accent hangs on each word, "We stacking paper, mayne..." This outward performance of Southernness allied Breeze with the competitive spirit of his region's hip-hop community and thus gave special political relevance to an otherwise conventional commodity. The subtle contradiction between Breeze's conventional lyrics and his subversive performance is an example of why Fiske calls popular culture an "elusive concept." (Fiske 1989 45) "Stackin Paper" will only resonate politically for listeners attuned to the peculiar disenfranchisement of Southern hip-hop artists.

Opposition

Frankly, my reading of "Stackin Paper" is generous. Another reader might rightfully point to Breeze's uncritical glorification of the drug trade and ask how I reconcile such destructive images with my commitment to improving the lives of young people. To this point, I defer to Fiske, who admits that popular readings are not the only possible readings and may not even be among the most common. (Fiske 1989 44) It is for this reason that we must examine modes of consumption and locate those that permit diverse encounters with new texts and encourage discussion of available texts. Exploration of a wide variety of texts and readings is an important part of encouraging a diverse media discourse.

In 2006, I organized a weekly hip-hop workshop for my high school students. One of our regular activities was to gather around a big table and listen to a favorite song suggested by one of the students. During the discussion that followed one of these listening sessions, talk turned to the dearth of highly visible female rappers. I thought immediately of Remy Ma from Terror Squad, a female rapper I considered radical in her unusually butch presentation of feminine power. When

Remy came up in conversation, however, one of my female students responded that she found Remy's lyrics too violent and overly concerned with sex. I was initially surprised, as I expected this student to identify with my subversive reading. After I shared some of my thoughts, I listened as other students confirmed that mine was clearly the minority view. The divergent readings we shared in workshop resulted in a richer understanding of Remy's power and position than we could have had with only one or another reading left unchallenged.

My fandom of Remy Ma further presses Fiske's admission that subversive, resistant popular readings of media artifacts are not necessarily the most common. Do self-identified fans tend away from dominant readings? And, if so, how does my position as a hip-hop fan practitioner bias my research?

Hip-hop fans are "not the helpless subjects of an irresistible ideological system" but neither do they select media artifacts as "free-willed, biologically determined individuals." (Fiske 1989) They are each individually immersed in a complex, unstable web of social relationships that demands constant negotiation through their everyday lives. Fandom is but one dimension - albeit a powerful one - in this social system. Likewise, my eagerness to locate queer or feminist icons in rap privileged certain qualities in my reading of Remy over ones that better resonated with my students. Such a radical reading may not be the most common one but its possibility foregrounds the role of the reader in making meaning from the commodities they encounter.

Producerly texts

"Every act of consumption is an act of cultural production." (Fiske 1989 35)

Not all commodities will be selected for reuse by the makers of popular culture. People strategically explore available artifacts and select a subset to use in the construction of their culture. Shane Mercado contributed to our popular culture through his creative reuse of Beyoncé's

"Single Ladies," an interpretation that demanded considerable labor to rehearse and perform. Why was it worth the effort? Are there qualities that made "Single Ladies" better suited to his expressive reuse than other songs, dances, and videos?

Building on Roland Barthes' analysis of "readerly" and "writerly" texts, Fiske describes commodities like "Single Ladies" as "producerly." The producerly text is unusually welcoming to intervention and creative reuse. No single characteristic determines the producerly nature of a text and no text is producerly in the absolute. Mercado's selection of "Single Ladies", like every popular act, depended on the relevance and timeliness of Beyoncé's commodity to his unique social circumstances.

In addition to its social significance, the formal qualities of a text may afford more producerly modes of consumption. The process of selecting commodities for reuse is concerned largely with "function" and "the potential [creative and expressive] uses" of a given artifact. (Fiske 1989 129) Mercado notes that one reason he chose "Single Ladies" is "because you can see the choreography from the first to last second. Most of the other videos out there, they're all edit." (Von Metzke 2) Specific directorial and pictorial decisions presented the choreography in a way that welcomed creative intervention. Mercado's approach highlights possible educational, instructional uses of music video, a form frequently derided as mere advertising.

In a fascinating twist, Mercado's exploitation of Beyoncé's "Single Ladies" resulted in the production of a similarly resonant commodity of his own. Google results for queries like "single ladies gay" include countless blog posts and forum threads concerning Mercado's recorded performance. Additionally, several unrelated YouTube users created remixes that join Beyoncé and Mercado into a single, split-screen dance. The affordances of digital editing tools and networked distribution shrink the distance and distinction between the consumption of one producerly commodity and the production of another.

Fiske's work with African-American citizen video makers revealed a powerful affordance of their impending transition to digital media. By connecting their video cassette decks to a

personal computer, they converted analog signals into digital bits that could be endlessly manipulated, he wrote, "just like words." (Fiske 1996 224) In this sense, the computer functions like a producerly text among various home electronics; uniquely open to expressive intervention by a popular audience.

Anticipating the expressive possibilities of sampling and general-purpose computers, hip-hop practitioners in the 1970s long searched for producerly technologies that would afford fluid interaction with audio-visual artifacts in the way that Fiske describes. They approached available media technologies in unexpected ways to craft artifacts and performances that explicitly displayed producerly "gaps." Though it may not be apparent at first glance, the tools used to read, write, duplicate, and modify media artifacts are commodities subject to the same process of popular selection as any other text. Preferred brands and models of turntables, cassette decks, samplers, software, and websites are all chosen because of their relevant and producerly qualities.

Of all the samplers designed and sold in the 1980s, only a handful found widespread use among hip-hop producers. In addition to the Akai MPC series, the E-mu SP-12 and SP-1200 stand out as favorites among hip-hop producers of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Hank Shocklee from Public Enemy explains his preference for the SP-1200 based on its specific combination of features, "[The SP-1200] allows you to do everything with a sample. You can cut it off, you can truncate it really tight, you can run a loop in it, you can cut off certain drum pads." (Rose 1994 76) Schoolly D describes being resistant to adding a sampler to his studio until he discovered that the SP-12 could synchronize his existing instruments, "At first I didn't want to use the SP-12 [sampler] but when I saw that I could link up all my machines and use that, I went even more crazy." (Coleman 409)

The producers' reflections hint at the criteria they use to select their tools. Shocklee describes a machine that affords him the greatest freedom in his manipulation of artifacts clipped from existing recordings. Schoolly values connectivity and compatibility among the various machines in his studio. Once the producers had selected their machines, they frequently describe

pushing the boundaries of the machines' intended use. For example, Questlove of the Roots remembers circumventing the short time limit of his Casio SK-1 sampling keyboard by recording samples in double-time and programming the machine to play them back at half-time, effectively doubling the sampler's time-limit. (Coleman 372) The producerly media tool is one that not only matches the hip-hop artist's pre-existing aesthetic priorities but also affords creative experimentation with its technical constraints.

The practice of selecting, exploring, and innovating media production tools is one of the most consistent features of hip-hop's music culture. While the memories of Shocklee and Schoolly D are overwhelmingly positive about their decisions, recent discourse reveals a tension between contemporary innovators and a certain hip-hop orthodoxy that seeks to limit hip-hop's technical and aesthetic evolution. In response to critics of his transition from vinyl to digital DJing, producer Just Blaze calls upon the history of technological innovation in hip-hop, "Every few years there's going to be advantages in [music] technology. You either stick with them or you don't. [...] Use the technology to your advantage." 9th Wonder's reflection on his use of the Fruityloops software suite takes a similarly defensive tone, "The only reason that [critics] think it is bad is because they had Fruityloops on their machines for 6 or 7 years and didn't know that it could do [what I do with it]."

Those who criticize contemporary producers for experimenting with new tools and technologies misunderstand the reasons that earlier practitioners selected tools like the E-mu SP-1200 sampler. As the evidence in Chapter 2 demonstrates, hip-hop's approach to music predates any particular machine. Savvy producers like Shocklee selected the SP-1200 because, of all the available technologies, it afforded the richest possibilities for expressing hip-hop aesthetic priorities. When today's young practitioners select Fruityloops, they do so not out of ignorance of the older machines nor because an SP-1200 now costs more than a new laptop, but because the software affords specific creative opportunities that better reflect their social and technological environment.

Central to the endurance of hip-hop as a highly visible popular culture is a continued commitment to innovation driven by creative competition. The locus of competition shifts in response to changing social, technological, legal, and market demands. Whereas the SP-1200 users competed along one set of axes, contemporary producers like Just Blaze and 9th Wonder work in a different competitive context. Blaze argues that shifting terms of competition influence his tool selection,

"It's a different day and age. People pride themselves on different things. It was cool 10 years ago to be the only person that has [this breakbeat sample] but you know what? You're not special anymore because [anyone] can go and download it." (PP2GTV)

The availability of digital recordings on the internet altered the terms of hip-hop competition. For Just Blaze, a self-identified collector of vinyl records, this changing context affected the criteria by which he selects tools and texts for creative consumption. If it were not for the competitive negotiation of changing technological contexts, hip-hop would have long ago receded from the pop music industry as its artifacts would no longer be timely or relevant to a popular audience.

For as long as hip-hop culture has engaged with the pop music industry, it has blurred common distinctions like commercial/non-commercial and mainstream/underground. This complicates Fiske's understanding of the producerly text as he conceived of the media ecology as clearly divided into distinct groups of dominant and subordinant stakeholders. In his analysis, the subordinant audience identifies a few producerly texts from among many industrially produced commodities and is able to creatively exploit the selected texts in the creation of popular culture. The recent phenomenon surrounding Lil Wayne's "A Milli" provides a valuable example of a hip-hop text moving fluidly through a variety of social contexts due to savvy deployment of media and communication technologies.

Shortly after "A Milli" leaked onto the internet during the spring of 2008, dozens of vocalists recorded themselves rapping, singing, and talking atop the same instrumental as Lil Wayne. Leaving Bangladesh's beat largely unchanged, each of these new versions replaced Wayne's voice with the artist's own in the same fashion as the "riddim-plus-voicing" tradition in Jamaican dancehall reggae. (Manuel) Highly visible artists like Jay-Z, Ne-Yo, Lil Mama, and LL Cool J wrote and recorded "A Milli" versions along with lesser-known, non-English speaking, or aspiring artists. Many of these versions were collected on DJ mixtapes, blogs, and playlists on media-sharing sites like imeem.

Whereas "Single Ladies" welcomed innovation along multiple axes: dance, dress, gender performance, and video production, revision of "A Milli" happened almost exclusively in the recording of new vocals. Rather than inhibiting participation, this constraint highlighted a producerly opportunity for intervention and gave a clear discursive focus for critique of the new artifacts. Materially, the consistent instrumental track facilitated reuse by DJs mixing on two turntables. By synchronizing the speed of each turntable platter, the various versions could be endlessly overlapped, blended, and re-arranged in live improvisations.

As "A Milli" attracted an unusual quantity of creative reuse, its producerly quality actually increased over time. The constant versioning enabled it to stay relevant and timely as it invited participation from a wide variety of social contexts. The enlarging phenomenon created an exciting discursive environment for fans and a pleasurable, competitive context for rappers. With all of these stakeholders thus enlivened by the phenomenon, rapper Fabolous recalls, "I did the freestyle because the beat was hot in the streets." (Reid 2008)

"Hot in the streets" is a phrase that is often used to describe a song that is resonating with popular hip-hop audiences. It frequently suggests interest among urban, African-American hip-hop fans as an indication of future commercial potential. As a well-known artist, Fabolous' decision to record his version because the "A Milli" beat is "hot in the streets" reflects a combination of artistic one-upsmanship with commercial interest. If the version Fabolous creates

is well regarded by hip-hop fans, it will raise his visibility in ways that may lead to future opportunities in the pop marketplace.

The importance of internetworked personal computers to the spread of "A Milli" cannot be overstated. Less visible, less capitalized artists like Kingdom recorded versions with the same motivation as Fabolous. Because only Lil Wayne's version would (or legally could) be released as a conventional pop single, all of the downstream versions circulated using the same internet distribution mechanisms. Despite their vastly different social and capital power, when rendered as a mp3 files, Lil Wayne, Fabolous, and Kingdom are technologically equal: entries in a playlist, files on a hard drive, links in a blog post.

Accessible digital production tools further facilitated participation in "A Milli". While some versions were likely recorded in conventional recording studios, most of the artists recorded themselves in home studios. Kingdom recalls recording his vocals directly into the built-in microphone on his Apple laptop computer. Using software available free of cost on the web, Kingdom compressed his version into an mp3 and emailed it to friends, DJs, and bloggers who would, in turn, circulate the track further. Because the performers were adept at using recording apparatus and digital self-distribution tools, they were able to turn around new versions of "A Milli" very quickly. This rapid expansion gave the phenomenon tremendous power to reward participants with social visibility and the frequency with which new version were released continually renewed its popular relevance.

The "A Milli" phenomenon teaches us a few important things about the unique combination of characteristics found in a producerly hip-hop text. First, and perhaps most distinct from Fiske's analysis, producerly hip-hop texts fluidly circulate through commercial, non-commercial, and not-yet commercial contexts. Each of these classifications, like the other qualities of a producerly text, is determined largely by the social context in which it is observed. The inclusion and sale of Fabolous' version as a track on a mixtape is commercial use but fan distribution on YouTube likely is not. Second, the producerly quality of a hip-hop text is dynamic

and changes in response to shifting circumstances. As excitement about the "A Milli" phenomenon grew, the text itself became more producerly and attracted further innovative intervention. Finally, the producerly hip-hop text must enrich the culture with opportunities for discussion and debate. After a few versions circulated through the internet and radio, "A Milli" became vernacular. Every fan is exposed to some of the phenomenon but no one is exposed to it all. This unequally distributed knowledge provides rich opportunities for sharing, discovery, and debate.

Secondary texts

Critics of hip-hop culture rely primarily on artifacts manufactured by the hip-hop industry. They examine albums, music videos, singles, and rap magazines. Hip-hop culture, however, circulates an enormous volume of secondary texts that, for many fans and participants, form the material strata through which the primary texts are encountered. Blog posts, YouTube videos, messageboards, gossip, radio mixshows, and unauthorized mixtapes all play a role in constructing diverse cultural contexts in which the primary texts circulate.

Music video in particular must be examined contextually as a growing number of young people encounter music videos primarily through media-sharing websites like YouTube or WorldStarHipHop. While MTV and BET are still the gatekeepers and agenda-setting stakeholders for the production of hip-hop music videos, informal observation suggests they no longer account for the bulk of music video watching. Though young people go to YouTube and related sites in search of videos that they may have first seen on MTV or BET, the modes of consumption afforded by those websites is quite different from that of a television channel.

When video playback concludes on YouTube, the viewer is immediately presented with a revolving menu of related videos. Presumably, the videos in this menu are selected algorithmically based on some combination of keywords and user habit. They will inevitably

include other artifacts of the pop music industry by the same or similar artists. But, as many hip-hop fans no doubt discover, they also include home videos, remixes, and critical responses.

"Blame It" by Jamie Foxx and T-Pain may not activate much producerly activity in its viewers but seeking it out on YouTube can (though it certainly does not always) lead to a much richer series of videos. A T-Pain fan is equally able, though not necessarily likely, to select the video of three guys rapping in their dorm room as he or she is to follow "Blame It" with another T-Pain video like "I'm N Luv (Wit A Stripper)." Without consideration for the apparatus in which they are viewed, it is difficult to see the diverse connections that internet-enabled viewers make among contemporary music videos.

Artifacts of the hip-hop industry frequently bear evidence of their construction. These trace remains act as suggestive, even educational, indications of the producerly practices that might attend their consumption. For example, when Jay-Z precedes his verse on "Brush Your Shoulders Off" with "turn the music up in my headphones," he highlights the technological environment in which hip-hop recordings are made. Secondary texts further exploit the momentary gaps in these artifacts by enumerating the tools and practices by which they were produced. Teenage YouTube vlogger JehFree562 sparked a minor scandal in 2008 with a short video in which he reconstructed the famous expensive instrumental track for Usher's single, "Love In This Club" using stock samples that ship with Apple's GarageBand, a piece of audio editing software that ships free of cost with all Macintosh laptops. The volume of criticism from fans in the days following Jehfree's revelation compelled producer Polow Da Don, of whom Jehfree is an admirer, to make a public comment defending his use of these sounds. Secondary texts like Jehfree's video not only detail the technical practices by which hip-hop recordings are constructed, they also materially deconstruct pop industrial manifestations of hip-hop culture.⁴

⁴ Jehfree has since removed the video from his channel but it remains available due to the mirroring efforts of other YouTube users. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVHvnpovTGY>

Which things are incorporated?

Phenomena like "Single Ladies" and "A Milli," reveal some common criteria to producerly hip-hop texts. If a commodity is able to move fluidly among diverse commercial environments, change in response to shifting social contexts, and provide raw material for discussion and debate, it is more likely to be selected for creative reuse by hip-hop culture. We have also seen, in the case of Timberlake's "Single Ladies" parody sketch on Saturday Night Live, how effectively pop media industries are able to incorporate hip-hop innovations into the manufacture of new commodities. This cycle highlights the need for future research to identify common characteristics among popular innovations that attract incorporation by the dominant media industries.

Free culture

Fiske's understanding of popular culture and especially his identification of "producerly" artifacts help explain the selection, circulation, and manipulation of hip-hop commodities within changing social circumstances. Those social circumstances can be further elaborated to reveal an interconnected web of forces constraining the day-to-day practices of hip-hop participants. In his writing about free culture and digital remixing, Lawrence Lessig offers a more detailed understanding of the peculiar arrangement of technology and law from which hip-hop's social circumstances are determined.

Lessig's thinking is strongly informed by his experience of computing culture and the free/open source software tradition. As is a common habit among studies of internet culture, Lessig occasionally uses terminology borrowed from hip-hop - e.g. "remix" - without providing cultural or historical context for the term. This obscuring of hip-hop history not only denies individual innovators of due credit but misses a potentially transformative connection between the

contemporary personal computing paradigm and the creative practices of hip-hop culture.

Because of widespread discursive slippage between hip-hop and young black men, illustrating some of Lessig's ideas with hip-hop examples can contribute to altering an enduring stereotype of young black men as less technically savvy than youth in other social categories.

Whereas Fiske's study of culture concerns the everyday practices of media user-consumers, Lessig's work tends to emphasize the intertwined histories of law and media technologies. By combining these two perspectives, we can see with finer detail how the hip-hop practitioner engages creatively with his or her technological surroundings. Furthermore, the social and economic norms found in hip-hop provide a new perspective with which to consider Lessig's exploration of "permission cultures" and the boundary between commercial and non-commercial activities.

Read/Write (RW) culture

Lessig's analysis begins with a description of "read/write culture," the default mode in which humans create, share, and express culture freely. In read/write cultures, professionals and amateurs interact in on-going discourse that can move fluidly between commercial and non-commercial spaces. In this sense, Lessig's read/write culture appears to share many of the same characteristics as Fiske's understanding of popular culture. The people in a read/write culture "add to the culture they read by creating and re-creating the culture around them [...] using the same tools the professional uses." (Lessig 2008 28)

The meanings generated in such a culture are the product of a community and reflect the values of that community. In a classroom context, read/write culture is found in group projects and open discussion. In hip-hop, read/write culture manifests in clusters of creative activity. In "A Milli," for example, professionals, semi-professionals, self-identified amateurs, and fans contributed in different ways to the production of a multi-layered phenomenon that represents hip-hop's spirit of

creative competition, innovation, and reuse. Some of the artifacts generated in this phenomenon were sold in various commercial contexts while others circulated solely through social channels. The means of production were as diverse as the artists who contributed recordings but their output was materially uniform, circulating almost universally as mp3 files. In addition, commentary, aggregation, curatorial work, and redistribution by fans, bloggers, and DJs yielded a multi-layered culture of shared creativity among the various stakeholders.

Read-Only (RO) culture

In contest with the diverse, egalitarian image of a read/write culture, Lessig describes read-only culture as "less practiced in performance, or amateur creativity, and more comfortable [...] with simple consumption." (Lessig 2008 28) Whereas professionals, semi-professionals, and non-professionals intermingle in a read/write culture, read-only culture is characterized by a voice of authority that is tightly related to professionalization. Accompanying this authority is a stricter distinction between commercial and non-commercial activities. In a classroom, read-only culture is the conventional textbook and the lecture.

In a read-only culture, the professional is distinguished from the amateur in a few ways. Institutional accreditation and a shared formal training give members of a professional class a common foundation and shared vocabulary with which to discuss and enact their practices. The amateur, on the other hand, only exists in contrast to the professional. The amateur is characterized as an autodidact for whom a given practice is not tied to sustenance. In cases where no formal training is expected, merely being paid can be a form of validation and professionalization. By this formulation, an amateur rapper has a day job and a professional pays rent with money earned through rap.

While there are many instances of professionalization in history, the professionalization of popular culture is a unique feature of the twentieth century. Rather than look to one another for

expressions of popular culture, writes Lessig, "people [are] taught to defer to the professional." (Lessig 2008 29) In the time leading up to the last century, new media technologies like the paperback book and phonograph afforded high-volume replication of professionally produced cultural commodities. These artifacts of read-only culture were designed to be "consumed, not used. Played, not played with." (Lessig 2008 37)

An up-front investment of time, labor, and capital is required to make money from a tangible cultural commodity. The resulting object is then replicated, distributed, and sold to recoup the initial expense and turn a profit. The founding fathers included copyright in the Constitution as a special incentive to encourage U.S. citizens to produce creative works by providing a state-enforced, time-limited monopoly to authors for the reproduction and sale of an original media artifact. For read-only artifacts that require significant up-front capital investment to produce but very little to re-produce, the guaranteed monopoly is both incentivizing and confidence-building. Copyright regulation thus enabled the growth of media industries to produce highly capitalized read-only artifacts: blockbuster films, major video games, music videos, etc. Although this copyright policy has been very effective at encouraging certain types of expression, its inability to justly regulate popular cultures is revealed in the ambiguously commercial practices of hip-hop culture.

When is culture commercial?

Until very recently, copyright law was concerned primarily with commercial activity. According to Lessig, "commercial" refers only to those artifacts and practices that are "produced and sold or produced to be sold." (Lessig 2004 7) The remaining cultural activities are non-commercial and, again, until recently, "essentially unregulated." (Lessig 2004 8) Because of this benign neglect, read/write and read-only cultures in the U.S. were able to grow and borrow from one another for most of the first three-quarters of the twentieth century.

In the last three decades, however, the distinction between commercial and non-commercial activity has become increasingly blurred. As the act of consumption increasingly results in the production of new commodities like mixtapes and homemade music videos, the law has begun to constrain activities that were previously unhindered. Furthermore, when popular culture is expressed through digital media and circulated using commercial online services like YouTube, the same artifact may simultaneously have commercial and non-commercial implications. This ambiguity reveals opportunities for regulatory intervention where previously there were none.

Although the tension between existing regulatory structures and digital media became highly visible as soon as people could access the internet from their homes, hip-hop culture has, from its earliest manifestations, embraced complexity and ambiguity in the commercial status of its practices and artifacts. As Chapter 2 will explore in depth, the hip-hop mixtape, composed of artifacts from the pop music industry, exemplifies a regulatory structure that prioritizes social norms over more formal legal structures like licensing. The mixtapes circulate through internet-mediated fan trading networks as well as more traditional commercial spaces and in many cases, the exchange of mixtapes overlaps and competes with industrially produced commodities. Nevertheless, artists signed to major record labels regularly participate in the socially regulated mixtape economy alongside their contractual engagement with the pop industry. Despite their differences, the mixtape and pop economies are each vital expressions of hip-hop culture enriched by their interrelationship.

Fluid mobility among multiple commercial spaces benefits hip-hop culture in many ways but it confounds one of the important features of U.S. copyright law. "Fair Use" refers to a set of guidelines that assist judges presiding over cases of alleged copyright infringement. One of the criteria that a judge uses to evaluate a possible fair use is the commercial impact of a given artifact. In other words, even if a reuse of existing media artifacts is clearly transformative, like

Jay-Z's version of "A Milli," it may be considered copyright infringement because of its potential commercial value.

Copyright law disproportionately affects hip-hop practitioners among other artists because of the distinctly technological nature of their creativity and the commercial mobility of their artifacts. This conflict was never made clearer than in the 2005 case of *Bridgeport Music v. No Limit Films* in which District Judge Thomas A. Higgins infamously threatened creative practices involving unauthorized sampling by saying, "Get a license or do not sample." (Bridgeport) Higgins' opinion hinged on a fundamental misunderstanding of the role that technology plays in the production of hip-hop music. Defending his decision against criticism that mandatory licensing would chill hip-hop creativity, Higgins made his confusion plain,

"It must be remembered that if an artist wants to incorporate a 'riff' from another work in his or her recording, he is free to duplicate the sound of that 'riff' in the studio."
(Bridgeport)

This opinion makes no distinction between compositions and recordings of music. In Higgins' view, sampling is merely a shortcut to the reproduction of "riffs" that could just as well be re-played by another instrumentalist. He does not take into account that it is not possible to re-play the emotionally resonant qualities of an existing recording. Indeed, early hip-hop producers tried to use studio musicians to recreate the producerly passages of popular songs in mimicry of a breakbeat-juggling DJ but these recordings lacked the popular relevance of live DJ routines using the original records. When producers later adopted samplers, it was not as a cost-cutting measure but the result of a conscious search for the specific affordances found in sampling technology. More than mechanically interpreting a musical composition like a player piano, the sampler reimagines popular culture through material transformation of its artifacts.

Higgins' decision would not have been so troubling were it not made amid a legal context that regularly rejects claims of fair use by hip-hop producers. As hip-hop commodities frequently circulate in the same commercial spaces as the recordings from which they sample, they fail to

meet the non-commercial exception provided by fair use. Thus, a use deemed fair by hip-hop social norms still subjects the creator to discipline by copyright law. Fair use does not protect creators who act in ambiguous commercial circumstances.

Does hip-hop have a read-only culture?

In their creative use of tools like the sampler, hip-hop practitioners bring the creative affordances of media technologies to bear on read-only artifacts in a manner more closely related to read/write culture. To understand the ways in which hip-hop culture complicates Lessig's notion of read-only artifacts, we need to first take a moment to walk through the emergence of read-only culture.

Initially, read/write cultures simply incorporated new media commodities into their folk practices. For a 19th century family gathered around the fire after supper, one song might be sung from a songbook, the next from memory. (Darnton) This integration was made possible in part because media artifacts like books were still somewhat rare compared to widespread folk traditions. Twentieth century industrialization dramatically increased the volume of media commodities being produced and flipped the balance between folk cultural and industrially produced artifacts. Mass production rather than local tradition now supplied people with the raw materials from which to select and create their culture.

In the case of popular music, the combination of phonograph records and music programming on the radio yielded, for the first time, authoritative renditions of popular songs. Although the sale of sheet music had been underway for some time, sheet music still demands interpretation and human performance. The player piano, the radio, and the vinyl record, on the other hand, play music mechanically and require very little labor on the part of the listener. To the eyes and ears of music-loving critics like John Philips Sousa, the proliferation of phonographs would lead inevitably to the deterioration of read/write culture. Instead of a nation of singers and

songwriters, we would be a nation of music consumers served by a small number of professional recording artists. (Lessig 2008 27)

Sousa was right, to a degree. College dormitory guitar players notwithstanding, the U.S. is not the nation of amateur musicians he imagined. There are producerly possibilities in media technologies such as the vinyl record and phonograph system but they do not manifest in forms that would have been recognizable as read/write culture to Sousa or his contemporaries. Sure, Sousa might have appreciated the instrumentalist approach of turntablist DJs with their memorable scratch routines and unorthodox relationship to music playback devices but this example does little to assuage his fears regarding the future of non-commercial music-making. The steep technological requirements (special turntables, mixer, amplifier, speakers, headphones, and a record collection) discourage widespread participation and we are no more a nation of scratch DJs than we are a nation of marching bands.

Less immediately radical, but more revolutionary is the recognition of curation as an expressive activity that accompanies DJ culture. Though the reproductive capabilities of the phonograph may have mitigated the need for voice lessons, it introduced new creative dimensions to the presentation of music in the home. With emphasis shifted away from performance, the phonograph operator at a social gathering is challenged to select and sequence a compelling set of recordings for his or her audience. This practice gradually made way for the prominent role of the DJ in 1970s dance musics like disco, reggae, and northern soul. In each case, commodities designed to be read-only were selected, sequenced, and layered into evening-long programs of music. It is from this expressive reuse of media artifacts that hip-hop's treatment of the vinyl record is directly descended. (Brewster)

It is unclear if Lessig's distinction between read-only culture and read/write culture stands when we consider the creative reuse of media commodities in hip-hop. In addition to the curatorial approach to existing recordings practiced by the DJ, industrially produced hip-hop commodities often reveal the means by which they were produced or bear explicit points of entry

for creative intervention. The clearest example is in the case of hip-hop singles. Building on the convention of including instrumental B-sides that emerged in Jamaican reggae and New York disco, hip-hop singles frequently include "instrumental" and "acapella" versions. (Manuel, Graham) These recordings are as much instruments as they are artifacts, equally resources as commodities. Although their packaging, circulation, and sale suggest read-only culture, an implicit message is communicated by the inclusion of incomplete additional versions: the hip-hop single is but an instance of a larger phenomenon to be read, written, revised, and innovated upon.

Though they are widely available, not every hip-hop fan seeks out or accidentally encounters the instrumental and acapella versions of their favorite songs. In fact, considering the prevalence of single-file downloads from peer-to-peer filesharing networks and online retailers like iTunes, incidental purchase of these separated tracks is likely less common today than it was in the past when they came packaged together as a vinyl, cassette, or CD single. That being said, the transition to compressed digital audio affords new opportunities for expressive reuse. For example, selecting a song to play in the background on one's MySpace page is an even more intimate use of that pop commodity than simply playing it during a party. The constant search for new sounds among old recordings, a hallmark of sample-based music, is now reflected in the detailed exploration and evaluation of digital music in which iPod owners engage on a daily basis. We may not be the nation of musicians that Sousa hoped we might be but with our carefully curated playlists and bulging harddrives, we are no less expressive.

Permission culture

Copyright law is only concerned with the replication and exploitation of tangible instances of cultural expression. Teaching a friend how to sing a song is not regulated but burning a recording of that song to a CD is. As popular expression moves from non-commercial contexts to off-line semi-commercial online spaces, copyright law effects constraints on practices and

practitioners that it was never intended to regulate. This unexpected regulation is the consequence of the material process by which computers mediate communication among individuals. Nearly every activity we conduct on a personal computer generates instances of expression subject to regulation.

U.S. copyright law is very generous. Unlike trademark or patent protection, there is no copyright registry or application process. Rather, the law is triggered automatically by productive acts of expression. In the case of replicating an artifact produced by someone else, "[copyright] law requires either a license or a valid claim of 'fair use.'" (Lessig 2008 100) A license is a formal arrangement with the publisher of a media artifact and a claim of fair use depends on the opinion of a judge after infringement has been alleged. Either option requires considerable time, labor, and capital to pursue. As such, these arrangements are entirely out of balance with the everyday copying habits that proliferate in highly technological cultures such as hip-hop. When expressed through digital media, read/write culture is caught in a constant state of copyright infringement. Or, as Lessig puts it, read/write culture is now "presumptively illegal." (Lessig 2008 100)

Despite its prominence in the pop music industry, hip-hop's persistent commercial ambiguity and creative use of media technology positions it squarely in the "presumptively illegal" bind. From a purely legal standpoint, each of the countless versions of "A Milli" constitutes an instance of copyright infringement. Were the legal representatives of Universal Music Group so inclined, they could have initiated legal action against any of the rappers, singers, DJs, or bloggers who contributed to the growth of the "A Milli" phenomenon. Assuming they were aware of the proliferation of downstream "A Milli"s, we might assume that the corporations were happy to tacitly allow the unauthorized activity because of the promotional value it generated for Lil Wayne's commercially available album.

But what about the various "A Milli" vocalists who made their recordings without concern for copyright law? Are they all habitual lawbreakers? Their creative labor was not done under an explicit agreement with Lil Wayne nor did they contact his record label. It was also not

meant to be voluntary, unpaid advertising for Lil Wayne's album. How did they know it was okay to reuse the existing instrumental recording?

All of the participants in "A Milli" acted upon the implicit understanding that unauthorized reuse in hip-hop is permitted in cases of creative competition so long as the products do not compete in the same commercial space as the original. Jay-Z's widely circulated version, "A Billi", is perfectly acceptable without authorization so long as it remains a fan-traded mp3. But if Jay-Z wishes to include "A Billi" on his next official album, he will have to negotiate a license to reuse the instrumental track. Whereas copyright law expects permission to be granted explicitly through formal licensing arrangements, the negotiation of permission in hip-hop depends on a nuanced understanding of its social norms.

Lessig's terms "read/write" and "read-only" are inspired by the "file permissions" structure on multi-user computer systems. "Permission" is a valuable term for describing the regulation of creative reuse. Permission may be perceived or granted in a number of ways. Explicit licensing is the simplest arrangement but the social norms found in some popular culture grant permission implicitly. In the case of hip-hop, explicit permission is not required for participation in a phenomenon like "A Milli" though it is required for the distribution of conventional commercial artifacts. In contrast, Lessig uses the term "permission culture" to describe the structural effect of a copyright regime that expects explicit authorization for *all* instances of reuse.

Permission culture is only possible when everyday creativity and reuse is expressed through media and communication technologies. Ostensibly, copyright policy has always required permission for unauthorized transformation of existing media artifacts but, until recently, read/write activities were largely invisible to the law because the capital barrier to large-scale production and distribution was so high. Beginning in the mid-1970s, hip-hop practitioners exploited unexpected possibilities in consumer technologies to bring read/write norms to bear on

read-only culture. For many others, the barriers finally became surmountable in the early 2000s with the acquisition of fast internet connections and multi-gigabyte hard drives.

For most of its existence, copyright was an obscure area of law with which relatively few people were familiar. Most computer users assumed that the affordances of new media technologies implied permission to manipulate the artifacts of read-only culture. If a legally purchased CD could be ripped and stored as mp3 files, why would anyone think it unlawful? The lowering of technological barriers, as seen first in hip-hop culture, did not immediately effect revolutionary change to social expectation or copyright policy as is sometimes suggested by cyber-optimist histories. Instead, it revealed a pre-existing gap between user expectation and legal regulation. (Lessig 2008 98)

At the same time that new media technologies lower barriers to participation, they also enable greater enforcement of permission culture than ever before. While a DJ in 1975 could use any vinyl record with his turntables, a digital DJ in 2009 is not similarly free to use any song she purchases. Some digital materials are distributed in formats that prevent them from being copied to unauthorized devices, played back by unauthorized software, or burned to CD. For a concrete example, consider the frustrating experience of DJs who discover that they cannot use the songs they lawfully purchased from the iTunes Music Store in Serato, the industry standard digital DJing software. Although new media technologies appear to enable new freedoms, for consumers of pop music, the transition to downloadable media actually restricted uses they had previously enjoyed with earlier formats.

Hip-hop vernacular is multimedia. Participants speak and write with and through the material reuse of extant popular artifacts. Although copyright law makes no specific exception, lexical expressions are regulated less frequently than those that employ video, audio, film, or photography. One reason for this unequal application of the law is the legal distinction between "amateur" and "professional" creativity indicated by the fair use guidelines. (Lessig 2008 33) For most of the 20th century, highly technical audio-visual practices were more likely to be

"professional" productions than text and, as a result, they were subject to more stringent regulation. (Lessig 2008 54) But as media rich expression becomes as common as writing in plain text, the regulatory distinction appears increasingly arbitrary. As such, the bias against highly technical media expression in the application of copyright law subjects hip-hop culture to more strict regulation than other cultural forms.

When is permission required in hip-hop?

By appropriating, experimenting, and modifying media and communications technologies, hip-hop practitioners are able to open the artifacts of read-only culture and reimagine them as "raw materials" in the Fiskean sense. The products of this interaction often have commercial potential and may circulate in the same economic spaces as the source materials from which they are derived. Although hip-hop culture is occasionally thought of as one that disregards permission culture out of hand, the norms governing creative reuse in hip-hop are as strong as those found in a conventional read-only regime. Whereas other cultural forms rely on law to guide reuse, hip-hop practitioners adhere to well-known, if not written, social norms that may or may not match the existing legal regime.

Lessig cautions that a social context in which "creativity must check with a lawyer" weakens the traditions of read/write culture in exactly the ways that Sousa feared. (Lessig 2004 173) People will hesitate to sing and be creative in everyday exercises of popular culture for fear of being sued. Yet abandoning the current copyright law is to sacrifice the forms of creativity that have prospered within its permission culture: the pop album, the blockbuster film, the big budget video game. As the highly capitalized media industries now provide raw material for the production of popular culture, resolving today's tensions is not a matter of selecting one culture over the other. It will require a creative new solution. The ambiguity, complexity, and self-

regulation of the hip-hop economy might provide a useful model for imaging such a future copyright regime.

The production of a hip-hop mixtape involves significant reuse of existing media artifacts and requires the DJ to negotiate several different social relationships. The typical mixtape includes several different types of reuse, each with different social norms but all of which constitute copyright infringement.

- *Remixes* can take many forms. Most are constructed to either improve upon an existing recording or to center details that may have been peripheral in the earlier version. Remixing nearly always builds on an implicit permission structure in hip-hop culture that permits reuse of hip-hop commodities for purposes of competitive creativity.
- *Leaked* tracks and "exclusives" also come in different forms but, unlike the remix, these artifacts were likely produced to be sold as commodities in the pop economy. The "exclusive" is typically included with informal approval from the artist, producer, or a member of the marketing team. Leaks, on the other hand, are given to the mixtape DJ without authorization. Regardless of whether or not they have been tacitly approved, both leaks and exclusives are violations of the publishing company's copyright monopoly.
- *Freestyles* are performances recorded specially for inclusion on a mixtape. Although the artist appears of his or her own volition, the performance may be a violation of the artist's recording contract with a record label and the freestyle is often performed atop a beat "jacked" or copied from another popular song.

During the last decade, the mixtape has been informally incorporated into the hip-hop industry. Although its production and distribution constitute unauthorized reuse of pop commodities protected by copyright, the industry benefits from the hype generated among mixtape consumers who tend to be the most devoted hip-hop fans.

The mixtape story is not a happy one, however. In 2007, at the request of the RIAA, an industry trade group, police raided the studio of DJ Drama and Don Cannon. The authorities

arrested the mixtape producers on charges of racketeering and confiscated all of their computer equipment and recording technology. In sensational coverage of the event that exploited the worst stereotypes of young men of color in hip-hop, Drama and Cannon were misrepresented as bootleggers and participants in organized crime. Their mixtapes, among the most loved in hip-hop, were compared with pirated DVDs. News commentators on the scene insinuated that their sale was connected with the drug trade.

In an editorial analysis of the event, Andrew Graham wrote about the "honor" and "prestige" artists garner from being featured on a DJ Drama mixtape. (Graham 2007) The arrests, and the racist tone of the news coverage, revealed a persistent cultural tension in the pop music industry. While read-only hip-hop commodities continue to be among the most profitable across the industry, the social practices from which these songs emerge are ultimately tied to a read/write cultural orientation that violates the dominant permission regime. Since the raid, the mixtape trade has moved in large part to the web where it flourishes and receives increasing attention from music critics and fans. Rather than weakening the mixtape economy, the raid highlighted the incongruity of producing read-only artifacts from within the primarily read/write culture of hip-hop.

In 1998, Congress passed the Digital Millennium Copyright Act in an attempt to update copyright policy to deal with the unique affordances of digital media. Among several specific new regulations, the DMCA prohibits the circumvention of copy-protection technologies.⁵ The creative practices of hip-hop culture are particularly vulnerable to prosecution under this new law. From its very earliest manifestations as a DJ-driven performance to the richly layered sample-based compositions and mixtape economy to follow, hip-hop practitioners have always used media technologies in unexpected ways to express their cultural priorities. Whereas an early DJ

⁵ For example, if the digital DJ who purchased a song from iTunes Music Store wants to convert it into a format that is readable by her Serato software, she may be subject to criminal prosecution for circumventing the copyright controls embedded in the instance of the song that she purchased.

like Grandmaster Flash highlighted unseen qualities in pop music using vinyl records and turntables, today's hip-hop practitioner - the inheritor of this technical tradition - may risk criminal prosecution should she attempt to deploy digital media artifacts in similarly unexpected ways.

Lessig envisions a future in which media industries flourish within a regulatory regime that offers diverse options to satisfy both consumers and producers of read-only artifacts. The hip-hop approach to material culture suggests that the distinction of some artifacts as "read-only" is an illusion maintained only insofar as it benefits media industries and obscures the anachronism of the legal regulatory regime. The producerly hip-hop commodity may appear read-only on the shelf at Best Buy, but in practice, it is but one instance of a much larger read/write phenomenon. Each version of "A Milli" to circulate through web sites, mp3 players, nightclub soundsystems, and radio programs was both a distinct artifact and an incomplete component of a much more grand cultural project. Some instances of "A Milli" were sold as commodities and generated income, others were not, but all of them were products of a read/write cultural tradition.

The present regulatory situation cannot last. Existing copyright law no longer reflects the needs and expectations of the people it was designed to incentivize and protect. The result is incoherence that disciplines unevenly and unjustly. The raid on DJ Drama and Don Cannon was but one of numerous cases in which socially normative practice is deemed unlawful. As Lessig cautions, "Even the good become pirates in a world where the rules seem absurd." (Lessig 2008 44) Hip-hop culture provides a unique space in which read-only and read/write values appear to co-exist better than they do elsewhere. Its practices, norms, and creative uses of technology may inspire a more democratic policy to regulate the production and distribution of media artifacts.

Participatory culture

Henry Jenkins recently revisited Fiske's understanding of popular culture in the context of a culture enabled by digital media and constrained by persistent legal regulation. People still sing, dance, and tell stories together the way that they always have but they now build upon and treasure most the cultural artifacts of industrial production: juicy plot twists in TV shows, tunes made famous by pop stars, charming characters from video games. Fiske's distinction of mass culture ("a category of production") from popular culture ("a category of consumption") is central to Jenkin's analysis but he does not create an oppositional relationship between dominant media industries and their subordinant audiences. (Jenkins 136) Instead, Jenkins uses the term "participatory culture" to describe a media ecology in which artifacts circulate in ways that may be mutually beneficial to multiple stakeholders.

Participatory culture is not unique to the contemporary technological context but digital media affords greater visibility for a culture that existed previously "behind closed doors." Though the artifacts of this culture used elements of pop industrial commodities, they circulated only in small volume among friends, families, and neighbors. (Jenkins 136) Early hip-hop DJs like Brucie B recall duplicating their mixtapes in quantities of only a few dozen at home on dual-deck cassette recorders. These tapes were sold and traded through an informal economy that existed in parallel to the conventional pop industry. (Reid 2003) Because available technologies limited the scale and mobility of its output, this alternative economy did not concern the dominant media industries and, as Lessig described, it remained largely unregulated.

Participatory technology

Unlike a folk culture that is tied to specific practices without regard for changes in the technological environment, hip-hop culture develops new practices in tandem with the rise of

digital media. (Watkins 2005 132) As Shocklee's discussion of the E-mu SP-1200 sampler demonstrates, practitioners critically approach each new media and communications technology in search of specific affordances. The spirit of competitive innovation encourages them to explore the boundaries of these technologies and pioneer novel approaches to the production and distribution of recorded music. Enabled by low-cost, producerly digital media tools, the technological distinction between the pop music industry and the "alternative" hip-hop economy is quite minimal.

The competitive spirit of hip-hop culture rewards innovative uses of new media technologies. As the figurehead of 2007's "Crank Dat" phenomenon, Soulja Boy exploited social-networking and media-sharing websites to encourage a widespread dance craze that afforded him a level of visibility typically only available to artists working within the pop industry. "Crank Dat", like "Single Ladies" and "A Milli", began as a single commodity but grew into a multi-faceted cultural phenomenon. Whereas each of the previously discussed examples principally invited reuse in just one dimension (dance and vocals, respectively), "Crank Dat" provided numerous welcoming opportunities for participation.

Within just a few months of the first "Crank Dat" music video, fans had posted countless custom revisions of "Crank Dat" to media-sharing sites like YouTube, Soundclick, imeem, and MySpace. In each case, the participants altered the original video in a different manner. They changed the dance steps, wrote new lyrics, created new instrumental beats, wore costumes, and performed in groups. Some created remix videos that borrowed footage from popular TV programs and movies. Just as was the case with "A Milli", each new iteration of "Crank Dat" increased the producerly quality of the entire phenomenon, attracted new participants, and suggested new avenues for intervention.

"Crank Dat" welcomed diverse modes of participation but every production required considerable technical expertise. Even a cursory exploration of the various "Crank Dat" iterations available on YouTube provides evidence of many different media production tools and

techniques. The most basic homemade dance video requires operation of a camera, preparation of compressed digital video, and a successful upload to YouTube. For some of the participants in "Crank Dat", the dance craze provided an impetus for their first media projects. This lively media culture is representative of a spirit of innovation that traverses hip-hop history.

S. Craig Watkins dubs this culture of technological innovation the "digital underground" and identifies the internet as a "vital public sphere" where online exchange of hip-hop media presents a "resilient rejection" of rising corporate consolidation. (Watkins 2005 132, 139) The diversity of creative expression found in online spaces is inversely proportional to that of the record labels and their shrinking rosters. With little capital at risk and an eagerness to engage creatively with new media technologies, Soulja Boy and his teenage contemporaries are the first representatives of the digital underground to be seen and heard in conventional hip-hop channels. While some older practitioners pine nostalgically for the days of the E-mu SP-1200, Public Enemy's Chuck D has long spoken out about the centrality of continued technical innovation in hip-hop, "This community was the first to embrace [samplers] in the creation of music," he said in a 1999 Billboard interview, "The Internet is no different." (Watkins 2005 132)

Common vocabulary, convergence culture

As the hip-hop discourse that Greg Tate calls "a common ground and a common vernacular for Black folks aged 18-50" is increasingly manifested in online spaces, participation requires a ready understanding of new media technologies. This transition enlarges the locus of technical innovation in hip-hop from music production to everyday discursive practice. (Tate 2) Everyone who wishes to contribute to the growth of hip-hop culture is compelled to learn to express themselves through media and communication technologies. In this social context, the role of technology in the common culture of hip-hop achieves a new centrality and visibility.

As Fiske identified, people select a subset of the available mass-produced media artifacts to create their popular culture. As the same artifact might have been selected by a variety of groups, these unusually resonant producerly texts form a common cultural vocabulary. As this process is increasingly enabled by media technologies, Jenkins deployed the term "convergence" to describe the circulation of cultural artifacts through a diverse technological environment. (Jenkins 137) Whereas Fiske's understanding of popular culture emphasizes the producerly characteristics of individual texts, Jenkins' "convergence culture" prioritizes the flexibility and mobility of a text. In a convergence culture, a text is only relevant if it is technologically compatible with preferred modes of popular consumption.

In some cases, hip-hop practitioners acquire new technical skills in order to creatively compete with one another. Discursive uses of technology, however, concern the development of shared community practice and the experience is enriched by greater participation. Thus, informal, peer-to-peer training in new technologies strengthens the community as more people are welcomed to contribute. In an emerging example, rappers, producers, and DJs joining Twitter regularly ask questions that demonstrate a desire to attain a sophisticated understanding of its social and technical norms. In his first few days using the micro-blogging service, rapper/producer Lil Jon asks, in the terse idiom of a text message, how to import his contacts from AOL and publicly wonders, "so am i jus suppos 2 write random thoughts through out the day[?] umm im confused! well back to work." (LILJIZZEL)

In the introduction to *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins describes early adopters as "predominantly white, male, middle class, and college educated." This group of consumers exerts disproportionate influence on the media industries because of their visibility and access to new media technologies. (Jenkins 23) As hip-hop now provides a common vernacular for a large number of young black men, recognizing and encouraging the culture's innovative relationship to media technology could effect material change to the lives of those young people. By recognizing their "early adopter" status, the social category Jenkins identifies grows more diverse, leading to

an enlarged presence for young black men in media representations of technical innovators. This visibility will, in turn, contribute to a shift in the unjust stereotype of young black men as less technically able than their white counterparts.

Note in defense of bad art

"Not bad meaning bad but bad meaning good!" - "Peter Piper", Run-DMC, 1986

I was surprised to discover that both Jenkins and Lessig felt pressed to admit that "most" of what is produced in participatory culture spaces will be "gosh-awful" "crap." (Jenkins 136, Lessig 2008 93) Of course, they both go on to vigorously - and elegantly - defend this crap against those who consider it a waste of time. They cite, in both arguments, the educational value of producing gosh-awful crap. The very act of writing, says Lessig, leads bloggers to "think differently about politics or public affairs." (Lessig 93) And with people thus engaged and empowered, conventional media spaces grow more diverse. People who do bad art, writes Jenkins, will "get feedback[,] get better[, and] the best will be recruited into commercial entertainment or the art world." (Jenkins 136)

Why did both writers feel it necessary to include this caveat about bad art? It is as if they apologize in advance to the critical reader who fears the loss of the blockbuster film. These critics are correct insofar as an unauthorized video remix will not bear the polish of a J. J. Abrams production but this comparison is made on skewed terms set by a handful of highly capitalized stakeholders. Qualifying the artifacts of popular culture against the products of a massive industrial process validates a discourse of virtuosity and grandiosity that permeates the dominant media industries. The consolidation and capitalization of media industry in the U.S. is not replicable, nor has it proved sustainable. In pursuit of a more free and participatory culture, we should be skeptical of its values and metrics.

No need to apologize for bad art in a participatory culture. When the available modes of consumption respect and afford producerly intervention, art that is irrelevant, offensive, boring, redundant, costly, or uninspiring will be shortly ignored, replaced, remixed, or discarded.

Technological manifestations of the hip-hop approach

Hip-hop is more than music. As rapper KRS-One takes every opportunity to remind his fans, "Rap is something you do. Hip-hop is something you live." The practice of living hip-hop involves a creative relationship with material culture expressed through the innovative use of media technologies. Hip-hop is competitive and participatory, encouraging a highly productive mode of consumption.

Although the turntable and microphone tend to be the iconic instruments of hip-hop music, the culture's technological orientation is truly embodied by the unassuming DJ mixer. The mixer produces no original sounds. Input agnostic, it defines a process, not a result. Microphones, CD players, turntables, iPods, drum machines, samplers, and keyboards can all be blended and manipulated by the typical DJ mixer. As audio signals pass from their sources through the mixer and out to an amplifier, they are subject to the editorial control of the mixer's operator. The common functions - cue, blend, cut, and filter - determine the relationships among the various inputs. The mixer enables its operator to treat tangible commodities as malleable raw materials.

In 1976, Grandmaster Flash added a cue channel to his DJ mixer so that he could listen to one record in his headphones while he played another out to the audience. This seemingly minor modification set a standard for the creative transformation of media technologies that permeates hip-hop history. The next chapter explores this history by tracing the evolution of the hip-hop mixtapes.

Chapter 2

Let my tape rock until my tape pops

The hip-hop mixtape - ever-present, if not always visible in hip-hop history - reflects a competitive culture of innovation as expressed through the creative application of media communication technologies. From their earliest appearance as homemade cassettes to the digital distributions that proliferate on the web today, mixtapes make material one of hip-hop's central tensions as they activate both the pop industry's commercial stakes and popular culture's joyfully resistant potential. Driven by a spirit of constant revision and reinvention, the mixtape DJ relies on the pop industry for raw materials just as he challenges its conventions. The tapes themselves give voice to people disenfranchised by consolidated and de-localized media channels and exposes the shortcomings of the contemporary intellectual property regime. Despite the mixtape's myriad implications across disciplines, it remains largely unexamined in hip-hop scholarship.

What makes a hip-hop mixtape different any other mixed tape?

The mixtapes discussed below differ from the more common homemade compilations of the same name traded by music fans since the 1960s. (Moore) Although those mixed tapes and CD-Rs leverage many of the same consumer technologies as hip-hop mixtapes, they are typically produced in very small quantities and intended only for a very limited circulation. When Robert Christgau made "his own personalized Clash record" in 1978, he may have written about it in the *Village Voice* but the tapes themselves were strictly friends-only. (Moore) The mixtapes produced by hip-hop DJs, on the other hand, circulate in more diverse economies. As the examples below illustrate, ambitious production, distribution, and circulation among fans distinguishes hip-hop mixtapes from other types of homemade compilations.

As the dominant global pop idiom, hip-hop's complex economic, political, social manifestations have inspired considerable scholarship across disciplines. Surprisingly, there has been comparatively less attention paid to the intertwining of hip-hop culture with the history of media and communication technologies. Foregrounding the demand for technical innovation in hip-hop offers a new analytic framing for the issues raised by other scholars concerned with hip-hop and youth cultures. This chapter will emphasize the formal and contextual qualities of the examined mixtapes rather than investigating their content. Where possible, I will suggest further reading to address some of the intriguing, inspiring, startling, and downright bedeviling lyrics and imagery presented by the recordings discussed in this chapter.

Brief introduction to the hip-hop mixtape

At first glance, the hip-hop mixtape, dubbed to cassette or burned to CD, shares many formal characteristics with the traditional pop album. Both album and mixtape include a purposefully ordered series of recordings divided into tracks that can be accessed individually or

played sequentially by listeners. But while each track on a typical album contains a discrete song recorded by a single artist or group, a hip-hop mixtape is built from several different types of overlapping recordings that may include dozens of artists. Unlike a traditional album by a single artist or group, mixtapes are credited to a DJ, essentially acting as aggregator, editor, and curator of these various components.

In the production of a mixtape, the hip-hop DJ draws on the interrelated practices of recording studio engineers, on-air radio personalities, turntablists, and dance club DJs. Like the editor of any multi-author volume, the mixtape DJ asserts his or her identity through the selection and sequencing of pre-existing recordings. Exceeding the conventional editor's role, the DJ may further manipulate the chosen recordings by halting, scratching, blending, or rewinding them during playback. In some cases, the DJ will also talk over the recordings, either in response to their content or to directly address the listener.

As the recordings discussed below demonstrate, DJs take wildly varied approaches to the arrangement of a mixtape. In the earliest cases, the mixtape is documentation of a DJ mixing records live on turntables in a club, on the radio, or in a home studio with little to no later adjustment. At the opposite end, mixtapes may be carefully assembled using multi-track audio editing software in a personal computer. Most of the mixtapes included below fall somewhere in between, balancing performance with the layering and post-production afforded by contemporary music technologies. More than a single form, the mixtape is an approach to organizing recordings that is responsive to varying contexts, able to circulate and express meaning differently depending on changing local constraints.

Although term "mixtape" was coined in the informal cassette trading economies of the 1970s, hip-hop mixtapes have been distributed almost exclusively in digital formats for the last decade. In fact, exploiting the latest storage media is one of the many ways in which mixtape DJs compete with one another. The cultural and technological significance of cassette, CD, and mp3 are in constant negotiation among DJs and listeners. Distribution is equally varied and

competitive. Street corner sales, bootlegging, and other forms of face-to-face commerce accompanied the early tape trading era and one need only hang out in Harvard Square or Downtown Crossing on a Saturday afternoon to see that such an informal economy remains a primary channel for mixtape distribution. Of course, like many other informal economies, mixtapes are also sold, shared, and distributed online via message boards, blogs, direct download sites, and torrent trackers.

Methodological approach: Lessig's model of four regulatory forces

To better enable comparison among the selected mixtapes, I am borrowing an analytic tool Lawrence Lessig initially created to facilitate discussion of digital property rights. (Lessig 1999) For a given legal right, Lessig's model examines the interrelated effects of market, architectural, legal, and social regulatory forces. (Lessig 2004 121) By replacing the legal right with a stakeholder, artifact, or practice, this flexible framework is also an effective tool for investigating the conditions within which popular culture is practiced. In the case of hip-hop culture, the model can be used to examine a pop song, the dancers in a party, a radio listener, the distribution of mixtapes, or an emerging business. The balance of the four forces affects the mobility and freedom of the examined object.

To demonstrate the utility of this model, we can use it to examine the impact of regulating forces on the release of a new pop single. Contract law regulates the formal relationships among the record label, artists, management, producer, engineers, duplication facilities, packaging designers, distribution networks, and retail outlets. If the recording contains samples from any pre-existing recordings, copyright law constrains the reuse of these extant materials. The law is empowered to regulate the release of a pop song because it injects the threat of punishment into each of these arrangements. (Lessig 2004 121) By violating a contract or

infringing on a copyright monopoly, one risks state-supported sanctions in the form of fines or the loss of personal liberty.

Social norms discipline the release of a pop single in different ways from the law. Whereas the boundaries of the law's regulatory power are relatively clear, social expectations shift considerably depending on variables difficult to enumerate. For example, if there are lyrics on this pop single that some people find offensive, they may impose much stronger punishment than would the state if the lyrics are legally defined as obscene. The offended people may join together to protest the single. They might even call for a boycott of all singles released by the record company, thus affecting the livelihood of all its artists and employees. The government does not regulate "foul" language. Any censoring of such language by record companies, radio stations, and television networks is an example of social pressure effecting structural and material change.

Market constraints are effected through conditional relationships such as, "You can do X if you pay Y." (Lessig 2004 122) The pop single is destined to circulate as a commodity within the conventional pop music economy. If the single does not resonate with a large enough audience or the record label does not budget enough capital to appropriately market the single, it is unlikely to sell enough copies to recoup the cost of production. Furthermore, if there happens to be a glut of this type of song at the time of its release, it will similarly be constrained by the regulatory force of the market. For the pop single, the marketplace disciplines with the reward or loss of capital.

In Lessig's explanation of this model, "architecture" means "the physical world as you find it." (Lessig 2004 122) For the release of a pop single, the physical world includes as widely varied architectures as the highway system, the number of radio stations in a given city, and the machinations of the iTunes Music Store. Architecture may also concern the storage medium containing the pop single. Will it be released as a vinyl single? A CD? An mp3 or another

downloadable format? Each of these architectures constrains the circulation of the single in its own way.

As is apparent in the examples above, the four regulatory forces overlap, affirm, contradict, and regulate each other.⁶ For example, though copyright law imposes one set of restrictions for the reuse of existing creative material, social norms maintain different standards. Sampling from an out of print soul record without permission may garner social goodwill from music fans at the same time as it transgresses a legal constraint. Similarly, bribing the program director of a radio station may be in accord with industry social norms and market expectations at the same time as it violates legal standards. If the laws concerning payola are poorly enforced, the record label will take the small risk of state punishment to ensure that its pop single is played on the radio.

Hip-hop mixtapes reflect shifts in the balance of regulatory forces acting on hip-hop culture and the ability of hip-hop participants to resist discipline and appropriation by the dominant media industries. Across hip-hop history, the mixtape form reveals moments in which the pop market fails to satisfy the hip-hop audience, in which legislation conflicts with social norms, and where new technologies present novel affordances for the hip-hop practitioner. The process by which mixtapes engage in constant renegotiation with regulatory boundaries reflects the values of revision and innovation characteristic of the hip-hop approach to cultural production.

This chapter will examine five mixtape recordings in chronological sequence. It is by no means an exhaustive history of the mixtape. Each artifact was selected from many other equally fascinating possibilities that all demonstrate creative response to the peculiar conditions of their

⁶ In the discourse of regulation, the law circulates differently from market, architectural, and social forces. In a footnote to his discussion of this model, Lessig describes law as the only regulatory force that "speaks as if it has a right self-consciously to change the other three." (Lessig 2004 317)

historical moments. These examples are not meant to be exceptional but rather representative of widespread practices in hip-hop culture.

This project is made considerably richer by the archival efforts of hip-hop fans and bloggers. All of the mixtapes discussed here were gathered from blogs, discussion forums, and other media-sharing sites on the web. In recent years, cassette collectors have been digitizing their collections and trading the resulting recordings online. That these grassroots efforts are criminalized by existing copyright law and undermined by competing digital audio formats is a shameful state of affairs I intend to address in future research.

Party tapes: Grandmaster Flash and the Furious 4 MCs - Live at the Audubon Ballroom, 1978

"There was no hip-hop DJs back then. You were just a DJ and you played what the people wanted to hear." - Funkmaster Flex, December 31, 1992

The first recordings to be identified as hip-hop mixtapes were "party tapes" recorded and traded by hip-hop fans in the late 1970s and early 1980s when hip-hop began to achieve its first major visibility outside of the South Bronx. At that time, the creative interaction between MC and DJ that is now called "hip-hop" or "rap music" was almost exclusively a live performance. There were not yet any studio recordings of hip-hop or rap music on the market and the form was seldom heard on commercial radio. When early mixtape producers recorded the live performances of groups like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious 4 MCs, they created a market for recordings of hip-hop that did not previously exist.

Grandmaster Flash's events at Harlem's Audubon Ballroom attracted attendees from around New York City. Artists, musicians, and disco enthusiasts came up from their lofts and studios downtown to see the acrobatic breakdancers and experience the quick-mixing hip-hop DJ style. In contrast to the smooth, extended mixes of the downtown disco DJs, Flash ran swiftly

through his record crates, emphasizing the seams between and within them as he went.

(Freedberg) In time, clubs outside of Harlem and the Bronx began to feature DJs playing in the hip-hop style. People who grew up hearing DJs like Flash and Kool Herc at teen dances and public park parties in the Bronx followed the music to bigger, more upscale venues in Manhattan.

(Chang 128)

Among his many contributions to early hip-hop culture, Grandmaster Flash is best known for perfecting and popularizing the breakbeat-focused approach to DJing. Dance music enthusiasts from the disco tradition tend to emphasize the DJ's auteur role as expert selector of songs. (Graham 2008) Breakbeat DJs, on the other hand, increased the granularity of music selection by identifying not just the most pleasurable songs, but the most pleasurable *parts* from within songs. By manipulating two copies of the same record, the breakbeat DJ could effectively isolate and loop the best parts of a song - the break - indefinitely.

"Live at the Audubon Ballroom" begins with Grandmaster Flash and the Furious 4 MCs already on stage and in full swing. Beneath the rapping, one can hear Flash juggling a break from the Fatback Band's "Fatbackin'." (Spitfire) As was true with many of the most popular breaks, the "Fatbackin'" break features the rhythm section and does not include any of the vocals from the original. This emphasis on instrumental passages facilitates live rapping, encourages dancing, and anticipates the largely instrumental techno and house music to come in the 1980s and 1990s. Each time Flash cuts back to the start of the "Fatbackin'" break, he signals his transformative role in creating the loop by mixing in a single blast of the brass section.

Flash's set list in 1978 did not include any records that would be found today in the "Hip-Hop/Rap" section of iTunes, a Newbury Comics, or the Virgin Megastore. No one had yet tried to recreate hip-hop in a recording studio so Flash drew on existing disco and R&B recordings - some familiar, some obscure, some unexpected - to create the high-energy sonic atmosphere that the dancers and MCs desired. The records that Flash selected only became "hip-hop" in the moment of his intervention. By manipulating the playback of these artifacts of the pop music

industry in an unexpected way, Flash used the material products of a dominant cultural form (disco pop) to create a resistant form (hip-hop) that would ultimately supersede it.

Breakbeat DJing is a highly precise, technical activity. It requires an encyclopedic knowledge of popular music and an uncommon intimacy with each recording. The breakbeat DJ must be able to quickly locate the desired part of each individual record, cue it, and mix it in time with an on-going program. Similarly, to accurately cue and mix records in the breakbeat style required a steady, practiced finesse with phonograph equipment that was not designed for such activity. To maintain the rhythm and control of the breakbeat style, DJs needed to find unusually precise turntables, cartridges, needles, and mixers. In some cases, the equipment required modifications to meet the technical demands of breakbeat DJing. One such modification that is occasionally still practiced is the use of household items like pennies or playing dice to add extra weight to a turntable's tonearm so that the needle will stay in the groove while the DJ manipulates the vinyl record. Not only did DJs like Flash reuse existing music recordings in their creation of hip-hop music, they applied that same creative approach to the technological tools used to create and play it back.

In late 1978, when "Live at the Audubon Ballroom" was made, the term "hip-hop" may not yet have been in use, but the competitive spirit that characterizes a hip-hop approach to cultural production was firmly in place. In Flash's day, the depth of one's record collection was the locus of competition between DJs. Some peculiar practices emerged that reflect this social regulation. To stop "trainspotters" from identifying their song selections at parties, breakbeat DJs would soak the labels off of their most obscure records before bringing them to parties. While the technologies and techniques needed to practice breakbeat DJing were on display for observation and imitation, the actual breakbeats themselves were not. Transparency, in this era of hip-hop culture, was only practiced insofar as it encouraged widespread competition. Anyone could see how to be a breakbeat DJ, but not everyone could find the same breaks and sound like Flash.

Some party tapes were made by holding a microphone up to the PA speakers and include all of the ambience of the event: people talking, flirting, singing along, and responding to the MCs. Other tapes like

"Live at Audubon Ballroom," were made by party promoters or the DJs themselves and were recorded directly from the mixing desk. With no hip-hop on the radio or in record stores, these tapes provided the only opportunity to hear the DJs and MCs outside of their parties. Tapes were dubbed and traded among friends so it is difficult to ascertain exactly how many of a given tape were put into circulation.

The scarcity of hip-hop in traditional pop channels meant that tapes carried both cultural value and significant monetary worth for fans, DJs, and tape traders. Brucie B recalls duplicating cassettes in his apartment and selling them in his neighborhood for \$20 a piece, "I'd go on this block and make \$100, go on that block and make \$100." (Reid 2003 8) By the late 1970s, DJs were experimenting with new types of tapes to meet the demands of their fans. Years before Sony would produce its first portable Walkman cassette deck in 1979, DJs made party tapes to be blasted out of a slow-moving car with its windows down. From the start, hip-hop recordings were tools with which fans could express themselves in public spaces. Realizing this use for party tapes, Grandmaster Flash offered bespoke mixtapes for wealthier customers in which he would "continuously shout out [the tape buyer's] name using an echo sound effect" atop the mix. At their peak, Flash charged as much as a "dollar a minute" for these one-of-a-kind tapes that might run up to 120 minutes in length. (Reid 2003)

Sound-systems and DJ-technicians

Unlike typical nightclub DJs who play records on permanently installed equipment, Grandmaster Flash, Kool Herc, and the other South Bronx DJs were also responsible for building and maintaining the sound systems on which they played. Their success as DJs depended not only

on having a keen ear for dance music and an adventuring spirit to its juxtaposition but also an expertise to the operation and repair of high-end audio gear: speakers, amplifiers, mixers, turntables, microphones, and a bevy of sound effects. A young Herc was granted access to his father's sound system only after he covertly rewired it to achieve higher gain and clarity. (Chang 68) Flash, who regularly modified his equipment with soldering iron and screwdriver, credits his fascination with electronics for keeping him in his room and out of the gang violence that permeated his neighborhood's street life. (Chang 112) With the towering aesthetic influence of these early practitioners, it is easy to overlook the technical prowess that enabled their contributions.

Copyright Term Extension Act of 1976

The innovations of hip-hop's pre-pop era accompanied a growing awareness among members of the creative industries that accessible media technologies were affecting long-accepted distinctions between audiences and producers. One manifestation of this awareness is the Copyright Term Extension Act of 1976, a major revision to U.S. Copyright Law that established the foundation for today's "intellectual property" regime. Although party tapes like "Live at the Audubon Ballroom" were likely not yet on the minds of the pop music industry in 1976, they exemplify exactly the kind of outsider activity that prompted the changes made to copyright law.

On one hand, the Act recognized the need to formally protect certain kinds of expressive, academic, and critical reuse by codifying guidelines for "fair use." Based on existing common law, the guidelines are meant to assist judges presiding over cases of alleged copyright infringement. They provide four dimensions for the investigation of a controversial reuse:

1. the purpose and character of the use (commercial or educational, transformative or reproductive);
 2. the nature of the copyrighted work (fictional or factual, the degree of creativity);
 3. the amount and substantiality of the portion of the original work used; and
 4. the effect of the use upon the market (or potential market) for the original work."
- (17 U.S.C. 107)

To illustrate the impact of this approach to copyright, imagine that Perception Records, the label that released "Fatbackin'" in 1973 filed a lawsuit against Grandmaster Flash for juggling their record in the opening sequence of "Live at the Audubon Ballroom." Would fair use provide a convincing defense? Or would a judge find that Flash was infringing Perception's copyright?

A breakbeat-laden party tape contains countless instances of transformative, if potentially infringing, reuse. It is also a commercial commodity that may effect changes in the market value - positively and negatively - of the source recordings.⁷ For Grandmaster Flash to negotiate a license for each of the records he used would have been prohibitively expensive for the independent artist. Would a judge determine that accompanying breakbeat juggling with live vocalists constitutes sufficiently transformative reuse to be a fair use? Or is the commercial potential of the hip-hop mixtape strong enough that Flash should have sought a licensing agreement in advance of reproducing his party tapes?

The 1976 copyright legislation anticipates a culture of widespread creative reuse but does not reflect the degree to which this reuse will blur the distinctions between commercial and non-commercial activity. Hip-hop of this period is not only vanguard in its approach to material cultural production but it immediately renders inadequate the brand new copyright legislation. As hip-hop enters the pop economy in the next example, we will see how the regulating force of law begins to conflict more clearly with hip-hop social norms and the affordances of media production technologies.

⁷ Evidence exists that selection by a hip-hop DJ increases the market value of a recording. Obscure songs containing well-known breakbeats consistently fetch high prices in the used record market. Likewise, organizations such as the Bridgeport Group speculatively purchase the publishing rights to large catalogs of old pop recordings in the hope that they will one day be reused by hip-hop producers. (Davey)

Pop singles: Sugarhill Gang - "Rapper's Delight", 1979

In 1979, hip-hop crews like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious 4 MCs were a powerful force in New York City nightlife but because they were not recording songs of their own, they remained entirely invisible to the pop music economy at large. Many of the city's independent record producers desperately wanted to be the first to release an actual hip-hop single but skeptical artists and DJs repeatedly stonewalled them. For early practitioners like Flash, hip-hop was the product of numerous interrelated cultural practices that converged in the block parties, teen dances, roller rinks, and clubs of New York. Chuck D of Public Enemy, then a Long Island teenager, remembers struggling to imagine hip-hop in a pop context. "I did not think it was conceivable that there would be such thing as a hip-hop record," he recalls, "How you gon' put three hours on a record?" (Chang 130)

Obstinate local celebrities could not prevent the industry's eventual incorporation of hip-hop culture. It took a group of unknowns, discovered in a Jersey pizza shop, to do what established hip-hop artists deemed impossible and record the culture's first single. "Rapper's Delight" is a 15-minute approximation of hip-hop music as understood by fans on the dancefloor. The instrumental foundation is an interpolation of Chic's "Good Times" arranged and performed by a recording studio house band. A 16-bar passage from song's main theme is repeated countless times in an attempt to emulate a breakbeat DJ juggling the summer's hottest song. The Sugarhill Gang's rhymes copy the routines of other artists they have been hearing for years at parties (the memorable "hotel, motel..." line, for example, is heard on "Live at the Audubon Ballroom") but their comedic storytelling verses predict the prominence of rap's lyrics over its technical production in hip-hop's future.

While the Sugarhill Gang's record carried little weight among New York City's dominant hip-hop practitioners, it was an enormous hit everywhere else in the world, shortly becoming the

best-selling 12" vinyl single of all time. (Chang 131) The popularity of "Rapper's Delight" in record stores and on the radio affected the market demand for hip-hop recordings and, within a year, Flash and his contemporaries were all trying to repeat its success. Without the liberating naiveté of the Sugarhill Gang, these established hip-hop artists largely failed to translate the energy and spirit of their live performances and mixtapes to the short format and constraints of the recording studio. In most cases, the role of the DJ was reduced to that of a consultant as they vainly tried to coach studio musicians into replicating the quick-mix routines over which their MCs were accustomed to rhyiming. Furthermore, the rhymes of groups like the Furious 4 MCs tended to rely on call-and-response interaction with the audience and fell flat outside the context of a party. (Chang 133)

Although older fans proclaimed "Rapper's Delight" the death of hip-hop, its spread exposed more young people than ever to hip-hop's unique approach to material culture. If the older generation believed hip-hop dead, it was only because they underestimated the radical degree to which hip-hop's demand for constant innovation might transform the culture itself. As hip-hop entered the pop industry, the balance of regulatory forces acting upon it shifted. The breakbeat style which defined hip-hop's sonic presentation for nearly a decade was difficult to emulate in the staid architecture of the recording studio and its disregard for copyright law troubled businesspeople committed to making money from hip-hop singles. Mixtapes, once hip-hop's only recorded form, suddenly shared the marketplace with 12" vinyl singles, making them appear "bootleg" in comparison. Hip-hop culture was certainly not dead in the 1980s nor was it entirely driven by the pop music industry. The continued evolution of the hip-hop mixtape reveals a thriving spirit of creative experimentation and clever reuse.

Home studio recordings

The rising popularity, demand, and value of mixtapes during hip-hop's transition from performance to material pop commodity encouraged more DJs to make recordings outside of the live party setting. Using the same turntables, mixers, and microphones that they might bring to an event, the DJs constructed home studios in which they could more carefully assemble mixes for distribution in the lively mixtape economy. Working at home meant that mixes could be rehearsed, more carefully sequenced, and recorded with higher fidelity than on party tapes.

In a conventional "multi-track" recording studio like the one that the Sugarhill Gang used to record "Rapper's Delight", pop music is rarely recorded in a single room the way it might be done in rehearsal or concert. Usually, the engineer divides the band by instrument or voice and records each part separately in isolation. Even when the musicians play simultaneously, they stand in different rooms and can only hear one another through headphones. Audio signals captured in these various spaces are routed into a single mixing console where the engineer can balance, manipulate, and blend them.

The final step in such a recording project is the "mix down." Once everyone is satisfied with the playback coming from the tape machine, they record a final "mixed" version of the song in which all of the distinct channels are irrevocably merged into two channels: left and right. With a little more aural massaging, this mixed-down version is what will be commercially duplicated and distributed.⁸

Unlike the engineer working in a multi-track studio, the mixtape DJs of the 1970s and 1980s had few opportunities to correct mistakes. With no intermediate stage between the

⁸ In 1978, the mixing console would likely have been attached to a cabinet-sized multi-track tape machine. The 2" wide tape fed into this machine was usually divided into sixteen or twenty-four stripes, each capable of maintaining its own distinct audio track. This arrangement enabled a sequential recording process in which individual performers were not only isolated spacially but temporally. For example, it was not uncommon by this period for a single multi-instrumentalist like Stevie Wonder to record multiple parts of the same song, effectively obscuring the temporal distinctions between each performance.

recording process and the final "mixed down" product, DJs had to either perform their blends, scratches, and transitions perfectly in a single take or interrupt their mix by periodically pausing the tape deck. The standardized "compact" cassette tapes presented a special set of affordances and constraints to a DJ using them in a home studio setting. Considering that one side of a tape might last as long as sixty minutes, most homestudio mixtapes of this period typically contain several smaller mixes separated by tiny, almost imperceptible moments of silence where the DJ paused the tape to catch his breath and prepare for the next passage.

Pause Tapes

Technical innovation was not limited to a few DJs and producers with sound systems and home studios. When dual-deck systems became available at affordable consumer prices, the peer-to-peer mixtape trade greatly expanded as hip-hop fans duplicated and traded their collections. Soon, hometapers discovered that by holding the pause button on the first cassette deck while rewinding the second, they could emulate the looping and cutting techniques of a live DJ mixing on turntables. Just as Flash drew from a wide range of popular music in his parties and performances, these early "pause tape" architects mined compelling breaks from a variety of sources to create their compilations. The participants in the pause tape phenomenon essentially performed the same selecting, sequencing, looping, and blending practices of the live DJ without access to turntables or a mixer. These fan practitioners demonstrate that the hip-hop approach to material culture is not the product of a particular technological architecture but rather a creative orientation that can flourish across a variety of technological platforms.

Shout outs

Grandmaster Flash's custom tapes were not the only ones to feature a mixtape DJ's voice during the party tape era. Acting as much like a radio personality as a party DJ, World Famous Bruce B called out the names of friends and family on his widely distributed tapes. Although hip-hop was largely invisible on commercial radio of this time, the mixtape DJs' layering of pre-existing records and live voices links the early hip-hop practitioners to the rich history of African-American radio. Starting in the mid-1980s, high-energy hip-hop "mixshows" like Mr. Magic's "Rap Attack" draw equally from the creative approach to media technologies heard on the 1970s mixtapes as they do the fast-talking "hepcat" radio personalities from 1950s soul and R&B programs. (Sarig xiii) For radio DJs trying to bring hip-hop to the airwaves, homemade mixes like Bruce B's provided a model for performing the energetic party DJ style in an enclosed studio.

Break-beats without break-dancers

The home studio experience also divorced the hip-hop DJ mix from the dancefloor. Although the party tapes were played in cars, shops, and homes, they were usually products of the dancer/DJ relationship. The move to a home studio did not reduce the significance of the body in hip-hop culture but rather attended a shift in the role that hip-hop played in the lives of its participants. No longer simply the soundtrack to the best parties in the city, hip-hop could become the soundtrack to city life itself. By recording and playing mixtapes in a variety of settings, the DJs and listeners recoded their bedrooms, living rooms, basements, stoops, shopping malls, schools, and restaurants with hip-hop significance. Whereas the hip-hop party represents a temporary resistance to conventional modes of consuming pop music, the architecture of the mixtape spreads that sense of pleasurable possibility throughout the zones of day-to-day life.

With the flurry of hip-hop singles that followed the success of "Rapper's Delight", fans began to hear rappers on the radio. DJs' tapes were no longer the exclusive channel for hip-hop's musical output. Though one might expect this proliferation of hip-hop in the traditional pop industry to dull the energy of the mixtape trade, it appears to have instead triggered hip-hop's competitive spirit. The home studio afforded new freedom for DJs accustomed to the demands of a dancing audience and DJs like Brucie B began to include music from farther-reaching genres and moods in their mixtapes. Once serving only as documentation of the innovative hip-hop performance, the mixtapes following "Rapper's Delight" shifted the locus of hip-hop creativity from the party to the studio.

Blend tapes: Ron G - "Mixes #1", 1991

Ron G's mixtape begins like so many party tapes - with a little hiss and a noisy crowd. But when Ron's voice comes in on top, he addresses the tape's listener and not the cheering audience. The audience sounds are being played off of a record. They were recorded cheering elsewhere, pressed to vinyl, and appropriated here for dramatic effect. The audience noise shortly fades away beneath Ron G juggling a break from the Honeydrippers "Impeach the President" and introducing himself on the microphone. The strings from Michael Jackson's "Human Nature" suddenly fade in atop the beat and the two songs proceed in sync, effectively indistinguishable as separate tracks.

Ron G is present throughout the mix both vocally and in his manipulation of the included songs. He frequently calls out to listeners, demanding their attention. As the first chorus comes to an end, he urges them to, "Check out this second verse. Come on!" In addition to these vocal interjections, one can hear the pitches of the songs warble occasionally as Ron G nudges the records with his fingertips to keep them in time. Likewise, the beat is not kept steady but is constantly scratched and cut up, adding a new rhythmic density to the familiar R&B classic.

After another minute, Ron G fades out "Human Nature", shouts out a few of his friends, and brings in the intro section of Jackson's "Man in the Mirror." As the intro gives way to the first verse, Ron G scratches in the thumping beat to Biz Markie's "Make The Music With Your Mouth." Swept up in the music, Ron alternates singing along with the lyrics to inserting himself into them, as he does here:

MICHAEL JACKSON : It's gonna feel real good –
 RON G : *Ron G is gonna!*
 MICHAEL JACKSON : – Gonna make it right."

Swiftly dismissing "Man in the Mirror" after another minute of playback, Ron continues to juggle the Biz Markie beat, now almost giddy with excitement as he introduces the next song. "I want y'all to check out this Miami Vice joint", he cries out as he brings Phil Collin's "In the Air Tonight" into the mix. Riffing off of the assumption that the audience for his tape is familiar with the track's appearance in the pilot episode of Miami Vice, he goes on, "This is for y'all with the smooth-ass cars..." Ron's treatment transforms Collin's ode to isolation into a bass-heavy dance club track. He even ruptures the ultra-serious tone of Collins' vocal with silly interjections:

PHIL COLLINS : I can feel it coming in the air tonight.
 RON G : *So ...*
 PHIL COLLINS : Hold on
 RON G : *Tell your momma to –*
 PHIL COLLINS : Hold on

Ron G calls himself "the World's Youngest" but in his 1991 mixtape, one clearly hears the lasting influence of breakbeat DJs like Grandmaster Flash. Much remains structurally unchanged. The home studio tools are the same: mixers, turntables, vinyl singles, a microphone and an echo effect. Ron also exercises the breakbeat DJ's core competency in scratching and juggling two copies of the same record. But the tone and timbre of the mixtape has changed. With

hip-hop on TV and the radio (not to mention the Billboard Hot 100), the mixtape was freed of its role as the exclusive channel for hearing hip-hop outside of a party. Mixtapes might have disappeared following hip-hop's ascendancy to pop stardom. Instead, they flourished.

As the hip-hop's pop presence grew, so did the mixtape DJ's record collection. While the disco, funk, soul, and R&B records familiar to the 1970s party DJ continued to form hip-hop's aesthetic core, record stores now stocked "hip-hop" singles alongside the likes of other new genres like electro, new wave, house, and freestyle. Whereas Flash's break-juggling techniques created hip-hop music from pre-existing pop recordings, younger DJs like Kid Capri had access to records made in the spirit of these pioneers. Flash located and juggled the Fatback Band by hand but the DJs to follow lived in a world of unlicensed breakbeat compilations and pop records built on pre-juggled and looped breaks.

Rockboxes: drum machines and samplers

Hip-hop's pop sound changed dramatically in the years to follow the fifteen-minute anomaly that is "Rapper's Delight." Newer tracks fit better into the pop radio format with verses and choruses and rarely lasted longer than four minutes. Jeff Chang writes critically of this period as a time when "hip-hop was refined like sugar" but pop music's constraints revitalized a music beginning to sag under the weight of its own conventions. (Chang 134) The hip-hop approach to music, originally a creative orientation toward existing recordings, was now being focused on the creation of new materials. Harnessing, duplicating, multiplying, and activating the intangible qualities of the breakbeat became the younger hip-hop producers' chief obsession.

Rather than rely on virtuoso DJs to create tracks live with their hands, the new generation of hip-hop producers, like the pause tape architects, exploited new technologies to achieve the dynamic repetition, layering, and cutting that characterized hip-hop's "soul sonic force." (Rose 1994 62) They achieved an intimate understanding of available recording studio technologies by

accessing the same cultural tradition as the breakbeat DJs who sought out and modified their turntables, needles, and mixers in the 1970s. Some observers have suggested that hip-hop sonics are an effect of the increasing visibility and availability of samplers, sequencers, and drum machines. But as Tricia Rose documents in detail, hip-hop producers of this period articulate a pre-existing set of stylistic priorities through and with sampling technologies, not because of them. (Rose 1994)

In contrast to histories that suggest accidental or technically determined relationships to production technologies, hip-hop practitioners from the 1980s and 1990s sought specific qualities among the available machines. The MPC60 "feels" one way, the SP-1200 "swings" another, and the TR-808 "booms" when properly tuned. (Rose 1994 76-77) These observations reveal the hip-hop practitioners' sensitivity to details that may not be immediately apparent to listeners outside of the largely black dance music discourse. Hip-hop producers, engaged with hip-hop's continuing demand for revision, reinvention, and innovation, sought tools to express and extend their aesthetic commitment to rhythm and repetition. Samplers and drum machines joined and, in part, replaced turntables only insofar as they afforded a deeper engagement with that commitment.

When breakbeat DJs isolated specific passages from their records, they increased the granularity with which a DJ might select music to play for a crowd. Enabled by adept application of a sampler, hip-hop producers further improved this precision by sampling specific drum hits rather than complete phrases. Producer Marley Mal discovered that he "could take any drum sound from any old record, put it [into a sampler] and get that old drummer sound." (Rose 1994 79) By combining sampled drum hits, melodies, and phrases from many different sources, producers created new musical passages that behaved like breaks but could be manipulated to a level of detail that evaded even the most technical DJ. Producer Bill Stephney was astonished at the layering enabled by such careful sampling, "a kick [drum] from one record on one track, a kick from another record on another track, a Linn kick on a third track, and a TR-808 kick on a

fourth." A sequencing computer could synchronize even these densely layered arrangements such that sounds from four disparate sources could play in time and sound to the listener like a single instrument.

Hip-hop music commodified

With their innovative approach to music production technologies, practitioners in the 1980s successfully ported the hip-hop approach to cultural production from the party to the studio. But what about the media architecture on which the recordings were duplicated, distributed, and sold? Surely hip-hop could not alter the industrial machinations of pop music, even if it was emerging as a successful source of producerly commodities. The records were still cut to vinyl and dubbed on cassette, weren't they?

"Good Times", the Chic song that provided inspiration for the "Rapper's Delight" beat was an undeniably resonate record for hip-hop fans in the summer of 1979. It "sent dancers running to the floor" and MCs "lining up to the mic." (Chang 131, 237) But hold the record in your hands and you find little material difference in "Good Times" from any other disco single of its era. There are no testimonials from breakbeat DJs printed on the sleeve. There is no sticker proclaiming "Producerly!" on its label.

Four years earlier, Mel Cheren of West End Records pioneered the 12" "DJ-friendly" format for disco and insisted on including an instrumental version on the record's B-side several singles to facilitate mixing, blending, and extending the track. (Graham 2008) This structure would be familiar to dancehall reggae DJs who were accustomed to receiving an instrumental "version" on the B-side of their 7" singles. (Manuel) Both the disco and reggae examples demonstrate material changes to a conventional publishing practice in order to better serve an existing musical practice and reveal an artifact's producerly properties. With hip-hop redefining

pop music production in the recording studio, how would its records materially differ from those that came before?

Since the introduction of a Parental Advisory sticker in 1985, rap singles typically include a version with curse words silenced, reversed, replaced, or otherwise obscured. Affixing the sticker and cleansing the vocal tracks are not required by law but are voluntary measures taken by industry participants to avoid censure by radio and TV stations wary of drawing negative attention from anti-obscenity groups. Examining the various terms used to distinguish the original from the edited versions on rap records reveals the cool irony with which hip-hop culture simultaneously undermines as it participates in the traditional pop economy. "Radio", "TV", and "Clean" tracks accompany "Street", "Club", and "Dirty" versions. These strategically selected names render the modified pop representations unofficial or unreal by contrasting them with real, tangible spaces – the club, the street.

In addition to the edited versions, many hip-hop singles also include instrumental and acapella tracks. While Cheren's visionary introduction of the instrumental dance track reflected the extended mixing style of a disco DJ, the hip-hop instrumental invites significantly greater participatory activity as it suggests listeners write, perform, and record their own vocals atop the record. This expanded imagining of the instrumental track blurs the distinction among professional and non-professional uses. Rappers in concert frequently rhyme on top of the same or similar instrumental tracks to those distributed on their singles.

The inclusion of an acapella track deserves special attention. Unlike the instrumental version, it is not common to casually listen to a naked rap vocal. Absent instrumental accompaniment, the acapella rap serves an instructional function as it reveals the artist's vocal technique and foregrounds the low barriers to start creating hip-hop music. Of all the features of a vinyl single, the inclusion of an acapella track demonstrates most clearly the intention of hip-hop producers to manufacture producerly raw materials for reuse by fan practitioners. To buy a hip-hop single with these various versions is to buy the hip-hop equivalent of a How-To kit. The

four tracks on the 12" single contain all of the necessary components to begin creating, versioning, and performing one's own hip-hop music.

It took the investigative intervention of breakbeat DJs like Grandmaster Flash to locate the producerly possibilities in Chic's "Good Times" single. As hip-hop moved into the marketplace, it subtly ruptured the durability of the pop music substrate. By including the component parts of its songs on the same commodities circulating in the pop economy, hip-hop inscribed its artifacts with the material means for reinvention. Like the "View Source" function in your web browser, the instrumental and acapella tracks highlight their own producerly gaps and act as welcoming invitations to engage creatively with the media environment. Instead of shearing off its participatory spirit, the production of hip-hop commodities secured the centrality of creative experimentation.

Using the past future to make the future past

For a teenager in the 1980s like "The World's Youngest," Ron G, the distinction between hip-hop and pop music was fairly blurry. Mentored by the senior Kid Capri, it is appropriate that Ron G is remembered best for his "blend" tapes on which he reworks pop and R&B songs in a hip-hop idiom. The blend is performed by carefully synchronizing the simultaneous playback of two different records. In a home studio with three turntables or a sampler, DJs like Ron G wove non-stop layered collages from their collection of 12" singles. Enabled by the increasing availability of instrumental and acapella tracks, the blend DJ makes connections among seemingly disparate areas of the pop landscape. Otis Redding's "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay" lends a tender melancholy to Eric B and Rakim's "I Know You Got Soul" just as the latter reimagines the former with a newfound sense of urgency.

With hip-hop and rap now visible and highly capitalized on the pop stage, competition grew ever more fierce in the wings. To compete as a mixtape DJ, one had to offer something

different from what was happening in the clubs and on the radio mixshows. Furthermore, with contracts being signed and records being pressed, the mixtape was not the best site for creating new hip-hop tracks. Instead, as Ron G's blend tape demonstrates, the mixtape DJ could provide context for the rapid expansion of hip-hop and highlight a lineage between hip-hop and older forms of black pop like R&B.

Simply juxtaposing interesting tracks sequentially was not enough to satisfy hip-hop's need for innovation. Ron G and contemporaries like Doo Wop and Kid Capri faced a twin challenge: to present relevant new tracks from hip-hop's pop economy at the same time as they upended expectations with surprising blends, interpolations, samples, and forgotten classics. The locus of competition for the hip-hop mixtape DJ had shifted again, from the selection of great songs to their timely (re)contextualization.

The production and deployment of acapella/instrumental records on blend tapes reveals a dimension to hip-hop's drive toward innovation not easily seen in its pre-pop incarnations. Rose suggests that the commitment to repetition and recontextualization in hip-hop music is the result of black cultural tradition in contact with post-industrial urbanity and technology. (Rose 1994 63) The expression of this tradition need not only be aesthetic, however. Hip-hop's adaptation to changing social, technical, legal, and economic contexts suggests that the repetition heard in hip-hop music is actually reflected in the growth of the culture itself. When Ron G juggles the instrumental side of Biz Markie and Marley Mal's "Make the Music With Your Mouth", he is performing the same process of isolation and looping that Marley Mal used to craft the beat in the first place. Like sampling from a sample, Ron G is dealing with hip-hop records in the manner of their construction, treating the products of hip-hop's past with the same creative license that defined their production.

Blends, samples, "mashups," and copyright

Engaging the pop economy increased the power of law to regulate the growth and mobility of hip-hop culture. For all its commercial success, 1991's hip-hop music was still subject to the ambiguous copyright legislation enacted in 1976. Multi-tracked digital sequencing and sampling enabled producers to create ever more pleasurable webs of intertextual reference for culturally literate audiences. (Rose 1994 89) Unfortunately, skeptical listeners lacking the needed literacies to enjoy them derided the creative reuse as theft. The real theft, of course, was taking place in the courtrooms where copyright infringement lawsuits were heard. The U.S.

Throughout the pop industry's history, a systemic process of racist exclusion and exploitation cut countless black R&B, soul, and funk artists out of the publishing and licensing arrangements for their songs. (Chapple) Therefore, lawsuits over the reuse of African-American pop history by predominantly black hip-hop producers revive and profit from the industry's racist past. Despite this terrible legacy, unscrupulous organizations holding rights to older recordings of black pop musicians nevertheless hired kids "to sit in a room and listen to hip hop record after hip hop record for the sole purpose of catching a [potentially litigious] snippet." (Davey 1997)

In this ominous legal environment, Ron G's exciting pop/hip-hop blends held no commercial potential within the conventional pop industry. Record companies wary of lawsuits over short sampled hits and phrases could not risk the certain litigation or devastating licensing fees that an authorized blend tape would attract. As a result, mixtape DJs like Ron G were unable to access the pop capital entering the hip-hop economy. Kept out of traditional media channels, their mixtapes circulated in the informal economy of the street, the same venue as dealers of bootleg videocassettes and imitation luxury goods.

Mixtape production is not the only economic activity available to a DJ. In contrast to their relative invisibility on the dominant media channels, mixtape DJs were often well known to their local communities. For DJs in a city like New York, this esteem could translate into other

opportunities to capitalize on hip-hop's pop success. Surely the opening track to "Mixes #1" served as an appropriate audition when Ron G was hired to remix Michael Jackson's "One More Chance." Furthermore, the innovations of mixtape DJs could be heard in the pop sounds produced elsewhere (Mary J. Blige's hip-hop-influenced R&B is one notable example), though constraints on sampling meant that they were often imitated with interpolated "replays" by studio musicians, diminishing their potential semiotic richness.⁹

Promo tapes: DJ Clue - Clue for President Vol. 1, 1997

Ron G's mixtapes exploited the technical affordances of working with pop commodities as raw materials in a home studio but he did not fundamentally question the approach taken by earlier hip-hop DJs like Grandmaster Flash. "Clue for President," however, represents a radical shift in the competitive terms of mixtape production. Unlike Ron G and Grandmaster Flash's creative reuse of existing material, Clue prioritizes the acquisition and presentation of unheard, unreleased recordings. To this end, he circumvents the exclusion of mixtape DJs from the pop industry and resists a period of radio consolidation brought on by government deregulation.

DJ Clue opens his mixtape with silence. Over the light hiss of rolling tape, he shouts out a list of affiliations and friends, his voice bouncing around the empty sonic space with characteristic echo effect. Without further ceremony, the first song starts to play: a tense, organ-driven beat with verses from three of New York City's most popular rappers, Jay-Z, Ja Rule, and DMX. Like Ron G, Clue's presence is felt throughout the recording. He laughs at the clever punchlines, shouts his name, and calls out the names of the artists.

But a curious thing happens as the first track ends. Nothing.

⁹ The blend achieved its greatest visibility in the "mashup" trend of the early 2000s. Enabled by tempo-matching functions in digital audio editing software like Acid, fans produced thousands of cross-genre blends and circulated them on the web in mp3 format. Unfortunately, by rebranding these artifacts "mashups" out of ignorance, the pop press excluded and obscured the pioneering recordings produced by DJs like Ron G and Kid Capri more than a decade earlier. As DJ Soul reminds readers of his blog, "The mixes are called blends... Not mash-ups!" (DJ Soul)

Clue's mixtapes are not mixed in the sense that we have seen in our previous examples. He allows the opening song to play to its conclusion and fade out before jumping in to introduce the next song,

"New for 9-8. DJ Clue-minati! Representing Queens. We're gonna set this shit off with Jay-Z featuring Memphis Bleek. You know how we do it."

Another song starts and we hear Clue laughing on top of it,

"You heard?"

For fans of the genre-defying bricolage found on tapes by Ron G, Kid Capri, DJ Premier, and others, DJ Clue must have seemed a retrogression. The blending, cutting, looping, and layering pioneered by Grandmaster Flash and taken further by the blend DJs is all but absent from Clue's compilations. In fact, Clue's only aural intervention appears to be his voice, incessantly echoing across every track.

At first, the song selection on "Clue for President" would be similarly bewildering. None of the tracks reach as far back into pop history as Ron G's reworking of Otis Redding. Rap fans looking closely at the tracklist would recognize nearly all of the artists' names but none of the song titles. Of the dozen songs on side A, only one had ever appeared on a conventional pop album in 1997. Six of the remaining tracks would be released in 1998, four were never officially released, and one was recorded specially for this mixtape.

Whereas the breakbeat DJ obscures the identifying information on his records, DJ Clue boasts about his. He calls out the artists' names ("New Lox!"), their labels ("Bad Boy!"), and even their release dates ("Coming in March 98!"). Fans of the technical prowess and unexpected juxtapositions that characterized most of mixtape history dismissed Clue's unblended compilations as uncreative, haphazard bootlegs. Like the party DJ who could not conceive of recording a hip-hop single, these critics could not see that Clue had changed the terms by which

mixtape DJs might compete. Instead of trying to further innovate on the creative manipulation of dusty records, Clue focused instead on exclusive content.

Clue's incessant chatter on "Clue for President" takes on new meaning when we consider this changed locus of competition. Instead of addressing the audience or responding to the music, as did Ron G, Clue is marking his territory by "tagging" the audio. No other mixtape DJ will be able to reuse the songs with Clue's voice echoing over every verse and refrain. Thus tagged, they remain exclusive until official release.

The capital value of hip-hop music, already a powerful market force in 1991, rose dramatically in the six years between Ron G's "Mixes #1" and DJ Clue's "Clue for President." The introduction of barcodes and Soundscan reporting technology in 1991 suddenly gave the music industry access to more accurate sales figures than ever before. Within a matter of weeks, the numbers began to paint a surprising picture. The three best-selling albums in the U.S. were by Garth Brooks, Skid Row, and N.W.A. (Chang 416) Before Soundscan, the industry considered country, metal, and rap to be niche, peripheral subgenres. Now that they could see the degree to which these diverse, regional musics were driving retail sales, their budgets adjusted accordingly.

Initially, this attention brought with it new opportunities for hip-hop artists and entrepreneurs. But in 1996 after independent record labels collectively outsold them, the five major labels started to buy out independents. This consolidation hurt the network of independent distributors and mom&pop record stores that had nurtured and supported hip-hop's growth but also enabled some of hip-hop's practitioners to build new businesses within the industry and demand access to channels that were previously closed off to young black entrepreneurs. Unfortunately, the net result of this consolidation was a narrowing of the culture's aesthetic diversity. (Chang 445)

As the number of record labels shrank, the hip-hop industry's support structure was further weakened by another type of consolidation. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 deregulated commercial radio such that a single company could own as many as seven or eight

stations in a single market. In the first year following passage of the Act, twenty percent of commercial stations in the U.S. changed ownership. Six months later, more than one thousand mergers had taken place. After five years, there were seven percent more radio stations in the nation but the number of owners fell by 25 percent. (Watkins 2005 137) The community-based urban radio dramatized in Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* and examined in John Fiske's *Media Matters* gave way to layoffs, shrinking playlists, and syndicated programming.

DJ Clue's compilation-style mixtapes proved excellent promotional tools for record companies with dense release schedules and limited opportunity to get their artists heard on commercial radio. Where earlier DJs had learned to technologically hack their turntables and studio gear, Clue learned to socially hack the music industry itself. By forging relationships with employees, contractors, artists, and affiliates of popular record labels, Clue was able to gain access to recordings long in advance of their official release. (Bell) Rather than undermine conventional retail sales, a Clue mixtape created excitement about forthcoming albums among hip-hop fans with money to spend.

Chuck D called hip-hop "the Black person's CNN" and with urban media outlets threatened by marauding conglomerates like Clear Channel, 1997 needed such a fresh channel. In this context, Clue tapes sound more like an alternative to commercial radio than a DJ mix. Whereas radio personalities like Funkmaster Flex might traditionally have been the ones to "break" new records, mixtape DJs like Clue could play a similar role as long as they sustained a regular release schedule week-to-week and month-to-month.¹⁰

In 1991, Ron G's blend mixtapes served as calling cards for his remunerative work as a producer, performer, and remixer. The tapes' mobility in the formal economy was restricted because of their ambiguous legal status. By 1997, however, the backstage hip-hop economy had flourished in parallel with its onstage pop manifestation and mixtapes were sold in independent

¹⁰ Later in his career, Clue produced a handful of mixtape-like compilations in cooperation with record companies. These authorized recordings tended to receive lukewarm reception from critics in part because they lacked the timely urgency of his work with the informal economy.

outlets across the country. In his 2001 press materials, Clue claims, "If the RIAA were to count the tapes I've sold independently over the years, I would've been certified multi-platinum by now."

The volume of Clue's output was further enabled by a transition from cassettes to compact discs. As mixtapes were still largely duplicated by DJs using consumer equipment, cassettes required a considerable investment of time to reproduce. Compact disc replication, on the other hand, demanded a serious initial monetary investment but otherwise reduced overall production costs while increasing capacity. Furthermore, although CDs were cheaper to produce, consumers seemed willing to pay more for them when sold alongside cassettes.

At first glance, "Clue for President" seems an odd detour from the path established by Grandmaster Flash and Ron G. Clue abandons the aesthetic priorities of the breakbeat DJ in favor of hosting a rather conventional compilation that has more in common with a pop album than a live DJ mix. Yet, as we have seen, Clue's mixtapes demonstrate an adroit response to changing technical, legal, social, and market constraints. Though their mixtapes differ sonically and structurally, Clue, Ron G, and Flash all responded to increasingly powerful regulatory forces with a creative curiosity driven by a competitive commitment to innovation.

Imitating albums: 50 Cent is the Future, 2002

Each mixtape in this chapter reflects a unique balance of social, technological, legal, and economic forces. By the end of the 1990s, artists like 50 Cent recognized the flexibility of this semi-commercial medium to circumvent pop industrial constraints. Shut out of traditional media channels, 50 Cent and DJ Whoo Kid produced a series of recordings in 2002 that circulated like mixtapes but sounded like pop albums. By exploiting the social mobility of the mixtape form, the commercial ambiguity of hip-hop productivity, and the technical affordances of personal computers, 50 Cent gained access to the highly capitalized pop industry.

More than any other rapper, 50 Cent has leveraged his biography like a brand. He is the hustler-turned-MC who survived being shot to achieve multi-platinum pop success, or so goes the legend. (Matthews) Equally mythologized is a trio of mixtapes released following his recovery. In 2006, XXL magazine selected "50 Cent is the Future" as the "best mixtape ever" and numerous fans posting to the Datpiff mixtape messageboard concur. (Datpiff)

If Clue's radio host approach to DJing marked a surprising twist in the mixtape narrative, "50 Cent in the Future" truly obscures the role of the mixtape DJ. From the cover art to the recorded content, DJ Whoo Kid is largely absent from "50 Cent is the Future." Presumably, Whoo Kid is responsible for selecting, sequencing, arranging, and producing the mixtape but, unlike Clue or Ron G, his presence is rarely foregrounded on the recordings. Although Whoo Kid is occasionally heard speaking through the now-compulsory echo effect, 50 Cent's is the one shouting over and between almost all of the tracks.

In the mythology of 50 Cent's early career, he was blacklisted from the pop music industry after being shot by someone involved with the drug trade. Though he had been preparing to record and release an album at the time of the attack, he found himself suddenly without institutional support. In the oft-repeated story, 50 recorded enough material independently to fill three mixtapes. With the exception of a handful of spoken "drops" from radio personality Kay Slay, DJ Clue, and DJ Whoo Kid, 50 Cent and his two partners, Tony Yayo, and Lloyd Banks, are the only artists that appear on "50 Cent is the Future."

Denied access to the conventional processes for producing pop albums, 50 Cent and DJ Whoo Kid created a hybrid mixtape / album. Where Clue's mixtapes offered exclusive access to tracks that would be later included on conventional albums, "50 Cent is the Future" presents songs recorded specifically for release as a mixtape. There is no overlap from one song to the next and each track concludes with 50 or Whoo Kid talking as the beat fades out. Clue might have ruffled some feathers with his pre-release exclusives but on "50 Cent is the Future" one hears an artist effectively bootlegging himself.

In addition to original productions, 50 Cent popularized the practice of "beat-jacking" in which he constructs new songs atop the instrumentals from popular hip-hop singles. Beat-jacking draws on the layering practices of Ron G's blends and the freestyles heard on Clue mixtapes. But unlike the live improvisation of a freestyle rap session, the beat-jacked song is often written and rehearsed like a traditional pop song with verses and a chorus. Rapping on a beat made popular by another artist competitively expresses an alternate hip-hop history in which the beat-jacking rapper replaces the original artist. For 50 Cent, beat-jacking inserts his voice into a pop industry from which he was denied access.

"50 Cent is the Future" demonstrates a full appropriation of the multi-purpose personal computer for creating hip-hop music. 50 Cent's semi-autobiographical film, "Get Rich or Die Tryin'", includes a reconstructed image of the portable mixtape studio used to create "50 Cent is the Future." 50 Cent stands in a bathroom with a mic stand and headphones while Whoop Kid sits outside the door at a large desk covered in electronics. The microphone and headphones lead into a portable mixing console into which the output from a sampler/sequencer is also fed. In the background of the shot, a turntable and a laptop sit on the edge of the desk. These twin artifacts represent the oldest and newest media technologies to be appropriated for expression by hip-hop practitioners. The camera cuts away and we see a figure rendered in silhouette assembling mixtapes by hand while an inkjet printer and CD replication machine attached to the laptop churn out new copies. The screen fades to black, swiftly replaced by a brightly lit street scene in which a teenager purchases the mixtape with cash from a man at a folding table.

For all that "50 Cent is the Future" blurs the distinction between pop album and mixtape, it represents a significant shift in economic power between the mixtape DJ, marginalized in the conventional pop marketplace, and the pop producer. With the appropriation of the personal computer, the technologies of performance, production, recording, duplication, and distribution are all accessible to the independent hip-hop practitioner. This does not signal shift away from the enormous capitalization of the conventional pop industry. Rather, 50 Cent's disruptive production

of a hybrid mixtape/album affords him access to traditional channels, the exploitation of which makes him extremely wealthy.

"50 Cent is the Future" effected a shift in the popular understanding of a hip-hop mixtape. No longer an ephemeral form circulating in a parallel but largely distinct economic space from the conventional pop marketplace, industry stakeholders and hip-hop fans begin to see the production and circulation of mixtapes as an essential facet of the production of hip-hop commodities. At the end of 2001, hip-hop album sales had fallen 15% from the previous year yet it appears that mixtape production and distribution was surging. (Chang 446) Changes in the use of networked personal computers for recording, replicating, and distributing music reduced the regulatory power of the traditional pop industry. Free from the constraining architecture of a pop marketplace, fans and artists alike indulged in the exciting mixtape phenomenon.

Beat-jacking drew little attention from copyright litigators, but the distribution of 50 Cent's mixtapes accompanied both the spread of high-bandwidth internet access across North America and a growing paranoia about unauthorized digital duplication among music industry stakeholders. While traditional pop stakeholders resisted unauthorized redistribution of their commodities, mixtape producers actively courted it. DJ Whoo Kid explains the unusual method by which his mixtapes are circulated,

"I take it to the main [wholesale] bootlegger [who] has about 300 bootleggers [that he works with]. They all know each other. They all got their own portable pressing machines. It's not only them, it's regular people. My main thing is to get it bootlegged." (Reid 2003 5)

By shifting the responsibility for mass duplication and distribution to the "bootleggers," DJs like Whoo Kid and Clue deftly exploit the potential of a changed technological context. Although they sacrifice potential retail profit, they avoid the risks associated with unauthorized copying.¹¹

¹¹ "Bootlegger" is an unfortunate term that obscures the diversity of stakeholders who may play this role. Some of the downstream duplicators may fit the "bootlegger" stereotype of a petty criminal making unauthorized copies of DVDs but a significant number are simply the owners of independent retail outlets.

Like Ron G and Clue before them, DJs like Whoo Kid use mixtapes to indirectly access pop capital. "I make more money from advertisers," claims Whoo Kid whose other mixtapes feature artists with upcoming albums and occasionally bear the names and images of new video games. (Reid 2003 5) Whoo Kid also reveals that a system of post-millennial payola has emerged in which pop music marketing budgets include as much as five thousand dollars per track to buy space on a mixtape. (Reid 2003 3)

50 Cent and Whoo Kid's approach to production and circulation inspired a surge of attention, creativity, and capital in the mixtape economy. In the years to follow "50 Cent is the Future", nearly every rapper to achieve high visible in the conventional music industry preceded his or her pop album with a mixtape of beat-jacking freestyles and exclusives "for the streets." No artist exploited this formula more successfully than revived child star Lil Wayne.

Replacing albums: DJ Drama ft. Lil Wayne – The Dedication II, 2006

"The Dedication II" is a culmination of all earlier mixtape innovations. DJ Drama is as concerned with the transformative manipulation of recordings as Grandmaster Flash, as eager to introduce meaning through juxtaposition as Ron G, and as industrially minded as DJ Clue. For his collaborator, Lil Wayne, the mixtape replaces the pop album as his primary commodified form. Yet, for all that its creators embrace mixtape history, the discursive position of "The Dedication II" indicates that the mixtape form has been finally incorporated by the pop industry. Fortunately for the durability of hip-hop creativity, the production and circulation of "The Dedication II" reveal that the innovative orientation of earlier mixtape producers is now found among young hip-hop participants expressing themselves on the web.

After receiving one copy of the mixtape, they use their own resources to replicate the disc and artwork. It seems disingenuous for Whoo Kid to characterize these important figures in the hip-hop economy as criminals. (Bell) In addition, fans routinely copy and share mixtapes on- and off-line so it is not uncommon to see two copies of the same mixtape with slightly different tracklists or unmatched artwork.

Lil Wayne, the teenage rapper who sang "bling, bling" on B.G.'s 1999 single of the same title, fell out of the public eye shortly after the turn of the century. Using 50 Cent's model, Wayne adopted the mixtape form as a vehicle for his return to the pop music industry in 2004. Seemingly driven by rumors that his rhymes were "ghostwritten" by older artists, Wayne embarked on a tireless recording schedule beginning with a mixtape titled "Tha Drought." From original material to freestyles, jacked beats, guest verses, and remixes, Wayne released hundreds of tracks between 2004 and 2007. Following this prolific period, Wayne released an album through conventional pop channels. Perplexing to those outside of hip-hop who had not heard a new release from Wayne in five years, "The Carter III" became the highest-selling album of 2008. (Cohen)

Although "50 Cent is the Future" blurred the distinction between a pop album and hip-hop mixtape, its conventional structure and purpose ultimately left the pop album unchallenged as the dominant form for distributing hip-hop music. 50 Cent used mixtapes discursively, economically, and architecturally to circumvent barriers to accessing traditional pop channels. Wayne, on the other hand, neglected an available opportunity to produce a pop album in favor of circulating recordings on mixtapes. While 50 Cent's commercial success positioned the mixtape as a kind of "minor league" for engaging with the industry of hip-hop, Wayne's success with "The Carter III" altogether undermined pop traditional structures. 50 Cent's success is a validation of the pop industry. Wayne succeeds in spite of it.

"The Dedication II" is a collaboration between New Orleans rapper Lil Wayne and Atlanta mixtape DJ Drama. Released in May 2006, "The Dedication II" is among the most widely heard mixtapes of all time. Datpiff.com, a hip-hop fan site with mixtapes for download, recognizes over one million listeners to the 77-minute recording.¹² It has also received more critical attention in conventional media outlets than any previous mixtape, having been reviewed in the *New Yorker*, *Village Voice*, *Rolling Stone*, and *New York Times*. The unusual visibility

¹² Acknowledging the role of digital distribution in the spread of his mixtapes, DJ Drama calls himself "the iPod king."

make "The Dedication II" seem exceptional among hip-hop mixtapes but the nature of its production and circulation are otherwise representative of common practice during this period.

iPod King

Mixtapes give DJs a medium through which they can present innovations in the sound and style of hip-hop music. The combination of hip-hop and R&B found on Ron G's mixtapes formed the foundation of later trends in the conventional pop industry. With digital distribution spreading mixtapes far beyond their geographic origins, DJ Drama exploited the mixtape's educational potential to introduce culturally specific Southern hip-hop music to audiences in other regions. Though Atlanta, New Orleans, and Miami were always important hubs in the hip-hop network, the capitalization of hip-hop was not equally distributed. For most of the 1990s, Southern artists in places like Mobile, Memphis, and Houston were marginalized by a hip-hop discourse centered on Los Angeles and New York City. (Grem) Working in a similar hybrid mode as Whoo Kid, Drama's single-artist mixtapes increased access and visibility for the diverse accents, sounds, styles, and concerns of Southern hip-hop culture during the 2000s.

"The Dedication II" opens with the sound of DJ Drama scratching the first few syllables of a Lil Wayne acapella on which he proclaims, "You already know what the fuck it is, man." And for those listeners who have been following the evolution of the hip-hop mixtape, much of what is to follow will be familiar as Drama incorporates all of the earlier mixtape innovations. Drawing on Grandmaster Flash's non-stop overlapping mixes, Ron G's surprising blends, Clue's pursuit of exclusivity, and Whoo Kid's album-size vision, "The Dedication II" represents a culmination of mixtape history.

"The Dedication II" is remarkable not just for its derivative qualities but for Drama's innovative integration of these influences. While a traditional understanding of authorship concerns the composition, arrangement, and performance of a piece of music, Drama asserts his

authority by strongly emphasizing the sequencing of his mixtape. The various tracks on "The Dedication II" are knit together with snippets of recorded conversation between Drama and Wayne that only form a coherent dialogue when heard in the proper sequence. For example, on a few occasions Drama will begin a song, only to have Wayne interrupt its playback because the listener is not "paying attention." Listening to the tracks in a different sequence would render this exchange nonsensical. This temporal discipline calls forth the live performances of party tapes and the immediacy of a hip-hop radio broadcast. At times, listening to "The Dedication II" suggests the intimacy of two friends taking turns sharing their favorite songs. Listeners are encouraged to "sit back and [listen]" to the tape, challenging the digital imperative to "rip, mix, burn" lengthy albums.

The Importance of Place

Of all the mixtapes examined so far, "The Dedication 2" demands the greatest degree of hip-hop literacy to unpack. Each track on the mixtape contains interrelated meanings activated by regional and historical tensions within the hip-hop community. The first three beats are from The Diplomat's "Get From Round Me", Dem Franchize Boyz' "Oh! I Think They Like Me", and Young Buck's "Bang, Bang." For hip-hop fans, these tracks carry significant place-based energies. The Diplomats are a Harlem group who departed from New York convention by incorporating the sounds and styles of Southern hip-hop artists; Dem Franchize Boyz, an Atlanta group, were widely derided for the apparent simplicity of their sparse "snap" music; and Young Buck is a rapper from Tennessee recruited to represent a Southern sensibility by G-Unit, 50 Cent's New York-based group. For the literate listener, this contextual information provides additional tools and dimensions with which to engage the recording.

On the tracks crafted by his in-house production team, Drama continues to foreground regional difference in his choice of guest rappers. Of the five rappers on "Cannon (AMG Remix)"

four of them explicitly declare their geographic location. Widespread access to broadband internet enables producers in different home studios to share digital audio fragments. It is entirely possible that none of the voices heard on "Cannon" were recorded in the same studio. Each rapper might have gone to his or her local studio, recorded their performance, and emailed the resulting file to Drama for assembly in his Atlanta studio. Not simply a matter of working with studio engineers, rappers themselves need technical expertise to participate in such collaborations. Highlighting their geographic positioning is an overt attempt to reconcile the spatial fragmentation of an asynchronous recording process and maintain the primacy of place in hip-hop.

Mixtapes traditionally documented the sounds of a particular place. A mixtape by a Bronx DJ would sound different from a mixtape produced in Oakland. With distance now distorted by online distribution, mixtape participants are compelled to assert their geographic presences more explicitly. On "The Dedication 2", for example, Drama, Wanye, and their guests name numerous specific locations. In his shout-outs alone, Drama mentions all of the following places using their colloquial names: Hollygrove, Magnolia projects, New Orleans, Philly, Harlem, G-town, Bridgeport, the Hollow, A-town, the 4th Ward, West Side, Bankhead, Adamsville, Chitown, Detroit, Duval County, Memphis, East Bank, West Bank, the 305, Miami, and New York City.

As a DJ committed to bringing together various regional hip-hop communities, Drama expresses this hope for unity most eloquently through his nuanced selection of music. The beats jacked for "The Dedication II" are drawn from songs made popular by Southern artists in 2005 and 2006. Drama selects these beats strategically because he knows that Lil Wayne's popularity and reputation as a lyricist will attract attention outside of the South. The result is an artifact *through which* he argues for the validation of Southern hip-hop in response to long-term critical and industrial marginalization.

Timeliness and Hurricane Katrina

By exploiting the rapid production and distribution capacity of networked personal computers, mixtape producers are able to achieve a timeliness unmatched in the pop industry. Recorded within a few months of Hurricane Katrina, "The Dedication 2" examines the disaster from several perspectives. Near the end of the mixtape, Wayne speaks to both the displaced youth of New Orleans and to their new neighbors:

"This right here is dedicated to all the young motherfuckers all over the world - especially from my city, New Orleans. I respect how y'all hold your heads up high and stand strong after disaster[.] My city went through a tough one and I want the young motherfuckers to know that I see y'all. I see y'all. [...] Respect my city. Respect a New Orleanian if you see him..."

In the track that follows these comments, Wayne raps, "Straight up d-boy / Seventeenth Ward / Katrina turned my neighborhood into a seashore" to which Harlem MC Juelz Santana responds, "Wayne / I feel your pain and I see your stress / How they think people are supposed to get through Katrina on a FEMA check?" Yet the frustration in these lyrics is dwarfed by the final track on which Wayne parodies the refrain from Field Mob's country-rap hit "Georgia":

"We from a town where
Everybody drowned
Everybody died
But, baby, I'm still praying witcha
Everybody crying
Nobody trying
But there's no doubt in my mind
That it was (Georgia) Bush"

The prominence of Katrina on "The Dedication 2" contrasts sharply with the disaster's fading presence in the national news. Speaking directly to the people living with the disaster day-to-day, Wayne exploits the mixtape's history as an asynchronous accompaniment to community radio. The wealthy rapper is likely not living in temporary housing but his expression of sorrow,

anger, and regret give voice to people feeling disenfranchised and forgotten. Wayne and Drama remind listeners that for the effects of Hurricane Katrina are an everyday reality for the "New Orleanian". Yet they package this sober message among songs that celebrate a fantastical non-reality. Rather than diminish the mixtape's political significance for listeners living in daily ignorance of the Katrina reality, this organizing principle might provide comforting moments of escape for the struggling New Orleanian.

Circulating the Dedication

Lil Wayne's creative practice is intimately linked to his exploitation of media and communications technologies. In a video posted to his YouTube account, Wayne describes the daily recording regimen that enables his unusually prolific output. Producers send him instrumental tracks attached to email. He records vocals in his own studio and returns the results later that same day. Once released, Wayne yields control over the distribution of this material. As a result of this liberal attitude about ownership, Wayne's voice temporarily achieved a kind of omnipresence in hip-hop music. In a December 2007 analysis of Datpiff.com, I observed 628 mixtapes containing material recorded by Wayne, of which 174 listed him as the primary artist.

Though the abundance of recorded material might have made listeners weary, Wayne's provocative public persona and increasingly strange aesthetic sensibility inspired an unusual dedication among his fans. Though Wayne appeared regularly as a guest rapper on singles from other artists, he all but ceased releasing his own records. Instead, he relied on downstream duplication to re-distribute his DIY productions. Unlike Whoop Kid who periodically passed completed mixtapes onto a small circle of "bootleggers", Wayne released a constant stream of new freestyles, remixes, and original tracks but rarely assembled whole mixtapes himself. Mixtape fans and DJs were left to collect and sequence this material in whichever way they saw

fit. As a result, Wayne's oeuvre lacks authoritative markers to signify which mixtapes represent "official" releases.

"The Dedication 2" is a rare artifact among mixtapes featuring Lil Wayne, as it is clear that the rapper collaborated in its production. The formality of his collaboration with Drama suggests a new distinction between albums and mixtapes in which "official" mixtapes occupy a different category from those produced without artists' explicit cooperation. This new hierarchy is evidence of a change in the mixtape's relationship to the pop industry. Mixtapes like "Clue for President", "50 Cent is the Future", and "The Dedication II" reflect incorporation of the mixtape form by the traditional pop industry.

Lil Wayne highlighted the growing distinction between "official" mixtapes and the work of independent mixtape DJs in a 2008 interview in which he insulted mixtape DJs for stealing from him when they reuse his recordings. Wayne goes on to demand that mixtape DJs, "stop putting my face on the cover of your CDs," revealing a more nuanced understanding of authorship from the era in which DJs like Clue, Ron G, and Doo Wop felt free to use whichever records they could obtain. (Malo) The ease with which digital audio can be replicated and transmitted means that mixtape DJs no longer needed the kinds of social connections that gave Clue access to exclusive material. Wayne affirms the importance of these interpersonal relationships when he criticizes a series of unauthorized Lil Wayne mixtapes titled "The Drought Is Over",

"[They] put out a CD on me every month but I couldn't tell you what none of [them] look like in person." (DJ Drama)

For years, DJs described hunting and "digging" for new records in record stores, want ads, estate sales, and second-hand shops. (Pray) DJ Clue took the desire for novelty that motivates the "digging" DJ and applied it to new, unreleased material. Web-savvy mixtape DJs, however, bring the "digging" impulse to peer-to-peer networks, messageboards, and blogs, changing the balance

of architectural forces that such that previously implicit social norm are agitated and made explicit.

Wayne's anger confused many fans that had been following his recorded output through mixtapes. On a blog post discussing the interview, the comments of some fans reveal a widespread confusion about authorship in digital mixtapes,

"If he says he did not put out no mixtape but yet theres about 25 [Lil Wayne] mixtape[s] burning space on my [hard drive], then darn, kinda explains why so many songs are repeated." (Mr Starks)

Other commenters suggested a reading of the mixtape ecology that validates the work of some DJs over others,

"[A]ll these DJ's arent even notable DJ's though, just teenagers sitting at home behind a comp uploading shit to datpiff" (PHOENIXXX)

PHOENIXXX's dismissal of teenagers using the web to craft and share their mixtapes is a repetition of the reluctance to change that has accompanied each moment of transition in hip-hop history. In an effort to discredit the younger generation of mixtape DJs, some commenters calls forth the names of earlier DJs,

"RON G use to put out tapes every month with exclusives and blends. chill will had the craziest blend tapes and now the art form of djing and making a mixtape has changed and sadly the art form is no longer respected. damn shame." (Jose S.)

"Mixtapes ain't been hot since Clue and Kay Slay stopped making them."
(PHOENIXXX)

As our examination of mixtape history demonstrates, each of these DJs introduced innovations that challenged convention and drew criticism. That the "teenagers [...] uploading" their mixtapes might be similarly targeted suggests that they, and not DJ Drama or Lil Wayne,

carry forth the spirit of competitive innovation that drove the earlier mixtape DJs. When, in an effort to discredit the makers of unauthorized mixtapes, Drama declares, "I've never done an unofficial tape with nobody," he actually distinguishes himself from the vast majority of mixtape DJs and reveals the incorporation of his practice by the dominant pop industry. (DJ Drama) Until the turn of the century, nearly all mixtape DJs operated in social contexts that did not require permission.

The discourse surrounding Lil Wayne's comments attest a rising tension in hip-hop regarding the production and circulation of mixtapes. In the 1990s, mixtapes like "Clue for President" suggested a taste-making role for the mixtape DJ. The pop music industry could use fans' reaction to songs on Clue's mixtapes as a tool for planning their releases but they could not supersede Clue's expertise in assembling the mixtape. In an economy where inclusion on a Whoop Kid mixtape is worth \$5,000, a new hierarchy emerges in which a few mixtape DJs like Clue, Whoop Kid, and Drama are validated by the pop music industry to circulate unreleased material while the rest are derided as "suburban teenagers" or criminalized as "bootleggers."

An optimistic reading of the distinction between "official" and "unofficial" mixtapes is that the "official" mixtape is slowly replacing the pop album. When artists signed to major labels work with a mixtape DJ, they often do so in tacit violation of their recording contract. The labels likely do not prosecute their artists for this transgression because the mixtape appearances have a positive impact on traditional record sales. However, with the affordances of digital distribution, it is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which emerging artists opt to deal directly with mixtape DJs rather than enter notoriously unrewarding major label recording contracts. (Albini)

Mixtape sharing sites like Datpiff and MixtapeTorrent indicate that that the new locus of competitive innovation in mixtapes may not be the work of Drama or Wayne at all. Whereas Clue shifted the focus of mixtapes to exclusive content and Whoop Kid appropriated the formal structure of the conventional pop album, thousands of mixtape fans today are work in concert to distribute tapes by DJs like Drama. Rather than a short list of a few mixtape DJs that could be

named in this paragraph, the innovation in hip-hop music distribution is the result of thousands and thousands of mixtape DJs working in parallel. Characterized, perhaps accurately, by some critics as "teenagers sitting at home behind a computer," these digital DJs upload dozens of new mixtapes each day, most of which will never be burned to a CD or dubbed to a cassette.

Datpiff.com, a hip-hop fan site geared toward sharing and discussing mixtapes, is among the richest contemporary archives of hip-hop music. The Datpiff model is similar to media-sharing sites like YouTube. Users upload their mixtapes, which are then assigned a unique URL and embedded into a display framework with ratings, listener history, and space for comments. Datpiff, which is clearly in danger of litigation, provides a link at the bottom of every page leading to detailed instructions on how to have material removed from the site. But like most of the mixtapes examined above, Datpiff appears to flourish through some combination of tacit industry approval and benign neglect.

Copyright catches up to hip-hop mixtapes

The legal ambiguity of hip-hop mixtapes was clearly established by Grandmaster Flash's party tapes in 1978. With Flash juggling breaks and the Furious 4 MCs rapping atop the mix, the tape bore a material reuse of existing recordings that could not simply be classified as copyright infringement. The Copyright Act of 1976 provided guidelines to protect such transformative reuse of copyright materials but also gave preference to non-commercial uses. As they circulated in ambiguously commercial contexts, the commercial status of hip-hop mixtapes is difficult to determine.

During the 1990s, the highly visible use of samplers in hip-hop production attracted negative attention from litigious rights holders and led to numerous costly out of court settlements. A cottage industry emerged in which unscrupulous organizations purchased the rights to collections of aging pop recordings in the hope that they would be sampled and provide

opportunity to profit from hip-hop reuse by way of either a licensing agreement or copyright infringement settlement. (Wu) One unfortunate side effect of this phenomenon was that the semiotically rich practice of layering samples from many sources became a financial risk for record labels releasing hip-hop albums. Mixtapes, with their liminal legal status, became a medium on which tracks with uncleared samples might survive.

In 1998, Congress revised the 1976 Copyright Act and added new provisions specifically concerning the reuse of digital media for creative purposes. The Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998 (CTEA) extended the duration of the copyright monopoly for corporate-owned works (most recordings of contemporary pop music) to 120 years after their creation or 95 years after publication, whichever comes first.¹³ The extension of the copyright term did not directly affect the practices of hip-hop producers or mixtape DJs as even the fourteen year term set in original U.S. Constitution would be too long for DJs like Drama but its passage indicated the degree to which the aesthetic priorities of the hip-hop practitioner were not reflected broadly in the pop music industry of the time. Lawsuits regarding the use of unlicensed samples continued to burden hip-hop producers and their record labels. As DJs like Clue and Whoo Kid bridged the mixtape and pop economies, the copyright litigation that plagued highly visible pop industry participants began to affect the mixtape producer.

Among the best-known cases of a mixtape being targeted for uncleared samples is the 2004 "Grey Album" by DJ Danger Mouse. Drawing on the pioneering work of DJs like Ron G and producers like 9th Wonder, Danger Mouse crafted a "full-length blend" by combining samples from the Beatles "White Album" with acapellas from Jay-Z's "Black Album." The result

¹³ In addition to the CTEA, Congress also passed the Digital Millennium Copyright Act in 1998 (DMCA). This grandly-named legislation collected together several regulations that affected the circulation of cultural artifacts in digital spaces. Title II of the DMCA, the Online Copyright Infringement Liability Limitation Act (OCILLA) protects service providers from liability for the actions of their users. This provision anticipated online media-sharing services like YouTube, Flickr, and Datpiff. To secure "safe harbor" protection, service providers must agree to take an administrative role in handling material alleged to infringe a copyright. Unfortunately, the mechanics of this process unfairly advantage large corporations and burden individual creators. For examples of the effect that the DMCA takedown process can have on the online media ecology, see MIT Free Culture's YouTomb project. <http://youtomb.mit.edu>

garnered modest critical attention before lawyers representing record label EMI demanded Danger Mouse cease distributing the unauthorized remixes.¹⁴ Fans resisted EMI's attempts to stem the circulation of the mixtape by posting mp3s of the remixes to their website in an act of civil disobedience called "Grey Tuesday." (Howard-Spink) All of this attention inspired further transformation of the "Black Album."

Following the model set by Danger Mouse, full-length blends like "The Double Black Album" and "The Black and Blue Album" featured samples from rock bands Metallica and Weezer. An unauthorized collection of samples and software titled "The Jay-Z Construction Set" encouraged further remixing and countless new versions began to proliferate across the web. As is customary in hip-hop, the acapellas used on the "Grey Album" were commercially available on the B-sides of Jay-Z's singles. Despite making no official comment on the controversy, Jay-Z later released a full-length acapella CD of the "Black Album" and produced an authorized set of genre-transgressing blend-style remixes in collaboration rock band Linkin Park. While the music industry spoke through lawyers and in the language of law, the fans and artists concerned responded largely through their use and exploitation of media and communication technologies.

In May of 2006, the Recording Industry Association of America, a music industry trade group, published an article in its newsletter concerning "hot spots" for music piracy in the U.S. The article detailed the activities of investigators and law enforcement raiding businesses suspected of selling or manufacturing unauthorized copies of CDs and DVDs. In addition to the run-of-the-mill bootlegger, the article describes "enterprising pirates" who produce "unauthorized compilations of popular hits" along with "bonus tracks." If there was any confusion that this report concerns mixtapes, it is clarified later in a section dealing with "urban" music,

"Urban music [...] is almost exclusively found in a lower-quality format burned to blank CD discs with packaging far less likely to be confused with legitimate products. A large

¹⁴ Fittingly, the "White Album" was one of the first pop records to incorporate a kind of analog sampling by reusing bits of tape on "Revolution #9." This fact was not lost on upset fans.

portion of the urban piracy market consists of compilations of music from various artists and multiple albums."

Despite acknowledging the differences between mixtapes and simple unauthorized replications, the article groups them all together under terms like "illegal" or "pirate" music. In addition to statistics regarding sales of unauthorized recordings, the article lists common characteristics of a "pirate" product. It is low-priced, "too good to be true", sold in unusual places, and packaged with "blurry graphics." (RIAA)

Raid on DJ Drama's studio

"Home movies never threatened Hollywood, as long as they remained in the home."
(Jenkins 136)

On January 16, 2007, less than one year after the release of the RIAA report on mixtapes, police raided DJ Drama's studio in Atlanta. Drama and his partner Don Cannon were arrested at gunpoint. All of their studio equipment was seized as officers with dogs searched the premises. Perhaps most violating, however, was a humiliating portrayal of the two DJs by FOX5, the local FOX News affiliate.

The report, run on television and the web, obscures the relationship of DJs like Drama and Cannon to the conventional industry and mischaracterizes their enterprise as a bootlegging operation. Matthew Kilgo, a representative from the RIAA, is pictured standing in front of a wall covered in sound-dampening foam. He describes the Gangsta Grillz website from which fans can order mixtapes but does not explain what is sold there in any meaningful terms. The report continues with images of men in RIAA windbreakers packaging slim jewel cases and CDs into brown cardboard boxes. Despite close-up shots of mixtape cover art, music industry award plaques, musical instruments, and recording equipment, Stacey Elgin, the reporter on the scene,

refers to the materials being produced in the studio as "illegal CDs." In a final insulting swipe, one of the officers on the scene is prompted to confirm that the search did not turn up drugs or weapons, though, he concludes, "it's not uncommon [...] to find other kinds of contraband."

(FOX5)

In the days following the raid, artists who worked with Drama seemed reluctant to speak out in his defense. It was as if the pop music industry was only willing to take advantage of mixtapes' liminal status when convenient. DJ Drama's sister, filmmaker and activist Aishah Shahidah Simmons used MySpace to circulate a provocative reflection on the raid. In her letter, she asks,

"Was this solely about mixtapes? Would this have happened if this wasn't a Black run company? One of the claims is that Tyree (DJ Drama) was racketeering. Well, this alleged racketeer is a legitimate businessman who played and continues to play a pivotal role in the careers of numerous known and unknown hiphop artists, which by direct extension helps the recording industry immensely." (Simmons)

When a MTV News reporter asked Brad Buckles, executive vice president of the RIAA's Anti-Piracy Division, if the RIAA was specifically targeting mixtapes, Buckles declined the opportunity to clarify the mixtape as a distinct form from bootleg CDs,

"Whether it's a mixtape or a compilation or whatever it's called, it doesn't really matter: If it's a product that's violating the law, it becomes a target." (Aswad)

"The Dedication II" is an exciting mixtape that incorporates the influence of all the mixtape trends that precede it. DJ Drama demonstrates an expertise at compiling, sequencing, and crafting a compelling mixtape that balances his own presence as DJ/curator with the talents of its featured artist. Unfortunately, as evidenced by the raid on his studio, there are barriers to further merging the informal economy in which mixtapes circulate with the traditional pop economy. It appears that industry stakeholders tolerate the mixtape form only as long as it remains a marginal or

supporting artifact rather than a competitive one. Fortunately, the distributed innovation of teenaged bedroom DJs on Datpiff.com suggests that the competitive creativity characteristic of mixtape history is beginning to manifest in other spaces and in other forms.

End of the mixtape era

In January of 2009, Village Voice music critic Jeff Weiss published an article titled "The Mixtape Will Save Us All" in which he suggests that the success of Lil Wayne following his participation in the mixtape trade is a possible "business model for the Internet age." For Weiss, the raid on DJ Drama's studio "inadvertently sparked the Golden Age of Mixtapes" by forcing distribution into online spaces. Weiss further supports the notion of a coming mixtape "Golden Age" by pointing to recent validation of the form by other pop music critics marking "the medium's full bloom into a legitimate art form [...] as coherent and complex as any album." (Weiss)

For the same reasons that Weiss mobilizes in support of his "Golden Age", I argue that we are entering a post-mixtape era in which the mixtape, as we have known it, will likely not show further innovation. Surely the Dramas, Whoo Kids, and Clues of the hip-hop world will produce fantastic new hybrid album/mixtapes in the future, but, so long as they are organized according to the constraints of a compact disc, they will not be radically different from once groundbreaking productions like "50 Cent is the Future." That the mixtape is now attracting traditional markers of pop success – attention from music critics and visibility retail sales data - might say more about the declining state of the conventional pop industry than it indicates any sort of ascendancy of the mixtape form.

More than just online distribution channels for conventional mixtapes, Datpiff and other internet-based mixtape resources point to a mobility of the spirit of competitive innovation found on Flash's party tapes and Ron G's blend tapes that extends beyond the boundaries of the mixtape

form. Perhaps the technical innovations demonstrated by mixtape DJs are actually local manifestations of a more general hip-hop approach to cultural production. If so, the same young people that would have appropriated turntables, samplers, and CD-burners in the past are now testing the efficacy of new media tools like YouTube and MySpace to express hip-hop's compelling aesthetic priorities. The results of these experiments will likely not appear at all similar to the mixtapes of the past. While the transition from cassette to CD to mp3 maintained the coherence of songs and tracks, YouTube videos do not at all circulate with similar architectural constraints.

The next chapter will explore the "Crank Dat" dance craze, a phenomenon that manifests the same spirit of technical innovation and creative competition that drove hip-hop's mixtape DJs. Though the mixtape in its current form may have reached its innovative zenith, its history demonstrates a remarkable flexibility in the face of wild shifts in the balance of regulatory forces. New forms of hip-hop expression are now emerging on the internet in response to contemporary social, technological, legal, and economic circumstances. Their artifacts may not be formally similar, but these young digital practitioners continue to activate the same cultural history as the mixtape DJs before them.

Chapter 3

Crank Dat, innovation in a post-mixtape moment

"Soulja Boy, you single-handedly killed hip-hop."
-- Ice-T, *Black Ice: Urban Legends* mixtape, 2008

Shortly after the release of "Urban Legends," Ice-T's rant was ripped from his mixtape and posted to YouTube where it began to circulate quickly through hip-hop fan spaces on the web. Ice-T spoke for many of his peers when he charged the rising teenage star with hip-hop's decline. Soulja Boy's minimal party music flaunts the emphasis on lyricism and gritty sample-based production that characterizes hip-hop recordings from the late 1980s and early 1990s and which many older fans and practitioners prefer. Ice-T criticizes Soulja Boy for his failure to perform the hypermasculine hip-hop pose, telling him to "man up" and stop "looking happy." For Ice-T, hip-hop is about lyrics and a tough gangsta image complete with "khakis and straps."

Ice-T would be easy to dismiss as an odd curmudgeon were it not for numerous other hip-hop veterans voicing a similar lament. From making jokes at Soulja Boy's expense during their shows to leaving critical comments on hip-hop blogs, older rappers and fans were rapidly making

Soulja Boy the "most controversial rapper in the game." (Golianopoulos 68) Why would someone so widely dismissed as a one-hit wonder trigger such anger? How could a teenager who had only released one album possibly "kill" a culture with history as rich as hip-hop?

Soulja Boy's success revealed an on-going conflict about authenticity in hip-hop culture. The consolidation of the media industries in the late-1990s limited pop representations to a very few stereotypes. As a result, a gap emerged between the most visible hip-hop commodities and the day-to-day practices of its participants. Ice-T, perhaps he benefits from the dominant images, has difficulty seeing this distinction. Instead of examining Soulja Boy's creative practices, he focuses exclusively on his manner of dress, his lyrics, and the way that he moves his body. In his criticism of Soulja Boy, Ice-T locates hip-hop culture in its commodities rather than its practices.

John Fiske called the search for authenticity amid industrial production, "a fruitless exercise in romantic nostalgia." (Fiske 1989 27) Historically, hip-hop has not been defined by a single sound or style. It is an approach to cultural production, consumption, and circulation characterized by "dialogue with the past, remixing, appropriation, communal ownership, [and] creative chaos." (Watkins 2007) The aesthetics of hip-hop performance constantly shift in response to changing social circumstances. Soulja Boy is not "killing" hip-hop; he is keeping it relevant.

To better understand expressions of hip-hop culture in the context of networked computing and digital media, this chapter examines Soulja Boy's career in three stages. During the first stage, Soulja Boy is an ambitious teenager engaged with a large community of other young digital media producers. Second, Soulja Boy is signed to a major record label and is managing his transition from community member to unexpected pop stardom. Finally, third stage addresses Soulja Boy's continuing effort to negotiate the changing media environment as a young celebrity. Accompanying this narrative is a closer examination of the "Crank Dat" dance phenomenon with specific attention to its technological circumstances.

There are countless young hip-hop participants doing fascinating things with digital media. The reason that Soulja Boy attracts my attention is similar to the reason that I focus on hip-hop in particular amid numerous other media cultures: Soulja Boy's expressed goals were not radical. As his pre-fame blog posts from 2006 attest, his teenaged aspirations did not stray far from the typical fantasy enshrined in the title of Cam'ron's single of that summer, "Girls, Cash, Cars." Yet it is precisely the unremarkable nature of his ambitions that makes his story worth examining. Soulja Boy did not circumvent convention in order to undermine the pop music industry. He found an alternate entryway because he wanted to join it.

Soulja Boy Stage I: From Soundclick to Collipark

Today, Soulja Boy is a hip-hop celebrity. He recently released his second full-length album and, despite lackluster CD sales, his two lead singles are in constant rotation on hip-hop radio, and ranked high on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. His YouTube channel is among the most viewed on the site and over half a million fans follow his daily routines on Twitter.

A persistent myth in pop music journalism presents Soulja Boy as a mastermind or architect of this success. He is said to have "rocketed to the top of the Billboard charts and launched a nationwide sensation" based on an "innovative Internet marketing strategy." (Carle, Erwin) Though his story is certainly one of innovation, the internet, and a nationwide sensation, to imagine him a lone genius is to discredit the powerful influence of his peers.

Soulja Boy is an ambassador and figurehead of what S. Craig Watkins calls hip-hop's "digital underground." (Watkins) The habits that make him such an outlier among older hip-hop practitioners were learned among the creative milieu of media-sharing websites like Newgrounds, Soundclick, and YouTube. Soulja Boy engages with the pop media industries based on the norms of his online peer group. By exploiting the affordances of computing technologies for learning

new skills, producing his own tracks, and building a sense of community, Soulja Boy carries on the hip-hop tradition of appropriating media technologies in unexpected ways.

Who is Soulja Boy Tell Em?

Born in 1990, Soulja Boy spent the first decade of his life in Atlanta with his mother. Although he rejects being labeled as a geek, he fondly recalls analyzing video games and cartoons, "I was interested [in how] they make them. I wanted to go deeper." (Carle) In 2002, Soulja Boy moved to live with his father in the suburban town of Batesville, MI where he had a chance to pursue this curiosity. His father had a personal computer with dial-up internet access and the young Soulja Boy learned to make animations, edit photos, record audio, and compose music. Though he was not thrilled about the move at the time, Soulja Boy now credits his experience of multiple social, economic, and geographic settings with his innovative approach to media technologies,

"When I went to Mississippi, I had to adjust to what was going on. But it was really a blessing in disguise, because if I would've never moved to Mississippi, I wouldn't be where I'm at today. I wouldn't have had access to no computer, no internet, no camera to film my dancing. I took the hood to where the money was at. If I didn't have no money behind it, nobody would've ever known about it." (Soulja Boy Bio)

Imagining himself growing up to be a "video game designer, Flash animator, or computer programmer," Soulja Boy was also developing an interest in hip-hop and the music industry. (Golianopoulos 70) His favorite rappers, Master P and Birdman, were as well regarded for their business acumen as their music. When Priority Records sought out a partnership with Master P's No Limit Records, he set a new standard for entrepreneurial independence by negotiating for ownership and publishing rights to his artists' "master" recordings. A few years later, Birdman brokered a similar deal for his Cash Money Records label and Universal. Soulja Boy's

engagement with hip-hop culture is motivated as much by his idols' accumulation of wealth as their art.

The first and only CD that Soulja Boy purchased in his youth was 50 Cent's first album, "Get Rich Or Die Tryin." (Erwin) Though Master P, Birdman, and 50 Cent all represent somewhat different eras in hip-hop history, Soulja Boy recognizes them all as "old-school" artists. (Miller) Of all three, 50 Cent inspired Soulja Boy to redirect his career ambitions from digital arts to hip-hop,

"All the business ventures, all the things he did. He showed me that it wasn't impossible for me to do it. Before I got into the music industry 50 Cent sold twelve million albums on his first album, his second video game just came out. He's got the Get Rich or Die Tryin' movie coming out, the Vitamin Water. All these different things. It's like, 'Man, how did he do it?' I was like, if he can do it, I can do it too." (Carle)

50 Cent modeled the use of hip-hop as a stepping-stone to a range of media pursuits. With success as a rapper, Soulja Boy reasoned, he would have the resources to return to animation and video game development on his own terms.

Making music at home

As a high school student in 2004, Soulja Boy began to dedicate himself more fully to entering the pop music industry. With a copy of Fruityloops sampling/sequencing software, a microphone and "other equipment his dad bought from Wal-Mart," he began to make recordings in his bedroom. (Golianopoulos 70) Taking advantage of the raw materials produced alongside of hip-hop singles, he and his friends initially recorded parodies of pop songs by rapping new lyrics on top of instrumental versions downloaded from the internet. (Erwin) With only a dial-up connection at home, his distribution of these recordings was limited to the burned CDs he would make and pass out to friends at school. (Carle)

Soon, Soulja Boy included some original tracks alongside the parodies. Following the pattern set by 50 Cent, he released a mixtape on CD and began to perform in the area at talent shows, teen dances, and roller rinks. His father's friend agreed to help manage the aspiring rapper and they started to push his songs to radio station program directors. The mixtape generated some interest among his schoolmates but did not stand out among the hundreds of other post-50 Cent mixtapes circulating in the hip-hop industry at the time.

Soulja Boy's father upgraded their home internet connection to broadband and Soulja Boy became an active member of several online media-sharing communities. He spent hours exploring sites like Soundclick, Newgrounds, YouTube, and MySpace, publishing his creative work and getting feedback from other users. As he continued to produce new recordings, he regularly posted short diary entries about his day-to-day life. Most of these entries are still on Soulja Boy's MySpace page and, read together, present a compelling narrative about balancing his nascent career with the high school experience. The confessional nature of these posts drew sympathetic readers from the around the web who came by to offer support in the form of encouraging comments and cute animations left in the "comments" section of his profile. On September 9, 2006, for example, forty users gave him "Kudos" and forty-three left comments on a post written in all caps titled "DOUBT ME! BUT I WILL MAKE IT!"

In addition to well-known sites like MySpace and YouTube, Soulja Boy was a particularly active member of Soundclick, a site specially designed for music producers. Soundclick allows users to post their work, leave comments for each other, and participate in open discussion forums. The feature that drew Soulja Boy and other aspiring hip-hop producers was the opportunity to sell one's tracks. At the peak of his independent popularity, Soulja Boy reports over ten thousand paid downloads to his Soundclick account but, along the way, he also exploited the system's open architecture to trick other users into downloading his music.

By tagging his original recordings with the names of popular artists and making them available free of cost, he piggybacked on the widespread practice of unauthorized digital music

sharing. (Erwin) Someone searching Soundclick for "50 Cent In Da Club" might unwittingly download a file containing Soulja Boy's song. As his name is repeated so often in the lyrics, Soulja Boy believed that this mild deception might lead curious listeners to search for him on the web. (De Leon)

"Crank Dat (Soulja Boy)" is a song

By the winter of 2006, Soulja Boy was doing brisk business on Soundclick, garnering thousands of hits a day on his MySpace page, and performing regularly around Mississippi and Georgia. It was around this time that he recorded "Crank Dat (Soulja Boy)", incorporating a looping steel pan melody, a catchy refrain, and his own quirky slanguage. Throughout the track, he instructs the listener to perform various movements: "crank it", "roll", "superman", "lean/rock", "supersoak", "roosevelt", "shuffle", and "jig." Some of these movements would be familiar to the average hip-hop fan while others, like the Roosevelt, were native to the Soundclick niche from which "Crank Dat" emerged.

Several Soundclick users were making "Crank Dat" variations around the same time as Soulja Boy, each of them working in similar bedroom studios, drawing on similar sounds, and using similar software. Pipeline, whose "Crank Dat (Roosevelt)" may predate the version made famous by Soulja Boy, reflects on the origins of the Soundclick trend,

"Roosevelt was the dance that everyone was doing [in our high school.] We didn't know who made it up so we were going to make a song for it called "Crank Dat Roosevelt." [...] We weren't even serious about rapping back then when we made that song. We made it, threw it on Soundclick.com, [and] started getting downloads. [...] We didn't know who made [up the Roosevelt]! It was just a hot dance to us!" (Hazard)

Exploiting the mobility of the mp3 format across media services, Soulja Boy catalyzed and accelerated the emerging Soundclick phenomenon by cross-posting his version of "Crank Dat" to

his MySpace page. Teenage dance squad, the Cash Camp Clique, heard the song, choreographed a dance for it, made a home video, and posted it to YouTube. Soulja Boy embedded this video in his blog on February 25, 2007 along with some cellphone videos of a more rudimentary version of the dance. Above the video of three Cash Camp teenagers dancing, he wrote, "Dis is how u do da dance to my new song. Just punch to da left or right den crank it 3 times." (Soulja Boy 2007, February)

With little more to go on than those simple instructions and the Cash Camp video, several other fans created home videos of their own variation on the dance. Although he had been previously promoting "I Got BAPES", a song he intended to be his first single, Soulja Boy quickly recognized the resonance that "Crank Dat (Soulja Boy)" was having with his audience and turned all of his attention on encouraging more versions of the dance. After a few weeks, he had collected and reposted a half-dozen videos of other people doing "Crank Dat (Soulja Boy)", each time garnering more comments and attention to his MySpace blog. Attracted to his MySpace page by the emerging remix culture, visitors eventually played "Crank Dat (Soulja Boy)" more than 20 million times. (Galianopoulos 70) That number brought attention from the traditional music industry and on May 15, Soulja Boy met with Mr. Collipark, the producer of the Ying Yang Twins. Despite snubbing "I got BAPES" a few months earlier, Collipark signed Soulja Boy to a major label record deal with Universal during their first meeting.

"Crank Dat" is a phenomenon

For the rest of the summer 2007, Soulja Boy remained relatively quiet in his former online haunts as hundreds of new versions of "Crank Dat" poured on to YouTube. Reports at the time mischaracterized these fan creations as an "unexpected wave of responses and knock-offs" of Soulja Boy's now-famous version. (Padgett) The volume may have been unexpected but to call these works "knock-offs" obscures the creative community from which "Crank Dat" emerged.

Never the mastermind, Soulja Boy was its most visible champion. Each new version of "Crank Dat" enriched the phenomenon with a unique tweak, change, or twist. To imply that they were merely imitations of a single authoritative original text misses the joyful sense of discovery, competition, and innovation born out by each new video.

Even at its most off-hand, participating in "Crank Dat" was rarely a trivial act. Each iteration represents several highly technical operations: rehearsing the dance, preparing the scene, shooting the dancers, transferring the video to a computer, editing the footage, compressing the final version, and uploading it to YouTube; skills not typically taught in school. A desire to join the phenomenon motivated hundreds of young people to locate and learn a creative approach to digital media production tools that they might never have encountered otherwise. In this sense, the "Crank Dat" trend carried hip-hop's innovative approach to technology outside of traditional hip-hop contexts.

Of all the videos, songs, and dances being shared online, "Crank Dat (Soulja Boy)" contained several different points of entry and thus enabled an uncommonly diverse range of potential transformations. For all their producerly quality, artifacts of the "Single Ladies" and "A Milli" phenomena primarily display intervention along the two axes of dance and rap, respectively. Meanwhile, "Crank Dat" is composed of several layers, each of which invites a different type of reinvention. A remixer might radically alter the dance, dress, lyrics, beats, setting, and production technology and yet the resulting artifact will still be considered part of the phenomenon.

From an industry perspective, "Crank Dat (Soulja Boy)" is a surprisingly successful pop commodity. Viewed through the lens of popular culture, however, it is an unbounded phenomenon in which many different stakeholders are engaged in on-going creative competition. Each new artifact circulates among the web of the larger "Crank Dat" project and expresses something unique about the social and technological circumstances from which it was produced. A college sophomore at Kentucky State University and a middle school student from Milford,

MA might upload recordings of a similar performance but the two videos will communicate complex information about each dancer. How does the student's dorm room compare and contrast with the teen's bedroom? What are they wearing? How is their hair kept? What color is their skin? From what device is the music played back? How is the room lit? Are there other people in the shot or are they dancing alone? How do they present their gender in the video? What title and tags do they choose for the YouTube page?

The countless performances, remixes, and reimaginings of "Crank Dat" posted to YouTube, MySpace, and other sites reveals a diversity in participation missing from the manifestations of hip-hop culture in traditional media channels. Many – perhaps most – of these online dancers do not consider themselves "inside" of hip-hop, yet their expressive deployment of media technologies is similar in approach to the history of innovation in hip-hop. By using a hip-hop approach to play with their media environment, collaborate with friends, and express meaning about themselves and their social allegiances, these young people contribute to dismantling the monolithic gangsta image that unfairly marks hip-hop practitioners in general and young black men in particular.

Contextualizing Crank Dat

"Crank Dat (Soulja Boy)" emerged amid a moment of change in the hip-hop industry. For the better part of the 1980s and 1990s, nearly all of hip-hop's most visible artists came from New York or Los Angeles. (Chang) By 2005, with CD sales flagging, industry stakeholders began to promote hip-hop music from other areas of the United States, notably the largely ignored yet wildly innovative Southern states. (Grem) Among the various regional styles afforded high visibility in this period, snap music deviated most from the conventional New York hip-hop template. With minimal drum programming and repetitive spoken or chanted lyrics, snap

destabilized seldom-questioned hip-hop norms like the value of complex wordplay and the use of samples from funk and soul records.

Another reason that snap music seemed alien to the New York/Los Angeles tradition is its close relationship to dance. Goofy party rappers like D4L and Dem Franchize Boyz stood in stark contrast to tracks like "Lean Back", Fat Joe's New York club anthem of the previous summer with its aloof cool-pose and assertion that "gangstas don't dance." True to the genre's name, snap's basic dance step has dancers freeze and snap their fingers on the third beat of every bar. As the music video for Dem Franchize Boyz' "Lean wit it, rock wit it" shows, snap's slower tempo and sparse aesthetic provided a simple structure within which dancers could improvise on the core snap template. Rather than engage in the boastful competitive wordplay or ghetto narratives of New York hip-hop luminaries like Jay-Z or Notorious BIG, snap artists wrote lyrics more fully integrated in the embodied experience of their dancers, directing them through well-known movements like a square dance caller or wedding party MC. The dancers, in turn, continually invented new variations on the snap step in a state of joyful competition with one another.

Although snap music's moment of nationwide visibility had passed by 2006, a group of young producers kept the music alive on Soundclick. The "Crank Dat" phenomenon began there with silly, parodic snap songs shared among this circle. Each artist borrowed the same familiar snap beat structure and added his or her own individual take to the lyrics. Some of the Soundclick users were connected to one another in parallel on other sites and the songs, lyrics, jokes, and videos they created migrated across these platforms. Because of this trans-service network, the "Crank Dat" phenomenon grew rapidly once participants began to record and share dance steps, home videos, and pop-referential remixes like "Crank Dat (Mega Man)" and "Crank Dat (Batman)."

The simplicity in snap music that drew such criticism from hip-hop traditionalists proved a fertile foundation for the young members of Soundclick. Whereas densely layered, sample-

based recordings can intimidate tenderfoot hip-hop musicians, snap's sparse minimalism is downright legible. The aspiring ear easily picks out individual drum hits and can quickly learn to recreate the basic snap music rhythm with widely available software like Fruityloops or GarageBand. Of all hip-hop variants, snap music is especially welcoming and open to deconstruction and producerly intervention.

Soulja Boy as catalyst

The uncommon success of Soulja Boy's version of this simple snap track is not based on qualities unique to his recording but to his persistent highlighting of its multiple points of entry. From his encouraging blog posts on MySpace to the "How to Crank Dat" instructional video that followed his major label contract, Soulja Boy consistently diverted attention from his role as artist to the creative potential of the networked "Crank Dat" culture. As a result, it became a fertile space for innovation, competition, and diverse expression in popular culture. This managing and massaging would not have worked had not "Crank Dat" been an unusually welcoming phenomenon from the start.

Soulja Boy first introduced "Crank Dat (Soulja Boy)" to his MySpace fans with the Cash Camp home video, a performance in which he does not appear. By debuting the dance via the work of online collaborators, Soulja Boy implicitly encourages the creation of further "Crank Dat" variation videos. Rather than get scared of the song circulating out of his control, Soulja Boy is flattered by the transformations. Recognizing the importance of active participation in hip-hop culture, he could see that the burgeoning phenomenon indicated the relevance, and therefore the commercial potential, of "Crank Dat." Fans and listeners, he reasoned, just "wanna do the same thing." (Padgett)

For a cultural artifact or phenomenon like "Crank Dat" to spread on or offline, it must reflect the lived experiences of its audiences. Through their use of recognizably Southern hip-hop

signifiers - clothes, movements, slang, accents, and choice of snap music - Cash Camp and Soulja Boy demonstrated how "Crank Dat" might be used to express the features of one's local environment. Its geographical specificity first presents a side of hip-hop culture that was largely absent from MTV, BET, and other conventional channels. And, second, it offers a model by which other individuals or groups might gain visibility for their own allegiances and identities.

By altering the music, lyrics, dance, dress, and setting for their Crank Dat videos, participants have drawn a remarkable array of cultural signs into the discourse. Artifacts from video games, comics, professional sports, and anime appear alongside such abstract categorical descriptors as nerd, jock, geek, and preppy. The ability for adept young people to manipulate their cultural surround with a hip-hop approach is most evident in the mobility of ethnic, racial, and gender-based signs. Not only do young video makers self-identify racially and play with associated stereotypes in their "Crank Dat" videos but they take advantage of the discursive affordances of YouTube and MySpace to engage in discussion and debate around the videos they create.

Race play

One striking example of the use of "Crank Dat" to express and explore the tensions in hip-hop culture is the discourse surrounding the twin stereotypes that all white people dance poorly and all black people dance well. In some parodic videos, young whites self-identify and purposefully dance poorly while in other videos, black-identified dancers may be criticized for not dancing well enough. In one peculiar case, we see a young man in silver athletic shorts, and a long-sleeve white shirt dancing in hi-top sneakers to a post-Soulja Boy song variant titled "Crank Dat (Spiderman)". The video is very low resolution and thus compression artifacts obscure the image. Because of the distortion, the dancers' skin color is left ambiguous, prompting several early viewers to leave comments like this one:

"lil boi u can dance 4 a white boi." (skaters28)

Frustrated by the confusion, the original poster edited the description of the video and angrily asserted his race as "black." This decision influenced the rest of the nearly four hundred comments that now almost exclusively concern his racial identity and the durability of the stereotype.

Other videos intentionally draw attention to their racial coding. "Crank That Soldier Boy" is a "white version" of "Crank Dat" in which three white teenage boys perform the same choreography as the black teens in the Cash Camp clique. Although both videos were shot in similar living rooms, the white teens wear cargo shorts and Polo shirts with popped collars to contrast with Cash Camp's Dickies and oversized t-shirts. The white teens further perform the white preppy stereotype rendition by exaggerating their body language and simplifying some of the dance movements.

From the conventional re-spelling of its title to the video's tags ("funny, white, honkey, cracker") to their faithful reproduction of Cash Camp's complex choreography, the creators clearly intended to make a respectful parody but they did not realize the extent to which racial discomfort pervaded the "Crank Dat" phenomenon. The discourse that emerged around the video reveals a persistent concern among the viewers regarding the parody of black youth by white youth. Viewed over ten million times (the typical "Crank Dat" version receives just a few thousand views), thousands of angry comments accompany the "white version." They accuse the boys of mocking Soulja Boy and Cash Camp, call them homophobic slurs, and correct the parodic changes as if they were made out of ignorance rather than humor. Though the creators of the "white version" eventually attempted to respond to these comments with a more straight-faced rendition of "Crank Dat (Spiderman)", the first video continues to attract new comments on a daily basis.

One final example of the racial discourse surrounding "Crank Dat" is evidenced in a video that is no longer available on YouTube. Titled "The Whitest Black" version, it features a young black dancer who appears largely unfamiliar with the dance and looks fairly uncomfortable as he stumbles his way through. The video was presumably posted by acquaintances of the dancer to tease him for his poor performance. That they chose to name him the "Whitest Black" dancer not only calls forth the stereotype of whites as bad dancers but also suggests closer reading of his surroundings. Whereas most of the "Crank Dat" videos discussed in this paper are shot in anonymous living rooms and bedrooms that could be in almost any U.S. home, the "Whitest Black" dancer is shot on a bright green, well-manicured lawn in front of a short stone wall and large BBQ setup. Does teasing one another for being white take on new significance when a young black man is pictured dancing in what appears to be an affluent suburb?

"Crank Dat" is not a platform well-suited to serious discussion of race. Rather, the prevalence of racially charged discourse in and around the phenomenon reflects a widespread anxiety about race – especially among its young participants. By using video cameras, personal computers, and the open framework of "Crank Dat", these teens explore their day-to-day performance of race. It is up to the adults in their lives – parents, mentors, and educators – to take seriously their creative uses of technology, show interest, provide guidance, and offer support.

Crank Dat Fandoms

In addition to signifiers of race, gender, and class affiliation, "Crank Dat" participants draw on their participation in countless other overlapping popular cultures. "Crank Dat (Spiderman)" is only one of hundreds of "Crank Dat" variations to explicitly link fandom of television, film, gaming, and comics to hip-hop. Each of these fandoms brings its own affordances and constraints to bear on the new hybrid artifact. For example, in "Crank Dat (Spiderman)" dancers hold their hands out like Spiderman, middle two fingers touching their

palms and the remixed soundtrack incorporates a sample from the recent Spiderman blockbuster film. This type of multi-faceted reimagining of "Crank Dat" produces entirely new branches of the phenomenon as some downstream innovators will begin their projects with a "Spiderman" version rather than the earlier videos posted by Soulja Boy or Cash Camp.

Other fandoms afford very different types of intervention. "Crank Dat (Winnie the Pooh)" and "Crank Dat (Spongebob)" are remix videos that leave the audio of "Crank Dat (Soulja Boy)" untouched. Instead, they draw on the vast amounts of raw material provided by the two animated television programs to assemble new music videos. By carefully selecting and manipulating short clips, the video remixers are able to create scenarios in which the characters from Spongebob and Winnie the Pooh appear to be singing the lyrics to "Crank Day (Soulja Boy)." That these videos juxtapose familiar figures of children's television with a more adolescent soundtrack subverts the conventional manifestation of each, stimulating the transgressive pleasure of taboo.

Unlike the low-tech stereotype that plagues hip-hop, other fandoms are more widely recognized for their innovative uses of media technologies. When the overlap of these social groupings is revealed in "Crank Dat," it highlights the technological savvy that already exists among young hip-hop practitioners. Furthermore, by drawing on multiple fan networks "Crank Dat" is able to act as a commons for teaching and learning new technical skills. It is not uncommon for discussions of tools and technique to take place in the comment threads accompanying "Crank Dat" videos on YouTube.

Challenging hip-hop conventions

While the fandom remixes make visible the overlaps among a variety of popular cultures, young hip-hop participants also used "Crank Dat" to express self-criticism. In "soldier boy wit technique," two young black men in pajamas perform a variation in which they incorporate

movements from ballet and modern dance. At the start of the video, one of the dancers addresses the viewer in a challenging tone of voice, "This is how you do the Soulja Boy dance with technique. See, there's art in hip-hop!" After they finish, he again speaks directly to the viewer, "Just like that. Technique can be made. It's real." By bookending their innovation in the language and style of hip-hop competition, the men in the video argue for an expanded understanding of movement in hip-hop through the use of the familiar "Crank Dat" dance. Their argument would not have been as effective were they to have simply crafted a new dance and performed it, but by exploiting the living trend, they brought a sense of relevance and timeliness to their critique.

Where is Soulja Boy in all of this?

As the various remixes and variations of "Crank Dat" piled up on YouTube during the summer of 2007, Soulja Boy was physically absent from the conventional media industry. Sure, his name might be called to mind each time a celebrity or sports figure was caught doing the dance in public but Soulja Boy was not being interviewed on late-night talk shows or doing spots on MTV. We have seen how "Crank Dat" was an effective tool for exercising new technical skills and expressing a broad range of personal and social meanings for fans but from an industry perspective, the "Crank Dat" phenomenon remained a challenge. With thousands of people participating in an essentially popular activity, Collipark, Soulja Boy, and their fellow stakeholders needed to find a way to incorporate these new practices for profit without damaging the existing creative culture.

Soulja Boy Stage II: Releasing an album

The strategy developed by Soulja Boy and Collipark during the summer of 2007 successfully balanced their commercial goals with the popular interests of the "Crank Dat"

phenomenon. Through a deft manipulation of music video conventions and consistent emphasis on everyday creativity, they exploited a grassroots movement to sell millions of ringtones, CDs, and digital downloads. Their unusual engagement with the pop industry reflects the commercial ambiguity and spirit of innovation that historically characterizes hip-hop culture.¹⁵

Soulja Boy was signed to Collipark Records, a subsidiary of Universal, in May of 2007. Soon after, they brought him to a professional studio to re-record "Crank Dat (Soulja Boy)" for use as a digital single and ringtone. They did not, however, immediately shoot a music video for the song. Instead, they waited as the number of "Crank Dat" videos on YouTube continued to rise and at the end of July, to keep the momentum going, quietly released a short step-by-step instructional video.

Waiting in spite of the song's growing presence on radio meant that fan videos fulfilled the role typically played by a conventional music video. By keeping Soulja Boy in the wings, sales of "Crank Dat (Soulja Boy)" ringtones and downloads could raise money for Collipark Records without de-centering its roots in participatory culture. When a music video was finally released at the end of August, it depicted Collipark as a clueless record executive sitting in his office and riding in a limousine as people outside danced, sang, and shared their own "Crank Dat" videos. Rather than introduce Soulja Boy and "Crank Dat", the music video recognized and commemorated cultural work that had already taken place outside the purview of the pop industry.

During the height of the "Crank Dat" craze, Soulja Boy rarely played the role of a rapper or producer on his blog. He acted as curator, cheerleader, and symbol for the collective. By reposting "Crank Dat" home videos, he rewarded the creators with social capital in the form of visibility and recognition. He frequently encouraged fans to post more remixes and inspired

¹⁵ One loose thread that vexes this analysis of "Crank Dat" concerns the distrust we must maintain in the wake of LonelyGirl15. Plenty of evidence affirms that in 2006, Soulja Boy was truly a high school student who stimulated the wild spread of a remix practice from Soundclick but we may never know for certain the manner in which various industry stakeholders like Mr. Collipark assisted his ascension.

friendly competition among them, challenging the fans to innovate upon the original Cash Camp video with new dance moves, new dress, new sounds, and new video editing techniques. Finally, he posted candidly about the machinations of his career, frequently crediting the readers with his successes, "I still need yall support all da fans yall da ones who helped [me] get signed! I LUV YALL!" (Soulja Boy 2007, May)

Meanwhile, Soulja Boy's experience with media and communications technologies afforded him an unusual maturity and sense of self-confidence. Collipark gave the young artist an unusual amount of influence over the development of their fan-centric strategy. Admitting some degree of ignorance, the executive recalls, "I hadn't heard his stuff in the clubs, on the radio, nothing. It was all Internet." (Erwin)

Soulja Boy was able to survive potentially destructive incorporation by the pop music industry because of his persistent effort to highlight the diversity of stakeholders in his audience. Fans became invested not only in his music and image but also in the actual progress of his career through the on-going narratives of his blog and YouTube channel. By maintaining a role in the community, interacting directly with fans on MySpace, and promoting the creative work of others, Soulja Boy's eventual commercial success could be read as a shared victory for all stakeholders in the Crank Dat phenomenon rather than the selling-out of just one.

Soulja Boy Stage III: Resisting the one hit wonder

"Part of Soulja's magic that blew him up, even before I got to him, was that the kids looked at his music as something that was just theirs. It was something they could have that nobody else could have." - Mr. Collipark, as quoted in Soulja Boy Tell Em's official bio, 2007.

In spite of the surprising sales of his first album, Soulja Boy's continued success was by no means guaranteed. Early coverage in the hip-hop press suggested that Soulja Boy and his MySpace peers were ultimately destined to be one-hit wonders. (De Leon) Mr. Collipark senses

the importance of "the kids" in his assessment of Soulja Boy's appeal but he does not address the tension that must exist when something "nobody else could have" becomes the most popular digital download of all time. (Burgess) Should not his pop success undermine his outsider credibility and destroy the possessive investment felt among his fans?

Beyond his role in championing the "Crank Dat" phenomenon, Soulja Boy continues to be commercially and popularly relevant because of his creative use of media and communications technologies. Although he is now a wealthy celebrity and no longer the underdog high school kid with Fruityloops, he struggles to find his place amid the traditional hip-hop industry. Inspired by low expectations to improve his skills as a rapper and producer, Soulja Boy makes public the motivational power of creative competition in hip-hop. Furthermore, as his early ambitions suggested, he has diversified the presentation of his public self to include animated shorts, appearances at consumer electronics fairs, and as the leader of an online gaming group.

Relevance of the ringtone

Success in the pop music industry continues to be measured in CD sales in spite of the medium's irrelevance. While Soulja Boy's first CD sold over a million copies, this number obscures the many reasons for purchasing a CD and the meanings that such an act can express. The prevailing discourse in some areas of the hip-hop community indicates that to purchase a CD is a demonstration of fan loyalty rather than an avenue for accessing the recordings. Around the time of its release, Soulja Boy featured photos on his blog of young people who had purchased more than a dozen copies of the CD. For these fans, the compact disc was not a medium by which they could access the music but rather a token of their commitment to Soulja Boy's success. Having followed him for nearly a year and watched as he struggled through various stages of his early career, the purchased CD was as much a thank-you note for the vicarious ride as something to rip into iTunes and cast aside.

Certainly, there have been unexpected hits before but what makes Soulja Boy's success different is his deployment of multiple types of pop commodities. His album may have sold over a million copies but he sold five times as many ringtones during that same period. (Galianopoulos 68) Fiske's understanding of popular culture indicates that consumers always select commodities based on their expressive functionality. The ringtone represents a new kind of pop commodity uniquely suited to the day-to-day technological experience of many young people. As mobile phones are often carried in our pockets and purses, the ringtone emanates outward from our bodies as we move through the world. Without the conceit of being a storage medium like a CD or cassette, the ringtone explicitly bears its expressive function.

Sales of Soulja Boy's second album are quite low by comparison to his first. Yet, despite flagging sales, his latest singles are played frequently on commercial radio stations, in clubs, and as ringtones. Perhaps Soulja Boy's lasting contribution to hip-hop culture will not be his elegant massaging of the "Crank Dat" phenomenon but that he is shifting the conditions for success in the pop music industry. Though the worth of an artist's activities was historically measured in album sales, Soulja Boy's career suggests a need for new metrics. Consistent with hip-hop's commercial ambiguity, new pop commodities like the ringtones sold by Soulja Boy are both financially rewarding for artists and expressively rich for the fans with whom they interact.

Soulja Boy and hip-hop competition

The volume of criticism aimed at Soulja Boy was so high after the success of his album that hip-hop magazine XXL invited him to publish an open letter in April 2008. The young rapper agreed and, in a defensive tone, asked readers to consider his commercial successes rather than focus exclusively on his technical ability to write and deliver lyrics,

"If I was smart enough to think of a different way [of approaching hip-hop], I should be respected for that. I broke the record for highest-selling [digital] song of all time. The

album just certified gold. Got the Grammy nomination, doing all these shows. If you can't respect that, what will you respect?" (Miller)

For Soulja Boy, the artistry of producing hip-hop music is inextricably tied to its circulation across multiple commercial and non-commercial contexts. He does not differentiate innovation in pop commodification from innovation in the producing of musical recordings. This expansive understanding of hip-hop broadens the terms by which hip-hop practitioners may compete with one another. In Soulja Boy's view, a view presumably shared by many of his peers online, creating home videos can be as much an expression of hip-hop culture as learning to be a DJ or a rapper.

In light of this enlarged understanding of the creative possibilities in the hip-hop approach to culture, Soulja Boy has recently begun to reclaim his history in geekier pursuits. In a recent interview, he vaguely outlines his future ambition to develop "movies, video games, [and] clothing lines." (Galianopoulos 71) By joining his music activities with pop fandom and commercial interest, Soulja Boy begins to reveal existing areas of over-lap among these popular pursuits. The resulting visibility of hip-hop culture's diversity challenges destructive stereotypes of young black men from which only a small number of stakeholders profit.

Soulja Boy and the hip-hop approach

Hip-hop is a culture of creative competition in which participants express themselves through innovative deployment of media and communications technologies. The practices and resulting digital artifacts move fluidly across commercial, non-commercial, and semi-commercial contexts. Soulja Boy's exploitation of networked computing resources for purposes of learning, self-expression, and entrepreneurship revealed a thriving creative community of young people using the hip-hop approach to explore online spaces. Their work reflects on-going ambiguities

and contradictions that have characterized hip-hop culture from its earliest manifestation. Soulja Boy did not "kill hip-hop," as Ice-T asserts. He is living it.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The year I started teaching was the same year that reggaeton, a Spanish-language relative of dancehall and hip-hop, crossed over to English-speaking audiences in the U.S. Many of my students, especially a handful of Puerto Rican and Dominican boys, were learning to produce reggaeton music on their personal computers. Using the same Fruityloops software as the young snap enthusiasts from Chapter 3, they made songs on their home computers and occasionally brought tracks to school on burned CD-Rs.

Listening to a set of new tracks one afternoon, I complimented the producers' steady improvement and asked if they had good reference materials for their composition software. The boys showed me a stapled stack of black and white printouts. I flipped through and discovered that, though there was little text in the packet, there were diagrams of common reggaeton beat patterns rendered with dashes, Xs, and plus signs. The boys explained that they were using the "comments" sections of their MySpace pages to share knowledge about programming reggaeton

drums. By rendering the patterns in plaintext, they could easily copy and paste from one MySpace page to the next.

The history of hip-hop culture is a full of similarly elegant reuses of media technologies, yet the participants in hip-hop are rarely thought of as technical innovators. Reflections on hip-hop's technical past often imply an accidental discovery of machines like the turntable and sampler when, in fact, practitioners chose their tools carefully in pursuit of specific affordances. As hip-hop entrepreneurs began to take a major stake in the pop industry at the end of the 1990s, some of these tools and practices were validated and calcified such that they now obscure the on-going innovations of younger hip-hop practitioners. Soulja Boy is one member of a lively culture of young artists expressing themselves wholly through the creative use of networked digital media technologies.

Widespread stereotyping of hip-hop participants has a significant effect on the everyday lived experience of young black men in the U.S. In countless cases, these young people are collectively referred to as the "hip-hop generation" and are marked by the limited representations of hip-hop that proliferate in the most highly capitalized media channels. As a result, an empowering opportunity is lost to credit young black men with pioneering a material creativity that now characterizes daily life on the web. While it will be difficult to interrupt the constant collapse of hip-hop practitioners in particular into young black men in general, altering the stereotype of the hip-hop practitioner to reflect a spirit of creative innovation may liberate and inspire young black men marked by this stereotype to foreground their own engagement with media technology.

The first step to altering these damaging stereotypes is to recognize hip-hop as a popular culture rather than a genre of pop music. Hip-hop culture is one of creative competition that relies on the raw material of its past for the creation of its present. These new artifacts, in turn, frequently bear evidence of their construction in a manner that will encourage further creative intervention. The most relevant of these artifacts and practices can migrate across multiple social,

commercial, and technological contexts. Some of these are granted a high degree of visibility to outside observers as they circulate through the conventional pop marketplace, but within hip-hop culture, they represent incomplete segments of an on-going discourse.

Hip-hop critics tend to focus on the lyrics and video imagery that are broadcast through conventional television and radio channels. While these well-funded commodities have a powerful effect on the culture of hip-hop, they represent only one of its myriad manifestations. Textual analysis fails to capture the creative practices and unusual modes of consumption that flourish among hip-hop fans. The mixtape economy predates the incorporation of hip-hop artifacts by the dominant media industries and has since maintained alternate social norms, commercial practices, and technologies for the production and duplication of sound recordings. The geographically diverse, socially rich narratives of hip-hop mixtape history are all but absent in a critique that relies solely on the content of conventional pop commodities.

One reason that innovative practices like those of the mixtape economy remain largely invisible is that hip-hop is disproportionately constrained by recent legislation among other popular cultures. The changes to copyright law implemented by the Copyright Act of 1976 and extended by the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998 render the creative reuse of existing cultural material "presumptively illegal." (Lessig 2008 100) As such, the day-to-day creativity of many hip-hop practitioners is subject to state-backed discipline despite being well within the bounds of hip-hop social norms. Commercial opportunities are further constrained by widespread consolidation in the media industries accompanied by the deregulatory effects of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Negative hip-hop stereotypes remain unchallenged in part because such unjust legislation effectively criminalizes and marginalizes hip-hop's most innovative practitioners.

After the commercial success of 50 Cent's incorporation of mixtape practices, pop industry stakeholders combed through cities formerly marginalized by the exclusive focus on New York and Los Angeles in traditional media channels. The sudden capitalization of regional

music from cities like Oakland, Houston, and Memphis brought a broad diversification of the sounds, styles, and accents heard on commercial radio and TV. Attending this rise of Southern hip-hop was a revelation on the part of the media industry stakeholders that hip-hop discourse had largely moved into online spaces.

Soulja Boy's savvy exploitation of social-networking and media-sharing websites enabled him to bring a slice of what S. Craig Watkins calls the "digital underground" to traditional media channels. By championing the everyday creativity of the "Crank Dat" remix phenomenon while circulating new pop commodities like the ringtone and digital download, Soulja Boy managed to achieve considerable commercial gains without alienating the popular culture from which he emerged. In spite of low expectations from critics, Soulja Boy continues to creatively engage new media technologies with the same competitive spirit of innovation that has long driven hip-hop culture.

The stereotype that young black men are less technically abled than their peers in other social groupings accompanies poor representation of young black men in the growing fields of science and technology. (DiSalvo 1) In spite of ample evidence that these young people are among the most highly engaged with new media technologies, they are not transferring skills learned in that area to the traditional pursuit of employment. Bridging this gap requires mentorship by adults who engage positively with the technical history of hip-hop culture. Young people may understand how to operate new media technologies but they need the guidance of caring adults to help them understand the shifting social contexts in which these technologies circulate. Soulja Boy's sober response to Ice-T's insults makes this need explicit,

"Instead of dissing us, help us!"

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