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# 808s and Deep Bass

*How Technology Helps Hip-Hop Accomplish its Political Project*

Matthew Wiecha

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Bachelor of  
Arts in Media Studies

Advisor, Justin Patch

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My fellow MEDS majors



# Introduction

Writing in 1964, Lewis Mumford proposed a way of looking at the politics of technological artifacts, claiming that new technology can either serve democracy or authoritarianism. In doing so, he attributed a political value to technology, and noted that technology often plays a part in determining the political situations of its users.<sup>1</sup> Hip-hop, as a genre and a culture, is ontologically dependent on technology. Since its inception, it has relied on ornate assemblages of consumer technology, from soundsystems and turntables in the early days through the internet of the contemporary era. As technology improves in ability and declines in expense, the story of hip-hop has been one of increasing access and of lowering the barrier of entry. On one hand, due to its context and communicative potential, the genre itself is highly political and would not exist without the technology that facilitates its creation, dissemination, and consumption. However, those very techniques, when aided by democratically accessible technology, maintain inherent political implications. Whether through confrontation of constrictive political-economic structures, or through analytic, oppositional gazes towards art of the past, technology, for hip-hop, enables a reconfiguration of extant culture, and a reapplication for the historically marginalized.

Taking place within an extensive theoretical tradition, hip-hop uses technology to envision alternative futures to the mainstream, mobilizing political notions of liberation. Beginning in earnest toward the start of the Industrial Revolution, various thinkers, intellectuals and industrialists have proven fond of attaching grand, utopian guarantees to

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<sup>1</sup> Mumford, Lewis. "Authoritarian and Democratic Technics." *Technology and Culture*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1964, p. 1.

the arrival of new, paradigm-shifting technology. Specifically, these figures would typically propose that a certain novel gadget or technological development, such as the airplane, would result in egalitarianism and the expansion of equal liberties to all humankind. However, with historical perspective, it's easy to poke holes in these declarations. Not only has most new technology failed to ensure an egalitarian future, but often ends up contributing to the steady rise of authoritarianism. The reason for this consistent predictive failure is simple: in a capitalist mode of production, technology maintains a parallel identity, that of the commodity, meaning that it is expected first and foremost to produce, not to liberate. Therefore, new technology is almost always too preoccupied with the goal of turning a profit, rather than ensuring the freedom of oppressed peoples.

Hip-hop represents a radically new approach to the use of technology in the realm of politics. While taking place unavoidably within the market, hip-hop's aesthetics promote the appropriation of consumer technology in creation of an art form that both centers black cultural priorities and complicates and challenges the oppressive capitalist system under which it functions. Hip-hop knows both that power functions through the envisioning of the future, as well as that new technology has failed to liberate the underclasses – it therefore refashions, reappropriates and recontextualizes existing tech to suit its needs. What results is a decidedly unique, political form of media. It's political both in the traditional sense, referring to the lyrical and linguistic messages contained within, but also due the implications of its form. Technology encourages practices both in creation and consumption that take issue with political-economic precedent, and express and expose contrary cultural priorities to the Western norm.

At its rawest form, hip-hop represents a form of expression accessible to certain communities to whom institutions of political power have traditionally been unavailable. Popular culture, of which hip-hop is undoubtedly a part, has a tenuous relationship to the realm of politics. Traditionally seen as inferior in efficacy to more tangible methods of expression like “bullets or votes,” a more populist attitude towards politics has opened up the realm to inclusion from less traditional methods and voices, and hip-hop has gladly stepped up.<sup>2</sup> Once hip-hop asserts itself as a relevant form, though, it’s necessary to examine its content to uncover how, exactly, it serves marginalized communities. From its invention in the South Bronx in the 1970s, its origins and ensuing mythology have been mired in the culture of the era, referencing crime, poverty, and squalor, but also revelry, community, and aspiration.<sup>3</sup> The narrative of postindustrialism and the neoliberal city is essential to the identity of hip-hop, as these sorts of social and economic relations formed the crucible that would bear the emerging culture. While these themes have been exploited and dramatized to sate a burgeoning audience of both urban and suburban listeners, this narrative of struggle is both based in reality, and integral to the form of hip-hop.

Reality, or “realness,” is an essential trait of the culture, so it’s only logical that hip-hop would express the authentic experiences of its members. From the early days of rapping, MCs like Grandmaster Flash propelled the genre forward by providing

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<sup>2</sup> Dunaway, David. “Music as Political Communication in the United States.” *Popular Music and Communication*, edited by James Lull, Sage Publications, 1987, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Deis, Christopher. “Hip-Hop and Politics.” *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, edited by Justin A. Williams, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 192.



commentary on black urban life with songs like “The Message.”<sup>4</sup> Later, in hip-hop’s “golden age,” groups like NWA would expand on the practice with songs like “Fuck Tha Police,” whose political relevance I need not explain. As hip-hop crossed over to mainstream success in the 1980s, commercialism sapped a majority of its linguistic political relevance, but an underground scene made up in part by “conscious” rappers filled the void and continued to use the medium in a traditionally exhortatory manner. Nowadays, the genre is far too fragmented and diverse, not to mention popular, to make any solitary claim about its political capacity, but rest assured that hip-hop is alive and well as a political medium.

Indeed, the question of commercialism and commodification is one of the foremost debates ongoing in the field of hip-hop studies today. Bereft of accordance, scholars and fans alike are left to argue over the effect of mainstream success upon, what some would call, a formerly political genre. Without a doubt, hip-hop in recent years has enjoyed levels of success reserved in previous decades for genres like jazz and rock n’ roll, and the effect of commercialization has certainly left a lasting impression on its sound and what it has to say. The problem inherent in this claim, though, is that, since the advent of mainstream success with Run DMC and NWA in the 1980s, hip-hop can no longer be referred to or thought of as a solitary, monolithic genre. Instead, commercial rap has opened the door for numerous subgenres, many of which fill the void left by its straightforward disregard for political content.

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<sup>4</sup> Marshall, Wayne. “Hip-Hop’s Irrepressible Refashionability.” *The Cultural Matrix: Understanding Black Youth*, edited by Orlando Patterson, Harvard University Press, 2015, p. 177.

However, a central tenet of my argument deals with the residual political value in commercial hip-hop, regardless of its frequent thematization of seemingly complicated and problematic phenomena. Commercial hip-hop behaves like any other commercial media, from blockbuster movies to pulp literature, and frequently opts to express biases and prejudices inherent in society at large. However, while popular rappers might devote their attention to those lyrical tropes of hip-hop too frequently cited and derided to be repeated in this thesis, I argue that there is something about the form of hip-hop, commercial or not, that carries political value regardless of linguistic content. Present even within commercial rap, technology facilitates an enthusiastic rejection of Western musical aesthetics and works to prioritize traditions and practices at odds with the norm, and what is legitimized by capitalist political economy.

Hip-hop, due to its ontology and lyrical might, has proven itself an emancipatory culture for its participants. But, due primarily to its form, it also paves the way towards the forging of an inclusive musical aesthetic, and concomitantly, forces us to consider the limiting nature of our legal system and societal conceptions. As Kevin Driscoll writes, “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.”<sup>5</sup> From the early days, hip-hop took advantage of technological developments in sound and recording to reorganize and recombine existing music, rather than involve itself in creating a wholly “original” form. The history of originality is fraught, but I will argue that hip-hop’s central creative innovation, the remix

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<sup>5</sup> Driscoll, Kevin Edward. “Stepping Your Game Up: Technical Innovation Among Young People of Color in Hip-Hop.” *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, 2009.

through sampling, is inherently political, as it takes what bell hooks calls “an oppositional gaze” at preexisting art, and confronts what came before. By recontextualizing, sampling reinterprets earlier music for a new generation and their unique experiences.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, sampling calls into question the traditional legal structure of copyright, and confronts its exclusivity and classism that has historically privileged wealthier art.

In its reliance on Enlightenment humanist conceptions of art and the author as its basis, copyright is unprepared and unwilling to legitimize hip-hop and its practice of sampling as a legal art form. By rendering hip-hop transgressive, copyright relies on an antiquated romanticization of the aura of human authorship, blissfully ignorant of its declining relevance in Western art in all forms of media. In its use of technology, hip-hop is rather blatant in its repudiation of the human aura, and this stylistic property is a significant part of what makes it political. Sampling’s emphasis on the intertextual reordering of history is but one black cultural priority that hip-hop brings into being, and which relies upon technology for its execution. However, the very practice of sampling makes use of prerecorded music, or steals from intellectual property, depending on whom you ask. Therefore, it is political both in terms of its pertinence to the black community, as well as its outright rejection of the laws that seek its mitigation.

Perhaps the most significant byproduct of rap’s commercialization has been the foundation of an underground that seeks to adhere to hip-hop’s founding principles and rejects the vapid nature of commodified art. However, it would be wrong to claim that underground hip-hop rejects the market outright. Rather, the underground seeks a reorientation of the market, and pursues a more inclusive capitalism that benefits the

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<sup>6</sup> Deis, 2015, p. 196.

historically excluded. This is a rationality that has again been reinforced and encouraged by technology, most recently by the internet. Best epitomized disparately by Soulja Boy and Chance the Rapper, the internet has drastically reshuffled the balance of power in the music industry, and has ushered in a neocapitalist economy of self-promotion. The internet brings hip-hop further into the realm of the popular, and manages concurrently to empower a rising tide of hip-hoppers in the name of self-determination. Rappers native to the internet have been able to usurp the traditional label system and pursue the underground ideal of a more inclusive capitalism.

Nowadays, in the digital era, participating in hip-hop has never been easier. Soulja Boy is emblematic of a new phenomenon of hip-hop as mass culture, in which the internet facilitates a read/write culture at odds with legal frameworks. Since Soulja Boy, online communities like SoundCloud have flourished, providing a new regional ecology for hip-hop: online. It seems that the internet is the true paradigm shifting technology of the music world, but might actually succeed in the goal of emancipation promised by so many inventions of centuries past. However, we must refrain from the sort of optimistic utopianism that plagued those early advocates of technology. Thanks to the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, the internet, too, has become the domain of oppressive legal frameworks even as it philosophically resists the economy of ownership. As if by nature, the internet has engendered a sharing economy extending across all fields of media, and music is no exception. However, the DMCA works to resist this trend, and perpetuate the image of digital media as protectable and defensible just like its physical antecedents.

Today, it's not as easy to get away with making the sort of oft-repeated techn-utopian promises accompanied by so many industrial technologies of the past. For one,

history provides perspective, and we are wise to note the overarching theme of failure innate to their narratives. However, technology and the conditions within which it exists are simply too complex and interconnected to produce a solitary appraisal of its political consequence. Too often has technology failed to ensure political liberation, and instead sewed authoritarianism in yet a new facet of life. Hip-hop, though, is a different story. While its use of technology and relation to politics is far from simple, it has made a tradition of using technology in new ways – those that center cultural practices typically excluded from Western art and question the laws that govern it. While existing shamelessly within the market, hip-hop uses technology to question the effect of capitalism on media by creating music that does not play by its rules. Hip-hop represents a potent, indefatigable technological culture alien in many ways to the status quo, and for that reason is not merely political, but through Mumford's lens, democratic.

# The Technological Future

But why is it hip-hop's job to be political, to advocate for the disenfranchised and oppressed, to use technology for good? Plainly, it's because, despite grand promises in line with grand narratives of societal progress toward equality, we've failed hitherto to do just that. Simply put, hip-hop's use of technology is radically different from the mainstream, in that it bypasses both the commodification inherent in these technologies as well as their role in the capitalist system, and seeks to utilize them to liberatory ends. While technology is often framed as a force to undo legacies of oppression and ensure an egalitarian future, we will find that something nearly always gets in the way. Hip-hop, though, complicates the technological relationship to capitalism, and presents a viable alternative to the normative techno-industrial complex. Essentially, hip-hop establishes a framework for a reappropriation and reclamation of technology in service of true cultural liberation.

Before a discussion of hip-hop's political nature and the ways its practitioners have appropriated and continue to utilize technology can be had, we must first analyze the narrative of technological utopianism, and what has historically resulted from a tradition of high hopes. In reference to modern information technologies that mediate and augment our social relations like the telephone or internet, technology is often construed as a recent development. However, it's important to remember that technology is far older than our present modern era, and older too than most of our contemporary institutions, like government and religion. Technology has always been adept at revolutionizing the way its subjects live their lives, and, essentially, there's nothing new about technologically-enabled

social revolution. As tempting as it may be to attach superlative predications to a new technological arrival, we must contextualize these expectations within an identical history, in which most new technological development has been met with expectations of either societal collapse or universal prosperity – or both.

Since the inception of the modern era, most technological prediction has occurred with an optimistic mindset. Encapsulating the modern mentality he terms the *technological sublime*, Langdon Winner writes,

“Surely the coming of this new machine, this new device, this technical novelty will revitalize democracy. Surely its properties will foster greater equality and widespread prosperity throughout the land. Surely it will distribute political power more broadly and empower citizens to act for themselves. Surely it will cause us to cultivate new and better selves, becoming larger and more magnanimous people than we have been before. And surely it will connect individuals and groups in ways that will produce greater social harmony and a relaxation of human conflict.”<sup>7</sup>

Winner is making the point that new technologies are often perceived as a primarily liberating influence, one that will bolster democratic access and participation for the people, and will allow us individuals to create better selves. Technology here seems to be a force that might continue to liberate us from authoritarian oppression, and might be hoped to lessen the inequality that plagues members of marginalized communities in the United States. Winner’s appraisal must be unique to the U.S. or similarly democratic nations, as technology, as a liberating force, must still function subject to institutional power.

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<sup>7</sup> Winner, Langdon, et al. “Sow's Ears from Silk Purses: The Strange Alchemy of Technological Visionaries.” *Technological Visions: The Hopes and Fears That Shape New Technologies*, edited by Marita Sturken, Temple University Press, 2004, p. 34.

However, the ability of technology to resist both de jure and de facto domination will become vital to the argument of this thesis later on.

Technology has indeed been effective at revolutionizing social and economic relations since the invention of the wheel. However, it is the coming of modernity in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century at which point we begin to hear grand utopian expressions in the vein of Winner's technological sublime. At its most basic, this notion refers to the uniquely modern experience of both awe and alienation, as well as "spiritual transcendence," that occurs in the subject in the presence of particularly stunning displays of technology – think, an illuminated city skyline, or CGI animation.<sup>8</sup> This notion has been expanded to influence our perceptions of new technology, and our predictions regarding how it will affect extant society. Winner makes a few key references to historical instances in which this sentiment has most ambitiously been expressed. He cites an 1855 speech given by the chemist Denison Olmsted, in which Olmsted praises various modern machines like steamboats, the telegraph, and factories, and their potential to "equalize the gifts of heaven, and to produce social equality among men."<sup>9</sup> Olmsted's use of gendered language is but one harbinger of the sorts of myopic contradictions inherent in most techno-utopian predictions of impending social equality.

Later, in 1915, Henry Woodhouse editorialized in his magazine, *Flying*, that the new technology of the airplane would inaugurate a universal consciousness of a shared sky, and therefore a new phase in community amongst those that live below it.<sup>10</sup> Woodhouse

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Corn, Joseph J. *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, p. 38.



believed that aeronautic technology would bring about a “peaceful social revolution,” and a new era of “unity, cooperation, and peace on the planet.”<sup>11</sup> Similar notions were widely attached to nuclear power, in the manner that it would enable a new era of energy “too cheap to meter.” These predictions were quickly expanded to represent the by-now dubious and cliché visions of the egalitarian future. However, with nuclear power, it’s a bit easier to see through the diaphanous veil of utopianism, and understand, for example, the grave implications for world peace and its appropriation by the military-industrial complex. Furthermore, some have remarked that in any assessment of the political implications of technological artifacts, we must expand our conception to include the political systems that accompany and assist the artifact in question that are necessary for its management and safe use. Nuclear power, for example, necessitates an authoritarian bureaucratic regulatory system due to its high potential for misuse and disaster, as well as its vulnerability and active role in national defense.<sup>12</sup>

Nuclear power gives us but one framework through which to assess the politics of technology, and the pluralistic nature of those conceptions and realities. The dominant discourse regarding new technology positions it as a great liberator, and it’s important not to overlook the sometimes-veracity of this thesis. However, nuclear power complicates this vision, if by no more than its origins in the Manhattan Project. While we may understand technology’s often-genuine capacity to endow freedom, we must also understand technology within the context of the dominant mode of production that encourages its development: capitalism. Indeed, under capitalism, technology is not merely that, but a

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<sup>11</sup> Winner. 2004, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Winner, Langdon. *The Whale and the Reactor: a Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*. University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 19.

commodity. Once we take into account technology's role as a product within our economic system, it's a lot easier to complicate popular visions of techno-utopianism and analyze them for what they might truly be: advertisement.

Indeed, it becomes necessary to problematize techno-utopianism through a Marxist framework – one that acknowledges the dialectical contradictions inherent. We must look no further to understand these contradictions than the outcomes of many of the aforementioned predictions, in some cases a century or so on. Frankly, it's not a complicated endeavor, and it's not difficult to see, that the majority of those artifacts subject to earnest expressions of the technological sublime and all its emancipatory potential have fallen flat. Without a doubt, technology, as a prosthetic, has greatly expanded the range of human ability, but that hasn't necessarily translated into human freedom. Rather, nuclear power, and since then the internet, have inaugurated and aided vast authoritarian totalitarian political systems.<sup>13</sup>

But, we may uncover more about the politics of artifacts in a primarily economic context. To use an aforementioned example, flying, as a technologically enabled human capability, relies on an airplane, an immensely expensive commodity. Flying is not free, and it's not cheap either. Ultimately, flying has failed to invent the egalitarianism we were promised due to its role in the capitalist mode of production. Early techno-utopianists not only failed to recognize the economic barriers of entry to human freedom in a capitalist system, but were aware that selling new commodities as guarantors of democracy, a value dear to most Americans, was more than a savvy act of salesmanship. Winner remarks, "The

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

creation of ‘modern society’ – the dynamic, rapidly changing, industrial social order of the twentieth century – required that industrial corporations, designers, advertisers, journalists, educators, and the media apply their ingenuity to sell people on notions of selfhood and social relationships presupposed by all the new appliances, vehicles, foods, chemicals, and household conveniences.” Essentially, by correlating democracy with personal identity and selfhood, marketers sold products under the guise of vast political potential, targeting both the social body as part of the American community, and the private self in the process of incipient constitution in concert with modernity. By rendering freedom coterminous with technology, democracy was updated to encourage consumption.

Contrary to what Woodhouse or Oldmsted would have use believe, the future was to serve capitalism, and all residual human freedom that would result from the process would be due to that most “free” mode of production. There would be no “breakdown of the spirit of aristocracy,” no equality among men (or women), no era of peace and unity. In place of these heartwarming and holy vows stands that autonomous agent of capital, the consumer. It’s no surprise, in a political-economic climate that centers the individual and the antisocial accumulation of capital, that liberation and freedom for the oppressed would fall by the wayside. Indeed, capitalism does endow a form of economic freedom, but even that is diluted by structural inequalities and the legacies thereof.

And so, we find that new technology is too often integrated into extant modes of production to effect real emancipation, and thus traditional visions of the future, while liberatory in content, too often fall short. On the contrary, this was not an inevitable future - technology doesn’t need to signify consumption. Dalai Lama, in *Ethics for The New Millennium*, sets a vision for the future in which the immense potential of science and

technology is not mobilized in service of the accumulation of wealth, but towards the relief of suffering of others.<sup>14</sup> However, perhaps better relating to the case of hip-hop is the work of Kodwo Eshun. Setting out from political economy, Eshun, in his words, makes a point of studying “the appeals that black artists, musicians, critics, and writers have made to the future, in moments where any future was made difficult for them to imagine.”<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to claim that the Afrodiasporic subjects of Eshun’s inquiry have no stake in the past, but rather are both concerned with putting forth an equitable and emancipated future as well as a history that does justice to the disenfranchised. In one case study, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is on record as early as 1966 calling attention to the disparity between social and technological progress.<sup>16</sup> King understood that traditional visions of technological futures eschewed effective liberation for the oppressed. Eshun, too, makes this point, noting that traditional predictions seek primarily to ensure the safety of the market, and not only ignore the marginalized, but typically include dire representations of Africa and the global south.<sup>17</sup> Eshun goes on to elucidate a variety of artistic techniques that imagine an alternative technological future, and empower those oppressed peoples so often ignored by “the future,” and represented injuriously within. Importantly, he takes issue with capital as a determining factor in the freedom of humans. However, he also opposes the underlying symptoms of Enlightenment humanism, which essentialize an autonomous construction of the self – endowing

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<sup>14</sup> Dalai Lama. *Ethics for The New Millennium*. Riverhead Books, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Eshun, Kodwo. “Further Considerations of Afrofuturism.” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2003, p. 294.

<sup>16</sup> King, Martin Luther. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Harper & Row, 1967, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Eshun. 2003, p. 294.

capitalism and its associated exploitation with the individualism upon which it relies - and is exclusive of most marginalized communities.

The legacies of Enlightenment humanism have grave implications for hip-hop and black art as a whole, many of which will be discussed in this thesis. First and foremost, Eshun views hip-hop and similarly technological genres as post-humanist art forms, in the way that hip-hop's use of technology severs it from the Western tradition and all that it holds dear regarding the author and his influence. He classifies mainstream American media as "allergic to cybersonic technology," due to our humanist obsession with the "real" human being and his evident aura in art.<sup>18</sup> He goes on to characterize sampling, hip-hop's primary creative tool, as politically effective not merely due to the way it masks the identity of the sampler, but also as an intertext that reorders history in order to reclaim the historical narrative.<sup>19</sup> Hip-hop envisions a future in which technology is appropriated and utilized as a means of black self-empowerment and liberation. It centers black cultural priorities, and reclaims space too often denied to marginalized artists.

Crucially, Enlightenment humanism does not represent the sole conception of the human and its social (or antisocial) relations. With hip-hop's complicated relationship with capitalism in mind, it's worth finding out what the genre can learn from Karl Marx and his alternative suppositions of the human. Along with Nietzsche, Marx was interested in the phenomenon of alienation in modern life, and stated plainly, "private property is the

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<sup>18</sup> Eshun, Kodwo. *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. Quartet Books, 1998, p. -006.

<sup>19</sup> Eshun. 2003, p. 299.

material expression of alienated human life.”<sup>20</sup> Amongst philosophers of his ilk, conventional wisdom dictated that modernity bred alienation amongst its subjects, and Marx rendered the accumulation of wealth and private property culpable. Marx’s humanism rejects that of Locke and Hobbes, which constituted the human as an individual self imbued with autonomy and agency, and whose humanity derived from his possession of property. Instead, Marx viewed humanity as inherently social, and viewed Communism, the relinquishment of property, as the return of the community and the human as a social being.

Likewise, perhaps the best characterization of hip-hop is that of the community. Hip-hop’s rejection of certain aspects of capitalism, like intellectual property, and emphasis on intertextuality directly contradict the political-economic expression of Enlightenment humanism and its attitudes towards the individual. I think it would be a bit much to call hip-hop inherently communist, but it’s worth pointing out its complicated refusal of capitalism, and how certain aspects of the culture reflect Marx’s attitudes about the centrality of community in human life. In short, Marx believed the end to alienation would come with the supersession of private property. In this sense, hip-hop’s attitudes towards authorial ownership and intellectual property could be seen as a means of overcoming societal alienation, a star symptom of Winner’s technological sublime.

While perhaps not Communist in name, hip-hop is an artistic reformulation of the past, present, and future that may not entirely reject capitalism, but responds to it and seeks a more inclusive model. Hip-hop understands the historically contradictory nature of

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<sup>20</sup> Marx, Karl. “Private Property and Communism.” *The Portable Karl Marx*, edited by Eugene Kamenka, Viking Penguin, 1983, p. 150.

techno-utopian visions of the future, and seeks to use technology to both center black cultural priorities and resist classist and racist legal structures.

# Part I: Hip-hop as Politics

Hip-hop necessitates that we take a populist approach to the notion of politics. In the style of media scholar John Fiske, we can approach popular culture as a site of political expression, first and foremost due to the manner in which diverse publics receive and use it on their own terms.<sup>21</sup> It is a view that privileges interpretations of intentionality, and focuses on the ways certain audiences might appropriate mass culture within a different context. However, a populist view of pop culture also recognizes that “high politics” is not the exclusive domain of political behavior. As Christopher Deis writes, “When politics is imagined as consisting of more than the high politics of formal institutions and participation, we are able to frame the politics of popular culture as possessing the potential to be a robust and meaningful site of both political contention and political expression.”<sup>22</sup>

Deis sets the stage for how popular culture, and hip-hop in particular, can be a site of political expression outside of traditional government. This is important when considered within the historical context of American governing institutions, which, due to limitations both de facto and de jure, have historically prohibited participation from women and people of color. Due to its mere existence as a medium for traditionally black expression, hip-hop provides a forum for those that have not found such an outlet in conventional forms of culture. Like punk rock, hip-hop is an effort to “establish a space for pleasure and release in a system of political-economy that marginalized poor and working-

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<sup>21</sup> Fiske, John. *Understanding Popular Culture*. Unwin Press, 1989, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Deis. 2015, p. 196.



class youth.”<sup>23</sup> Importantly, this notion of political expression through music predates hip-hop, and notably shaped the course of events during the civil rights era. Hip-hop, though, came of age necessarily in response to earlier forms of music, in order to deal with the unique struggles of a unique era. Folk music - both of the United States and Africa, which had guided those seeking to escape the oppressions of slavery and Jim Crow, found itself outmoded and antiquated in dealing with less institutionalized forms that had mutated out of those prior.

## Hip-Hop as a Mouthpiece for Urban Struggle

Hip-hop is not merely a *space* for politics. It has, in various ways since its origins, adopted styles and forms that take active issue with dominant systems of power in society that work to oppress certain communities. In this sense, hip-hop artists have gladly taken advantage of its capacity for effecting political change. Before rap, hip-hop was a mostly festive, party-centric genre, and was most often accompanied by dance. However, once MCs assumed their place on the microphone, it soon became apparent that rap lyrics could communicate reality, and could be a site for candid discussion regarding the injustices of black and Latino American life.

Rap prizes *realness*. While hip-hop has mutated substantially over its brief existence, its connection to the *real* has always been prominent in traditionalist discourse. But, hip-hop’s many divergent forms, like any good art form, have been wont to stray from its founding identity. This trend has been cause for widespread derision, most notably from

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

the old guard. Brian Goedde claims that realness is both an expression of one's existence in their own reality, as well as what they have to say about it.<sup>24</sup> He quotes the rapper Obie Trice, who, in the spoken-word introduction to "Look in My Eyes," says, "Every man determines his definition of realness, what's real to him."<sup>25</sup> Goedde goes on to explain, "Realness is not reality, something that can be defined or identified. Reality is what is imposed on you; realness is what you impose back. Reality is something you could question; realness is beyond all doubt."

In the 1970s, the South Bronx imposed a stark reality on its residents that was cause for expression. It's important to understand the social and economic conditions that produced hip-hop, as capitalism was deeply involved once again at the level of its founding. Therefore, in order to understand the response - the realness - we must understand what came first. Marx makes the point that the activity of human beings cannot be separated from the social and economic conditions within which they live. While the sort of neoliberal political-economy conspiring in the '70s to disenfranchise urban blacks and Latinos represents a form of capitalism Marx never could have predicted, it nevertheless remains a significant actor in the culture that emerged out of it. Academically, this is a tradition that makes reference to a variety of black musics. Andre Craddock-Willis describes four genres - the blues, jazz, R&B, and hip-hop - as phenomena that occurred resulting from specific societal conditions and relations between black Americans and the political situation of the nation at large. Craddock-Willis recognizes hip-hop as both a

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<sup>24</sup> Goedde, Brian. "Fake Fan." *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, edited by David Shields, Vintage, 2010, p. 99.

<sup>25</sup> Obie Trice, "Look in My Eyes." *Cheers*.

benefactor from a legacy of black music and emblematic of the way it has historically represented the desires and affects of black Americans.<sup>26</sup>

While hip-hop emerged from the South Bronx due to a specific set of social and economic conditions, those conditions were by no means unique to New York, or even the East Coast.<sup>27</sup> American cities of the 1970s were in decline, with New York perhaps leading the charge. Old, industrial American urban areas were in the midst of a decline in population and employment, but federal funds were gradually disappearing for its amelioration. This dearth of resources is best epitomized by Gerald Ford's famous refusal to bail out the broke city, reported in the *New York Daily News* via the headline: "Ford to City: Drop Dead."<sup>28</sup> Devoid of the sort of tax base upon which the city had come to rely, New York had finally defaulted on its loans. In previous decades, the federal government might have been expected to meet this crisis with aid and a plan for recovery. However, prevailing trends in neoliberal thinking in the 1970s changed everything. As federal aid for cities gradually came to virtual halt, broke and decaying cities like New York found themselves without a helping hand in a dire time of need. Ultimately, the city was able to hatch a deal with the federal government, albeit one with serious stipulations regarding service cuts and terms of repayment.

These cuts are emblematic of a growing trend of unequal wealth distribution in the city that continued with a housing crisis well into the 1980s. Tricia Rose writes:

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<sup>26</sup> Craddock-Willis, Andre. "Rap Music and the Black Musical Tradition: A Critical Assessment," *Radical America*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1991, p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. University Press of New England, 1994, p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> "Ford to City: Drop Dead." *New York Daily News*, 30 Oct. 1975.

Between 1978 and 1986, people in the bottom 20 percent of the income scale experienced an absolute decline in income, whereas the top 20 percent experienced most of the economic growth. Blacks and Hispanics disproportionately occupied this bottom fifth. During this same period, 30 percent of New York's Hispanic households (40 percent for Puerto Ricans) and 25 percent of black households lived at or below the poverty line. Since this period, low income housing has continued to disappear and blacks and Hispanics are still much more likely to live in overcrowded, dilapidated, and seriously undermaintained spaces"<sup>29</sup>

These racial disparities are representative of a new sort of stratification amongst New Yorkers materializing in the 1970s. As an industrial economy marked by high wages and high employment based in manufacturing, shipping and warehousing transitioned into a service and information economy, Daniel Wolkowitz contends that New York became "sharply divided between an affluent, technocratic, professional white-collar group managing the financial and commercial life of an international city and an unemployed and underemployed service sector which is substantially black and Hispanic."<sup>30</sup> In essence, the blue-collar middle class of New Yorkers had disappeared, sending economic shockwaves still felt and being dealt with today.

Shrinking funds and housing coupled with shifts in the professional landscape meant that low-income blacks and Latinos paid the highest price for this economic restructuring. However, the coming trend of urban renewal, ironically meant to deal with

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<sup>29</sup> Rose, 1994, p. 28.

<sup>30</sup> Wolkowitz, Daniel J. "New York: A Tale of Two Cities." *Snowbelt Cities: Metropolitan Politics in the Northeast and Midwest since WWII*, edited by Richard M. Bernard, Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 204.

these issues on a material level, would deal yet another blow to New York's working-class communities on the urban periphery. Perhaps the foremost figure in the era of urban renewal in New York was Robert Moses. A now-infamous name, Moses spearheaded hundreds of projects that ripped and tore at the urban fabric of New York, serving the needs of affluent, often suburban citizen at the expense of the poor urban folks already hurting in this era of neoliberal restructuring.

One project in particular is typical of the era of urban renewal, and had particular consequences for the borough hip-hop would come to call home: the Cross-Bronx Expressway. Designed to connect middle-class suburban areas of New Jersey with those of Long Island, the Cross-Bronx Expressway offered the Bronx neighborhoods through which it passed as a sacrifice in exchange for the improvement of the daily commutes of tri-state area suburbanites. Often times, Cross-Bronx Expressway users were not even interested in New York, effectively resulting in a more efficient way for drivers to bypass the city entirely. The claim has since commonly been made that Moses easily could have avoided the densely-populated working class neighborhoods of the Bronx that he elected to use, but instead, his chosen route required the demolition of hundreds of apartment buildings and storefronts, issuing a death-sentence to the neighborhoods in its midst.

I don't mean to pillory Moses at the expense of the many, many other actors involved with urban renewal and the greater contemporary project of neoliberal urban sacrifice, and I don't even mean to put forth a one-sided appraisal of Moses et al.'s techniques. Urban renewal often gets a bad rap due to its current-day inefficacy and ghastly aesthetics, but it's likely that many planners truly believed these ideas would aid the city in its postindustrial recovery. Certain projects, like the Pruitt-Igoe public housing

development in St. Louis, were initial successes, only to fall prey to decades of racially-motivated poor maintenance.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, it would be wrong to blame urban renewal or any one aspect of the 1970s' economic restructuring for the so-called decline of the Bronx, but each represents a significant factor in the radical shift witnessed by the borough at the time.

## The Realness

Urban renewal represented a material manifestation of the federal and city negligence of the urban periphery in favor of the white-collar upper classes. Throughout this decade of decline and the one that came after it, Bronx residents never stopped dancing and throwing parties, and it was at one of these parties in 1973 that DJ Kool Herc invented hip-hop. It might seem ironic to attribute an author to a genre that so blatantly eschews authorship and plays with its parameters, but the original techniques of remixing and repeating breakbeats from popular funk and R&B tracks can be concretely attributed to one man: Herc.<sup>32</sup> Even before rappers started touting their realness on recorded tracks, hip-hop was *real* at the point of its birth, when the genre was purely instrumentally-based, as it was an expression of its creators' reality; it was an answer to the question, "What are you gonna do about it?" In the reality of a political system that had systematically marginalized and disenfranchised the people of the South Bronx, *realness* was a political act. Essentially, it's a strategy of resistance, both through expression and control over discourse.

Realness is an example of an attempt to control knowledge, which Michel Foucault has aligned with the production of power to the point that they are inseparable. The

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<sup>31</sup> Freidrichs, Chad, director. *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*. 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Marshall, 2015, p. 175.

power/knowledge structure, to Foucault, is a single entity, and speaks to the effect that power is represented by the ability of discerning knowledge, and that knowledge has the ability to legitimate systems of power.<sup>33</sup> *Realness* is a form of knowledge; it represents the perspectives of an unheard class, as well as an unfettered attitude towards its expression. As resistance, it signifies that outside of institutional political power, culture, even as it reaches the mainstream, is political. Through this framework, it's interesting to examine the battle for control over discourse regarding black and Latino communities at the time, as rappers and participants of hip-hop culture sought to both resist and complicate dominant narratives constructed and perpetuated through the media.

On one hand, the era was plagued by a “crisis of representation,” in which the interests of poor urban residents were virtually absent from mainstream reportage.<sup>34</sup> Attendant to this era of economic restructuring was the transition of news from the domain of the government to the private sector. Motivated by profit and the necessity of advertisers to appeal to high-income demographics, most media outlets sought to represent the narratives of those same viewers, who mostly remained unconcerned with the dire affairs of the urban dispossessed. However, this crisis mutated in 1977 in response to two infamous events: the citywide blackout, and President Jimmy Carter’s attention-grabbing tour of the Bronx. As result of these two moments, images began to flood the media and national consciousness of the Bronx as a “symbol of America’s woes.”<sup>35</sup> However, news reportage was not the only external contribution to popular discourse – soon, films like *Fort*

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<sup>33</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

<sup>34</sup> Bagdigian, Ben. *The Media Monopoly*. Beacon Press, 1987, p. 122.

<sup>35</sup> Dembart, Lee. “Carter Takes ‘Sobering’ Trip to South Bronx,” *The New York Times*, 6 October 1977, p, B18.

*Apache, The Bronx* began to exploit the borough for its dangerous and perilous cinematic appeal.<sup>36</sup>

As Rose notes in a later passage on rap concerts, violence occurring in black spaces is almost never reported for what it is: violence. Instead, it is often contextualized within the notion of blackness, as if some connection need be made between the individual act and an attractive larger narrative of prejudice.<sup>37</sup> In the Bronx, stories of urban decay, arson and lawlessness became defining characteristics not merely of the borough and its situation, but also fueled racism in its connections to black life in general. Stuart Hall takes issue with this epistemology in writing, “the use of the label is likely to mobilize this whole referential context, with all its associated meaning and connotations.”<sup>38</sup> Hall is pointing out that once information is contextualized as representative of a subjectivity, that information is more reliable as a signifier of that group, rather than as a fact in its own right. The majority of public discourse surrounding the Bronx and its inhabitants of the time was produced through this rationality – at once pejorative and detractive, but also referential to grand racist narratives.

Rap was only one facet of a hip-hop culture that arose to reclaim and resist this popular discourse. Two other aspects, graffiti and breakdancing, emerged as methods of popular culture that functioned both as communicative media and occupiers of public space.<sup>39</sup> Graffiti was an especially dynamic art form as its frequent appearance on the sides of subway cars spread its message and identity throughout the whole of New York City.

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<sup>36</sup> Petrie, Daniel, director. *Fort Apache, The Bronx*. 1981.

<sup>37</sup> Rose, 1994, p. 136.

<sup>38</sup> Hall, Stuart. *Policing the Crisis*. Macmillan, 1978, p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Rose, 1994, p. 40.



Breakdancing, too, was an especially visible and influential medium, as its typical location on city sidewalks and in parks confronted New Yorkers with its presence. Each of these three forms of hip-hop culture were met with fierce institutional and governmental regulation, yet managed to flourish and contribute to the representation of oppressed and neglected New Yorkers. Graffiti was especially transgressive, and ultimately assumed a representative role in the popular consciousness for New York and its urban struggle of the 1970s and 1980s. However, in phrasing black and Latino responses to a problem with the problem itself, this popular perception might also be the product of mainstream media. Indeed, it's indicative that city government sought to deal specifically with the issue of graffiti, rather than the policy and planning of disenfranchisement at its root. To its participants, graffiti and hip-hop culture was a valuable and necessary method of dealing with institutional disruption, and were never truly defeated.

While incipient instrumental hip-hop was *real* due its existence in the face of a dismal political reality, rappers took the opportunity to linguistically make it explicit. Two of the earliest rap songs, "Planet Rock" and "The Message," are interesting to compare in this context, as they adopt different attitudes towards the lyrical potential to express realness. "Planet Rock," by Arthur Baker and Afrika Bambaataa, seems predisposed with the novelty of its synthesizer-driven sound, and thematically doesn't stray too far from the futurism imbued by its robot-like vocals. It's a significant example of technological experimentation at the dawn of a new genre, but, for better or for worse, doesn't have a whole lot to *say* about real life. However, while it might be tempting to conflate a dearth of lyrical gravity with a disregard for politics, Bambaataa was a fiercely political figure in the South Bronx neighborhood of Soundview, both spreading hip-hop culture and

advocating for a subsidence in gang tensions through his cooption of the Black Spades gang. Furthermore, Kodwo Eshun might link the synthesized nature of the track to his posthuman conception of hip-hop, severing it from the Western tradition and establishing a novel, musical aesthetic.

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message," on the other hand, takes full advantage of hip-hop as a black music to express lyrically the "psychological tolls of urban blight."<sup>40</sup> The song came in contrast to hip-hop's previously party-centric lyrics, but had no problem earning popular approval, eventually reaching number four on the R&B charts. Vitally, though, the song had an outsize effect on shaping public perception of its genre. Wayne Marshall writes, "Injecting a certain gravitas into hip-hop's festivities, "The Message" refashioned the genre as specifically positioned to offer timely commentary on black urban life." He goes on to claim, "In one stroke, the song sowed the scenes of activist 'conscious' rap, as well as gangsta rap's vivid depictions of street violence."<sup>41</sup> In the wake of "The Message," the subgenre of conscious rap would persist throughout hip-hop's history, and become a founding principle of its identity. Most debates over the role and influence of the later commercialization of hip-hop have been articulated within this rationality.

## Commercial Hip-hop

By 1985, hip-hop had "crossed over," and achieved mainstream success. The seminal moment in rap's arrival as a mass cultural force is often attributed to the release of Run DMC's collaboration on Aerosmith's "Walk This Way." However, hip-hop music was not alone – graffiti and breakdancing too began to find acceptance within the mainstream,

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<sup>40</sup> Marshall, 2015, p. 175.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

and thus a repurposing and reappropriation of their signifiers. Just as hip-hop found a place on the radio and in clubs downtown, graffiti too found a place in SoHo galleries, enjoying a popularization partly due to the publicity of Fab Five Freddy. Doubtless, the gallerists and patrons interested in graffiti at the time were mostly motivated by its cutting-edge image and the accumulation of cultural capital. In this way, certain signifiers can be expropriated from an indigenous context, and repositioned within a higher class of culture through the workings of capital. Stuart Hall has written extensively on the use and mobility of signifiers within popular culture, and remarks that the essential delineator between high culture and low, popular culture is class.<sup>42</sup> He notes that since members of different classes may use the same language, people will attach different meanings to the same signifiers accordant with their class. Inherent to this proposition is that while the categories of popular and high culture may be fixed, their contents are not. It is for this reason that graffiti may ascend the cultural hierarchy through its acceptance by SoHo gallerists, and that Debbie Harry might create new meanings by rapping and referencing Fab Five Freddy.<sup>43</sup>

While hip-hop existed hitherto as an underground fringe culture of resistance, vilified by authority, commercialization represents something different for its relationship with the dominant class. Dick Hebdige frames the process of subcultural commercialization as a process of “recuperation” by the dominant class.<sup>44</sup> While hip-hop existed primarily in opposition to dominant capitalist modes of production and their effect on inner cities, commercialization represents the process by which the dominant class

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<sup>42</sup> Hall, Stuart. “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’.” *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, edited by John Storey, Pearson/Prentice Hall, p. 447

<sup>43</sup> Blondie. “Rapture.” *Autoamerican*.

<sup>44</sup> Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Routledge, 1979, p. 85.

swallows and absorbs this previously transgressive genre. Hebdige writes that this process takes place via the “conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects and the ‘labeling’ and redefinition of deviant behavior by dominant groups – the police, media and judiciary.”

Understandably, many in the hip-hop community became concerned with this trend of commercialization and what it meant for the culture and community it had represented. As a result, the genre began to experience a splintering effect, as an underground movement unsatisfied with commercial implications for hip-hop’s aesthetics emerged. Beyond this fragmentation, though, hip-hop began to escape New York for the first time, and found a second home on the West Coast. There, gangsta rap assumed stylistic dominance, and began to play with traditional notions of realness. At no point did NWA claim to fabricate their lyrical narratives, which often followed in Grandmaster Flash’s tradition of social commentary, but the Hollywood influence on their art is apparent. “Fuck Tha Police” is a track emblematic of NWA’s approach to storytelling, mixing vocal dissatisfaction with the realities of inner-city life with theatrical interpolations of police sirens and Foley-style sounds of running, fighting and gunshots. These sonic additions serve to further the narrative, and in some ways even deepen the sense of the real. In other ways, as Marshall writes, “The mix of cartoonish violence and self-proclaimed realism made for an intoxicating but toxic cocktail, a feedback loop through which hip-hop’s sense of ‘the real’ would be reconfigured by gangsta rap’s surreal and salacious media spectacle.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Marshall, 2015, pp. 179-180.

In this way, hip-hop's intrinsic, democratic capacity for the expression of realness and what that meant for the state of knowledge/power of marginalized communities came head to head with the realities of the production of art under capitalism. For the first time, hip-hop began to profit increasingly from the sale of archetypal cultural narratives, and became less of an authentically expressive medium. However, it's important to note that while true for commercial hip-hop, this is also true amongst all forms of commercial art, and it's precisely the symptom of mainstream success that underground hip-hop seeks to address. Capitalism has since continued to exert its influence on hip-hop, resulting in a prominently commercial subgenre that at times abandons its fundamental values, namely realness. Like any good art form, the genre has evolved with the times, so on one hand it is illogical to assess contemporary hip-hop by 40 year-old criteria. However, by doing so, we can better illuminate the ways that monetary success, commercial influence, and mainstream acceptance of the genre have shifted the priorities of the music, and how it has now effectively expanded its repertoire in pursuit of alternate goals.

The discourse surrounding commercial hip-hop and its dedication to political action is one of passion and vigor. On one hand, Tricia Rose comments, "the drawing power of rap is precisely its commitment to black youth and cultural resistance, and nothing in rap's commercial position and cross-cultural appeal contradicts this fact."<sup>46</sup> However, hip-hop's recuperation by the dominant class as supposed by Hebdige is certainly cause for concern, and many do not see eye-to-eye with Rose on this issue. Carlton A. Usher leverages a substantial attack on commercial hip-hop, assailing its conversion from a cultural product to a commodity. He writes, "The centrality of the black experience in the

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<sup>46</sup> Rose, 1994. 19.

United States is simply a reflection of market and consumer culture. It does not reflect the making of common decision for a group of people through the exercise of power, which is the basis of power itself.”<sup>47</sup> Usher views hip-hop as a commodification of blackness, and does not acknowledge either the benefits of representation nor the economic opportunities afforded by the hip-hop industry.

## Three Theories of Authenticity

Much criticism of commercial hip-hop pits it against its pre-commercial form, epitomized by Flash and Bambaataa, and claims that rappers are no longer using their music to portray authentic representations of black and Hispanic life. Essentially, many fear that realness has been forsaken in favor of mass-produced, fabricated narratives. However, it’s important to critique the criteria upon which the truthfulness of commercial hip-hop has been assessed, and what, precisely, is the value of factual accuracy in terms of political result. Three writers in particular take issue with notions of truth in art, but do so in different ways.

How do societies determine what is true, and what is not? For one, John O. Calmore declares authenticity to be a construct of dominant culture, and that notions of truth are dictated by those in power.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, Critical Race Theorists like himself reject traditional notions of objectivity and neutrality. It’s possible, then, that we should

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<sup>47</sup> Usher, Carlton A. *A Rhyme Is a Terrible Thing to Waste: Hip Hop and the Creation of a Political Philosophy*. Africa World Press, 2006, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Calmore, John O. “Critical Race Theory, Archie Shepp, and Fire Music: Securing an Authentic Intellectual Life in a Multicultural World.” *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed a Movement*, edited by Kimberle Crenshaw, New Press, 2010, p. 233.

reconsider our assessments of commercial hip-hop's saleable narratives and not discount them due to their alleged deceptions. He writes that authors employing an "oppositional voice" need not write with what the dominant class would classify as objectivity.

The postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard too questions the methods through which societies ascertain veracity. Lyotard claims that ideas are typically assessed in comparison to grand narratives, or stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves. Of course, these narratives are devised and upheld by the dominant class. He supposes that one might be deemed untrue, or not derived from reality, if it deviates merely from these traditional narratives.<sup>49</sup> In this way, merely through challenging conventional wisdom, hip-hop might be discarded and regarded as inauthentic. Lyotard characterizes the postmodern era, in which hip-hop plays a role, in part through the demise of these grand narratives. Therefore, by challenging them and bringing them into conflict, even commercial hip-hop is undoubtedly politically liberatory.

Finally, David Shields picks up the argument against societally sanctioned authenticity in his manifesto *Reality Hunger*. While not directly connected to the politics of it, he argues that art, such as memoir, can still be expressively effective without needing to adhere to absolute truth (a term that Calmore and Lyotard have already called into question). With quips like, "If my forgeries are hung long enough in the museum, they become real," he points out the degree to which authenticity is decided by consensus.<sup>50</sup> Later, he writes, "Memory is selective; storytelling insists on itself. There is nothing in my

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<sup>49</sup> Mansfield, Nick. *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*. New York University Press, 2000, p. 194.

<sup>50</sup> Shields, 2011, p. 34.

story that did not happen. In its essence it is true, or a shade of true.”<sup>51</sup> Shields is a believer in essence, that something can be true if it carries the essence of something that did, in fact, happen. Part of this is because he understands that different communities have different standards of truth, similar to the way that different communities interpret identical signifiers in different ways. He terms the traditional adhesion to objectivity “trial by google,” in that society tends to assess truth via the sort of facts that Google might supply, as opposed to a feeling or affect, or “essence.”

Calmore, Lyotard and Shields each present different alternative conceptions of truth that acknowledge the role of power in dictating objectivity, and respect the activity of particular groups in putting forth alternate visions. Although commercial hip-hop may function as a commodity, and may have sacrificed a measure of realness in the process, we are not to take its supposed “inauthenticity” as merely that. Rather, we should learn to glean essences from these artifacts, and understand that there might be more to a narrative than its literal lyrical transcription, as vapid as it may be.

## The Underground

Before Run DMC changed the game, it was common to refer to hip-hop songs as “underground,” seeing as the entire genre was such. However, the commercialization of hip-hop has had the residual effect of inventing an entire subgenre devoted to the underground. Carlton Usher attributes the founding of underground rap in response to the “domination of hip-hop culture by market forces.”<sup>52</sup> Clearly, the underground exists in conflict with capitalist domination of the culture, but crucially, does not unequivocally

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>52</sup> Usher, 2006, p. 95.



reject it. According to Usher, the underground is marked by pervasive cultural awareness and explicit concern with politics, as well as a clear dedication to hip-hop as an art form, rather than commodity. However, while it may be easy to claim that underground hip-hop wants nothing to do with capitalism and the accumulation of wealth, it is more accurate to point out that it advocates for a more inclusive capitalism, one free of white exploitation, and which includes results more beneficial for the artists in question.

Talib Kweli provides a lucid introduction to the philosophy of the underground in his piece, "Manifesto."<sup>53</sup> His lyrics include "kick facts with raps, and curse with clarity," "we gonna fix industrial poli-tricks," and "acknowledge that you need food on your plate in order to say your grace." Kweli sets forth a notion of the underground as a site in which concerns for the sanctity of the art form, as well realness, are apparent, but that also features a rejection of corporate control over the artist, and a yearning for a more self-deterministic system. Clearly, underground hip-hop is deeply concerned with linguistic expressions of political messages, and staunch opposition to systems of control thereby. But, I think what's most interesting about underground hip-hop is its function within the capitalist system in a bid to restore equity and compensation to the artist. Unlike Marx, underground hip-hop makes no mention of a revolution, nor the supercession of private property. Underground hip-hop understands the role that capitalism has played in altering hip-hop's political efficacy, but seeks to harness the system's power to return a measure of monetary value to the artist. It is unabashedly pro-wealth, but in a manner that rewards the historically excluded. Ultimately, it believes that capitalism can be made to work for hip-hop artists, but there are changes to be made.

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<sup>53</sup> Reflection Eternal. "Manifesto." *Groundation*.

Of underground hip-hop, historian Robin Kelley writes, “these strategies [of the underground] do not undermine capitalism; profits generated by the most successful ventures simply buttress capitalism and illustrate, once again, its amazing resilience and elasticity, even when the commodities themselves offer ideological challenges to its basic premise.”<sup>54</sup> Kelley understands that capitalism might seem antithetical to hip-hop, or at least the underground, given hip-hop’s founding amongst the ashes of the neoliberal South Bronx. Although the underground’s complicated acceptance of capitalism may seem unlikely at first glance, he makes the point that resisting capitalism is easier said than done. After all, in the United States, the accumulation wealth does indeed guarantee a fair amount of privilege, and is understandably something that a member of the dominated class may desire.

The internet has only provided more room for the underground to flourish. As I will discuss in my next chapter, the internet helps to realize the underground’s desire to rid the genre of white exploitation, as it works to exorcise from hip-hop consolidated corporate ownership and censorship. On the internet, a sort of “neocapitalist network”<sup>55</sup> of self promotion has sprung up, in which independent artists are more capable than ever of marketing their own work without the “aid” of corporate labels. In particular, Chance the Rapper is emblematic of this phenomenon, as he straddles the line between the underground and the mainstream. While one of the most popular rappers working today, he has never relented in his resistance of the label system, and has remained faithfully independent throughout his monumental success. In the digital age, the underground has

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<sup>54</sup> Kelley, Robin D. G. *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Beacon Press, 2008, pp. 45-46.

<sup>55</sup> Usher, 2006, p. 110.

mutated to suit new forms of media and communication, but its priorities have always remained constant: empowerment and restitution to the artist.

# Part II: Hip-hop and Technology

Part I established hip-hop as an undeniably political genre and culture. In pursuit, hip-hop producers and consumers, sometimes coalesced as “prosumers” in reference to their dual activity, have relied on innovative technology and its ability to adapt continuously into the next era. Without a novel approach to consumption and production and the technological tools to effect that vision, hip-hop would never have had the avenues to exist and become what it is today. While hip-hop uses technology to accomplish its political project, we must also attend to the political implications of the specific techniques in question, namely sampling. Sampling represents a reuse and recombination of existing musical recordings, resulting in an original piece composed of extant compositions. Lying at the core of hip-hop, it has been approached in different ways over the decades, aided by improved technology. Its relevance to the genre cannot be overstated, but neither can its controversial potential. Sampling represents a departure from Romantic notions of authorship and originality, and necessitates a cultural reorientation in its reception. Furthermore, it calls into question arguably antiquated legal notions, namely copyright, and continues to poke holes in a system of laws that might be out of step with art of the modern day.

## Black Cultural Priorities

Hip-hop producers and DJs are adept at manipulating extant technology to suit a series of needs strikingly different from the demands of composers and practitioners of

traditional Western music. Hip-hop musicians embody a set of alternative priorities in the production of music that contrast and often oppose those of the West. Predictably, these discrepancies have resulted in challenges of legitimacy and legality for hip-hop, as it seeks to thrive in a system opposed to its stylistic attributes. Technology has been crucial in helping these musicians attain their goals, but before an analysis of the technology itself can be undertaken, we must understand what, exactly, technology in hip-hop is tasked with doing.

Tricia Rose begins her investigation into the cultural and sonic differences between hip-hop and Western music with an anecdote about a meeting with a white college Professor of Music. As many self-avowed progressives are wont to do, he was eager to declare his acknowledgment for the validity of the linguistic messages communicated in rap songs. However, when it came to a musical assessment, he was not so quick to express approval for the sound of the music. Following an earnest endorsement of hip-hop's lyrical potential, he continues, "But they ride down the street at 2:00 A.M. with it blasting from car speakers and [they] wake up my wife and kids. What's the point in that?"<sup>56</sup> To this professor, hip-hop is merely noise lacking in purpose or anything resembling value. However, he is certainly not alone in his sentiments - amongst the unenlightened, it's not uncommon to overhear comments like his that express respect for the lyrical messages of a song, but none for the way it is made.

There are a slew of reasons for the lack of respect hip-hop receives within mainstream society, but ultimately, it just doesn't sound like Western music, resulting in a widespread fear of the unfamiliar. Rose continues that her conversation with the professor

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<sup>56</sup> Rose, 1994, p. 62.

brings a history lesson to mind. She recalls a story in which African slaves were prohibited from drumming because, “as a vehicle for coded communication, they inspired fear in slaveholders.”<sup>57</sup> In telling this story, Rose is not comparing the professor to a slaveholder, but is drawing a connection between each figure’s position outside the black musical discourse. The slaveholder and professor occupy similar positions of authority, in which both feel permitted to cast judgment upon another culture’s art, and greet its arrival with fear. Indeed, it is not pleasant to be awoken by the passing by of loud music, but is it possible that the professor, like the slaveholder *and* the mainstream media of the 1970s, is engaging in a practice of contextualizing individual behavior within the specter of blackness? What’s more, by extrapolating individual instances as representative of an entire group, he takes the opportunity to smite the genre of hip-hop as a whole, if for no other reason than his fear of the unknown. It’s safe to say that he does not understand this form of black culture, but as a professor – unlike the slaveholder – he is under some obligation to do better.

If a professional intellectual such as he can’t seem to wrap his head around the specific cultural value of hip-hop, it’s no surprise that wide swaths of musical discourse greet hip-hop with the same derision given its significant formal and sonic divergences from Western music. Perhaps the easiest distinction to make between the two musics is that of harmony vs. rhythm. While doubtless an oversimplification, it’s a good place to start in parsing the differences between the two, and in understanding the roots of the unequal cultural and legal regard each are afforded. The complexity of Western classical musical is typically expressed through its use of harmony and melody. Specifically, tonal

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

functional harmony “is based on clear, definite pitches and logical relations between them; on the forward drive toward resolution: the final perfect cadence.”<sup>58</sup> Already, in Western music’s emphasis on resolution and forward, almost teleological progress, the “ills” of hip-hop are becoming apparent.

Tonal harmony necessitates a strict division of the octave into twelve tones arranged in either the minor or major. The division of the octave is one of the clearest expressions of Western music’s authority, and one of the sharpest ways black music marks its divergence. Take the blue note: halfway between the major and minor third, it is typical to jazz and the blues, and is often expressed vocally. However, it’s nowhere to be found amongst the twelve tones of the Western octave. Certain instruments, like the guitar, can bend to achieve these notes in a manner similar to the voice, but blue notes are not fretted. This use of the guitar is an example of a subversive use of musical technology in an effort to escape Western musical limitations, a tradition that runs deep in hip-hop.

Christopher Small writes about Western classical music coming about as a result of the enlightenment, and a humanist attitude toward art. He writes,

“[We] see changes in European consciousness that we call the Renaissance having its effect in music, with the personal, humanistic viewpoint substituted for the theocratic, universalistic approach of the Middle Ages, expressed in technical terms by a great interest in chords and their effects in juxtaposition, and specifically in the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

perfect cadence and the suspended dissonance, rather than in polyphony and the independent life of the individual voice.”<sup>59</sup>

Small connects Western music’s rationality to that of Enlightenment humanism, which seeks to order sound and progress and ensure perfect resolution. Furthermore, humanism can be blamed for the notation system, which established a certain distance between composer, performer and audience. However, perhaps most dire for hip-hop and other divergent musics, humanism also established a cult of personality around the author, and endowed him with a certain aura and prestige. Music, for the humanist, must result from the unique genius and individual identity of the creator, and must bear the influence and essence of that autonomous human monad. Hip-hop lives in the shadow of this ideal.

Hip-hop, like much Afrodiasporic music, expresses complexity through rhythm, often in ways contrary to strict Western delineation. Swing, for example - intrinsic to jazz and the blues, and later reggae - behaves in ways adverse to stated meter, and that which is capable of notation. After all, it was a break – a moment in which percussion and rhythm is foregrounded at the expense of harmony – that Herc chose to sample and repeat in his incipient renditions of hip-hop. This is not to say that hip-hop is devoid of harmony and melody (one will find that it’s near impossible to sell a track without a good melody) but that hip-hop typically opts to explore rhythm in approaches to Western music’s interest in harmony. Rhythmic privilege opens up a litany of sonic opportunities previously unexplored in Western music: complexity and layering of polyrhythms, showcasing of the drums and

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<sup>59</sup> Small Christopher. *Music, Society, Education: An Examination of the Function of Music in Western, Eastern and African Cultures with its Impact on Society and its Use in Education*. Schirmer, 1977, pp. 9-10.



other percussion instruments, interrogation of bass frequencies, breaks (like those that invented hip-hop), and finally repetition.

Though repetition is present in all music, it is both one of the most fundamental elements of hip-hop and Afrodiasporic music, as well as perhaps the one that has earned it the most contempt. In reference, James A. Snead claims that the means by which a specific culture treats repetition may reveal a great deal about the way that culture regards itself. He argues, “Repetition is not merely a formal ploy...but often the willed grafting onto culture of an essentially philosophical insight about the shape of time and history. One may readily classify cultural forms based on whether they tend to admit or cover up these repeating constituencies within them.”<sup>60</sup> Snead elaborates that when Western music repeats, it is not treated as such, but under the guise of slight variation creating forward momentum. Furthermore, Snead connects the characteristic of rising momentum in Western music with the grander humanist ideological narrative of societal progress - Western music progresses because Western society does, too. To acknowledge repetition for what it is would be to counter the dominant discourse that human society was moving in the right direction.

However, the astute listener will notice that hip-hop often repeats in a similar way, involving variation, and more so that it is one of hip-hop’s defining characteristics. Snead writes that in hip-hop, repetition means that “the thing circulates,” and that there is an equilibrium – not accumulation and growth, but flow. Amongst cultural critics, repetition in popular culture has often been the object of antipathy, and has famously been cited as an

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<sup>60</sup> Snead, James A. “On Repetition in Black Culture.” *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1981, p. 146.

intrusion of capitalist mass-production in art by theorists like Theodor Adorno.<sup>61</sup> It is certainly true that an arm of hip-hop has been commercialized and functions as a commodity, but this is one instance in which hip-hop must be considered not in collusion with but at odds with capitalism, as a conception of repetition as merely a byproduct of industrialization discounts its unique black cultural relevance. Adorno was a member of the Neomarxist Frankfurt School that sought to elucidate the pernicious influence of capitalism in mass culture. Adorno, in his interrogation of capitalism in art, shared some of the same goals of this thesis, yet failed to acknowledge cultural difference, and that the impact of capitalism might be different upon different art forms. He pitted popular music, or jazz, against Western classical, and isolated repetition in part as a factor separating the popular from high culture. While jazz, and today rap, works within the market, Adorno ignored the ways alternative uses of repetition could represent collective resistance to that very system. Once again, jazz and hip-hop are upheld by the intellectual elite as inferior to the classical canon, only this time, from an unlikely source: the Marxist left. Adorno's views are in line with the Western practice of deriding popular music, an institutional paradigm that will hinder hip-hop's legitimacy in years to come.

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<sup>61</sup> Adorno, Theodor. "On Popular Music." *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, edited by Simon Frith, Pantheon Books, 1990, p. 313.

# A History of Hip-hop's Love Affair With Technology

There is simply no way to view the history of hip-hop outside of the lens of technology. Unlike earlier genres, it was not founded via the acoustic instrument or combinations thereof. Hip-hop embodies a series of differences from Western classical music that technology alone has brought into being. For one, its reliance on repetition is aided by samplers and drum machines that allow clips of music to exist in continuous flow ad infinitum. Samplers further allow the manipulation of bass frequencies, and the layering of rhythm upon rhythm to produce something “original.” However, as we will find, technology allows producers to create art that is often not legally sanctioned, and which usurps traditional conceptions of art and authorship. However, that’s precisely what makes hip-hop political.

Modern hip-hop is comprised of a combination of “original” production based on generic templates and sampled music, but at the time of its birth, there was nothing to originally produce. The first hip-hop, invented by Herc in 1973, was the product of brief sections of vinyl selected for its effect on the audience, mixed and looped until he had made something new. But, before that, thanks in part to Herc’s origins, hip-hop traces its roots to Jamaica’s dancehall culture, which relied on a series of mobile disco units termed “soundsystems.” These units were crucial to the scene, and were informally branded according to their size, volume, and audio quality. Paramount, though, was the role of the selector, who dictated the night’s music, and DJ, who presided over the event and “[turned] the experience of listening to recordings into something closer to a locally customized, live

performance.”<sup>62</sup> In Jamaica, these were two jobs done by two people, but in New York, Herc made them one, recalling the soundsystem tradition of manipulating records to extend portions of songs that partygoers seemed to enjoy. By doing so, Herc had invented the “merry-go-round” technique, in which he would deftly pick up the needle and replace it on the record at an earlier position, extending certain breakbeats into perpetuity. Grandmaster Flash improved on Herc’s technique, employing his technical expertise in aligning faders and cues to streamline the process. Later, Grand Wizard Theodore, a disciple of Flash’s, would invent the technique of rhythmic scratching.

Aided by an embrace of consumer electronics and popular recordings, DJs can be credited with effectively transforming forms of consumption into modes of production. Although they may not have known it, Herc and Flash were experimenting with an early form of sampling, in which they would recontextualize existing recordings, resulting in a live, authored experience akin to performance. Although sampling wasn’t formally introduced to hip-hop composition until the mid-eighties, it can perhaps be thought of as originating with Herc and Flash. In between, two of the first hip-hop recordings, “Planet Rock” and “The Message,” notably departed from the practice of reusing musical material by recording drum machine and synthesizer tracks in the studio. Perhaps still enamored by traditional notions of musical creation and in denial of sampling’s efficacy on a commercial release, the composers of these two songs avoided sounds lifted from well-known recordings. However, hip-hop composers soon realized that synthesized tracks lacked a certain “aura” central to hip-hop’s identity – namely, the use of recognizable sounds from

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<sup>62</sup> Marshall, 2015, p. 169.

beloved recordings that jog the memory and induce a feeling of familiarity.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, if the gospel of *realness* was to persist into the future of hip-hop, recordings and compositions would need to reflect in some manner an essence of the musician's reality, as well as what he had to say about it. However, producers also began to realize that programmed drums, aside from novelty effect, just didn't sound as good as those recorded live on soul and funk tracks of decades past. Producers began to embrace sampling once again without the slightest regard for what mainstream society would call thievery – instead, it was part of the artistic process.

Sampling would mount its return - or formal introduction, rather – through the advent of relatively affordable consumer sampling devices in the mid-1980s. While many distinct devices were released, only a few truly found widespread acceptance. Of the range of personal samplers released in the 1980s, the Akai MPC series, still in use today, and the E-mu SP-12 and SP 1200 were most prevalent.<sup>64</sup> Users discuss their preferences for certain devices over others based on how they treat source material, and how they enable fine manipulation and adjustment. Hank Shocklee, of Public Enemy, remarks, "[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."<sup>65</sup> Essentially, Shocklee is expressing the SP-1200's ability to realize a number of black cultural priorities, from repetition to rhythmic play. Like Shocklee, most producers and DJs have unique preferences for certain technologies that allow them to actualize their unique musical visions.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>64</sup> Driscoll, 2009, p. 44.

<sup>65</sup> Rose, 1994 p. 76.

While DJs typically chose their machines based on what they could do for them, some also recall how their limitations could be skirted: “[Questlove] 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.”<sup>66</sup> In this way, Questlove demonstrates a tradition of adopting and innovating beyond a certain technology’s intrinsic limitations begun by Herc’s use of the turntable to extend the breakbeat. Tricia Rose terms this “working in the red,” due to the sound meter’s frequent location in the distortion zone.<sup>67</sup> Working in the red, or using technologies in unintended ways, is one of the foremost means by which DJs impart unique influence on their music. This subversive use of technology is innate to hip-hop, and authorship and identity is most often expressed through this unorthodox adoption.

Working in the red is an outstanding way that hip-hop artists express black cultural priorities, from repetition to emphasis on bass, and create a sonic aesthetic removed from that of the West. This is a logical result, given that the first DJs began by appropriating consumer technology intended for the production of Western music, and used them in novel ways. As an example, Kurtis Blow exclaims, “[The Roland TR-808] is great because you can detune it and get this low-frequency hum. It’s a car-speaker destroyer. That’s what

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<sup>66</sup> Coleman, Brian. *Check the Technique: Liner Note for Hip-Hop Junkies*. Villard Books, 2007, p. 372.

<sup>67</sup> Rose, 1994, p. 75.

we try to do as rap producers – break car speakers and house speakers and boom boxes. And the 808 does it. It's African music!"<sup>68</sup>

Rap engineer Gary Clugston provides a further example of how rap producers reorient sound: "If you're using a drum sample in a rock record, you want it to sit in the mix with everything else. In rap, you do whatever you can to make it stand out – by adding effects, EQ, bottom – and make it sound dirty."<sup>69</sup> Engineer Steve Ett reiterates Clugston's point: "For me, rap is a matter of pumping the shit out of the low end." Ett typically mixes songs to promote leakage from one recorded track to another, allowing the bass to take up more space than is typically allowed, i.e. more than one track. Ett is working in the red by subverting engineering and recording norms, and by seeking a messier sound by boosting the bass. All this time spent in the red is indicative of one more defining trait of hip-hop at odds with Western music: hip-hop prides autodidactic skill, and music creation done on one's own terms rather than those taught in school. Albeit less so nowadays, hip-hoppers tend to be untrained, resulting in a use of music technology different from pop, rock, modern jazz, and classical. This lack of training and work in the red results in mark of originality that many critics, and the legal system, find illegible.

## Copyright and Oppositional Gaze

The first hip-hop DJs deserve credit for appropriating and extending consumer technology to adapt patterns of consumption into methods of production. To use

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<sup>68</sup> Dery, Mark and Bob Doerschuk, "Drum Some Kill: The Beat Behind the Rap," *Keyboard*, Nov. 1988, pp. 34-36.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

Lawrence Lessig's terminology, they succeeded in turning hip-hop into a "read/write culture." Per Lessig, DJs "add to the culture they read by creating and re-creating the culture around them [...] using the same tools the professional uses."<sup>70</sup> This is a clear representation of hip-hop, as it was founded on the manipulation of preexisting material.<sup>71</sup> As sampling technology improved, the DJ, who had already experienced a transformation of roles in transit from Jamaica to New York, once again assumed a new identity, this time of the producer. In many ways, the producer was merely doing what DJs had been doing all along, albeit with faster and more complex technology.<sup>72</sup> Most importantly, though, DJs and producers were engaged in the practice of applying read/write culture, which had existed for centuries prior, to pop music, and in turn, creating a new sonic language. Kevin Driscoll traces the history of read/write culture to the pre-industrial era, before the mass production of cultural commodities. Before the widespread inauguration of the culture industry, musicians were free to perform whatever songs they desired in whatever settings. Once phonographs, radios and player pianos began to yield authoritative versions of popular songs, legal systems began to cater to the artist's intellectual property, and it became more difficult for the lay musician to participate in the culture to the extent that she previously might have.<sup>73</sup>

Hip-hop arrived in a post-industrial era, rather, and thus saw its intrinsic read/write identity in conflict with an institutionalized read-only culture. Most tangibly, copyright

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<sup>70</sup> Lessig, Lawrence. *Remix*. Penguin Press, 2008, p. 28.

<sup>71</sup> Williams, Justin A. "Intertextuality, Sampling, and Copyright." *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, edited by Justin A. Williams, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 206.

<sup>72</sup> Brewster, Bill and Frank Broughton. *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey*. Headline Publishing, 2007, p. 267.

<sup>73</sup> Driscoll, 2009, p. 56.



evolved to protect artifacts of the culture industry, and to protect their authority and claim to originality. For years, hip-hop managed to thrive amidst copyright's legal framework, mostly because it hadn't yet matured into commercial dominance, and wasn't yet enjoying the sort of monetary success to which it would come. Only upon hip-hop's cross over to mainstream culture in the mid-1980s was it forced to confront its dubious legal position.<sup>74</sup> Copyright philosophically privileges resource-intensive art in recognizing the risk and investment required for its production, and by protecting its intellectual messages and content from appropriation and unlicensed replication. The only problem is that it applies this privilege to all art, including hip-hop's democratic tradition of easy remix.

Owing to the relatively recent development of the culture industry, sounds within a recording were only first copyrighted by U.S. law in 1971. Since then, the lion's share of copyright cases having to do with hip-hop music have had to do with sampling.<sup>75</sup> Legal attitudes towards the practice are hostile at best. Various court cases have resulted in remarks like, "there can be no more brazen stealing of music than digital sampling," "samplers are ultimately thieves," and, "Only through prosecuting samplers will creativity be spawned."<sup>76</sup> However, sampling is certainly an intrinsically valuable black cultural priority, albeit one at odds with mainstream societal views embodied in the legal system. I've discussed the humanist origins of this bias, but now I will dive deeper into the sorts of cultural conceptions and fears that hip-hop brings to light.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>75</sup> Schumacher, Thomas G. "This Is a Sampling Sport: Digital Sampling, Rap Music and the Law in Cultural Production." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1995, p. 445.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 447.

It is exceedingly important to remember the legacy of Enlightenment humanism in understanding the philosophical basis for much of the American legal system's attitude toward art. Perhaps the best place to start in analyzing this attitude is with the work of Walter Benjamin. Recalling Kodwo Eshun's critique of modern society's allergy to cybersonic technology, Benjamin tackles many of the same fears in his seminal *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.<sup>77</sup> According to Benjamin, an artwork's "aura" is what is at stake as the age of artisanal human creation gives way to the era of mechanical manufacture. For Benjamin, that aura is uniquely tied to human creation, as well as the human traditions and rituals that typically accompany art and its consumption.

Benjamin's thesis focuses on the death of this aura at the hands of mechanical reproduction, but American common law seems less sympathetic to this notion. The project of intellectual property in the United States is highly interested in protecting this aura, meaning music's authenticity and connection to its creator, but in doing so, is selective of what technologies and what cultures deserve protection. Looking at the ways popular music is actually created, sampling aside, and the ways that music has, for decades, been reliant on alternate technologies from the human brain, we find intellectual property immediately hypocritical. In its belief in the sanctity and integrity of the aura, intellectual property conceals "the constructedness of musical sound" - that recorded music is most often not the product of live performance.<sup>78</sup> The wide variety of technological apparatuses (that dwarf sampling) involved in music production are an integral part of modern music making and a necessary part of any understanding of music production. Given the existence

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<sup>77</sup> Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, Schocken, 1969, p. 44.

<sup>78</sup> Schumacher, 1995, p. 448.

of this technology, which ranges from amplifiers to effects pedals to autotune, it's impossible that Benjamin's and intellectual property's notion of the aura could remain intact in today's technologized music scene. While it's true that the purpose of much of this technology is, in part, to conceal its own presence, that's no excuse for ignoring its role in deconstructing the humanist aura.

Much of the art of music making today is predicated on a mastery of recording technology, not merely instrumentation. It's the reason that the influence of a producer can be equal if not greater than that of the performer – just ask the “fifth Beatle,” George Martin. As a result of the influence of technology and its manipulators, there can no longer be one true moment of authorship associated with one personality. Contemporary musical reality, especially recently, is predominantly the effect of technology. When musical technology discredits the myth of the creator, it goes a long way towards challenging the notion of authorship, a notion situated upon humanist ideas of genius and originality. How can there be intellectual property without authorship? Common law conveniently avoids this fact, and, while accepting and concealing the death of the aura, focuses its wrath upon other, more explicit forms of cybersonic art, like hip-hop.

Therefore, in persecuting hip-hop's intertextual identity, copyright law establishes a skewed and unequal conception of originality. Michel Foucault observes that the designation of authorship is often political, and that not all texts are deserving of the author function.<sup>79</sup> Those that are not granted authorship, in his words, are transgressive. Perhaps there is no better example of a transgressive art form grappling with the parameters of

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<sup>79</sup> Foucault, Michel. “What is an Author?” *Language, Countermemory, and Practice*, edited by D.F. Bouchard, Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 120.

authorship than hip-hop. Because sampling and intertextuality obscure moments and personalities of creation, common law takes issue with its claims to originality, and declines to award the status of legal art and legal product. Foucault claims that authorship is truly about possession, property, and ownership, meaning that court cases dealing with intellectual property aim to decide who owns certain ideas and certain fragments of creativity. Technologized music production means that no piece of music is truly the product of human ingenuity alone, or any one human, rendering intellectual property hazy at best.

However, for common law, hip-hop's practice of sampling might be one step too far. Benjamin writes, "But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based in ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics."<sup>80</sup> Copyright and intellectual property represent precisely the realm of politics to which Benjamin refers. In deciding what is and isn't original and worthy of authorship, art becomes the locus of a political struggle. Hip-hop, to the larger extent, has fallen victim to the legal system's selective designation of authority. Sampled recordings are not granted author-function, and thereby, in Foucault's terminology, become transgressive. Indeed, author function may be entirely inappropriate for hip-hop (as many scholars taking issue with humanist notions of genius and originality have argued it may for all art), resulting perhaps in a need for a new identify: DJ function.

Sampling facilitates much of hip-hop's expression of black cultural priorities, from repetition to the establishment of a black artistic tradition, and thus is a highly valuable cultural practice. Like Adorno, it's worth noting Benjamin's ignorance of the cultural value

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<sup>80</sup> Benjamin, 1969, 224.

of mechanical reproduction. A fellow member of the Frankfurt School, Benjamin too was concerned with the intrusion of capitalist rationality into the production of art, and identified mechanical reproduction and industrialism as key culprits. As expressed in *The Work of Art*, Benjamin was critically concerned with the role of mechanical reproduction in transporting art outside of the realm of cultural tradition and into commodified space. However, Benjamin fell victim to the same misconception as Adorno, and confused commercialism with distinct, anti-European priorities. Certain strains of hip-hop have certainly commercialized, and the debate over commercial hip-hop's political value rages on, but that's no reason to vilify the tools of its, and indeed all popular music's, production.

Sampling, as both an intertextual practice and a form of mechanical reproduction, establishes a black musical pedigree and works to construct a musical vernacular for hip-hop. Given its cultural value, why might the legal system be so predisposed with ensuring its censure and ceasing its distribution? Like Benjamin, copyright law privileges centuries-old Western definitions of art that make no space for intertextual black cultural priorities that "are premised on referencing the other and by explicitly relying on previous utterances."<sup>81</sup> In dealing with copyright law, intertextuality is precisely the transgressive issue at hand. Simon Frith fervently makes the point that copyright is not a moral issue, but is designed to "sustain a market in ideas."<sup>82</sup> Copyright is merely the legal incarnation of the notion of authorship, which seeks to attach an identity to an idea. As sampling seeks to utilize and sell preexisting ideas, it's only natural that private enterprise and the "owners" of those ideas would take issue with that appropriation. However, by enshrining the ownership

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<sup>81</sup> Schumacher, 1995, p. 452.

<sup>82</sup> Frith, Simon. "Copyright and the Music Business," *Popular Music*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1987, p. 63.

of ideas in law, copyright explicitly defines art in Western, humanist terms. Hip-hop challenges accepted notions of intellectual ownership, with are situated vitally within capitalist social relations. Once again, rappers and samplers would make Marx proud in the ways they reject proprietary attitudes. In Marx's time, capitalism had yet to develop to include the commodified exchange of ideas, yet he regarded art as the "wealth of society," and the collective domain of all of its members. Hip-hop borrows from this endowment, and utilizes preexisting music almost as a library. However, despite its unique cultural value, sampling upends the basic tenants of the culture industry, a business designed to sell ideas, and is thus persecuted by an antagonistic political economy.

Copyright mobilizes its paternalism not toward the protection of expression, but rather the market value of cultural artifacts. In the case of hip-hop, it is precisely expression that pays the price. Rosemary Coombe points out that, due to copyright law, "the more powerful the corporate actor in our commercial culture, the more successfully it may immunize itself against oppositional cultural strategies to "recode" those signifiers that most evocatively embody its presence in postmodernity."<sup>83</sup> In essence, this is the intrusion of capitalism into artistic production that Benjamin should be worried about. Copyright dismantles hip-hop's practice of recontextualization and reformulation of meaning, and thus both renders signification static and assigns its activity to whichever corporation has the most money to earn it in court. This notion is confirmed even within commercial hip-hop, as the practice of sampling has certainly not disappeared. Instead, hip-hop funded by wealthy record labels or created by wealthy producers can opt to license a certain sample,

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<sup>83</sup> Coombe, R.J. "Objects of Property and Subjects of Politics: Intellectual Property Laws and Democratic Dialogue." *Texas Law Review*, vol. 69 no. 7, 1991, p. 1874.

ensuring its legal presence in their work. However, this cannot be regarded as positive, as it perpetuates the practice of allowing the wealthiest actors the greatest amount of artistic agency. Ultimately, capital controls signification.

Current legal structures regarding intellectual property are outmoded and inadequate to deal with newer forms of remix culture, like hip-hop. Copyright is inherently antithetical to and discriminatory towards hip-hop directly because of its role as a democratic art form. Since most hip-hop doesn't require a significant monetary investment, and relies on the remixing of popular culture and adaption of consumer electronics, it is illegal. As Lessig points out, "Creativity must check with a lawyer."<sup>84</sup> It's important to consider the class implications of copyright, as it effectively forbids certain forms of creativity not dependent on certain forms of privilege. Legally-sanctioned creativity requires not only disposable income, but the sort of leisure time to enable its investment. Hip-hop is an art form that categorically opposes this old fashioned ideology, and thus exposes copyright as an age-old tactic of imposing class structure in the United States, and perpetuating an exclusive perception of art. Hip-hop's democratic potential confronts copyright's exclusivity, and thus is a revolutionary strategy for achieving an artistic tradition for the masses.

However, while sampling and the culture it represents starkly call into question and resist American intellectual property law, it is aesthetically, too, a political technique. As I've discussed, hip-hop is a site of political discourse for those excluded from "high politics." Even so, copyright discriminates against it, and in doing so, tries to limit its political impact. Given this framework, sampling is political in that it actively resists a classist legal

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<sup>84</sup> Lessig, Lawrence. *Free Culture*. Penguin Press, 2004, p. 173.

structure. However, there's also something about the way that it looks, or gazes, at preexisting art, as well as the way to recontextualizes it and applies to a different culture – essentially, the process of resignification that is controlled via copyright by oligopolistic, multinational corporations. bell hooks calls it the “oppositional gaze,” and it's a common tactic used toward media by societies in resistance.<sup>85</sup> Take, for example the military jacket, adopted and redefined by the counterculture of the 1960s in opposition to the Vietnam War. Essentially, the oppositional gaze is used to “reframe and reinterpret a text or practice so that it has meaning for [one's] personal experiences.”<sup>86</sup> By recontextualizing popular music within a fringe culture by a marginalized population, DJs and producers are able to redefine the cultural narrative of previous art - which has often been mired in classism, racism and sexism – and reapply it in a democratic framework. It's an act of reclamation, both of art and control over discourse. Yes, hip-hop “steals,” but it doesn't purport to be doing anything else.<sup>87</sup> By taking an oppositional look at its source material, it's shamelessly staking its claim and creating space for its practitioners, when space has been prohibited hitherto.

However, the gaze that sampling casts upon its source material need not always oppose exclusive artistic realms of the past, but may further engender an inclusive musical history, one that recognizes the contributions of underappreciated artists of the past. Sampling is, for many, an act of homage, or of tribute to those that came before. It's an attitude toward history that would make Marx proud, one that regards the total wealth of human history as a shared resource, not as private property. Many samplers regard their

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<sup>85</sup> hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Sound End Press, 1992, p. 115.

<sup>86</sup> Deis, 2015, p. 196.

<sup>87</sup> Shields, 2011, p. 90.



craft as essentially communal, as finding another voice to help them say what they want to say.<sup>88</sup> Rather than opposition, sampling could also be viewed as a process of cultural literacy, and of establishing a black musical history. Sampling locates the past in the present, and ensures that contemporary culture never forgets what came before.

## The Internet

Technology has clearly had an emancipatory effect on hip-hop, at once enabling its origins, birth, and development into a dominant cultural force, as well as extending across the realms of creation, dissemination and consumption. However, no technology has been as influential and formative for the culture as the internet. S. Craig Watkins conceives of the internet as a “digital underground” and a “vital public sphere” that facilitates a “resilient rejection” of corporate and legal control over popular media.<sup>89</sup> Of course, decentralized modes of sharing and music release are nothing new to hip-hop, but the increasing emphasis on a peer-to-peer network rather than the traditional top-down industry approach has many in the business scrambling to realize their future in its landscape.

It’s hard to overstate the impact of the internet on hip-hop, music, and popular culture as a whole, but perhaps the greatest influence it’s had has been on the ultimate translation of hip-hop into mainstream culture. No longer does hip-hop represent one dominant culture in competition with other forms of pop culture, a role it’s occupied since the 1980s; it’s now appropriate to frame hip-hop and mainstream culture as synonymous,

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<sup>88</sup> Rose, 1994, p. 79.

<sup>89</sup> Watkins, S. Craig. *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*. Beacon Press, 2005, p. 139.

one in the same.<sup>90</sup> In this sense, the internet facilitates hip-hop's consumption beyond urban audiences traditionally involved in the culture, in the same way that MTV fueled gangsta rap's popularity among white suburban youths in the 1980s. The only difference, of course, is that the internet better facilitates a participatory read/write experience amongst its diverse fan bases, rather than MTV's read-only format.

To explain the effect of the internet on perpetuating hip-hop's participatory remix culture, I will use Soulja Boy, who has utilized the internet not merely as a rapper, but as a uniquely novel sort of celebrity. Unsurprisingly, Soulja Boy kicked off his career rubbing much of the old guard the wrong way, adopting a low-fi approach emphasizing rawness and bypassing lyrical virtuosity. Many of hip-hop's founding fathers have met his enigmatic popularity with a mixture of confusion and disapproval: it was Ice-T who remarked, "Soulja Boy, you single-handedly killed hip-hop."<sup>91</sup> While his remark might suffer from sensationalism, his sentiment is not uncommon, as the rift between what's now termed "old school" rap and rap in the digital era continues to widen. What's at stake is an entire conception of hip-hop's system of values, but there's nothing atypical about the internet as a hip-hop technology. Hip-hop owes its existence not merely to an adoption of technology, but to an enterprising, innovative spirit that sought to bend it to its users' will. The internet merely works to lower the barrier of entry even further, and to democratize the art form to a new extent. However, in peril is a solitary notion of hip-hop's aesthetics, as the internet further fragments the genre and endows new subcultures, as well as a widespread adherence to "old-school" hip-hop values.

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<sup>90</sup> Coscarelli, Joe. "Jay-Z's Producer No I.D. on the Grammys: 'Urban Culture Is Now Pop Culture,'" *The New York Times*, 29 Nov. 2017.

<sup>91</sup> Ice-T, "Black Ice."

Perhaps what most perturbs Ice-T is the unfamiliar sound of hip-hop enabled by computer production. Driven by digital technology, a system Marshall summarizes as “the unprecedented availability of professional grade audio and video production software together with the advent of internet sites and services that provide free global publishing capacity,”<sup>92</sup> the aesthetics of hip-hop are certainly in flux. While commercial hip-hop has a strong foothold in the aural appetites of music audiences, a thriving underground has flourished on the internet, facilitating a much less-polished sound. Furthermore, bedroom-style production enables an even less resource and time-intensive creative process, enabling a casual culture of production, of which Soulja Boy is a part. A prejudiced appraisal of Soulja Boy’s affect on the genre akin to Ice-T’s is an inappropriate approach to hip-hop in the digital era, but it’s based on certain realities, namely, that hip-hop is changing.

Soulja Boy tried to do it the old-fashioned way, hiring a manager and playing local shows, but it wasn’t until he turned his attention to his digital presence that he began to accrue a following.<sup>93</sup> His hit, “Crank That,” is a true product of the internet, not merely in how it was created and shared, but in how it fostered a participatory relationship with his fans. Almost from the beginning, after a rough cut was posted on his MySpace page, fans began to interact with the song in a unique way – not by listening and sharing, as is typical, but by choreographing, recording and posting unique dances to the songs, almost like a cover. Dance became central to the song’s popularity, and as it grew, Soulja Boy began to fashion his public persona less as a rapper, and more as a multifaceted public figure charged with curating his fans’ contributions, and cheering them on.

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<sup>92</sup> Marshall, 2015, p. 189.

<sup>93</sup> Driscoll, 2009, p. 122.

On one hand, Soulja Boy is relevant due to his use of hip-hop as a portal into popular culture, as his identity became less that of a musician and more of an internet celebrity. He recognized that rap, given its place in pop culture, could be more than music, and that by embracing its narrative as part of his own identity, could use its cultural potential to earn fame and following. However, he's important for more traditional reasons, too. Soulja Boy represents a significant assertion of Southern hip-hop, specifically "snap," in the digital era, amidst a cultural landscape dominated by the coasts. Snap, as a subgenre of hip-hop, embodies a particularly low barrier-of-entry, as it relies less on complex rhythmic or harmonic structures. Driscoll writes, "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."<sup>94</sup> Soulja Boy embodies a further democratization of the medium, as his brand of popular music seems creatively accessible to anyone with a laptop. Furthermore, his avant-garde, unpolished aesthetic established hip-hop further as a diverse genre, and worked to further disassemble the gangsta image that hip-hop embodied for so long, and that "unfairly marks hip-hop practitioners in general and young black men in particular."<sup>95</sup> In this way, Soulja Boy's use of the internet to create a wildly distinct brand of hip-hop worked to challenge stereotypes of the genre and its users, held both outside and inside the culture.

"Crank That" is now ten years old, and, predictably, the internet continues to change the ways hip-hop is made and received. While Soulja Boy's brand might now be

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 128-129.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 128.

termed “MySpace rap,” its most direct descendent nowadays comes from SoundCloud. A subgenre all its own, SoundCloud rap embodies the further proliferation of hip-hop on the internet, and seems to revel in its harsh aesthetic. Jon Caramanica describes it as “low-fidelity and insistent, throbbing with distorted bass, like trap music reduced over a hot fire to its rawest component parts.”<sup>96</sup> Unlike Soulja Boy, Soundcloud rap works a bit harder to assault the ears, exploiting its synthesized identity to push norms of “what music sounds like” further than many would like to see it go. Regardless, it’s hot, and it has a coterie of young, internet-using fans.

Caramanica positions SoundCloud rap as a response to hi-fi commercial rap in the streaming era, typically embodied by artists like Drake. SoundCloud artists are following in Soulja Boy’s tradition of challenging commercialism by presenting audiences with new, alternative sounds, and making a few enemies in the process. However, what’s important about SoundCloud is less the aesthetics of the music, which do deserve an honest assessment, but rather what it signifies about the changing nature of hip-hop within pop culture. In a tradition founded by Soulja Boy, SoundCloud rappers are truly anything but. Rather, they occupy a role nonexistent ten years ago: the content creator. Like Soulja Boy, these artists recognize their responsibilities as less akin to those of the musician, and more within the realm of general internet celebrity. Caramanica quotes a blogger who attributes them with being, “so aware of what makes a song popular or what makes a tweet go viral that they have completely redefined the idea of what it is to be a rapper.”<sup>97</sup> In SoundCloud

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<sup>96</sup> Caramanica, Jon. “The Rowdy World of Rap’s New Underground,” *The New York Times*, 22 June 2017.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

rap, the complete absorption of hip-hop into mass culture is illustrated by the mere fact that rap isn't the point.

SoundCloud rap illustrates perhaps better than any other genre the extent to which music can be a visual medium. Here, it's all about the image, to the point that the same blogger finds it to be "so far from what any thinking person could consider 100 percent real." With this latest incarnation of hip-hop, perhaps its most fundamental attribute, realness, is under attack. SoundCloud rap illustrates that hip-hop is no longer necessarily a narrative form, or responsible for exploring reality. In a trend perhaps begun by NWA, SoundCloud rap sells an image, although dissimilarly, there is no real narrative, outside of allegiance to prescription drug use, that unites the music. True to internet form, it's a meme, and works more as a self-aware joke than any sincere art form. Not only has hip-hop become mass culture, but internet culture, too. In reference to one particular participant in this culture, the late Lil Peep, blogger Adam22 remarks, "When I talk about understanding the meme, he gets it." In its embrace of internet culture, hip-hop has taken a step further towards mass media, and towards a truly democratic art form.

However, it would be a mistake to view the unorthodox sounds of Soulja Boy and Soundcloud as the only sort of rappers that call the internet home. After all, we should be weary of technological determinism, or viewing the internet as a catalyst working to alter and transmogrify the sound of hip-hop. Closer to the mainstream, Chance the Rapper has engaged the internet to both decentralize the distribution of his music and accrue a sizeable, loyal fan base, all the while dominating the hip-hop scene and remaining independent to this day. Chance describes various reasons for his independence, which include both a rejection of exploitative commercialism and an acceptance of a form that is

equitable and inclusive. Chance understands the label system and the degree of exploitation suffered by most rappers, and desires to pioneer and participate in a self-deterministic system in which, essentially, he earns more money. However, his independence also results in a richer, more intimate relationship with his fans, and not only because he lacks the aid of a label's marketing department. Regardless, Chance could not have achieved his independence without the internet, serving as one example of its ability to liberate artists from underhanded label deals and white, corporate oppression.

Chance's independence has become part of his mythology, not least due to lyrics like "If one more label try to stop me it's gon' be some dreadheaded n-ggas in ya lobby."<sup>98</sup> As such, he has become somewhat of an activist, railing against the label system and what he views as a cruel and dishonest scheme. Instead, he uses social media and streaming platforms to replicate label services, in what has been termed a "neocapitalist system of self-promotion."<sup>99</sup> His most recent album, *Coloring Book*, provides an ideal example. After the success of his previous two mixtapes, most expected that Chance would progress in the traditional manner, sign a record deal, and begin to sell his music like everyone else. Only, his blockbuster third release didn't take the form of an album, but yet another mixtape, meaning it would be free to stream. As a professional musician, it's a risky move to eschew the relative safety of a record contract, but Chance has two things going for him: the outright quality of his music, and the loyalty of his fan base. It's often noted, acknowledging the declining relevance of the label system in the internet era, that one of the greatest remaining benefits of a record contract is the work of marketers and

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<sup>98</sup> Chance the Rapper. "No Problem." *Coloring Book*.

<sup>99</sup> Usher, 2006. p. 110.

promoters, who toil to get their clients' music on the radio and in our Spotify queues.

Using social media, Chance replaces their work with his own, by developing and sustaining a committed, intimate relationship with his fans.

Perhaps the fundamental act in building this relationship has been the act of “giving away” his music for free. Even without a label, Chance could have set up an independent online store through which to sell his music. However, *Coloring Book* was released concurrently via an exclusive streaming deal with Apple Music and a short-lived drop on the mixtape sharing site Datpiff. After two weeks of exclusivity in which Apple Music distributed the music independently and assumed the role of a record label in its own rite, *Coloring Book* expanded to other streaming sites, and the album was officially ours. To explain the economics of the scheme, Chance imperatively earned \$500,000 through the deal with Apple, meaning that the financial aspect was more or less comparable to an advance from a label.<sup>100</sup> However, Chance retained mechanical license, meaning the right to sell his music and receive royalties was exclusively his. In this way, it's apparent that Chance is not rejecting capitalism or ownership of music, but is merely striving for a system in which musicians wield more control over their creations.

Chance's modus operandi expresses a regard for his work as art rather than commodity, or so fans tend to believe, regardless of the respectable compensation he continues to earn. As an artifact without a price, Chance's work is not so much a product as he is a brand. Through social media and live appearances, Chance sells himself as a member of a community, first and foremost of Chicago, but also of his listeners. Without the

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<sup>100</sup> Coscarelli, Joe. “Chance the Rapper Say His Apple Music Deal Was Worth \$500,000.” *New York Times*, 17 Mar. 2017.



supportive arm of a label, it's up to Chance to sell himself, and he does so through technologies akin to those that distribute his music. Owing to the noncommercial status of his work, it's easier for Chance's fans to view themselves less as consumers and more as listeners and members of a community. Chance has monetized his art not through album releases but through touring, and it's up to these fans to attend his shows.

It's not hard to like Chance. He's an affable guy, he's got a friendly face, and hey, he gives away his music for free. However, it's important not to ignore the extent to which his image and reputation is a product of labor, and doesn't come about without vigorous internet-based self-promotion. Chance is a brand that he sells relentlessly under the guise of community building and hometown representation. This is not to allege any disingenuity, but merely that outside his music, Chance's work is promotion, and that his fans, as is the case with any artist, directly translate into income. Chance knows this, and tactfully uses technology to keep himself in the public eye.

For all this talk of techno-utopianism on the internet, it would be a mistake not to discuss at least some of the strands of authoritarianism to be found there. Perhaps first and foremost is the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, which updates the copyright law of previous decades for the digital era. However, the DMCA is predicated upon a contradiction. While it uses the template of copyright law to regulate transmissions as if they were physical commodities, it ignores the fact that transmissions do not actually copy. The DMCA uses the language of copyright to regulate transmissions, engendering a fiction that expresses some sort of continuous evolution among media from the physical

artifact to the invisible transmission.<sup>101</sup> However, digital signals are not like printed copies. Peter Lyman sums up the disparity: “Commodities are scarce because my consumption of them deprives you of their use; ownership of them is easily protected because they are physical things; and they are transparent because buyers know about their utility before purchase. Economists have names for each of these characteristics of commodities: rivalry, excludability and transparency. None is necessarily a characteristic of information.”

While digital information refuses to be treated as a physical commodity, the DMCA redefines it as such, and uses encryption to prohibit the unlicensed reproduction of copyrighted material. Just as copyright works to ensure the safety of the market, the DMCA envisions a digital future within liberal market parameters. However, while copyright makes allowances for fair use along educational grounds and similar exceptions, the DMCA makes no omissions. Instead, the DMCA renders information as a source of wealth, inaugurating a new form of inequality. However, there exists significant discourse regarding whether the DMCA actually protects business interests, or if it stifles growth and innovation. Manuel Castells regards information as a raw material that is continuously refined by technology, a notion reminiscent of sampling’s practice of refining preexisting art in a new context.<sup>102</sup> He supposes that the concept of “information flows” might replace the idea of the commodity, in recognition of the way that information moves, or should move, on the internet. If fluidity is the essence of information on the internet, then perhaps

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<sup>101</sup> Lyman, Peter. “Information Superhighways, Virtual Communities, and Digital Libraries: Information Society Metaphors as Political Rhetoric.” *Technological Visions: The Hopes and Fears That Shape New Technologies*, edited by Marita Sturken, Temple University Press, 2004, p. 204.

<sup>102</sup> Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Blackwell, 1996, p. 61.

the DMCA and its associated encryption are actually blocking the internet from reaching its full potential economic productivity.

It's possible that, if allowed access to a truly free market without protections for the intellectual property of corporations, information could cycle and transform, benefited by the labor of untold millions of prosumers. It's an interesting lens through which to view sampling – not as a process that exploits and leaches off the work of preceding artists, but of one that improves upon earlier commodities and increases their value in a new era. After all, did anyone really stop listening to Ray Charles's *I've Got a Woman*<sup>103</sup> when it showed up in Kanye West's *Gold Digger*?<sup>104</sup> Of course, this is a rationality that works within the market, and seeks to validate sampling on economically productive grounds. Regardless, it illuminates the shortsighted attitude of copyright and the DMCA, as well as the true emancipatory potential of the internet.

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<sup>103</sup> Charles, Ray. "I've Got a Woman." *Ray Charles*.

<sup>104</sup> West, Kanye. "Gold Digger." *Late Registration*.

# Conclusion

Hip-hop is an invitation – both to a listening public to start creating, and to a society to reassess its artistic values and notions about what art should and can be. It has the capacity to carry and communicate vitally political messages, and functions as a political outlet for those without access. Hip-hop and its identity as a product of remix is dependent on technology for its existence, but also uses technology as a medium through which to increase access to popular culture. Its exploitation of consumer technology gives it a quality of democratic participation, but its very central technique of sampling carries political significance, too. However, the internet represents a new era in its history, and, while a major force for change, has mostly succeeded in redefining the culture both through fragmentation, as well as by calcifying it as popular culture itself. The internet, with a culture all its own, has infected hip-hop, both through SoundCloud and more “traditional” streaming services, resulting in the genre’s next step.

While SoundCloud rap might be a fad (and it probably is), there’s no doubt that the internet will continue to provide the next iteration of hip-hop, until it’s assumed the same canonical status as jazz and rock n’ roll. Hip-hop has always been concerned with the future, both in a political sense and in a stylistic embrace of new sounds and aesthetics, and current events shed light on possible outlooks for this futuristic genre. On a technological front, an artifact of a previously hegemonic genre is having its worst year in recent memory. After a series of poor executive decisions coupled with years of declining sales, Gibson, a manufacturer of electric guitars that Danny Hakim calls “more than a company, a public

trust,” is currently the subject of bankruptcy rumors.<sup>105</sup> As recently as 20 years ago, before the cultural conquest of hip-hop, Gibson’s bankruptcy would have been unthinkable. Now, in a sonic culture pioneered by producers and DJs, the guitarist is no longer the object of the sort of idolization as was common in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Gibson’s chief executive, Henry Juskiewicz, puts it, “There are no guitar heroes anymore.” Hip-hop’s use of technology has, in effect, reoriented the entire shape of music production, playing a role in the decline of an American institution. By dictating the future of music creation, hip-hop has ensured its safety and success for years to come.

Culturally speaking, Kendrick Lamar represents perhaps the most significant incursion of hip-hop into the realm of high art. Recalling Dick Hebdige’s concerns regarding the recuperation of popular culture by the dominant class, Lamar’s recent Pulitzer Prize for *Damn*. fits into what *The New Yorker*’s Doreen St. Félix calls “the grander affected consecration of blackness in elite spaces.”<sup>106</sup> St. Félix is calling attention to a wider cultural trend in which high society, historically hostile to blackness, has begun to view black art with a new eye. Lamar is the first rapper to win a Pulitzer, signaling a historic moment both for rap and for the prize itself. Recalling Calmore’s elucidation of Critical Race Theory, in what might have the broadest implications for the reception of hip-hop, Pulitzer jurist and critic David Hajdu told *New York Times* journalist Joe Coscarelli that recognizing *Damn*. means recognizing that rap music “has value in its own terms, and not

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<sup>105</sup> Hakim, Danny. “Is Gibson, a Totem of Guitar Godhead, Headed for Chapter 11?” *The New York Times*, 30 Mar. 2018.

<sup>106</sup> Félix, Doreen St. “What Kendrick Lamar’s Pulitzer Means for Hip-Hop.” *The New Yorker*, 17 Apr. 2018.

just as a resource for use in a field that is more broadly recognized by the institutional establishment as serious or legitimate.”<sup>107</sup>

In a common refrain, St. Félix wonders whether Lamar’s accolade means that hip-hop has lost its edge. However, she comes to recognize him as the perfect representative figure for the genre in its current state. St. Félix calls him a “political gadfly” more than capable of using his art to address reality and its deformities, but also of engaging in highly lucrative commercial ventures, like the *Black Panther* soundtrack – “he is a literary virtuoso who understands the charisma needed to makes songs you can play in a club.” In essence, this is where hip-hop stands in 2018 – at the nexus of politics and capitalism. In answer to her aforementioned query, St. Félix feels that Lamar refuses to answer the question, his business ventures occluding outright political “edge.” However, I feel that, piloted by Lamar, hip-hop is entering a new phase of cultural osmosis in which capital domination only speaks to the accomplishment of its political goals. Represented by Lamar, hip-hop can both critique a flawed political-economic system, as well as invade it and point it towards a new shore. Hip-hop is big business, and politically speaking, that’s not a bad thing.

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<sup>107</sup> Coscarelli, Joe. “Kendrick Lamer Wins Pulitzer in ‘Big Moment for Hip-Hop.’” *The New York Times*, 16 Apr. 2018.

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