Meaning and membership: samples in rap music, 1979–1995

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Abstract

This paper uses art works as the units of analysis to examine the constitution of a musical art world. I utilize data from rap music – a successful genre with a non-traditional musical score comprised of lyrics, music and samples of other recordings. In particular, I analyze the use of 750 musical samples in 473 rap songs that appeared on the weekly Billboard Top 100 R&B Singles charts from 1979 to 1995. Valuation of rap music rests in part on qualities of sample use. In particular, the qualities of samples include the identifiability of source material, the cost of its use, technical amenability to the process (pragmatic distinction), and musical or political attributes (symbolic distinction). These valuations tell listeners how to sort rappers into artistic circles, or sub-genres. These valuations and signals shift over time, as do the boundaries of these artistic circles. In sum, rap artists use samples to assert meaning and identity, just as other artists use literary reference or allegory. This study offers novel data for studying meaning and membership in creative industries.

1. Introduction

Since White and White (1965) sociologists of culture have emphasized the networked character of art worlds (Anheier et al., 1995; Becker, 1982; Faulkner, 1983; Fine, 1992; Giuffre, 1999; Kadushin, 1976; White, 1993). In networked art worlds, groups of artists explore the expression of certain ideas; aid each other in the execution and perfection of form; and share advice, gossip, practice and performance space, and fans. Networking is a sorting process wherein homophilous tastes are matched. It is also a productive process, as artists and audience members manifest tastes in order to gain membership to one or more groups. These artistic circles provide a context for competition and cooperation among artists, and they produce in part the modes of apperception, or distinctions, used to evaluate...
art works. Artists and audience members within these circles teach each other what is “valuable” about a particular performance. Distinction operates on and within art works, and some of these distinctions adhere in the art works themselves.

Becker (1982: 36) argued that “by observing how an art world makes...distinctions...we can understand much of what goes on in that world.” How do sociologists observe art worlds making distinctions? Surveys, participant observation, ethnography have all been utilized to tap into how individuals and groups perceive difference. However, at the heart of how we think about distinction are cultural meanings embedded in the objects themselves. In this article, I model data from rap music production that directly measures these cultural meanings.

In rap music, samples – prerecorded sonic performances that are subsequently used in new songs – function as some of rap’s musical notes and capture processes of distinction. As part of rap’s musical score, samples document patterns of distinction between groups of musicians. Rappers use particular samples to distinguish themselves from, and draw similarities to, other artists. In this way, rappers create musical links to others in their artistic circle. Consequently, an examination of the patterning of particular samples in rap songs depicts an art world by utilizing the links among artworks themselves.

2. Samples in rap music

Samples played a role in the earliest form of rap music production. In the early 1970s, “break dancers” created their style from freestyle movements made during the instrumental breaks between choruses of disco songs, but DJs (i.e., disc jockeys) working at clubs and parties soon realized the short breaks (several seconds long) limited dancers’ performances. Rap DJ Kool Herc solved the problem one night in 1974: “I’m watching the crowd and I was seeing everybody on the sidelines waiting for particular breaks in the records. I said, let me put a couple of these records together, that got breaks in them...Place went berserk. Loved it” (quoted in Brewster and Broughton, 2000: 208). The first break-extending technique was to play two copies of the break, one-after-the-other, on two turntables, which created a “loop,” named after the cyclical and continuous experience of sound achieved by successful cutting. Rapper Jazzy Jay noted, “We’d find these beats, these heavy percussive beats, that would drive the hip-hop people on the dance floor to breakdance. A lot of times it would be a two-second spot, a drum beat, a drum break, and we’d mix that back and forth, extend it, make it twenty minutes long” (quoted in Baker, 1988: 199).

Recording looped breaks was the genesis of the rap sample. In contemporary recorded rap, artists typically select one track (e.g., a single instrument’s performance) or a particular portion of a song (e.g., multiple tracks of instruments) and translate this into digital code using a computer or comparable device. The sound can then be looped ad infinitum in the new recording or used at its original length.

Sampling allows the artist a unique opportunity to have relative control over how recognizable the reference will be to the audience. In early rap music, DJs hoped familiar songs cut up into a sonic mélangé would move the crowd, or they acted as musical
archivists for whom the relative rarity of their samples was a mark of distinction. Recorded rap similarly offers the artist an opportunity to betray or disguise the source of their samples. With digital samples, the audio technician has the opportunity to edit sounds electronically, manipulating pitch and temporal or tonal qualities in virtually every way imaginable. Therefore, it is rap artists’ prerogative to preserve or “disguise” the source material. By allowing the listener to recognize the original artist, song, and even the lyric of a particular sample, rap artists build an interpretative link between themselves and the sample, the sample’s artist (including their political or social contribution), and the sample’s sub-genre.

3. Data

The data for this article consist of rap songs and the samples within them. I collected all rap songs that appeared on the weekly Top 100 R&B Billboard charts between January 1, 1979 and December 31, 1995. These charts detail the most successful singles (i.e., hit songs) in a given week in terms of sales and radio airplay. Designations of hit songs as rap (as distinct from other forms of r&b) were taken, in part, from Whitburn (1996). In this text, some r&b hits are marked as having rap interludes; they are designated thusly: “featured performer MC X (rap).” This clearly indicated a rap within the song, and it was sufficient for inclusion in my population. Designations were also taken from the shelving classifications (i.e., recommendations for placement in retail shops) listed on the album in which hit songs were located. If “rap” or “hip hop” was among the first two genres in the shelving list, all the songs that made the Top 100 chart from that album were included in my population. Finally, several rap music experts were asked to determine the genre of ambiguous songs. The first rap song to chart (“Rappers Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang) did so in October 1979. Therefore, I avoided problems associated with left-censored data (i.e., where events of interest occur before the time-frame of analysis).

Each of the songs included in the population of charting rap was given a sub-genre designation. These sub-genres are marked by a combination of lyrical, vocal, and musical attributes, in combination with the record label and geographic location of the producers – thereby reflecting the full compliment of attributes artists, marketers, programmers and fans use to make these same distinctions. There were 13 rap sub-genres during these 16 years: booty rap, crossover rap, don rap, dirty south rap, east coast gangsta rap, g funk, jazz rap, new jack swing, parody rap, pimp rap, race rap, rock rap, and west coast gangsta rap (for a detailed discussion of this coding process, see Lena, 2003).

The 1,333 rap songs in the dataset that charted between 1979 and 1995 were then examined for the samples they include. Whitburn (1996) occasionally included information on the samples used in rap singles, noting the sample’s source song and artist for approximately 16% of songs in the dataset. To build a more complete dataset, I triangulated

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1 Celebrated DJs like Afrika Bambaataa had the most eclectic breaks. Rapper and DJ Grandmaster Flash claimed that he was often unable to identify the obscure records Afrika Bambaataa (the “King of Records”) would play. Some DJs would compete with other DJs by “covering up” their finds: they would remove any identifying labels on the record discs and/or would replace the labels with those from other discs to confuse the competition (Brewster and Broughton, 2000).
this information with that from a website documenting samples in rap. The samples dataset recorded the genre of each source song – which is distinct from the genres of the charting rap songs – using the shelving classifications listed on recorded music, and then collapsed some of the genres. Eight genre styles of sample sources were represented: soul, funk and r&b; jazz; pop and rock; blues; comedy; old school rap; reggae; and various (e.g., traditional pop, salsa, electronica).

Of rap songs that entered the Billboard charts, 63% (i.e., those with information on sample sources and artists) were included in the samples dataset. This dataset contains 205 rap artists and 473 of their songs. Within these hit songs, there are 750 samples that represent 290 source artists responsible for those samples. The analysis of this data was structured into ten time periods: 1979 to 1983, 1984 to 1987, and yearly thereafter until termination in 1995. Without this disaggregation, the patterns evident after 1987 would be far too dense for analysis (see Lena, 2003).

Some of the data on samples was generated by fans themselves (see footnote 2), so it is likely that there is some selection bias. It could be the case that a fan of a particular artist – say, James Brown, who has an extraordinarily high number of songs listed in the dataset – aggressively documented the use of his work in rap music and contributed to the website’s listing of samples. There may also be selection bias in the documentation of rap songs containing samples as particular artists had disproportionately large number of samples documented. The analysis of trends in sampling was affected by this bias. However, it should only impact the magnitude of their importance. The analysis of trends rests on the relationship of artists through sampling, so the potential harm of bias increases if key relationships are not identified because of esoteric or disguised sampling of the source material. However, the likelihood of this harm is diminished because rap artists often utilized samples where the source is easy to detect, as a platform for distinction.

4. Legal, financial and political concerns with the use of samples in rap music

Patterns in the use of samples in rap music cannot speak to all of the legal, financial and political constraints facing rappers. Artists must navigate legal requirements and corporate bureaucracies successfully in order to engage in the work of artistic distinction through sampling.

When rap was first recorded, the limited visibility of the genre, the relatively small profits involved, and the high legal costs of pursuing the illegal sampling of copyrighted songs made enforcing copyright impractical (Rose, 1994a). Moreover, some catalogue owners believed that samples could re-open the market for some older recording artists (e.g., stimulate sales of their past albums), producing a new profit stream. However, record companies began to see that the biggest profits would be made by requiring rap artists to pay royalties to copyright holders. This made the use of samples prohibitively expensive for some producers. Carmen Ashhurst-Watson, from Rush Communications, explained: “If a rap producer had a choice between paying legal fees to clear samples or cleaning up

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2 http://www.the-breaks.com/, accessed November 1, 2003. I secured the owner’s permission to use this data. Regular visitors contribute to the website and this information is vetted by the site’s owner.
your last demo in the studio to make the music better, they will put the money into the record. It was a while before people even started chasing rappers for sample clearance. Since they had so little money to work with, they couldn’t see investing it in sample clearances” (quoted in Rose, 1994b: 130). The cost and time necessary for making the accounting of and payment of sample licenses based on the royalties from rap songs are overwhelming for many rap producers. Faulty execution often caused copyright infringement and the attendant costs.3

The legal use of samples is complicated by invocations of the “fair use” provisions of the Copyright Act of 1976, which the courts interpreted in a seemingly contradictory fashion in cases involving rapper Biz Markie and rap group 2 Live Crew.4 But even when rappers use samples legally, the execution of provisions governing use is complex for several reasons. First, samples use not only the song’s music and lyrics but the sound recording itself, so permissions are required from the owner of the song’s copyright (typically a music publishing house) and the owner of the recording copyright (typically a record company) (Krasilovsky and Shemel, 2000). Searching out the owners of samples can be time and resource intensive. Second, fee determinations for licensees are increasingly complex (see Collins, 1998). Paying these fees can be equally as complex. While rap artists can pay their sample royalties by allocating a portion of their own royalties for that purpose, this is linked to a particular procedure to calculate that fee – where that percentage is multiplied by their royalty rate and prorated by the ten-song standard contract limit (Rose, 1994a). If rights to the desired sample are prohibitively expensive, alternate cheaper samples can be secured, and when retroactive licenses are impossible to secure, records using unlicensed samples must be removed from sale at great expense. All of these complexities function as disincentives for the use of samples in rap music production.

Rappers predominantly sample from African-American artists who recorded in the 1950s and 1960s (Rose, 1994a), a time during which the record industry has been described as a “colonial system” because of the gross fiscal advantage and explicit racism exacted on these artists by their record companies and handlers (Kelley, 1999). Often record

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3 A sample of “I’m Ready” appeared in rap group Tag Team’s single “Whoop! There it is!” The owners of the Tag Team song, Bellmark Records and Alvertis Isbell, had secured a license to use the sample, and they made an initial payment of $75,000. However, the license stipulates that the licensee must pay a mechanical royalty to the copyright owner for every sale of the song and album and any public performances of the song. In this case (Emergency Music Inc. v. Isbell; 95 Civ 5182 (S.D.N.Y.)), music publisher Emergency Music sued for copyright infringement when Bellmark neglected to make subsequent accountings of the sales of the single using the sample and payments based on those sales. The group was ultimately responsible for $707,766.47 in damages, costs and attorney fees, and incurred a permanent injunction (Collins, 1998).

4 Warner Brothers Records, owners of the copyright for Gilbert O’ Sullivan’s song “Alone Again (Naturally),” claimed rapper Biz Markie’s use of the song on his album I Need A Haircut (Cold Chillin’ Records, 1991) violated U.S. Copyright laws. The court (in Grand Upright Music Inc. v. Warner Bros. Records (780 F. Supp. 182 (S.D.N.Y., 1991)) found in Warner Brothers’ favor because Markie had used the appropriated material for commercial gain, imposed damages, and referred the case to the U.S. Attorney for possible prosecution as criminal infringement (Krasilovsky and Shemel, 2000). However, in 1994, the Supreme Court invoked a different component of “fair use” provisions to protect Miami booty rap group 2 Live Crew’s parody of Roy Orbison’s “Oh! Pretty Woman” (Monument, 1964) from charges of copyright infringement. In this case, Luther R. Campbell aka Luke Skywalke, et al., Petitioners v. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc. (510 U.S. 569), the court determined that the audience for the Orbison and Crew versions of “Pretty Woman” were substantially different and, therefore, the 2 Live Crew parody was protected.
companies, not black artists, own the publishing rights to these early songs, and fees from using these songs as rap samples go to the owner of the copyright (Rose, 1994a). Even when the original artist also holds publishing rights, the record company generally retains about 94% of the proceeds from album sales; sampling usage fees are taken or received out of the remaining 6% (Rose, 1994a). Ironically, sampling from these artists is both a tribute to their genius and a further “colonization” of their work. Some older artists, though, prioritize intergenerational musical exchange and what they view as “fair profit sharing.” For example, George Clinton released a six-volume collection called Sample Some of Disc, Sample Some of D.A.T., a compilation of samples from his large body of work as a solo artist and with funk collectives Parliament and Funkadelic. The collection was designed for rap artists and producers, and included a “how-to” sampling guide and a sliding scale fee system determined by record sales.

Many assert rap’s potential as a countervailing force against the long tradition of economic and social marginalization of black artists in America (Kelley, 1999; Porcello, 1991; Rose, 1994a). In this framework, “rap musicians have come to use the sampler in an oppositional manner which contests capitalist notions of public and private property by employing previously tabooed modes of citation” (Porcello, 1991: 82). Positing rap’s revolutionary potential rationalizes the continued development of parallel production systems in music; however, it obscures the legal, economic and logistical factors that inhibit sampling.

5. Pragmatic and symbolic distinction

Rap artists want to use the “best” samples for the least cost, but the valuation of samples is a complex process that extends beyond cost and includes sonic, personal, and political decisions. In this section, I examine the patterning of sample use and evaluate how these patterns relate to mechanisms of distinction. These mechanisms of distinction are how rap artists navigate membership in artistic circles. After documenting general patterns in the use of samples over time, I will examine the pragmatic and symbolic dimensions of distinction.

Table 1 shows the number of samples, source artists and songs, rap artists and rap songs in which samples appeared. The number of samples in rap songs that reached the charts rose from 1979 to 1989 and from 1991 to 1993, and the number declined in 1990, 1994 and 1995.

In general, the number of source artists and songs, and rap artists and songs, kept pace with the number of samples in charting rap songs (see Fig. 1). However, when the number of samples was rapidly growing (from 1984 to 1989 and from 1991 to 1993), the number of source artists and songs did not match the pace of growth. During these periods, there was relatively more consensus among rappers on what songs and artists to sample.

5 However, artist advocacy groups and independent entertainment lawyers have won back the catalogue and publishing rights for many older artists from record companies. Sampling from these black artists, who did not receive a fair share of revenue from early copyrights but now benefit from sampling income, does allow rappers to “pay back” their musical ancestors (Rose, 1994a).
Table 1
Basic statistics of samples dataset

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Samples</th>
<th>Source artists</th>
<th>Source songs</th>
<th>Rap artists</th>
<th>Rap songs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1979–1983</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>1984–1987</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>34</td>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>36</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>53</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How did this consensus emerge? In the following sections, I will discuss consensus on samples that were deemed technically easy and desirable to use (pragmatic distinction) and samples of particular artists and songs that were deemed as important to use (symbolic distinction).

5.1. Pragmatic distinction

There are particular kinds of samples that are well suited to creating “phat beats,” or funky, kinetic instrumental sections. A rap producer would likely characterize these samples in a rap song as technically amenable and desirable. I call this practice pragmatic
**distinction** – the term describes samples that are chosen for inclusion because there are pragmatic reasons for sampling.

Instrumental breaks between verses or drum solos are cast as particularly amenable to sampling. Likewise, any portion of a source song where the original song’s engineer stripped away some of the layers of instrumentation are seen as easy to sample. Funk and soul music are rich with these instrumental sections, and thus they offer more and “better” sampling opportunities than other source genres. For example, four rap artists in the dataset (Eric B. and Rakim, Run-D.M.C., Sweet Tee and PM Dawn) sampled “Ashley’s Roachclip” by The Soul Searchers. Although The Searchers’ work is little known, they did chart two minor hits: “Think” and “We the People.” If a song from The Soul Searchers were being chosen simply for its name recognition, “Ashley’s Roachclip” would be a poor choice given the greater popularity of other songs by the group. This particular song was sampled because it was technically amenable to the process. The sample that rappers used is of a solo drumbeat positioned between verses of the song, making it an extraordinarily easy track to “lift” from the original recording and “place” within the rap singles. As evidence of this, the same beat has appeared in all of the following songs: Milli Vanilli’s (1989) “Girl You Know It’s True,” “Jack the Ripper” (L.L. Cool J., 1988), “Unbelievable” (EMF, 1991), “Choose” (Color Me Badd, 1994), and variations of the beat appeared in “Keep on Movin’” (Soul II Soul, 1989), “Tom’s Diner” (DNA featuring Suzanne Vega, 1990), and “I Don’t Wanna Fight” (Tina Turner, 1993).

Older funk and soul songs often also offer what are deemed qualitatively “better” sampling opportunities as these samples add a unique texture due to the particular conditions under which they were recorded. In this sense, these songs offer samples that are more technically desirable. For example, the rich drum tones found in these genres are particularly desirable to rap music creators. Bill Stephaney, member of the Bomb Squad and one of the most influential rap producers, explained what rap producers are looking for:

[Rap producers] hate digital drums. They like their snares to sound as if they’ve been recorded in a large live room, with natural skins and lots of reverb. They’ve tried recording with live drums. But you really cannot replicate those sounds. Maybe it’s the way engineers mike, maybe it’s the lack of baffles in the room. Who knows? But that’s why these kids have to go back to the old records. (quoted in Rose, 1994a: 78)

While live musicians could record “fresh” drum sounds in a recording studio, it is difficult to imitate the signature texture of now-outdated sound recording technology. Particular recording studios (and even certain rooms therein), certain recording machines, instruments, and performers have a sonic signature that is unique and desirable, and these are often impossible to imitate. These qualities are central to the rap producer’s or sound engineer’s craft and are central to rap’s sonic force (Rose, 1994a).

Rap producers learned about the limits and opportunities that contemporary and historical recording technology offered to them, but as I will show below, by using this source material they also paid tribute to their forbearers’ perfection of form and substance. Appreciating the instrumentation and recording technology of funk and soul songs augments rappers’ construction of a sonic history of black music, and experts argue that this history is one of the reasons why there are so many older samples in rap music. There are symbolic reasons to sample in addition to technical ones. The idea that rap producers
can perfect their craft by sampling from funk and soul music is illustrated in the following statement by a rap producer: “I don’t know how they made those old funk and soul records. We don’t know how they miked the drums. But we can learn from their records” (Rose, 1994a: 79).

5.2. Symbolic distinction

Symbolic distinction is the practice of linking a sense of history and historical accomplishments to rap songs through the use of particular genres, artists, and songs. This “versioning,” a process that revives collective history, is a characteristic of Caribbean and African-American music (Smitherman, 1997). Versioning means source songs take “on a new life and a new meaning in a fresh context” (Hebdige, 1987: 14; see also Brewster and Broughton, 2000: 116–122). The sampling practices of rappers “represents a conscious preoccupation with artistic continuity and connection to Black cultural roots” (Smitherman, 1997: 16).

Asserting meaning and identity through sampling was produced, in part, by using the music of particular African-American artists. The recycling of music through samples in rap provides sonic references to both African-American music and musical memory in general: “The coded familiarity of the rhythms and ‘hooks’ that rap samples from other Black music (especially funk and soul music) carries with it the power of Black collective memory” (Rose, 1991: 286). Rap lyrics also testify to this. In Statsasonic’s single “Talkin’ All That Jazz” (Tommy Boy Records, 1988), the artists explicitly discuss the earlier sampling of James Brown by rap artists Eric B. and Rakim in their song “I Got Soul” (1987). In sampling Brown’s work (and others like him), they note, rap revived a musical genre that “people could have forgot.” Music that has grown “old” was threatened both by the ravages of time and also by the actions of those who would “erase our music.” While this source material was easy to sample in many cases, samples preserve the unique and technically accomplished performances that may have been otherwise be unappreciated, or “forgotten.” Sampling is a way of paying homage and a means of archival research (Aaron, 1989; Bartlett, 1994), as “[the] hip-hop archive serves as a miniaturized repository for vast interactive historical material” (Bartlett, 1994: 647).6

Sampling “indicates the importance of collective identities and group histories” (Rose, 1994a: 5), because rappers sample particular artists to produce artistic circles and draw distinctions among these circles. Particular artists were sampled more often than others, and the most sampled source artists in the dataset were James Brown (with 115 samples), Parliament/Funkadelic (70), Sly and the Family Stone (36), Kool and the Gang (27), Zapp (21), the J.B.’s (20), Lyn Collins (17), the Honeydrippers (13) and the Isley Brothers (13). Patterns of preferences for sampling particular songs and artists evidence one form of symbolic distinction. A large minority of rappers, regardless of their other stylistic alliances, expressed a preference for sampling from the catalogue of James Brown,

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6The same has been said of other African-American musical genres, like jazz. This tradition is quite a bit older than jazz; Lawrence Levine (1977: 196) quoted Newman White from his 1928 American Negro Folksongs: “The notes of the songs in my whole collection, show nothing so clearly as the tendency of Negro folk-song to pick up material from any source and, by changing it or using it in all sorts of combinations, to make it definitely its own.”
George Clinton and their associated performance groups. This practice paid tribute to the musical, social and political accomplishments of these artists. By sampling these particular source artists, rappers signified their own location in black musical history and their desire to preserve and reinvigorate this music that was important to the African-American historical experience in general.

James Brown and George Clinton – two of the most sampled artists – are also two of the most accomplished and influential black artists of the twentieth century. Both were recording in the mid-1950s Clinton formed his first group, The Parliaments, in 1955; Brown had his first hit with The Flames in the mid-1950s with “Please, Please, Please” (Federal/King). Both worked alternately in the genres of funk and soul, even though Brown is immortalized as the “Godfather of Soul” and Clinton is “Dr. Funkenstein.” Rappers sampled from both Clinton and Brown as early as the second period (1984–1987). Collectively, the groups of artists associated with Clinton and Brown were sampled 258 times, and they represent 34.4% of the total number of samples in this data.

Beyond music with a funky sound and richly textured, easy-to-sample drum beats, James Brown’s music represents a political stance. In the 1960s and 1970s, Brown’s “new soul” reflected the populist concerns of the black, urban working class. Brown was, for many, the artistic guru of the Black Power movement, and many of his songs transmitted a history of black social protest to a new generation, particularly “Say It Loud (I’m Black and I’m Proud).” His records “had all the good feeling of the March on Washington, and the street cachet that March never had” (Marcus, 1997: 70).

However, many felt that Brown’s “I’m Black and I’m Proud” (and the ubiquitous dashikis of the 1960s) promoted a superficial articulation of black pride that superceded, replaced, or obscured real political strategies that were needed to address the African-American condition. Instead of promoting freedom for black culture in America, these cultural products illuminated the limits of black political expression (Neal, 1999: 61).7 Soul artists – with their peers in jazz, funk, rock ’n’ roll, and dance music – engaged in what some would interpret as the mass commodification of the black protest tradition (see Gilroy, 2000, for example).

In almost every time period analyzed in the rap dataset, citations of Brown’s work were used by a large group of rappers, as if the use of Brown samples were the beams on which the architecture of rap sampling rested. (However, in 1994, only five rap songs used samples from Brown, but samples from other funk and soul performers were also absent). Despite Brown’s complicated political heritage, sampling his work “reflects the way in which rap music capitalizes on Black cultural expression as a scaffold for resistance rhetoric” (Smitherman, 1997:16).

The funk tradition that stemmed from George Clinton formed the second, parallel family tree from which rappers sampled heavily. Clinton, a staff worker at Motown Records, penned “I’ll Bet You,” a song the Jackson 5 performed on the album ABC (Motown, 1970). Clinton crafted a new music he called “technofunk” and created a funk collective, Parliament/Funkadelic, in which the same artists worked together but the two groups were signed to two different record labels. The collective aimed to create a “Black

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7 This mimics the later critical preoccupation with depictions of conspicuous consumption in rap music, as described elsewhere (Lena, 2003).
Nationalist Urban Utopia” (Neal, 1999: 114). This aim is perhaps best represented in their single “Chocolate City,” a euphemism for black urban spaces.

The work of George Clinton as a solo artist, as a member of both Parliament and Funkadelic, and as a mentor for Bootsy Collins is of extraordinary significance to rappers. His use of rubato (e.g., loose adherence to tempo) rapping on the funk songs “P-funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)” and “Chocolate City” foreshadowed rap music through its street politics and musical characteristics – such as electronic effects, bass-heavy arrangements and slower tempo. Moreover, George Clinton layered his songs with multiple overdubs of vocal tracks, a practice that rappers would later imitate.

James Brown and George Clinton often appear in rap samples, as do other artists closely related to them. Brown and Clinton worked with many artists, in part due to their long recording careers, and many of these performers formed their own groups or recorded as solo artists. These artists worked in a style consistent with the sounds of Clinton and Brown and manifest their own artistic circles. James Brown’s co-performers – The J.B.’s, Bobby Byrd, Lyn Collins, and Bootsy Collins (and his Rubber Band) – all appear in rap samples. Similarly, Clinton’s fellow performers in Parliament, Funkadelic, Zapp and Bootsy Collins (who performed with both Clinton and Brown) appear in the samples dataset.

Symbolic distinction can also take another form: the refusal of artists to sample particular songs, artists, or source genres. While a large minority of charting rap songs include audible references to James Brown, George Clinton, and related artists, Rapper Posdnus from group De La Soul rejected the practice, saying, “I think it’s crazy how a lot of rappers are just doing the same thing over and over – Parliament/Funkadelic/James Brown – and all that” (Dery, 1990: 70). Posdnus’s statement illustrates another dimension of symbolic distinction. By refusing to use certain popular samples, De La Soul differentiates and circumscribes their artistic circle. In fact, the data show that De La Soul and other members of the “jazz” rap sub-genre were especially likely to look outside of the James Brown and George Clinton catalogs for sampling material, and in doing so, they distinguished themselves from those rappers who relied heavily on Brown and Clinton samples.

Certain rap sub-genres were less likely to use particular source genres. Some genres of source songs were little used in general. For example, reggae (4 samples), comedy and various (5) and blues (6) were the source genres least utilized as samples in charting rap songs. Additionally, only 2% (23 samples) of the samples were of old school rap music and 8% (73) were from the rock and pop genres. Ninety-seven percent of the samples used in charting rap songs were from jazz, old school rap, rock and pop, and soul, funk, and r&b. But there was variation among rap sub-genres on which source genres were used. For example, while “race rap” was the only sub-genre to include samples from all eight source genres in any given time period, they only sampled from four genres (jazz, soul, funk and r&b) more than twice. This suggests that artistic consensus on source material was least

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8 The dominance of these source genres is both a product of the location of pragmatic samples in songs from these genres and the presence of songs and artists upon whom rappers have conferred the power of symbolic distinction.
strict for this rap sub-genre. Race rappers seem to have taken the opportunity to experiment more with sampling, particularly in their use of the least popular source genres for rap in general.⁹

The dominance of certain source genres within rap sub-genre samples reflects a geographic dimension of distinction. “East coast gangsta” rappers were the second most common users of pop and rock samples. Their use of rock and pop samples suggests the link, both geographic and stylistic, between “rock rap” (which also used samples predominantly from rock sources) and east coast gangsta rap (see Lena, 2003 for more on their geographic and performative similarities).

The data do not permit me to gauge if rap artists circumscribed all the rap sub-genres through the practice of sampling from particular source genres; however, there is evidence that particular rap sub-genres used this mechanism to bound their artistic circle.¹⁰ The data suggest genre-level symbolic distinction for charting rappers, but also variation at the level of the song. In particular, 1990 was a transition year; before that date, song variety was on the rise and it seems the increasing popularity of the genre and the practice of sampling encouraged rappers to incorporate never-before-sampled songs into their musical scores. Taking account of the number of songs in the market does attenuate the relationship between the number of rap songs with samples and the number of source songs from which their samples have been taken. This suggests that consensus on symbolic distinction did develop, most strongly after 1990. Perhaps rules governing pragmatic and symbolic distinction were transmitted more effectively after the groups coalesced and a critical mass of rappers began engaging in similar sampling practices. Perhaps, however, rap music’s emphasis on sampling may similarly have exhausted the sonic resources by 1990 (see also Brewster and Broughton, 2000). As promoter and rap radio program host Ron Nelson said, “The real problem I find limiting rap is the fact that rappers are running out of break beats. Every rap song is based on a sample of an old song, but all the old songs are getting used up. James Brown has been used over and over, and it’s getting almost impossible to do something different” (quoted in Potter, 1989: F1).

Another notable element at the level of the song is the appearance of the first sub-group of three different rap groups who simultaneously sampled the same two source songs. In

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⁹ One aspect of race rap production that surely affected broad sampling patterns was the longevity of the sub-genre on the Billboard charts. Race rap was also the sub-genre style to produce the largest number of additional sub-genre styles (east and west coast gangsta, don, jazz, and it played a role in the development of pimp, booty, and g funk rap). It is likely the case that while still working in the race rap sub-genre, artists who would soon form these new sub-genre groups began to experiment with many aspects of form and substance, like source genres and sampling.

¹⁰ The collapse of the soul, funk and r&b genres into a single category prevented me from evaluating the contention that, for example, “west coast gangsta” rap primarily sampled from funk music. I would note, however, that west coast gangsta rap sampled 29 songs from funk, soul and r&b music. This particular peak in sampling from these genres, in addition to the general disposition to use this source material, does indicate that a disaggregated coding system would demonstrate the large-scale use of funk by these rappers. While this is the best data source to capture sampling before copyright regulations systematized the collection of this information and thus to best capture the early dynamics of sampling in rap, in the future, researchers should obtain data from sampling clearing houses. Although such data would not capture sampling before 1991, and are gathered by a number of different organizations requiring excessive data cleaning, this is the best available source to extend the present study’s findings.
1994, the Power of Zeus and the Whatnauts became the first groups to be sampled by three of the same artists at the same time. Three groups – Nas, a Tribe Called Quest, and Smif and Wesson – all sampled the songs “Sorcerer of Isis (The Ritual of the Mole),” and “Why Can’t People Be Colors Too?” The former is a highly sought-after recording among rap producers, break beat enthusiasts and disk jockeys because this song opens with a long solo drumbeat that is funky and catchy, making it easy for producers to sample. These findings lend evidence to the contention that rappers could practice symbolic distinction and pragmatic distinction simultaneously, and that a consensus about source artists could emerge among groups of rappers on both of these dimensions relatively quickly.

6. Conclusion: of art objects, artistic circles, and the study of culture

How can sociologists examine the construction of networked art worlds using signals embedded in art works? At present, conventional sociological methods rely on reports organized by participants or observers of an art world (artists, gatekeepers, consumers and sociologists) and delivered to us via surveys, interviews, and observation. Datasets of musical scores provide excellent new opportunities to extend the field into what is conventionally viewed as the musicological realm.

Art worlds produce aesthetic valuations, and some of these adhere in the work itself. Valuation of rap music rests in part on qualities of sample use. In rap, we consider the opacity of the source material, its cost, its contribution to the fair sharing of profits with older musicians, the archival research involved, its technical amenability to and desirability for the sampling process (pragmatic distinction), and its historical equivalences (symbolic distinction). These valuations aid the artist or group in signaling sub-genre identity. Through sampling practices, rappers tell listeners to which artistic circles they belong. These valuations and signals shift over time, as do the members of these artistic circles and their aesthetic values. Samples help rap artists not only to make what they consider to be better music but also to assert meaning and identity.

Most art worlds use their products to signal meaning and membership, and thus the model here can and should be applied to other creative realms. Other musical genres use samples (e.g., electronica, house, jazz) and provide excellent sites for comparative analysis. Several creative arts use a pastiche of source and original material in the way sonic samples are used in rap. A few of many examples are the allegorical or literal references to other literature in novels, the use of identifiable matter in collage, and the direct citation of other works in fine artists’ reinterpretation of poses, lighting, etc. Some art worlds will require more careful classifications of their “samples,” but the opportunity to move the sociology of music and culture forward into new terrain is too appealing to neglect.

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