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Sista Girl Rock: Women of Colour and Hip-Hop Deejaying as Raced/Gendered Knowledge and Language

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to introduce and situate a seldom-explored subject: the role and contribution of women hip-hop deejays in the testosterone-filled genre called hip-hop. Grounding the analysis in the interviews of six women deejays – Spinderella, Kuttin Kandi, Pam the Funkstress, Reborn, Shorty Wop and Natasha Diggs – ‘Sista Girl Rock’ works to privilege the words and ideas of these visionary cultural practitioners, sponsors, sound theorists and rhetorical innovators as foundational knowledge, the primary text; the knowledge these women and (re)present becomes paramount in (re)envisioning the ways we view participants of hip-hop culture as the purveyors of knowledge. From this source, we connect various locations of scholarship that can be related to the way(s) these women operate, flourish and maintain as twenty-first-century multimodal thinkers and scholars in a mostly male-dominated industry.

KEYWORDS

Hip-hop; DJ; deejay; hip-hop feminism; multimodality

Introduction

This essay focuses on the seldom-discussed role of women deejays¹ as producers and hip-hop cultural sponsors, sound theorists and rhetorical innovators. Because women deejays have important stories to tell about knowledge, technologies and gendered lives in the twenty-first century, we have titled our piece ‘Sista Girl Rock’ after the cultural phenomenon and movement of ‘Black Girls Rock’. ‘Sista Girl Rock’ thus situates women deejays as a new source of inspiration and example for: (1) the deejay’s communicative competence and cultural centrality in hip-hop culture and, thereby, today’s global music and aesthetics (Miller 2000; Reighley 2000; Schloss 2004; Wang 2015), and (2) the masterful (re)mix of gendered, racist hierarchies that would otherwise impede women’s visibility, impact and social imaginations in racist and masculinist contexts that attempt to deny our full humanity.

Our inquiry into the lives and worlds of women deejays intimately rests with six women – DJs Spinderella, Pam the Funkstress, Kuttin Kandi, Shorty Wop, Reborn and Natasha Diggs² – who stand on the cutting edge of hip-hop deejay culture. These six deejays³ vary in age and status in the industry and, collectively, span at least 30 years of hip-hop music; but even more specifically, they offer us hip-hop DJ culture from lenses in a landscape that

has been overly controlled and surveyed by male DJs. Whether a DJ for an all-women hip-hop group, the DJ of a 'hip-hop revolutionary group', a pioneering woman turntablist in a scratch DJ crew or just bad-ass DJ magic women who have demonstrated that gender is a guise that – if leaned upon too much – can get you scratched in a battle (literally), these six women are torchbearers for hip-hop's necessity for the presence of 'girl power' that counterbalances what can sometimes be unhealthy levels of testosterone-infused patriarchy and misogyny. These women will also tell you they have been influenced by the other women in this interview pool. Thus, we believe there is an organically cultivated and sustained synergy between these women as they exemplify what hip-hop DJ culture can and should be. The work these women have done, both individually and collectively, further speaks to the ways that educators, researchers and students – hip-hop headz and otherwise – can begin to (re)think and (re)envision the modes and practices of communication that have effected social change for racially marginalised communities. Their practices can and should dictate theories and bodies of knowledge about the intersections of gender, race, knowledge and rhetoric (Campbell 2005; Pough 2004).

A now very rich tradition of hip-hop scholarship at the nexus of black studies theorises hip-hop productions as central Black cultural artefacts. Earlier texts, such as Tricia Rose's (1994) *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Nelson George's (1999) *Hip-Hop America* and Michael Eric Dyson's (1995) *From God to Gangsta Rap*, have laid important foundations. However, Gwendolyn Pough's (2004) *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* offers a seismic shift in pushing us past a seemingly endless analysis of sexism and misogyny in men's rap lyrics as the focus of cultural critique in hip-hop studies. Instead, Pough has propelled us to focus on the narratives of women in hip-hop that she argues are central to the workings of the culture. We are thus attempting to vibrate on a similar frequency here as Pough in thinking about the narratives of women hip-hop deejays.

We have deliberately crafted our text about women hip-hop deejays as an essay rather than a typical, academic research report that often has the tendency to be rather stale. We have chosen a different rhetorical approach, one that does not assume all readers will like, be familiar with or want to learn through the typical formulaic frame of university-based qualitative research: research questions, methodology, literature review, findings, analysis. We believe the very creative and genre-bending nature of what the women deejays in this study do on a daily basis, as soundsmiths, sonic technicians and as gendered subjects in misogynist systems, compels us to push past the usual academic boundaries that dictate how we would present their stories, especially when such institutions have done very little to value and sustain hip-hop culture and/or the kind of women of colour who are centred in this essay. We have thus inverted the usual protocol for writing about a research study such as ours.

We centre our text with the interviews of the six women deejays. We have deliberately situated their stories first, with the deejays' words framing each section, as opposed to the usual academic expectation that a tedious delineation of methods and an extant literature review come before a discussion of the actual *subjects* of the research. We are also highly cognisant of a now long-standing and well-warranted distrust of academics, which many of the deejays here forthrightly express, when those academics appropriate hip-hop culture through publication and promotion though these so-called experts are far removed from

the everyday cultural production of hip-hop. We use these deejays' critiques of the academy to embolden us to, minimally, style this essay differently.

Our text opens with an interview with DJ Spinderella, now an icon who gained notoriety as the deejay for the group, Salt-n-Pepa, as a high school student in 1987. Spinderella has been a deejay for over 25 years and is a veteran and stalwart in hip-hop culture; Spinderella continues to rock parties, weddings, clubs and private events. Spinderella's experiences inspire us to think about gender, deejay skills and hip-hop through what Black feminists call an intersectional lens. Based on the gendered notions around deejay skills that our interviewees help us see, we examine the particular technological ethos and expertise these women represent. We follow through on this discussion of ethos to present another central, rhetorical strategy of the deejays in focus: the role of storytelling. After we discuss our notes and findings from each interview, we invert the usual formula for qualitative studies and leave our discussion of methodology at the end, rather than beginning with it. We attempt to frame what we call hip-hop feminist methodologies as a kind of final sound-check for staging the everyday work and lives of hip-hop's most esteemed cultural producers and the relevance of women hip-hop deejays to English/aesthetic/literacy studies today.

'Oh Hell Yeah ... I Had to Work Twice as Hard': 'Being Skilled' in Gender and Hip-Hop

You have to fight for it. (Pam the Funkstress)

Don't let nobody try to play you. (Shorty Wop)

There are thousands of women who spin. (Reborn)

There's a lot of women deejays out there and we're rockin' it. It's a beautiful feeling. (Spinderella)

We begin our series of interviews with a foundational presence in hip-hop deejay culture, Spinderella (interview, 28 December 2011). In 1987, Dee Roper (aka Spinderella) was a 16-year-old high-school student who was selected from an open audition to travel as Salt-n-Pepa's deejay. Her longevity as a deejay represents a set of critical, intersectional challenges for recovering the unique work of women deejays in hip-hop. As a woman, as a Black woman, as a deejay, as a hip-hopper and as a teenager from a working-class Black vernacular culture, Spinderella's story sits at a crossroads where her particular knowledge and resistance are usually marginalised or altogether erased. We use intersectionality theory and its political origins in Black feminism to challenge this erasure (Alexander-Floyd 2012; Bilge 2013; Cooper 2015; Crenshaw 1989, 1991, 2012). The convergence of whitestream feminism, a patriarchal music/hip-hop industry, a western preoccupation with lyrics/MCing over deejays/sonic-technicians, white racist disbelief in the genius of Black vernacular culture, and the (early) marginalisation and (later) hyperconsumption of hip-hop all seem to unite in a distinct and concerted front that masks the creative, political and intellectual work that women like DJ Spinderella do. Spinderella's lightning-quick and deeply embodied response in her interview session that 'oh hell yeah' (the words we are quoting as the title to this section) she had to work at least twice as hard as the men attests to this concerted front that we are suggesting operates in masking the unique contributions of women deejays in hip-hop.

Although Spinderella gained early notice and notoriety as the deejay for Salt-n-Pepa, she traces her origins as a hip-hop deejay to her father, especially to his expansive vinyl collection of funk and soul. Upon entry to high school, she travelled with her boyfriend,

who was a deejay at the time, to all of his sets and learned deejay technique, carried records and became skilled at digging through crates. Later, as a 16-year-old auditioning for the role of deejay with Salt-n-Pepa, she came with an early skill set, a library of music and a connection to what we can call the sonic origins of hip-hop. She has always worked as a deejay even while she was touring with Salt-n-Pepa, playing events like weddings, club parties, corporate events and bar/bat mitzvahs. Today, she has a large community of deejay friends as well as a college-age daughter with whom she shares music. This combination of family, neighbourhood and hip-hop community has thus remained at the core of her hip-hop identity where she sees herself as someone who is still learning, still working on her craft. As just a 16-year-old girl on tour as a concert deejay in the 1980s, Spinderella learned her skills in contexts that often did not include other women deejays. She stresses that she was not the first woman hip-hop deejay, only that they were not made visible in her early years when Jam Master Jay – Queens, New York native and world renowned DJ for the hip-hop group Run-DMC – was her major source of inspiration and her model.

Salt-n-Pepa's mainstream success offered a spotlight for women deejays. And yet even with that spotlight, commercialisation (and often appropriation) has often targeted rappers most closely, enabling the deejay to preserve the culture in ways that have often eluded other pillars of hip-hop. We see women hip-hop deejays as especially crucial to the longevity of a distinct expertise because of the socio-political context in which they have to represent their dexterity. DJ Reborn – a 12-year deejay veteran who has rocked a variety of clubs, served as the Russell Simmons' Def Poetry Jam tour DJ from 2004 to 2005 and is also a DJ instructor at New York City's DJ school Dubspot – especially offers a critical context in which to understand skills and the marginalisation of women deejays.

As a woman deejay, Reborn argues that as soon as you arrive at the turntables or any given DJ set, you are seen as a novelty, as someone 'just standing up there to be cute' (interview, 12 September 2011). Women thus have to prove themselves each time they show up, almost as if starting from the very beginning all over again. 'Being skilled' is a crucial way for a woman deejay to assert dignity and value. 'Being skilled' here is about something much more than a kind of minimalistic equality equation where a woman strives to be as good as a man. 'Skilled' in this context means controlling what Reborn calls the language of hip-hop deejaying and therefore how an audience will consume a woman deejay's presence and body. Reborn stresses that when she arrives at any set, she needs to know and command a range of techniques that include how to: let a mix ride out, address an audience on the mic, set up and break down equipment, masterfully use a mixer and turntables, troubleshoot technical difficulties, carry crates, hook and unhook RCA cable cords, choose relevant music, navigate the new equipment of new spaces, and know when to spin or blend or mix. As a woman, when her sound system has blown out, for instance, she has to show herself as someone who can handle that setback immediately. Failure to do so would mean a loss in credibility not merely for her own professional self, but for women deejays in general. For Spinderella, as an earlier deejay who travelled with female MCs and female dancers and performed on multiple stages, she had to contend with jumping and skipping needles, a constant challenge of the deejay technology at that time. Again, lack of ability in these domains hurts the entirety of women hip-hop deejays. 'Skill' in these contexts means knowing how to recover right away from jumps and skips as part of the way you rock the party, forcing deejays to also acquire new strategies that sustain and add new creative twists to the music and to an audience's experience.

Although Spinderella no longer contends with the same kind of credibility challenges that her more junior successors still face, since most audiences know her and her reputation before she arrives, Spinderella still argues longevity is not promised to her and she must still be careful in the ways she renews herself and in the kinds of jobs she chooses. As a 16-year-old high school student touring the world as a deejay 30 years ago, she immersed herself in hip-hop culture without knowing the influence she would someday have, especially since every woman deejay interviewed in this study cites her as inspiration. Spinderella is proud of the many more women deejays she sees today ‘rocking it’, and she knows that she will still be making sure ‘the light stays always on for the new deejays out there’.

‘Nothing Like Vinyl’: New Technologies, Same Ol’ Misogyny

Create your own style, create your own sound. (Pam the Funkstress)

The needle is the pen ... the needle writes that music that you are putting in from your thoughts, your mind, your heart ... by the time the needle gets to the end of the groove of that last track playing, that’s the story right there. That’s the ink. (Kuttin Kandi)

You don’t just use the culture and throw it away. (Reborn)

Looking at the work of the deejay allows us to focus on the way the beat is an integral part of African American political resistance and survival (Neal 2002, 2003; Weheliye 2005). Because we treat hip-hop beats as a culture and thought system (Kun 2002, 2005; Chang 2005), we see hip-hop deejays as cultural producers who work from and transform a very distinct ethos of rhythm and sound. We believe hip-hop deejays represent a *hip-hop idiom* – similar to what is commonly called a ‘blues idiom’ (Murray 1970) – that integrates multiple and oftentimes disjointed sounds and experiences using the most cutting-edge technologies available to them (Rabaka 2011).

Deejays are inherently savvy technologists given the unique history of scratching, mixing and blending that is central to the very sonic history and beingness of hip-hop culture (Weheliye 2005). The women deejays interviewed for this study all see the deejay as central to the culture and coin a variety of monikers to get this point across. Spinderella calls deejays the ‘backbone’ of hip-hop. Shorty Wop has been a DJ for over 16 years, and most recently served as Tour DJ for Grammy Award-winning singer-songwriter Estelle. Shorty Wop argues that deejays are ‘embedded in the DNA strand’ of hip-hop (interview, 7 December 2011). Because these women deejays experience themselves as central to the sonic philosophies of culture, Pam the Funkstress also calls deejays the people ‘who teach you how to hear the music’ (interview, 6 December 2011); Reborn sees her work as ‘sound-collaging’ where she places ‘sound-materials’ in conversations with one another to write a new text. Based on these deejays’ very own terminologies for their purposes and processes, we treat their platforms as new technologies that push critical educational and informational purposes (Alim 2006; Alim, Ibrahim, and Pennycook 2008; Petchauer 2009, 2012; Richardson 2006). As Pam the Funkstress, a 26-year veteran who was also the DJ for hip-hop revolutionary group The Coup, so adamantly stresses, the music – its form, story and importance – must be taught to you and so deejay practices, as inherently technologically based, must be construed as informational and pedantic. While all of these deejays are certainly collectors and call themselves such, we see them as doing more than just creating music libraries by the nature of what *they do with these collection technologies* in order to educate public audiences (Lingel 2012).

Ironically, the newest technology designed to help or increase deejays' productivity works as both an impediment and resource (Katz 2010). In this case, we are referencing new technologies, like the software, Serato, a topic that reverberated across all of the interviews. Serato's founders/inventors (see <http://serato.com/about>) tell a rags-to-riches story of itself as a digital system that has transformed the experience of deejaying without supposedly losing any of its impact and craft. Hip-hop deejays, however, tell a different story. Deejays have traditionally played vinyl records, which are heavy and costly. CDs seemed to ease these burdens but could not be manipulated in the way that vinyl could be. Serato thus invented what it calls 'vinyl emulation technology' which they have followed with: the digital promotional music distribution service, Whitelabel.net that, in most brutally simplistic terms, imagines itself as the alpha and omega of mp3 storage; an all-in-one compact DJ controller system that allows deejays to engage the crowd more and not just a computer screen and keyboard; and programs that allow DJs to play digital video files such that audio and visual can work together (Montano 2010; Swiss and Farrugia 2005). With vinyl emulation, a deejay maintains the ability to operate with vinyl and turntable; other than a digital catalogue of music, the foundational aspects of DJing can be maintained, if overtly chosen. The gift of this technological innovation lends convenience to deejays who travel (both in fees for carrying records as well as safeguarding invaluable records from being stolen en route from Airport A to Airport B). Now, one can travel with a laptop, hard drive and control vinyl in order to rock a party on turntables while having virtual access to a digital catalogue only limited by the size of the portable hard drive. The curse is that many can utilise the technology without ever engaging in studying the craft or technique of DJing. One can even play music at a party without ever touching a turntable. This is where the technology gets quite dicey. The women deejays in this collection of interviews chronicle complex narratives of the role of new deejay technologies in their lives.

Each of the deejays in this study offers a nuanced and complicated evaluation of what we are calling the newest additions to their information technologies. While each unanimously values the ease with which they can travel since they do not have to carry as many heavy crates of albums or 45s, they also acknowledge the limitations. Kuttin Kandi is an 18-year veteran DJ and turntablist who rocked with the DJ scratch crews 5th Platoon and the Anomalies. Currently located in San Diego, Kandi identifies how regressive economies of travel (heightened airport security and costly baggage charges) make it impossible for her to travel back and forth to the East Coast with her records and equipment (interview, 2 December 2011). Because San Diego does not host the range and number of music stores as other big cities, Kuttin Kandi has capitalised on the access to a digitised music catalogue that Serato gives her. Like Kuttin Kandi, each deejay notes these specific travel and mobility advantages of access but also works to make up for what she loses with the seeming disappearance of vinyl.

Since each deejay here uses both Serato and vinyl, most often using both for any given deejay set, these women hip-hop deejays challenge commonheld notions that we are witnessing 'the death of vinyl' (Attias 2011). Natasha Diggs is known for her vinyl stylings; a 10-year veteran, Diggs is a club and radio DJ and is resident DJ of 'Mobile Mondays' – an all-vinyl 45 party in New York City. Natasha Diggs is known for her reputation of playing 7" records (also known as 45s). Like Spinderella, Natasha Diggs explicitly calls the work that deejays do to find music and know artists her 'research' (interview, November 23, 2011). While she values the ability to access mp3 files so readily, she argues a deejay's research and

craft suffer because many times the mp3 files do not include information about an artist's name, history or band. Artists, therefore, become nameless, faceless entities for a kind of corporate consumption, limiting the stories that deejays want to tell with their music because they have no context in which to situate a track. For Pam the Funkstress, who has been working as a deejay since the 1980s, much of the older music she prefers cannot be found on mp3 and so Serato cannot help her achieve her full goals as a deejay. As she argues, 'there's nothing like vinyl'.

We contend here that there is a specific politics in which these women hip-hop deejays frame the new technologies available to them via software like Serato. The ethos of what we earlier called a *hip-hop idiom* becomes clearly visible to us. Technologies here are intimately tied not merely to the practices and techniques of being just a deejay, but to the role of being a deejay in and for hip-hop, to the very history and role of hip-hop. In her July 2012 interview at *Offbeat.com*, Spinderella responds this way when asked what gets lost when deejays no longer use two turntables and a mixer:

Technology makes it all easier and you cannot discount what it's become. We've taken advantage of it, but everything's so fast. 'I don't need to learn the foundation, all I need is the controller and a computer and speakers and we're good.' The hard part is learning the history. Don't call it hip-hop if you don't know the foundation. It's a labour of love for our culture, for the legends that came before us. (Boyles 2012, 27)

Similarly, in our interviews with women hip-hop deejays, you get the sense that if the deejays do not control the technologies and make the technologies do what the culture needs it to do, then hip-hop culture can no longer truly exist.

Kuttin Kandi further offers an important community context in which vinyl has been shared and understood by deejays. For her, deejays are the 'heartbeat of Hip-Hop culture' that put hip-hop on the map in the first place. They work to connect 'everyone together: bboys, graf writers, and the MC' (Kandi 2010). Kandi argues that the centre of gravity for deejay communities was the hip-hop record store. Vinyl stores, however, are struggling to remain open in the era of Serato and so the community of deejays who shared stories and ideas in the vinyl stores is gradually disappearing. Kuttin Kandi remarks on the work of searching for records, knowing the label colours and reading the visual designs of covers having real value (Kuttin Kandi 2010). The removal of this process changes the literate practices and social responsibilities of the deejay if Serato is all a hip-hop deejay knows.

As the youngest deejay of those interviewed, Shorty Wop offers a different lens of gender and this role of crate digging. Shorty Wop notes that the craft of deejaying is really exploited with Serato because deejays who are not talented, who are not connected to the history of hip-hop and who are not part of a record-collecting tradition now insert and assert themselves as deejays. Of particular note for Shorty Wop is that women deejays often substitute their sexuality for such deejay research skills. Women who are scantily clad are devoured as new digital deejays though they have not developed any real skills in the craft and do not really know (or spin) hip-hop history (Benard 2016).

Female hip-hop deejays discuss the limits of Serato and other new deejay technologies in ways that echo the politics of male hip-hop deejays (Craig 2013). These travelling women embrace constant motion, change and technological transition, not as passive and distant recipients of these processes but as active interpreters who decide quite deliberately how they will embody and transform new digital forces for hip-hop. They take on the disruption and discontinuity of new technologies and shape their own new expressions, refusing to

embrace technological determinism or fatalism. New sounds, multiple places and multiple experiences are deliberately welcomed. However, gender and sexuality become arenas for exploitation in markedly divergent ways. As women who see themselves as telling stories and teaching their audiences about music, they have sharp critiques of and practices against new deejay technologies that remove their skill, craft and knowledge and, instead, (re) inscribe the misogynistic requirement that women hypersexualise themselves instead of learning how to tell and spin stories as skilled deejays. We believe the ways they praise the ease with which technology helps them work *alongside* a critique of the consumption of their sexuality offers us an important reminder for how to situate the new roles of information technologies. In relation to twenty-first-century communication paradigms, women hip-hop deejays complicate new technologies in specific relation to hip-hop and offer new lenses into the ways new technologies can mobilise misogynistic hierarchies of gender and sexuality.

The 'Living Document': The Mix is the Story, The Language and The Rhetoric

I do my research. (Natasha Diggs)

We write the story for your whole night. (Shorty Wop)

I take the crowd with me on my ride. (Spinderella)

You have a responsibility to have a conversation in that space. You are speaking with your turntables and your choices. You are mixing, responding to what is happening in the room and other people are speaking back to you. (Reborn)

Each deejay in this study explicitly calls herself a storyteller. Pam the Funkstress even makes the distinction between hip-hop and rap, arguing that the difference must be critically noted by all who choose to be a part of hip-hop. Rap tells the truth about life in the streets and the social realities that the urban, black poor must navigate there. Hip-hop, on the other hand, represents lyrical expressiveness, the clever use of metaphors, tragedy, comedy and the fusing of new words. In these descriptions of hip-hop and rap, Pam critically assesses and understands the roles of stories and words in the atmosphere that she creates with each of her deejay sets; her heuristic organises how she chooses and delivers the stories of the music she plays.

Further extending Pam's definition of the deejay as an obvious reader of black culture and creativity, Natasha Diggs and Spinderella explicitly call themselves 'researchers' who study music and composition in order to create the story they present to the crowd in a deejay set. Spinderella's and Diggs's self-defined roles as researchers connect most explicitly to Banks's (2011) argument that the hip-hop deejay works as a digital griot who learns the history and stores it in her very being and body in order to chronicle it publicly, methodically and creatively for an audience. Reborn further explains she has explicitly called and treated deejays as griots after witnessing the off-Broadway play, *The Seven*, the hip-hop musical adaptation of Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes* which follows the struggles of Eteocles and Polynices, the two sons of King Oedipus who fight for the throne of Thebes (McCarter 2003). Will Power writes the play entirely in rhyming verse with a deejay-griot who weaves the story together with calypso, doo-wop, R&B, funk and blues with choreography designed by Bill T. Jones. Thus, for DJ Reborn, the cultural currency of deejays as griots resonates with the ways she experiences her own storytelling processes and interactions with audiences, what she defines a 'call-and-response relationship', a foundational strategy of African American

rhetoric as well as an important repeating trope in key Black cultural artefacts from *Call and Response: Key Debates in African American Studies* (Gates and Burton 2011) to *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (Hill 1998). While call-and-response has often been central to the ways scholars rhetorically situate the power and histories of black sermons, speeches, literary texts and general discursive styles (Smitherman 1977; Jackson and Richardson 2003; Richardson and Jackson 2004), we are not as often inclined to centre the sound philosophies and performances of hip-hop deejays in that same tradition in the way that Reborn defines her role.

This nature of the deejay's storytelling and story-crafting are further illuminated by Shorty Wop who explains that every record she plays is relevant and explicitly connects to the next record. Shorty Wop and Spinderella both call their deejay sets a 'journey' their listeners 'travel', a 'journey' they deliberately craft for them. Meanwhile, Kuttin Kandi calls her story a kind of 'movie'. We highlight this craft and role of storytelling because storytelling is often described within the purview of the hip-hop MC rather than in the very nature of what the culture calls for, a role that deejays explicitly represent. As Pam the Funkstress argues, deejays tell their own story in the mix; *the mix itself is a story*. As Ball (2011) argues in *I Mix What I Like! A Mixtape Manifesto*, we treat the 'mix' as these deejays describe and enact it as a source of Emancipatory Journalism: a form of media and communication disbursement that revolves around decolonising practices.

There are times, however, when an audience's interests do not match a deejay's interests, as Kuttin Kandi and Spinderella both explain. Spinderella, who aligns herself with Old Skool sounds, admits she does not often like much of the new music that comes out. In such cases, the deejay must mix the song so she can still be herself but connect with the audience at the same time. Kandi argues her job is to 'tell a story so others can relate to it' and gives the example of the times when she might play an artist such as Britney Spears, a musician who she doesn't particularly like but who her audience may enjoy and value. In those instances, Kuttin Kandi mixes the track in a new way with new beats and backgrounds that the audience might not even know. She shows her audience a new way to view the song because you can 'always rock your style' even when the audience does not know a piece. Reborn calls this ability to educate people about music they don't know how to access while also providing them with familiar sounds a matter of 'personal integrity' since deejaying is 'a live art form'. Reborn researches her audience beforehand, but makes sure she connects to the energy and vibe of the space, even when a crowd is not necessarily deeply and consciously listening to just the music. For Reborn, this 'art form' is a living 'document' that leaves a 'new canvas' behind.

No deejay in this study creates a definite, final set prior to meeting her audience. In each case, they read the crowd, both what the crowd likes and what the crowd needs. Each setting also has a different function: a themed gathering, a wedding, a sweet-sixteen party, a birthday party, a formal gathering or a club/dance scene. The deejays research their events and their audiences before the event, making some mental notes on the kinds of aesthetic tastes the audience may have (based on age, location, party promoter, setting, etc. – all of these deejays have travelled across the country and world), but they rely most heavily on what the crowd is communicating in the moment at each event.

This communication between audience and deejay is very nuanced. Natasha Diggs describes herself as reading her audience but also offering her audience inspiration and a model, thereby, also inviting them to read her. Shorty Wop similarly describes an emotional

connection she is making with the music she is offering to her audience, while Pam the Funkstress describes her connection with the audience as a sharing of music and, therefore, passion. Kuttin Kandi describes audiences and deejays as ‘working in tandem’ by ‘reading’ one another. She gives the audience a message about who she is and takes them on ‘an emotional ride’.

Because Kuttin Kandi is also a turntablist, her understandings of the differences between being a turntablist and being a deejay are particularly critical, especially in light of the role of the audience and the ability to ‘rock the party’. As a battle deejay, Kandi has crafted her turntablist skills in quite deliberate ways. Turntablism, as she notes, is about the self and a sharing of a skillset as a musician. However, being a deejay and honing in on the value of carrying record crates and working with a crowd has taught her how to really connect with people. Because she does both, she creates her own language and her own sound and communicates in many ways.

By focusing on the mix as a story and the deejay as a storyteller rather than the written or spoken word, we hope to push for a more fluid notion of text and textuality. We consider deejays’ storytelling as a process for setting texts in motion. Though he was not focused on hip-hop or deejays, Gates proposed the notion of ‘texts in motion’ in the now canonical, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1989). Thus, the concept of fluid texts is not new or original to us when tracing African American cultural traditions. We are simply suggesting that a focus on the primacy of the MC or the written word has often overshadowed the texts that deejays are also constantly rewriting and putting in motion. In this case, we mean motion quite literally since deejays are constantly crossing territories and boundaries with their archives/records in tow, as well as manipulating a variety of sources that rotate on turntables at various speeds and pitches while reverberating sonically through speakers.

The women deejays construct a ‘rhetoric’, a language that speaks new insights and connections into the worlds of their audiences. They are not offering their audiences a mere mimicry or cover of songs. Instead, these women integrate multiple sounds and sources as they craft a collective ethos that rocks the crowd. They are uniquely positioned in the ways they observe, interpret and musically comment on hip-hop as they shape audiences in real time and, as Shorty Wop argues, ‘write the story for your whole night’.

Loving Hip-Hop: The Public Pedagogies of Women Hip-Hop Deejays

I educate and bring my turntables along. (Kuttin Kandi)

I’ve been able to find my voice through deejaying and I’ve used deejaying to be able to communicate – to write – in a certain kind of way. (Reborn)

It is obvious to us that deejays are twenty-first-century multimodal readers and writers (Wakefield 2006), but it is also worth noting here that they perform these roles for the purpose of a public pedagogy. Though most of the deejays in this study never explicitly link themselves with state-sponsored ‘educators’, we see them as teachers based on the fact that every deejay in this study describes herself as *teaching her audiences* about the music. Her deejay set has a special function for Pam the Funkstress: it teaches people how to *hear* the music. When Natasha Diggs plays a set, she consciously and deliberately takes people back to teach about a certain moment in the history of the music and, thereby, the history

of their own lives. She writes a new moment with her set and takes her audience some place in particular with the collective memories of the participants of this moment. Shorty Wop makes the important distinction that having the music in your possession and playing the music are altogether different things. We are particularly inspired by the ways these women deejays describe their love of the music, where DJ Reborn even argues deejaying requires a kind of ‘unselfishness’ where you commit to the crowd. Like Pam the Funkstress, Reborn also contends that you always share your love of the music and the culture with your audience. Teaching in these models is thus an explicitly scaffolded experience. It is in the scaffolded playing of the music where these deejays compose their curriculum, a self-conscious act that each deejay critically calls teaching.

Kuttin Kandi and DJ Reborn, in addition to educating their audiences with their deejay sets, also work directly in classrooms and with young people. Kuttin Kandi’s experiences have ranged from her time teaching spoken word and poetry to high school students at El Puente Leadership Centre in Brooklyn to working at the Women’s Center at the University of California, San Diego (Hisama 2014). As a youth mentor, activist and hip-hop feminist, Kuttin Kandi sees her primary role as one of ‘educating our communities about hip-hop’, preserving hip-hop culture, and building social justice platforms with the music and art. As she argues: ‘I educate and bring my turntables along’.

Reborn teaches in two capacities: as a deejay instructor for Dubspot and as a workshop facilitator for UrbanWordNYC. At Dubspot, she uses both vinyl and Serato to teach ‘the language of deejaying’, namely song structure, sound, beats, range of motion, bars, dropping on the one, stamina, muscle memory and reading a crowd. She began at UrbanWordNYC by deejaying youth open mic shows and gradually moved to teaching girls-only deejay and creative workshops where young women learn deejaying, lyrical analysis and creative writing in the service of cultural critique of images of women in media. For both Kuttin Kandi and Reborn, when they are working in state-official capacity as teachers, they make sure that hip-hop, education and social justice are always functioning simultaneously in their lives.

Given the specific, feminist classrooms of Kuttin Kandi and Reborn inside a continuum where every woman deejay in this collective defines herself as a teacher, we see their public pedagogies as part of the wider teaching continuum in communication studies. We especially appreciate the ways these deejays centre themselves and their bodies outside the voyeuristic and cannibalistic gaze that comes when women of colour perform. Reborn reminds us that deejaying is a very ‘exposing craft’ that has taught her to communicate more directly and fluidly when at one point in her life she was shy. In contrast, deejaying forces you to open up as you must learn to communicate your love of the music and who you are as a person. This communication ethic and ethos of women hip-hop deejays points to the ways that women enter male-dominated closed systems of meaning and (re)define themselves and educate other young women to do the same.

Whether they are assessing new deejay software, describing themselves as storytellers, arguing for the role of invention or explaining their relationships with immediate audiences, women hip-hop deejays are always highly cognisant of the dynamic exchanges that occur between word, sound and audiences. These deejays act as both theorists and practitioners who challenge and reinvent lives. They continually construct themselves as dynamic authors of their sets and self-conscious teachers of their audiences.

Towards a Hip-Hop Feminist Deejay Methodology

The basic tool for 'Sista Girl Rock' was the semi-structured interview that allowed for a greater degree of flexibility between both the interviewer and participants (Creswell 1998).⁴ While using a singular set of questions designed in the semi-structured interview matrix, much of the discussion sprang forth from issues not necessarily listed in the interview questions (Creswell 1998). The assumption propelling these interviews with women hip-hop deejays is that their perspectives are 'meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit' and that as researcher-writers, our job is to 'capture how those being interviewed view their world, to learn *their* terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of *their* individual perceptions and experiences' (Patton 2002, 341–8).

Because there is no expansive body of research on women hip-hop deejays that stems and springs from the deejay herself, we chose qualitative research methods. We believe the worldview and experiences of the deejay must come from the deejay, not from the perspective of the academic(s) who like(s) to wax poetically and metaphorically on the idea of the deejay from afar. The methodology thus encouraged the deejays themselves to tell their own stories and reflect on their day-to-day experiences based on our own strong 'interest in subjectivity and ... people's life histories or everyday behaviour' (Silverman 2010, 6–10).

As we listened to the interviews over and over again, we kept asking ourselves: (1) what roles have women hip-hop deejays assumed in, for and against hip-hop culture? (2) How do women hip-hop deejays complicate notions of race, gender and sexuality as new media readers and writers? (3) What are the implications of women hip-hop deejays' rhetorical, digital and pedagogical practices? As we grew more and more inspired by the deejays' narratives, we had to challenge the notion that the often-cited pitfall of qualitative research is the bias from the researcher's close contact and commitment to the respondents involved in the study (Bowen 2005; Creswell 1998; Patton 2002). In direct contrast to this sentiment, 'Sista Girl Rock' purposefully strives to achieve a hip-hop deejay methodology that refuses to privilege distance from hip-hop culture as synonymous with being able to construct knowledge about it and honours multiple voices. Todd, as the interviewer who is a member of the hip-hop and deejay community, centred his own vast experience in the framing of the interview discussions.

It is worth noting here that Todd's own work as a deejay and his intimate connection with hip-hop circles allowed for the possibility of this research in multiple ways. For starters, he shares in the specialised vocabulary of hip-hop deejays and dissolved the distance between researcher and researched in important ways. Though this dissolution is not often valued in social science and humanities research, it is crucial to this study. We question the political economy of the consumption of hip-hop culture where banal, voyeuristic academic presentations of hip-hop often mirror the very same corporate industry that promotes the objectification and misogyny that the women deejays centred in this essay constantly battle. Kuttin Kandi offers perhaps the most provocative reading of the state of hip-hop scholarship in academia. As a staff member of a college Women's Center, she visits many college classrooms and interacts with many college students who sit in classes about hip-hop. Kuttin Kandi is both alarmed and incensed at just how much of the information is misrepresented, distorted or downright inaccurate. The very spaces that imagine they are passing on knowledge are not actually accomplishing this work in relation to hip-hop. The legends of hip-hop, when they are even included in a curriculum, are mere objects of study and never, as Kuttin Kandi argues, 'get to tell their own story'. She reminds us that her

very skill and craft as a deejay came alongside these stories the legends gave to her, stories that seem omitted everywhere from hip-hop curriculum as tenured bosses (i.e. university researchers) make their way up the scholarship chain.

Carmen enters this set of interviews of hip-hop deejays, not as a deejay, but as an old-skooled hip-hop black feminist in both theory and everyday action. She is interested in the labour that women of colour perform across the multiple spaces of our lives and how we navigate those spaces. These interviews serve as more than just an academic resource for her, but as a toolkit and blueprint for her own survival. When Carmen listens to women deejays speak at length on the ways in which they have had to teach themselves how to battle, how to mix, how to cut, how to create a routine, she is reminded of her own work and misogynist, institutional hierarchies and sees these deejays as kindred spirits who refuse to give up their souls and bodies to machines hell-bent on violence against her. In a male-dominated industry, women hip-hop deejays are not taken seriously when they are asked for help and are seldom offered rigorous tools from which to grow. These deejays thus offer us very important lessons about gender, race, labour, skill and knowledge.

Inspired by the women hip-hop deejays in this study, we are also attempting to ground the methods and polemics of this study in a specific movement: hip-hop feminism (Durham, Cooper, and Morris 2013; Lindsey 2015; Morgan 1999). We have outrightly rejected a kind of pseudo-critical stance in our writing where we must validate and ground the work these women deejays do in comparison to their male counterparts, a trend that still plagues many male scholars of colour who have routinely asked us to present the 'seminal' male scholars of the field first and then show how women of colour have extended that supposedly finished work with their gender critiques. We see that kind of problematically sexist ruse of feigned inclusion within a parallel racist universe where we are also often asked to make comparisons to white classical literature to legitimate hip-hop's lyrical success. We have no inclination to appease any of these oppressive camps that work against hip-hop women who can stand on their own, generate their own theoretical dispositions and spin the records of their own inclusion based on the unique locations they occupy in the world. In fact, we want the very process and purpose of sound-collaging, as DJ Reborn coined it, to work as the kind of intellectual and political process and style that writing about hip-hop must embrace, a praxis that we situate in hip-hop feminism.

The work of the women DJs in this study offers new notions for the ways race and gender frame rhetorical strategies in communication. We believe these women hip-hop deejays have important stories to tell about education, technologies, race and gender in the twenty-first century. The stories these women tell to their audience are also simultaneously a story they are telling us about life, work and knowledge. The barred entry points that each woman in this study faces offers us insights into how the very foundation of our culture works and strategies for breaking down that culture and remixing it. Everything that happens before, during and after these women hip-hop deejays spin a set offers us important techniques and insights that can rock multiple audiences.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this essay, the terms 'deejay' and 'DJ' will be used interchangeably.
2. Participating DJ names (which oftentimes are nicknames) are openly used in this study. All participants are already public figures who are known and/or wish to be known and formally

connected to this research. Thus, the research aims to highlight the work of these participants and make their contribution(s) visible to a community and/or demographic outside their present arenas and working environments.

3. This study is part of a larger study of 90 hip-hop deejays. Twenty-four interviews of the 90 were with women deejays. Of the 24, some are considered 'open source', while the DJs in this essay really focus on hip-hop and hip-hop cultural sonics (R&B, Soul, Funk, Rare Grooves, Dancehall, etc.). Thus, these six DJs represent 25% of a particular pool of a research study.
4. All research participants were interviewed in a location and with a recording medium of their choice: the participant's recording studio, the principal investigator's home office and public venues. Interviews not conducted in person were done via video, audio conference or telephone conference call. The medium and location were dictated by the research participants to ensure their comfort and to begin the process of building a rapport. Fieldwork also included attendance at public DJ events that included and/or were held by potential and active participants. This effort has continued to build rapport and demonstrate commitment to and authentic engagement within hip-hop culture being researched. Participants were selected and/or recruited based on their reputations in the hip-hop music industry as DJs, producers and/or musicians. An electronic call went out to an established network of DJs, producers and tastemakers in the hip-hop community. The referral process was, thus, another form of participant solicitation and recruitment. Because of Todd's intimate understanding of both hip-hop and DJ culture, he was able to have many conversations with participants that quickly turned from 'formal interview' to friendly conversation; this allowed the principal investigator to circulate through the DJ community in a very organic way: mainly through the word of mouth of colleagues and peers who had gone through the interview process and understood the purpose of this study.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Carmen Kynard is an associate professor of English at John Jay College of Criminal Justice (CUNY) where she interrogates race and the politics of writing instruction. She has taught high school with the New York City public schools/Coalition of Essential Schools, served as a writing program administrator, and worked as a teacher educator. She has led numerous professional development projects on language, literacy, and learning and has published in *Harvard Educational Review*, *Changing English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, *Computers and Composition*, *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Literacy and Composition Studies* and more. Her first book, *Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition-Literacy Studies* won the 2015 James Britton Award and makes Black Freedom a twenty-first-century literacy movement. Her article, 'Teaching While Black: Racial Violence and the Landscapes of Disciplinary Whiteness' was chosen as a best article for *The Best of Independent Composition and Rhetoric Journals* of 2015. Her current projects focus on Black female college students' literacies, Black feminist digital vernaculars, and AfroDigital Humanities learning. Carmen traces her research and teaching at her website, 'Education, Liberation, and Black Radical Traditions' (<http://carmenkynard.org>).

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