Getting Off at the 13th Floor: Rap Genius and Archiving 21st Century Black Cultural Memory

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In his verse on Goodie Mob's song "Thought Process," rapper Andre "3000" Benjamin declares, "I got off at the 13th floor/when they told me there wasn't one." The imagery of the 13th floor, a phantom space attached to misfortune and paranoia, is reimagined by Benjamin to signify his transcendence of others' expectations of his (self) awareness. Of course, Benjamin and his rhyming partner Antwan "Big Boi" Patton's hip hop moniker Outkast builds upon the intentional (mis)use of hip hop's margins to establish their brand of storytelling. From this perspective, the 13th floor gauges Outkast's brand of life on the margins as normal. Yet the imagery of Benjamin's voluntary dismount to hip hop's 13th floor can also be used to seek out alternative spaces where hip hop sensibilities reside. The fluidity of place and experience that the 13th floor metaphor embodies is useful in thinking about the Internet and its hand in constructing hip hop's identity politics in the 21st century. Although a highly accessible and popular space, the Internet is also capable of being a phantom commu-

nity, allowing infringed and marginalized narratives to co-exist with the status quo.

The Internet, like hip hop, reflects America's current social-cultural landscape as a complicated maneuver of race, place, and identity. As Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki aver, "the media operate[s] both as barometer of cultural integration and as [a] potential accelerator either to cohesion or to further cultural separation and political conflict" (206). It is through Entman and Rojecki's contextualization of media as a cultural litmus test of America's social-racial conflicts and anxieties that I render the Internet as a messy intellectual space. Seemingly concrete markers of race, class, and gender problematically collapse. Like hip hop, the fickleness of the Internet—wavering based on what is popular, profitable, and readily identified—further speaks to its position as a gray space of popular expression and social consciousness. Thus, my reading of the Internet and its potential as a hip hop archival space is grounded in its use as a gathering space of experiences, exchanging of ideas, conflicts, cultural expression, and witnessing. Extending Guthrie Ramsey's construction of music as a reservoir of cultural memory, digital hip hop archives serve as a working cultural reservoir of memory that documents a post-civil rights black identity in ways that entertain and offer up dominant upheavals of black identity that do not neatly situate into discourses currently in place about (black) American culture.

Hip Hop's digital imprint is ripe for investigation as a site of its shifting cultural aesthetics and performance. Technology—more specifically, social media—and hip hop overlap as spaces of popular opinion and identity. Consider the popularity of Twitter. Hip hop artists are able to engage their fans and

each other in short 140 character bursts. They are also able to plug their latest project for sale. The mechanics of tweeting parallel the construction of a rhyme – word choice, count, and delivery. Tweets, like a freestyle, are a reflection of the user's ability to quickly engage the topic or person at hand and sell themselves to their audience. A rapper's twitter feed is an archive of their digital "bars" and ability to remain fresh and relevant. It is also a public record of the artists' attempt to write herself or himself into a larger dialogue taking place about industry, race, and performance in digital spaces. Fans' engagement with hip hop artists via social media grounds the use of digital archives as performative and commodified spaces. Twitter timelines reflect a larger invoice of new media's role in hip hop's frequent transitions between art and enterprise. The sinew that attaches these seemingly oppositional expectations is hip hop's commodification as a cultural memory.

Hip Hop's status as a collective identity and memory resonates in social media as group forum discussion boards, or online periodicals like *AllHipHop* and *HipHopDX*. Yet the formal work of documenting hip hop's poetry—rap lyrics—takes place in lyrical archives like OOHLA (Original Hip Hop Lyric Archive) and the lyric annotation site Rap Genius. Online hip hop archives extend Imani Perry's metaphor of hip hop as "the juke joint gone public" in by grouping rap lyrics as a public juke box (6). The juke joint is a semi-hidden yet public meeting place of the less-than-respectable and visceral blues experience. Hip hop's initial service as what Tricia Rose labels a "contemporary stage for the theater for the powerless" updates the juke joint's purpose and amplifies the black working class experience once it crosses over into mainstream American popular culture (100). Like its Blues predecessor,

rap music initially exists as a response to the frustrations of black and Hispanic working class communities and later becomes profitable. Because the juke joint serves as a site of communal listening a jukebox signifies the collected memory buoyed by the listening practices of a particular audience.

Situating online hip hop lyrical archives as digital jukeboxes is useful in working through the construction of digital hip hop poetics. Their heavy reliance on crowdsourced transcription and interpretation doubly repurpose hip hop lyrics as public sites of personal and collective remembrance. Further, hip hop lyrical archives also raise questions of who curates the listening practices that frame the juke box as a form of cultural archiving. Adam Krims's theorization of song and "musical poetics" is useful for identifying how song lyrics are grounds for processing one's personal and communal identities. Krims argues that songs in their singular form reflect the "process of collective self-definition" (9). He writes, "the salient point is that the existence of the 'song,' though certainly impossible in isolation from other contexts, is nevertheless culturally widespread and widely 'lived'. . . audiences talk and think of rap music largely in terms of songs" (41). Although Krims's larger analysis theorizes that musical poetics should address the construction of songs in their entirety—the scoring, production, and organization in tandem with the lyrics—rap music's poetics are frequently imprinted by the consumer's understanding of the moment in which the song exists.

Currently, using songs instead of albums to define one's experience and genre aesthetics reflects music consumption's current state as a "pick and choose" culture. Song lyrics represent the commercial significance of an artist's and genre's identity instead of a branch of a larger body of work. The pop-

ularity of single downloads and iTunes reflects the rise of playlists as archives of individual experiences that also serve as sites of collective identity. The consumers' privilege of picking and sharing multiple songs across albums as touchstones of their personal tastes, moods, and experiences reflect Krims's assertion of songs as the foundation of collective self-definition but not the process behind it. Individual preferences and the memories associated with those preferences collapse music's purpose as an archival space.

It is here that the lyrical annotation site Rap Genius departs from the trajectory of its predecessor OHHLA because Rap Genius transcribes the lyric and attempts to offer context into what the lyric signifies for its users. When OHHLA was established in 1992 it was situated between the popularity of the gangsta rap genre and growing animosity towards rap as a social-cultural deviant. OHHLA's initial premise is grounded in the need to recognize rap as an art form. Their archival efforts are streamlined because they focus solely on the transcription of rap albums. There is no annotation or context offered with the transcription. Rap Genius extends OHHLA's model of lyrical archiving by encouraging users to provide social-cultural context to the lyrics via annotations. Both archives utilize the Internet as springboards for archiving hip hop's worth. However, OHHLA's genesis and documentation of hip hop parallels early stages of the Internet's popularity. Rap Genius's founding reflects hip hop, the Internet, and the Web's maturation as a site of popular culture and race and identity politics.

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