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DIVE IN THE ARCHIVE

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Mixtapes and memory-making: A hip hop remix of the traditional archive

ABSTRACT

The preservation of hip hop cultures presents opportunities to examine archival methods, procedures and protocol anew. By focusing in on DJ cultures and mixtapes, these elements of hip hop culture offer us pathways to decolonial and anti-colonial interventions into institutional archives. This article asks: what is at stake when we envision creative practice and artists at the centre of practices of preservation of hip hop culture?

KEYWORDS

creative practice
mixtapes
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It was a transformer scratch I would never forget. After the first eight bars of the introduction to Busta Rhyme's 'It's a Party' featuring Zhané (from Busta's 1996 debut album *The Coming*), DJ Funk Master Flex performed a transformer scratch. The word he transformed was an adlib by Busta: an 'ugh' became new notes in Flex's live performance on the New York commercial radio station Hot 97. By dragging Busta's guttural 'ugh' back and forth slowly with one hand while quickly cutting his fader in and out of the audible channel with the other hand, a sound reminiscent of the cartoon *The Transformers* emerged.

As a teenager from Toronto, I was lucky enough to visit New York City with my school and my trusty portable cassette player never left my side. My Walkman's digital radio dial was my prized possession, allowing me to clearly pick up Flex's hip hop radio broadcast. DJ Funk Master Flex ignited my imagination as I was learning to DJ and had not yet mastered the transformer scratch. In fact, I had rarely heard turntablist techniques on commercial radio. Upon my return to Toronto, the skills Funk Master Flex demonstrated live were not only etched into my memory, but they were the catalyst that motivated my development as a DJ. This memory has been preserved through my own efforts at learning the transformer scratch, regular practice and listening to the occasional mixtape.

Today, while I am confident I can transform on 'It's a Party', I am less confident in being able to preserve this special yet fleeting moment from live radio. As someone invested in archiving hip hop cultures in Canada, I am curious as to the possibilities of archiving ephemera, especially radio shows and mixtapes. My memory will not let me forget this one scratching performance, largely because it became a pedagogical tool for me in learning how to DJ. Yet, at the same time, while my memories are strong, my own mixtapes and my own transformer scratch on the opening bars of 'It's a Party' will never replicate Flex's unique composition (there is no desire to straight bite). In fact, the various skills DJs have brought over the years to 'It's a Party', and surely millions of other hip hop songs, have produced multiple versions, remixes and unique listening experiences for audiences. As the emergence and success of community archives, like the Mixtape Museum has shown, there is interest and energy devoted to collecting and archiving mixtapes.[1] However, I am also curious about the relationship between memories and the possibilities of hip hop archives. As a DJ, I wonder about the tangled web that brings into relation my record collection, creative practice, my memories and the possibilities of preserving and cataloguing DJing innovations and techniques.

Institutional hip hop archives have yet to purposefully archive the dynamic and intricate turntable skills and innovations of DJs, although the case can be made that archives would benefit from doing so. Like professionally trained archivists, DJs know and regularly handle thousands of vinyl records, have intimate knowledge of metadata and have organizational systems similar to archivists' data management systems. While archivists manage and care for historical documents and records, both DJs and archivists demonstrate a level of care that distinguishes them as members of specific professions. Some of the recordings DJs creatively manipulate are official releases, some are unofficial bootlegs or limited pressings, and may even include remixes performed live that were never pressed or distributed. Unofficial releases, bootlegs and rare b-side remixes often escape the official record that institutional archives have a role in creating and, therefore, legitimating knowledge production. Unlike the archivists, DJs are constantly working and reworking records and digital song files, creating a plethora of recorded, or live mixes and remixes.

DJs deal in multiplicity, carefully stewarding the historical record. Their repertoire of turntable techniques and massive catalogues allows them to contribute to the preservation of this art form through their creative practice. Rather than simply attempting to archive hip hop, solely relying on an objective professional archivist, might we try to understand how hip hop cultures preserve, organize and archive themselves on their own terms? Where can we – or *should* we – locate Funk Master Flex's 1996 live radio mix featuring his dynamic transformer scratch in the historical record, in an archive?

1. See https://mixtapemuseum.org/category/mixtape-memory-collection/ for further details on the Mixtape Museum's Memory Collection.

Additionally, how might the official and unofficial remixing of tracks produce generative and plentiful opportunities to challenge discourses of authenticity and intellectual property?

Why now? Posing these sets of questions at this specific moment is critical to envisioning and enacting an anti-colonial and decolonial ethic within the preservation and archival practices of hip hop archives. What is critical about this moment is that these collections and institutions are still relatively young, and the pace of market-fuelled technological change is urging and ushering in increased anxieties to save and preserve (Taylor 2010). As hip hop architects and OGs age, it becomes easier through platforms like Zoom, Instagram and Twitch to record oral histories and speak to more geographically dispersed audiences. These platforms enhance our abilities to record and preserve, but they can also place a greater onus on protecting the rights of artists in a digital sphere where the circulation of images and videos often run rampant without permission.

For hip hop archives, a decolonial ethic encourages us to recognize the limits of western conceptions of private property, and by extension intellectual property; this could mean understanding mixtapes as more than copyright infringement. With a focus on undoing the harms of colonialism, taking decolonization seriously amongst those charged with preserving hip hop culture can mean revisiting the methodological assumptions that underpin discourses of preservation. DJs find interesting ways to perform and preserve vinyl records, such that creative practice becomes one avenue by which we might think differently about preservation. Aligned with a decolonial perspective, an anti-colonial ethic can focus in on power relations and imbalances, refusing to reproduce the conditions of the colonial project in an outright rejection of coloniality and its hierarchical orderings, especially around race. An anti-colonial ethic in archival efforts to preserve hip hop culture thinks anew the terms of archival practices, beyond institutional and commonplace notions of preservation, storage or 'research purposes'.

For hip hop archives, this moment opens an intervention into how the archiving of hip hop can learn from past archival inequities, colonial harm and institutional bias. Ts'msyen and Mikisew Cree scholar Robin S. S. Gray, who is deeply engaged in 'rematriating' traditional Indigenous songs from university archives, illuminates the heightened level of consciousness required to disembed and expose the traditional archive's histories of extraction and the imposition of western notions of ownership. Gray and many other Indigenous community members are involved in long and difficult processes of having traditional songs returned from various institutional archives whose anthropological foci mark their acquisition habits in removing traditional songs from Indigenous communities (Gray 2022).

Contemporary archivists and information studies scholars, such as Jarrett Drakes, Michelle Caswell, Tonia Sutherland, J. J. Ghaddar and others, are working to decolonize their profession and attend to the racialized, gendered and excluded communities that are ill-served by traditional archives. In attempts to repair archival omissions, one might initially calibrate future activities to focus on those excluded from existing collections and those who never benefited from commercial success or failed to garner a national spotlight and the accompanying rewards. But there is another kind of engagement to consider. Being attentive to hip hop culture's unique memory making and preservation possibilities can lead us down another path of archivization (if this Derridean term holds value to hip hop community members).[2] Such attention might

2. See Jacque Derrida's (1996) definition of 'archivization' in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*.

benefit from the insights and practices of Indigenous repatriation movements and be influenced by archival professionals who are invested in decolonizing the ownership of artefacts, archival description practices and usage policies, especially in university-based archives. Hip hop archives, with less than two decades of existence under their belts, have an opportunity to develop new and refreshing methods and procedures that depart from ingrained archival practices while maintaining an alignment with the realities and values of hip hop culture.

What if creative methods, like the transformer scratch or DJ Screw's 'chopped and screwed' technique, were to become a focus of organizational efforts in the hip hop archive? With hundreds of unique DJ Screw mixtapes still floating around Houston and much of the Southern United States, focusing on archiving DJing methods could provide future pedagogical possibilities for DJs and a cataloguing logic aligned with the creative practices in hip hop culture. Emphasizing the physical commodity of cassettes can be balanced with attention to the methods and techniques that distinguish mixtapes as popular and desirable. DJ techniques are nicely captured on mixtapes, but if we keep in mind the limited lifespan of a cassette, long-term preservation remains a time-sensitive and difficult dilemma. While mixtapes and DJ mixes record specific creative moments and remain precariously tied to the medium's eventual obsolescence, techniques of DJs are also embodied, replicated, practiced and thus preserved through non-institutional means such as creative practice, performances and mixtapes. Memory and preservation, when we think about hip hop DJ culture, is never static, stored away, nor is it detached from the social realities which birthed it. My memories of Funk Flex transforming on the radio are intimately tied to my learning and practice of the transformer scratch technique using the same vinyl record as this famous New York DJ.

The massive task of cataloguing DJ techniques does not fall solely on the shoulders of archivists and information studies professionals. Hip hop artists must also play a role, as their physical collections and (muscle) memories are critical to remixing traditional archival practices, at least when dealing with hip hop culture. In addition to bringing together this mixture of scholars and artists, the newly emerging field of remix studies provides useful insights. Remix studies grapples with the limits of intellectual property regimes while also pushing back against market-driven discourses pertaining to piracy and digital copies. Remix studies scholars, such as Eduardo Navas, xtine burrough, Margie Broschke, Owen Gallagher, Virginia Kuhn and others, open up possibilities for us to think of 'remix' as something more than just copyright infringement.[3] For example, Navas's understanding of the cover song and his typology of remixes introduces new ways for us to thinking about archiving these elements of hip hop culture (Navas 2014, 2018). In a similarly important direction, Margie Borschke rightly asserts in *This is Not a Remix* that every copy of a song has a unique trajectory, which we should acknowledge (2017). In remix studies, copies, remixes and cover songs not only ask scholars to renegotiate concepts of authorship and trouble notions of authenticity, but also can have a pedagogical function.

Connecting the embodied memories of the artists and their repertoire of DJing techniques with existing (or expanded) archival cataloguing methods allows for a remixing of sorts, one in which the institutional archive and the lived experiences and embodied memories, skills and techniques speak to one another across a rigid professional/amateur abyss. More importantly, such efforts cultivates new and decolonial methods, an effort necessary to limit

3. Some of the works I am thinking of here include: Navas et al. (2015), Kuhn (2012), Navas (2018) and Borschke (2017).

and refuse the residues of coloniality, which underpin the institutional archive since its origins in Western European colonialism (Stoler 2009). Scholarship in remix studies allows us to imagine the various DJ mixes and remixes not as illegitimate creative activities infringing upon intellectual property, but rather as creative interventions, proposals as to how the same ethic can conjoin institutional and artistic preservation methods to avoid narrow and reductionist assimilations of hip hop culture into long standing archival institutions.

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