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# Cyphers, ‘hoods, and digital DIY studios in India: Negotiating aspirational individuality and hip hop collectivity

Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan, Jaspal Naveel Singh

## Abstract

*This article argues for an attention to the DIY digital studio as a key site where aspiring hip hop MCs in the contemporary moment negotiate between their desire for individual success and their commitments to various forms of local belonging, not least which includes staying true to a hip hop ethos of collectivity. We follow Sonal, a b-boy and MC we worked with in a studio that we set up in Delhi, India in 2013 to work with aspiring MCs in the city's scene. We trace his subsequent rise to fame in India to argue for an attention to the DIY studio as the material and metaphoric realization of the digital infrastructures of global capitalism. The studio manifests economic and social opportunities for young men like Sonal in Delhi, and, we suspect, for young people across the world who now have access to social media and inexpensive production hardware and software. Yet, in creating opportunities for individual economic and social uplift, the studio poses a threat to the ideal of a hip hop community that undergirds its possibility even as it opens up opportunities to enunciate commitments to other forms of belonging.*

## Keywords

studio, cypher, MC, DIY, India, mediatization, subjectivity

## Introduction

It is 2013. I climb the narrow stairway up towards Jaspal Singh's third-floor apartment. In the apartment located in a middle-class colony in South Delhi, Singh, a sociolinguist and hip hop artist from Germany as well as the co-author of this paper, had set up a small DIY (do-it-yourself) recording studio to engage with aspiring MCs in India's then emergent hip hop scene and had invited me to collaborate with him in doing so. When I got to the top of the steps, a little out of breath, I saw several young men squeezed into Singh's bedroom that doubled as a studio. On Singh's bed, a few young men sat hunched over and studiously scribbled in their bent and battered notebooks the lyrics that they

wished to record for the day. Sonali<sup>i</sup>, a Sikh b-boy<sup>ii</sup> who had travelled on the metro for over an hour from his working-class neighbourhood in West Delhi to participate in the day's session, stood in the narrow area between the bed and the recording equipment. As he sat, he quietly and intently watched as Singh demonstrated how the recording and music production technology that he brought with him from Germany worked. A group of young men were on the veranda just outside the apartment, where Singh had placed a small cot and a couple of plastic chairs. They were huddled around a smart phone listening to a new track on YouTube that one of them wanted to share with the others; a Nigerian hip hop-inspired pop song recorded by an underground artist from Lagos.

All of these young men had been b-boying for several years prior to Singh's and my arrival in Delhi to conduct research on the local hip hop scene, a scene each of us had got wind of through underground hip hop networks in our respective national contexts – the USA and Germany. Both of us were curious about how these young men living on the margins of Delhi's explosive growth and development in the last ten years had found hip hop and had each, respectively, travelled to Delhi to do ethnographic research in the scene. As we got to know them, it became evident that the infrastructural imaginaries (Mukherjee 2019), made possible as a result of 3G and 4G network expansion in India, allowed these young men who live in the marginal habitations of Delhi to access and make b-boying their own. By watching YouTube videos and connecting with b-boys from all over the world on social media, they learned the latest takes on classic dance moves that originated in the South Bronx over five decades ago. Videos of b-boys from Seoul, Marseille, New York and Los Angeles taught them how to toprock, baby spin, and airflare. They practiced these moves and invented others in their spatialized cyphers,

claiming space and their right to the city (Harvey 2008) by practicing in parks, malls, and heritage sites across Delhi (Dattatreyan 2017). Perhaps more profoundly, they learned how to inhabit a different masculinity in their everyday lives, one that interrupted their positions as the children of labourers and refugees to the city and their embodiments as ethnic, class, racial, and caste Others (Dattatreyan forthcoming).

When we arrived in Delhi, rapping<sup>iii</sup> on the mic was a new experience for them. While some of Delhi's b-boys had taken up the practice of writing their lyrics in books and even rapping in cyphers with their friends, the idea of recording with equipment was novel. Singh decided to create a studio to offer opportunities for b-boys in the Delhi scene to record their forays into rap as well as make music and dance videos with them. Singh had already anticipated this possibility, bringing recording equipment (a microphone, eight-track recorder, and sampler) from Germany with him. I, too, had thought about the possibilities of doing collaborative work with the hip hop artists I met in Delhi and brought professional camera equipment with me on the off-chance I could make videos with those I met in the scene. Both of us had reasoned, prior to our departures from our respective homes, that making with our participants offered us an ethical way of doing research. By offering something useful back to the young men we met in the scene we could, at the very least, avoid being extractive in our research and, ideally, we could instantiate what Spady et al. (2006) refers to as hiphopography – an opportunity to theorize with our participants by making together. Once Singh and I met in Delhi, it seemed obvious we should work together to create the studio.

Our music recording studio produced yet another infrastructural imaginary in the Delhi scene. The equipment Singh brought with him and set up in his apartment offered

the young men we met in Delhi an opportunity to record their voice, their words and their experiences and transmit themselves across time and space to unknown but highly anticipated audiences. For some of the aspiring MCs we met through Singh's studio, these de-spatialized and more-than-corporal recordings became a materialization of their ambition to gain Instafame (Marwick 2013) – immediate recognition and eventual financial reward made possible through the social media circulation of their raps but also of images of them rapping.

Others who came to the studio during the five months it was up and running, however, were humble in their aspirations. Recording was a relational endeavour. Just being in the room with other MCs from the city and with two international hip hop enthusiasts who had diasporic connections to India, already fulfilled their ambition. Recording their raps was simply an archiving process – a way to remember the collective experience of making together and share it with those close to them. If there was going to be any sort of future financial or social success, some of these young men articulated to us in the months we spent with them in the studio, it would be a collective one.

In this article we argue that our DIY studio and the DIY studios that mushroomed across the city in the years that followed, offer an opportunity to track how the tension between individual aspiration and collective becoming in global hip hop worlds are materialized in the digital age. On the one hand, the DIY studio promises aspiring MCs a chance to dream of mobility through a microphone, a makeshift soundproof booth and affordable recording equipment. That is, pragmatically the studio offers them the potential for individual uplift and a chance to imagine a different future for themselves and, by extension, their families. Metaphorically speaking, the studio affords them a

chance to imagine that their voices set to a beat would travel across the city, the nation and the world, and that, eventually, they themselves would travel to other hip hop places across India and the world, representing their 'hood.

On the other hand, the studio, because it creates the potential for individual fame, becomes a symbol of dissolution to the collective spirit of an emergent hip hop scene, idealized in the spatialized b-boy and rap cyphers that popped up around the city in the years just before we arrived. Here we think of dissolution as a kind of existential threat to the feeling of collectivity that the cypher, the space and time of shared practice, affect, and playful competition, creates (Spady et al. 2006). When the possibility of individual success creeps into the picture as an effect of the studio, the humble, everyday sociality of practicing dance moves with friends or rhyming together for pleasure feels, at least for some, imperiled.

To think through the studio as a site of individual hip hop aspiration that stands in tension with the felt potential for collective dissolution of hip hop collectivity in Delhi, we follow Sonal as he participated in our studio sessions and subsequently went on to create a DIY studio of his own. Since we met him in 2013, Sonal has become one of the most famous MCs in India. His rise to fame owes in large part to the ways in which he took the studio and recording seriously as a means to achieve financial stability for himself and his family and, as importantly, as an opportunity to represent and broadcast himself and his predominantly Sikh neighborhood as socially, economically, and historically marginalized. His rise to fame, however, has not come without critique.

Sonal's forays into production for social media circulation and his subsequent rise to celebrity status pushed members of Delhi's hip hop community of practice to critique

him and, through critique, raise larger questions regarding the commensurability between individual economic sovereignty and collective participation in hip hop. The tension between individual uplift and staying true to hip hop, for Harrison (2009), arises when individuals utilize rap to highlight their and their spatial communities' racialized, ethnic, and/or classed marginality in ways which are recognizable to the market. Paradoxically, the mobilization of a marginalized positionality which allows them to claim a localized authenticity and marketability threatens to separate them from their hip hop peers. In the context of Delhi what this meant was that Sonal's turn to the studio, for some of his peers, felt like a rejection of their hopeful desire to embody and practice hip hop to strategically bridge the increasingly widening social divides of a historically class, ethnic, and caste stratified and unequal city.

Indeed, for many of Delhi's hip hop practitioners, the five elements of practice were a way to create connections across the huge economic and social rifts in the city and the country (see also Osumare 2001 on connective marginalities). Sonal's success as a result of his studio ventures, some felt and vocalized, took him away from the organic sensibilities of 'real' hip hop located in the cypher. For them, the promise and possibility of connection in the cypher, despite caste, class, ethnic, and racial difference, was what was at the center of hip hop's ethos of unity. Sonal responded with a strong critique of his own that eschewed an idealized hip hop collectivity and, instead, centered a concrete kin, ethnic, and spatial relationship, that of his immediate family and the West Delhi working-class Punjabi enclave he lived in – an enclave that was built in the early 1950s to accommodate the many refugees of the Partition (see also endnote v) and that saw some of the worst violence during the 1984 anti-Sikh pogroms.<sup>iv</sup> For Sonal, studio recorded

rap, and by extension, hip hop, was a means to transmit his stories – stories from the ‘hood (Forman 2002) that centered place, space, and Sikh narratives of trauma and revenge that include pre-colonial and post-Partition histories. Moreover, Sonal, as we show in this article, argues that the studio opened up opportunities to create relations with those often inadvertently excluded from the cyphers in Delhi. In each case, whether representing his neighborhood in West Delhi or bringing peers into his studio who otherwise were left out of Delhi’s cyphers, Sonal was clear that he needed to make money through his creative labor to take care of his family and to position himself for the future.

Sonal’s responses to this questioning, in his music and in his social media commentary, highlights how his turn to studio production and digital circulation can be read as a complicated negotiation between new economic and social realities that global connectivity has made possible in Delhi, as the city is transformed, through in-migration, policy and the infusion of capital, into a ‘world class city’ (Roy 2011) as well as the historical legacy of violence and expropriation on the aspirations of its inhabitants. His desire for success through music production cannot be read simply as a quest for fame and individual accolades but, rather, as a way to redress historical and lived inequality in his ethnic, linguistic, and spatial community by broadcasting narratives of and about the ‘hood and making money while doing so.

In either case, the studio emerges as a material and metaphoric realization of the challenges and opportunities that global capitalism manifest through the relatively recent introduction of digital infrastructures, i.e. social media, inexpensive production hardware, software and so on. In what follows, we first discuss, in a bit more detail, the DIY studio



in Delhi that we created in 2013 to think through the socio-material specificities of what constitutes a studio space in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to trace the studio's influence in Sonal's trajectory to fame. We then briefly engage with the genealogy of the studio as a site of tension in hip hop since its inception. We conclude by offering a reading on DIY studios in urban India in the current moment. In the aftermath of the widely popular Bollywood film *Gully Boy*, which features the rise of a young Muslim man from a marginalized community in Mumbai through his mastery of the mic and social media circulation of his music and in light of Sonal's 'real life' rise to stardom to ask: how does the DIY studio figure into the present and future of Indian hip hop?

### **The studio, past and present**

Each of the young men who came and recorded in our studio in the five-month period it was up and running, met us under different circumstances. Some of them came through contacts we had in the scene with older b-boys who we had met online or had been introduced to through our diasporic networks. Others, we met simply by hanging out at the hip hop events, both underground and commercial, that were popping up all over the city. What becomes important is that many of the young men who came through Singh's studio were linked to each other closely, as they were in dance crews together or knew each other through the events they frequented. For instance, Sonal, when we met him, was in a dance crew with young men who lived in South Delhi, far away from his neighborhood in West Delhi. Several members of this crew would eventually participate in studio sessions with us. This meant, of course, that they had developed relationships in the physical, embodied spaces of the cypher.

As they began to record in the studio, our participants didn't articulate any particular desires for what would or could happen with their recorded tracks. Similarly, Singh and I didn't voice any specific goals linked to the recording sessions. By and large, the studio sessions felt very much like an organic extension of the cyphers in which these young men participated in the folds of their city but also a materialization of what Singh and I had grown up with in our respective youth cultural worlds in Germany and the U.S., a point we'll return to in just a moment. However, Sonal, even early on, voiced a different understanding of the studio.

Sonal, after meeting Singh at a Snoop Lion (now once again Dogg) concert asked, once he heard about Singh's studio plans, if he could record a track with him. Soon after, Singh invited Sonal over and they started experimenting with the recording equipment – Sonal taking his first stab at writing and recording lyrics. Soon after the recording session Singh received a phone call from Sonal. He told Singh, very earnestly, that he had a business proposal for him. He suggested that because of Singh's experience and expertise with recording and his equipment, Singh could charge money for recording sessions and that Sonal would bring him aspiring MCs who were willing to pay. Singh responded by saying that charging money for studio time wasn't his aim. Rather, Singh saw the studio as part of his research, a space for participation and observation. He said to Sonal he would eventually write about the studio, which would be, in effect, his remuneration for curating the studio space. Sonal responded, at first, with confusion. However, in subsequent interactions with Singh and others Sonal brought up Singh's disinterest in financial gain and his interest in creating knowledge through writing about hip hop in Delhi as a powerful example of an ethos of hip hop collectivity. Soon after Singh left,

Sonal opened up a DIY studio of his own and started charging some MCs, particularly those who lived outside of his neighborhood, for recording time and beats. How do we understand the dual positionings that are evinced in what Sonal says and does? To what extent does the tension that arises between studio and the cypher animate a negotiation between aspirational individualism and hip hop collectivity?

Much of the early music produced that eventually became known as hip hop, following Afrika Bambaataa's christening of this African diasporic genre of cultural production in the late 1970s, was improvisational and 'live'. DJs would plug their turntables in at parties or, in the legendary parties in the Bronx, New York, would rig them to street lamps and spin the breakbeats of existing records, playfully juggling between tracks. MCs emerged in this musical genre as the party host, who would 'toast' or 'rap' over the beats with their lyrical play, encouraging and exciting the crowd that gathered to listen and dance to the music. The MC eventually gained a more prominent role and those who could rap would, eventually, battle each other at parties and in small circles of practice that ultimately came to be called cyphers. Cyphers were spaces where MCs as well as b-boys, could initiate a competitive space that was built on older models of African diasporic call-and-response cultural practice (Newman 2005, Alim 2006). In these spaces, participation was marked by a willingness to engage in exchange that was delimited to the spatio-temporal conditions that produced it. In other words, the cypher stayed close to the proverbial 'street' from which hip hop derived its cultural force. The argument has been made that the space of digital production can act as an extension of the physical cypher. For instance, Spady et al. (2006) argue for an attention to the global cypher where transnational hip hop connectivity is facilitated by new communications

technologies. We'll return to this idea throughout this article and show that an attention to the (digital) studio reveals that the extension of the cypher to include production for social media circulation brings with it tensions even as it brings opportunities.

Hip hop's wild commercial success, which began in the 1980s, is predicated on the technologies of recording and broadcast and the ways in which mass media allowed hip hop's musical forms to travel from the local contexts where it was produced and find audiences across the globe. While the early recordings and circulations of hip hop music in the 1970s started at the grassroots level, where local DJs and producers would record mixtapes and sell them on the streets, the music industry quickly saw the economic possibility of hip hop and began inviting artists to do recording sessions in professional studios. In that era, the record label's professional studio, with its high-end equipment, came to clearly represent a co-optation of hip hop and a means to elevate and reward those who jumped in bed with the recording industry, while leaving others behind.

The Sugarhill Gang, one of the pioneering groups of studio hip hop music, recorded and released the first rap song and later rap album with the small New Jersey based record label Sugar Hill Records. *Rapper's Delight*, The Sugarhill Gang's hit single, is credited with being the first studio produced hip hop track to gain national, and later international, attention. This track set off debates within hip hop communities of practice concerning studio recordings. Toop (1991) describes how this record, at the time of its release in 1979, haunted one of hip hop's founding fathers, the legendary DJ Grandmaster Flash. Toop (1991) narrates how Flash, when he heard the track on the radio, expressed shock that this group he had never heard of before in the Bronx based hip hop scene was recording and circulating signature Bronx beats and rapping styles.

Grandmaster Flash, to keep up with this group of rappers he had not even known existed, went on to record the now iconic song, *The Message*, which was released by the very same record label, Sugar Hill Records. Flores (2004) in his analysis of the early years of hip hop music production, discusses how another prominent Bronx DJ of the time, Charlie Chase, argued that the song *Rapper's Delight* appropriates rhymes that originally were 'rapped' during a live event by another rapper, Grandmaster Caz. Charlie Chase's lamentations that The Sugarhill Gang never gave credit to Caz and made money off of rhymes that were originally shared in the collective, reveals a prevailing anxiety that recording necessarily takes away from the shared collectivity of cultural production in the cypher and works to reward some individuals while obscuring others.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, studio recording became entangled with the explosion of the drug economy in urban America. In their documentary *Planet Rock: The Story of Hip Hop and the Crack Generation*, Lowe and Torgoff (2012) suggest that several famous hip hop music groups' recording sessions in one of the several independent studios in L.A., New York, and Atlanta, before they got picked up by major record labels, were funded by money generated by the sale of crack cocaine. We are not bringing this up to belabor the history of the crack epidemic during the Reagan era or make a point about the morality of drug dealing. We rather wish to draw attention to the relationship between the commercialization of hip hop music and the economic, social, and political struggle that produces various, and at times, imbricated projects that individuals devise to find a way out of impossible socio-historic circumstances. On the one hand, the studio provided a means for dealers to launder their money. On the other hand, rapping about drug dealing became marketable and profitable in its own right. The

link between hip hop music and the street hustle authenticated the relationship between studios and the street as representative of the urban struggle. At the turn of the millennium, this link materialized in the figure of the hip hop mogul (Smith 2003); a new identity formation around an image of the self-made, African-American, young, male hip hop entrepreneur, fully agentic of his own personal uplift because he understood how to use capitalism's co-option of hip hop culture. Smith argues that the figure of the hip hop mogul makes visible late capitalist tensions between personal aspirations for upward social mobility and an ethical obligation to represent the dreams and aspirations of those who did not make it out of the 'hood (p. 71).

In direct response to the emergence of the fantasy of the hip hop mogul in the late 1990s, 'real', 'underground' and 'independent' genres of hip hop had a revival. Groups like Black Star and Rawkus Records in New York and the Dilated Peoples and Stones Throw Records in Los Angeles announced hip hop's return to b-boy aesthetics and old school values, celebrating the practice of fresh rhyming and sample-based beats of the early 1980s and combining it with a new intellectualized persona of the spiritually, historically and politically aware multicultural emcee. This old school revival entailed a celebration of the element of knowledge and thereby fueled an ongoing sentiment that 'real' hip hop should not be tainted by capital and its machinations and had to continue to exist outside of its net. Hip hop, so the sentiment goes, in its purest form, is not about making one's struggle a marketable commodity but, rather, about freedom from the material conditions of capital. In this idealized formulation the cypher becomes the epitome of freedom, as it allows for a temporal break from the traumas of the future and

past and the possibility, when one is within the cypher, to simply exist in the present with others.

This sentiment, where the cypher and its spatio-temporal present is depicted *as* real hip hop, is reiterated by icons in the U.S. hip hop scene in the contemporary moment. In a recent short video produced for the online publication of the British newspaper *The Guardian* by Nas (Jones 2015), a rapper from Queensbridge, New York, who has achieved legendary status in hip hop and is now associated with Harvard's Hip Hop Archive and Research Institute, this notion of immediacy and the spatial specificity of social exchange as the real is represented in a video montage of b-boys from around the world playfully competing in the hip hop cypher. The short video begins with an intertitle that states "the real hip hop" and continues by showing b-boys from several countries in the global south dancing in cyphers and on the streets. If the spatio-temporal specificity of the cypher was and continues to be seen as the location where 'real hip hop' has its origins and holds its power, then the studio and its technological apparatus has been painted as its potential antithesis, the space where hip hop's musical traditions that stress collectivity and improvisation are bound to become corrupted by capital.

Our youthful experiences with amateur studio equipment, however, contradicted this binary opposition. Singh, as he came of age in Frankfurt and Dattatreyan, as he came of age in New York City in the 1990s, experienced the rudimentary studios that we created with our friends as spaces of engagement and creative play. Rather than imagining hip hop production as a money-making endeavor and the studio as a means towards greater circulation, we saw music production as an extension of the cypher – a way to forge and maintain friendships through creative play. This was certainly influenced by our class

positions in our respective national contexts. Although each of our families struggled economically, the social capital that our families had created for themselves in their postcolonial migratory histories and the expectations of a middle-class trajectory, where a college education and a white-collar profession were expected, pushed the two of us to imagine our youthful hip hop experiments as a recreational practice disconnected from our future-making projects. The immediacy of the technological cypher of the studio allowed us to articulate our positions as immigrant outsiders in our respective national contexts in a way which our racialized positions were legitimated (albeit differently in Germany and in the U.S.A.) and offered us status within our friendship circles. For us, in our respective youth worlds in Frankfurt and New York, these intimate listeners rarely were those outside of the circle of friends and acquaintances who themselves often participated in studio experimentation or just hung out with us while we were recording.

The studio we constructed in Delhi attempted to reflect our youthful experiences of the studio as a space of friendship, experimentation, playful competition – essentially an extension of the cypher. By opening the studio to anyone we met in the Delhi hip hop scene who was interested in recording a track, we attempted to exemplify the ideal of the cypher as a democratic space where anyone could participate. We thereby promoted an ethos that producing hip hop music did not require high-end equipment for production. The studio Singh set up was a combination of old equipment, all stemming from the early 1990s when he was a teenager experimenting with hip hop music production, and ad hoc additions taken from local sources (a simple cloth functioned as a microphone pop filter, the recording booth was a cupboard, the microphone was placed in some styrofoam packaging material we found in the streets). The do-it-yourself (DIY) design of the studio



was, ultimately, a consciously motivated strategy to generate an impression that creative bricolage is the key to artistic production and that there is no need to ‘wait’ to make music until one could afford to buy prefabricated materials. The studio was therefore a means to disseminate hip hop’s culture of low-key inventiveness (Wilson 2011) in India’s emergent hip hop scene; a means to produce hip hop musical tracks by and for the young people who engaged in the regular and spontaneous studio sessions.

As a result of these sessions with the equipment that Singh put together to create ‘the studio’, several musical tracks were produced by veteran b-boys who were experimenting with hip hop poetics, some of which included cameos by a few older MCs in the Delhi scene from different class and ethnic backgrounds who previously had had the opportunity to experiment with recording. In addition, novices who previously had not had any involvement to the Delhi’s hip hop scene were also invited to record their verses and to produce their tracks. However, what neither of us had anticipated was that images, videos and musical tracks produced during and as a result of these studio sessions, would ultimately find their way onto social media sites through the efforts of our participants.

The circulation of musical tracks, images, and videos produced as a result of interaction in the studio and constructed on a DIY ideal that we promoted in our pedagogical discourse on hip hop had unforeseen consequences. As a couple of our participants who were regulars in the studio got a taste for circulating their productions online, they eventually came to the realization that music and video production in the contemporary moment required 21<sup>st</sup>-century technology and up-to-date aesthetic sensibilities to reach a larger audience and, ultimately, to become commercially viable in Delhi’s emerging youth culture industry. These participants, one of them notably being

Sonal, eventually invested in contemporary equipment, laptops and the latest beat-making software programs and continued to produce and disseminate tracks from their own home DIY studios. In the months that followed, the music and the social media commentary surrounding the music and video production that resulted due to the proliferation of ‘new’ home studios around Delhi began to animate a very different ideal of the studio, one that portrayed the studio as a site for commercial and social ‘success’ rather than only a utopia for contact and hip hop ‘play’.

These online circulations of audio-visual hip hop material linked to the concurrent rise of DIY studios around the city very quickly precipitated a response from Delhi’s larger hip hop community. These young people, most of who were b-boys or graffiti artists and who kept their practice of rapping to cyphers in the physical spaces where they congregated, argued on online forums that the turn towards studio recording for broader circulation was anti-hip hop; a move towards the crass commercialization of Delhi’s and India’s nascent hip hop scene. These sentiments, of course, evoke the dissolution of the collective in hip hop’s history we discussed earlier, where individual gain is seen as a direct threat to collective expression.

It seemed clear, as these debates ensued, that our small DIY studio and the values we attached to it were appropriated, remixed, and redeployed by the young men with whom we worked in ways that had material, social and political consequences for those who participated in the studio sessions. The studio was redefined as a site for economic as well as social possibility, in part, because of the economic positions of the young people with whom we worked. Singh and I, as we grew up in Frankfurt and New York respectively, approached hip hop as something we did irrespective of its economic

possibility. In large part, this is because we had access to other vehicles to imagine our economic futures. Part-time jobs, full-time college and the promise of gainful employment in the future allowed us to engage with hip hop as play. Our playful approach to hip hop was also shaped by the hip hop sociality we engaged in. For Singh and myself, our coming-of-age experience with hip hop music production was about the relationships that the technology of capture created rather than the aspirations that broadcast held. In part, this was a function of our limited capacity to circulate our recordings. YouTube, Facebook and so on did not yet exist and the only way to accrue new audiences through one's recordings was either through the recording industry or if a DJ in the local scene agreed to play your track. In either case, our productions were meant for our friends, mainly those who experimented in the makeshift studio space with us.

For some of the young men in the Delhi scene, however, studio production and recording had different stakes. For Sonal, as we shall see in a moment, hip hop music production and social media circulation was a clear path to financial independence, a means to make a living out of what he cared about most. Similar to the (American) hip hop moguls that Smith (2003) describes, Sonal did not see a conflict between making money with hip hop music production while simultaneously imagining himself as an authentic representative of a hip hop collectivity. Even more importantly, as we alluded to in the introduction, Sonal saw the studio as a site to make visible his 'hood's and ethnic and religious communities' traumas and struggles. For Sonal such a historically-rooted vision of hip hop was more important than the cyphers he participated in across the city. In the following section we mark the ways in which the studio, coupled with

digital circulation of the studio's products, shifts the self-perceptions of our participants and the way they imagine the possibilities of their engagements with global hip hop. It becomes clear that the studio, in the eyes of our participants, is not solely a space for democratic engagement and low-key inventiveness, but a space where production leads to circulation and circulation to the accrual of various forms of capital.

### **Commercial production, authentic representation**

As participants in the studio sessions began to utilize the images created in the sessions in their Facebook pages, they began to take on new personas in their virtual worlds. Some added the prefix 'MC' to their Facebook monikers to designate their new self-identificatory positionalities. They also posted pictures of themselves on the mic in the studio to fortify their new personas. These small re-significations became important markers for how these youth perceived themselves as a result of their forays in the studio and how they sought to cast themselves anew across virtual and terrestrial worlds. These identificatory claims, however, would have probably gone uncontested, even unnoticed, within the nascent hip hop scene in Delhi if it was not for the circulation of the music and videos that were also produced as a result of these sessions. Moreover, a few particularly ambitious young men, after getting a taste for production in the studio, had a great interest not only in rapping on musical tracks but also in learning how to produce beats and make music videos. These young men eventually, after saving and borrowing money, opened DIY studios of their own.

As Singh prepared to depart from Delhi, he bequeathed some of his equipment to Sonal. I travelled on the Delhi metro to Sonal's house, several months after Singh had

returned to Europe, to check out the home studio he had been assiduously assembling and, importantly, to bring him a digital mixer that he requested I purchase for him on my short trip back to the U.S.A. The long journey from my house in South Delhi to his place took me through Rajiv Chowk, the nerve center of New Delhi as the capital of India and the central hub of the relatively new Delhi metro system. There, I would fight through the thick crowds and transfer to the westward bound train, towards Sonal's neighborhood.

When I arrived at his station, Sonal picked me up and shepherded me through the tangled streets of his neighborhood, a colony that formed at the time of partition by Punjabi Sikhs and Hindus who had fled what is now Lahore, Pakistan.<sup>v</sup> The neighborhood he lived in was still predominantly Punjabi and Sikh, although there were Nigerian students and entrepreneurs who now made their home in the area. We walked until we reached his family house, where he lived with his mom and his sister. His father had left months before for a short trip and, inexplicably, had not returned. His mother owned a small tailor shop down the street, which supported their family. Sonal, since he graduated from high school, contributed to the family by working night shifts at a call center that catered to clients in the U.S.A. His proficiency in English and his interest in technology allowed him some mobility in Delhi's service labor economy.

His mother, when she found out I was coming over, came home from the tailor shop to make Sonal and me lunch. Before we sat down to eat, Sonal showed me around his studio, assembled in a sitting room on the bottom floor of the modest two-story house his family occupied. On a table stood the equipment that Singh had bequeathed to Sonal months prior. The eight-track recorder sat between a garlanded photo of Sonal's deceased grandfather, and a copy of the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy text. The condenser

microphone, now equipped with a professional pop-filter rather than a simple cloth as in Singh's DIY studio, was carefully placed in the corner of the room and covered with a red velvet fabric with golden embroidery to protect it from dust. Sonal's reverence for the equipment that Singh passed along to him had become a material remainder of the studio that we set up and an icon of hip hop's past. However, the value it held was purely symbolic. It was a way to materially represent his direct connection with hip hop's history as well as the relationship he had established with Singh and me during his first forays into studio production in Singh's apartment. "There is the beat machine", he said. A slight layer of dust covered it. "I don't really use it much. It's difficult to program. I prefer the laptop."

Sonal's studio set up sat on an adjacent table and consisted of a laptop, Singh's condenser microphone with a professional pop filter, a set of expensive headphones, and a hard drive. On the screen of the laptop was the interface of Fruity Loops, a beat-making program that Sonal had downloaded along with several other music and video editing software programs. He played a few tracks for me that he had produced on his own setup. These new tracks had a more contemporary, digital sound. The beats that Sonal was producing borrowed from many of the stock arrangements on Fruity Loops and other current beat-making software programs. These beats, to our ears, had a more commercial 'radio' friendly sound to them. The arrangements sounded thinner, less analogue than those of the beat making machine. His style and content of rapping had also shifted in the months since I had seen him. Sonal had worked on making the locutionary force of his words so that their sonic timber and lyrical content had shifted towards projecting a more street oriented image of himself.

The first music video he produced with me and Singh when the original DIY studio was in full swing, for example, was for a track he called *Guru*, or teacher. In the track, which featured a 1990s style beat produced by Singh's friend from Germany, Sonal and Singh rapped about the importance of having good teachers that transmit an ethically sound knowledge. In the tracks that he played for me at his studio, however, he rapped about keeping it real on the streets of his West Delhi 'hood. As we sat over a lunch of *rajma chawal* ('kidney beans and rice'), Sonal began to tell me about the several music projects he was planning with several well-known MCs from Delhi and Chandigarh,<sup>vi</sup> all of which he planned to broadcast online. Sonal also described on my first visit to his studio his desire to make his studio economically viable by charging money for studio sessions. "Not for my friends or those in my crew. But for others, there are many others, who want to produce a track. Why not? It is better than working in a call center" (the job which he recently quit as he decided to go into music and video production full time). Sonal, in creation of and justification for the studio as a business enterprise, returned to the vision he articulated to Singh almost a year prior – when he propositioned him to be his business partner in a studio enterprise.

Many months later, when I visited his studio again after he insisted that I come out to see the sound proof booth he had built, he discussed how circulating the tracks and music videos he produced and starred in, helped him to acquire paid gigs in local clubs. "Without likes on Facebook or ReverbNation, the club owners do not believe that I will attract a crowd." He also told me that he was doing pretty well economically with his new studio. "I don't need to get another job in a call center, I'm doing good producing commercial music for myself and others." For Sonal the term 'commercial' was deployed

as a descriptive for musical tracks that could create recognition and provide him and those he worked with outside of his immediate circle. This fame, he argued, would ultimately result in the economic viability of the thing he loved to do most – engage in hip hop’s forms. Likes on Facebook and views on YouTube clearly become central to Sonal’s ability to leverage economic gain from online fame. Sonal’s early success finding clients willing to pay money for production and accessing Delhi’s club scene as a performer through his studio productions reveals how, for Sonal and the millions of others who circulate original content on the internet, the aspirations of the studio production were inextricably linked to the promise of economic possibility and social fame that the internet provided.

Sonal’s push towards commercial viability contested Singh’s and my, perhaps, naïve assertion that hip hop was about the immediacy of the creative act in two important ways. First, it reasserted the political, economic and social realities of the lives of the young men we engaged with in Delhi. These young men, for the most part, were at an age (between the ages of 16-19) when real world responsibilities were beginning to make themselves felt. Several of them had dropped out of school and most of them did not have jobs. Moreover, many of their families were not financially able to support them. The studio and indeed hip hop practice, became, for them, not only a pastime or a personal creative endeavor, but a means to imagine an economic future. Our utopic notions of hip hop as a space where even amateurs could record music, an open space free, at least for a time, from the realities of the political, economic, and social realities of our participants, only held water until the young men who had recorded a few tracks began to feel they



were MCs, not amateurs, and that they needed to record music and music videos that would engender attention and, potentially, economic possibility.

Second, and just as importantly, the studios that these young men created in their homes pushed back against a notion of participation as an entirely democratic venture. For Sonal, the studio was a space where he could selectively let in friends, those in his ‘crew’, and prospective clients. The notion of the studio as an entirely open space was left behind in favor of imagining the studio as a site of privilege, a place where an already established relationship, money or, in some cases, merit entitled you to the right to participate. However, again in hindsight, the only reason why we could keep the studio open to anyone who wished to participate was that we were temporary fixtures in the Delhi hip hop scene. As visitors, we were able to forge a space that was, if only for a short time, open to all. However, even in the short five months that Singh’s studio was open, situations emerged that foreshadowed the limits of a democratic studio space. For instance, Singh’s landlords grew uncomfortable at all the foot traffic that the studio brought, particularly when a crew of Somali MCs began to participate in the studio sessions. This eventually led Singh to limiting the studio sessions to a smaller number of participants.

In Sonal’s studio in West Delhi, similar limits were reached when Dattatreyan took the same crew of Somali MCs over for a recording session. When they reached the door of his house, Dattatreyan saw Sonal’s mom walking down the alley and away from the house and hailed her. As he greeted her, she walked back to open the door for the crew. A group of young men, neighbors who lived down the block, saw this scene from afar and ran over to make sure Dattatreyan and the Somali crew were not coercing her to open the

house for nefarious reasons. The social stigma of difference, linked, in this case, to African nationals who live in Delhi, clearly created implicit limits around how inclusive the studio space could be. Given that hip hop is African diasporic art form, these limitations struck us (the authors) as being particularly challenging and pushed us to think about the ways in which colonial understandings of racial difference limit hip hop's potential to foster collectivity across difference in the postcolonial context of Delhi (see Dattatreyan, 2020 for a longer discussion on the continued significance of colonial era understandings of racial difference in India and the limits it poses on hip hop solidarity).

The question of financial remuneration and economic success as a result of studio production, however, was what ultimately irked several young people in Delhi's hip hop scene, many who have similar class positions to Sonal's. As we explore in the next section, their ambivalence to hip hop as a commercial enterprise that takes away from hip hop's ability to represent the 'real' emerged in the debates that take place on the very same social media spaces where Sonal distributed his and his crew's music, marking the centrality of social media as the site where not only 'commercial' aspirations take shape but where ongoing debates concerning the authenticity of cultural production are rehearsed.

## **Web 2.0 circulation and debates concerning the real**

The emergence of our studio and the subsequent proliferation of studios in Delhi, precipitated a strong response amongst youth, as the songs, videos, and photos emanating from studio sessions began to circulate on Facebook and YouTube. Many in the hip hop scene felt that 'real' hip hop could only be found in the raw and 'real' material spaces of

the cypher. These young men articulated the idea that studio production and dissemination watered down hip hop and opened it up to commercialization, echoing earlier sentiments around The Sugarhill Gang's studio recordings. The contours of this debate give a sense of what the stakes are in Delhi's hip hop scene as young men in urban India seek a viable artistic means to express themselves in ways that cannot be found in the popular or classical genres of the subcontinent. As several young people in the scene expressed to us over the course of the year, particularly those who felt themselves on the margins of national belonging, hip hop provided an alternative means of expression that captured their urban lives.

The interest that others outside of the immediate Delhi scene had in their creative play was at once sought after and circumspect. For the young b-boys, graffiti artists, DJs, and aspiring MCs, attention from and engagement with international hip hop practitioners was definitely of interest, as international hip hop practitioners legitimated their practices and allowed them to imagine themselves as part of a global hip hop community (see also Singh and Dattatreya 2016, Dattatreya forthcoming). For our mostly young male interlocutors, the attention of other young people in Delhi was equally important, particularly attention of the young women they encountered in their neighborhoods, in the malls, or who were part of their social networks on social media.

Audio-visual studio production, however, allowed for an indiscriminate hailing of audiences. As these productions took the hip hop practices of these young people outside of its practitioner centered space and disseminated it to a larger audience vis-à-vis social media, some young people within the scene began to get anxious. What was being represented as Delhi hip hop and who was representing it? Moreover, were those who

were representing Delhi hip hop in their media productions getting paid for their representations while others, who had been participating in cyphers for years, were not? This dual possibility of greater exposure and the subsequent social connection and potential income that it engendered, of course, is central to the ways in which the young people who we got to know made sense of their hip hop practices in the age of social media. The studio became a stand-in for all of the possibilities and pitfalls that production and circulation make possible.

Below are excerpts from a Facebook conversation between Sonal and his interlocutor, another MC and b-boy from Delhi's scene, Raj. This exchange offers an example of how the studio as an imagined and contested space of aspiration and opportunity.

Raj: A lot of emcees in the beginning need only practicing their skills by cyphers and battles. If u just started to record ur shit and if no body knows u then its worthless to record. U hv ur friend circle to do cypher. recording cant affect hiphop but getting into commercial from the raw cypher style scene will kill ur ghetto skills. to keep it real just do cypher for long years. Do freestyle!..increase ur circle not ur recorded tracks. for amature ppls, they just need cyphers and battles for some years. honey singh<sup>vii</sup> didn't practed in cypher no battles,,,he recorded his bitch ass shit. and ppls are spreading fake things as they do rap. fuck honey singh is nt an emcee. still recording stuffs, y?

Sonal: everyone have its own state of mind, yeah people not listening to me because I am producing songs for my circle , for my emotions .. n If you compare this scene with honey singh or pitbull, its your state of mind. I done work with Joel, Salim,

Hanif. when they got to listen their songs, that time those smiles are my happiness. so i consider my happiness first. and we can do cyphers and recording both. its my decision. i don't know i am hip hop or not but i am love doing this and i will do.. recordings and cypher both.

(Public Facebook dialogue between Raj and Sonal, 2013)

It becomes apparent, in the excerpts of the Facebook dialogue above, that the studio opened them a possibility for the recording and circulation of music and music videos that made these youth visible to their peers in the Delhi hip hop community. However, by providing access and use of studio equipment only to a small subset of youth in the scene, we played a part in triggering a debate that revealed how actors within the scene imagine the procedures or correct ways and sequences of building a hip hop persona. Such debates put them in the center of an ongoing process of self-description amongst hip hop adherents around the world that revolve around what is 'real' and what is 'fake' (see e.g. Pennycook 2007).

In the conversation above, fake is connected to the act of premature recording. According to Raj, "recording cant affect hip hop but getting into commercial from the raw cypher style scene will kill ur ghetto skills." Raj intimates that recording, rather than interacting within the living framework of the cipher, takes one away from what he calls "ghetto skills." For Raj what is at stake is not whether hip hop is a DIY practice or not. This sort of collective DIY cultural production, for Raj, is a given condition within hip hop. Rather, Raj expresses a concern that focuses on the medium, the practice that, in this case, the MC utilizes to express herself. While Raj articulates a general distrust of recording technology precisely because it will take one away from the placedeness of the

process of this sort of music making (in his words ‘the ghetto’), he makes a point of specifying that technology will make the music commercial or fake because of the speed in which one can circulate texts. He advises that, “to keep it real just do cypher for long years. do freestyle!” For Raj the immediacy of the cypher and the slow and steady progress that it offers through collective practice and critique, was the only thing that could legitimate an MC. The studio coupled with the internet, because of the speed at which they offered notoriety without any sort of member check, was fake.

Sonal retorts by arguing that this home studio allowed for collaboration that made people happy and that he had worked with other MCs, all of who are African nationals, and “when they got to listen their songs, that time those smiles are my happiness.” Sonal, by evoking the collectivity of the studio enterprise, gestures to the lessons he learned with us, that technological production could be as collaborative and collective as the physical cypher. What does not come through in the Facebook exchange we present above but certainly did in the years we have got to know Sonal, are the ways in which he imagined his studio enterprise as entangled in his lived reality. For Sonal economic and social pressures as well as aspirations for fame pushed him to reformulate what a DIY ideology and studio production could mean beyond the social relations it facilitated. The studio, in his estimation, was not only a place of meetings and connections but a business venture where he could charge for recording sessions for those outside of his immediate circle. It was a space where he could make products that would ultimately have value in and beyond the networks he traversed, where he could accrete social and financial capital through Facebook likes and YouTube views.

Sonal's reformulated DIY hip hop ideology aligns with the contemporary ethos of Delhi (and other emergent world megacities), an ethos that celebrates innovation in the service of capital as a means to produce the image and material possibility of a world class city (Roy 2011). As Roy (2010) has argued, capital's latest frontier has been to co-opt the urban and the rural working poor's innovative genius. Sonal, like many of the young men in Delhi's hip hop scene whose parents are a part of the city's service labor, imagines a future where, through his musical and visual practices that merge western notions of urbanity with distinctively South Asian experiences of the city, he could capitalize on this emergent desire for new images of urban South Asia.

And yet, Sonal, in the ways in which he values hip hop's material and immaterial signs as a means to articulate his personal struggles and aspirations as well as a means to construct new solidarities, affinities, and friendships across difference with youth who occupy similar economic positions in the city where he lives, points to a political awareness of hip hop as a praxis deeply rooted in urban struggle beyond its economic potential. His predominantly Sikh 'hood and its rooted connection with a postcolonial struggle and history is the other collectivity that Sonal embraces and centers in his music and his aspirations. We can see that Sonal's studio project reveals something more than an individual versus collective binary. Rather, Sonal's investment in studio production speaks to how he negotiates his various commitments and alignments which include his ethnic community, his family, his hip hop crew, the Delhi hip hop scene, the Indian hip hop scene and global hip hop as well as his personal aspirations. Sonal's response to Raj is indicative of this complex negotiation of social capitals.

When Raj essentially questions Sonal's hip hop authenticity because of his studio ventures, Sonal responds by saying, "i don't know [if] i am hip hop or not but i am love doing this and i will do.. recordings and cypher both." In his response we can see his rejection of a studio versus cypher binary through his refusal of hip hop membership if this means making a choice between the two. For Sonal happiness and love emerge as categories that link his various commitments and signal his intent to circulate his message across publics, whether in face-to-face interactions in the physical cypher or through the broadcast capacities of the studio. Moreover, by naming particular individuals who worked with him in his West Delhi studio, all of whom are African nationals living in Delhi, Sonal suggests that the physical cyphers in the public spaces of the city do not include those who are not Indian, something I write about in detail elsewhere (Dattatreyan, forthcoming).

The studio, in this formulation and in the historical context of India, allows for a slightly different articulation of hip hop postcoloniality than what Rollefson (2017) has argued in his engagements with hip hop in Europe. For Rollefson (2017) hip hop, when engaged with as a postcolonial formation, allows for an understanding of how hip hop functions as both a commercial product of the colonial-era slave trade and a "cultural politics" well suited to combat and address exclusionary and racialized politics in Europe through the cultivation of affinity across difference between postcolonial subjects. Hip hop in India, especially when seen through the studio, shows a more fractured sense of solidarity, where some are included as authentic hip hop Others within the national context capable of capturing the market's attention through the articulation of their story, while others are excluded. In this sense, the studio emerges as a contested site of



negotiation that blurs the distinction between face-to-face interactions and digital mediations to further individual aspirations but also call into question the contradictions that sit between the politics of the postcolonial nation state and the global formations that link them.

## **Conclusion**

It is 2019. The film *Gully Boy* (Akhtar 2019) has just dropped. Set in Dharavi, Mumbai, commonly referred to as the largest ‘slum’ in Asia, *Gully Boy* narrates the coming-of-age story of Murad, a young Muslim man who rapidly transforms from hip hop enthusiast to a local hip hop sensation. Murad’s meteoric rise to fame comes when he records a track, at the behest of his mentor, an older MC in the scene named Sher who he meets at a cypher that he accidentally finds out about while surfing on YouTube. Sher sees something special in Murad and encourages him to write his story and record it in his DIY studio for YouTube circulation. Murad’s track and accompanying video is immediately ‘discovered’ by an Indian-American producer named Sky, who has just come from Boston to scout out local talent in the Indian scene. Yet, while Murad finds his voice in the studio, which translates to access and capital, he struggles in the cypher.

The next time he attends the regularly scheduled cypher where he first met Sher, he finds himself in a battle with an MC from Delhi where he ‘chokes’ and has to leave. Even though he is unable to gain respect in the cypher initially, the studio liberates him. His next track with Sky is a hit and the video he produces along with it, set in Dharavi and called *Mere Gully Mein* (‘In my Street’) garners thousands of likes. Eventually Murad finds his voice in the cypher and is triumphant at the end of the film as he wins a

battle competition – with a prize of one million rupees and a chance to share the stage with the legendary Nas from Queensbridge – by claiming his authentic class positionality as a gully boy (a young man from the street) on stage. His collective allegiances, the film suggests, are not with the diverse class, ethnic and religious community of practice he meets in the cypher, but rather with the publics he is able to access through the studio by telling his story. Murad’s individual success is contingent on his ability to evoke and reaffirm his connection to his marginalized and spatialized collective subjectivity.

*Gully Boy*, with its constant referencing and aestheticization of studio time and social-media circulation as key aspects of hip-hop potentiality in the contemporary moment, captures the affective sensibility of the argument we have made in this article. In *Gully Boy*, the studio becomes the space where Murad can come to terms with his classed and religious subjectivity through articulation while simultaneously imagining and connecting to various publics including, quite importantly, his own neighborhood. In the final scene of the film, Murad returns to his ‘hood to an enthusiastic multi-generational reception. Murals of him have been painted in the streets. Graffiti celebrates his success.

The physical cypher, in contrast, becomes the space of initial contact, where one can find one’s footing and make important friendships. It is also depicted as a site of interpersonal tensions that highlight class difference and masculine performativity. Initially, Murad’s inability to shine in the cypher stems from his embodied lack of confidence linked to his subject position as a Muslim from the ‘slums’ trapped in an immobile laboring position. Amongst an ethnically and class diverse group of MCs in the cypher he is, at first, at a loss. However, as a result of his studio success, he is able to

transcend his position and return to the cypher to fully claim his mantle. In fact, the film suggests that it is imperative that he learn to battle in the cypher in order to enter and win the competition. The cypher, in his moment of return and his ability to fully claim his position as a gully boy on the mic, in turn, amplifies and legitimates his studio engagements.

Murad's filmic narrative, in some ways, doubles with Sonal's rise to fame. After our departure, Sonal met a producer in his neighborhood in West Delhi who had been selling beats to American MCs for some time but was not yet visible in the Delhi hip hop scene. The two of them produced a series of tracks and accompanying videos, and eventually an album, which feature the stories of their 'hood. Sonal, as a result of these studio-produced tracks and videos, became a key figure in Delhi's underground cyphers and, eventually, in the Indian hip-hop scene. Eventually, Sonal and his producer were picked up by an independent record label founded by a diasporic Indian.

In hindsight, our initial venture to build a DIY studio, in the moment we did so, was a critical intervention in the Delhi scene. Our studio gave MCs like Sonal and a few others who are now also key figures, an opportunity to find their voices. While these young men, as we described above, were consuming global hip hop on their phones and practiced b-boying not just as a form of dance but as way of becoming men in the city they have inherited, they had not yet ventured into the production and circulation of their own tracks and videos. If we consider that The Sugarhill Gang's recording of *Rapper's Delight* set in motion a chain of events that opened the door for MCs to circumvent the cypher as a necessary site of legitimation, the DIY digital studio in Delhi we set up for a short time and which was then picked up and developed by youth in the scene, offered

marginalized young men in the city an opportunity to tell and share their story in a way that *also* circumvented the seemingly necessary step of the cypher.

Our DIY studio and the studios that emerged in the scene after we had left, because they offered an opportunity to articulate, authenticate, and broadcast, also pushed MCs in Delhi to re-think how and with whom they located themselves, beyond hip hop. In this article we have foregrounded Sonal's negotiation of his religious, kin and classed belonging as they are entangled in his personal aspirations for hip hop success. The 'hood – as it is mobilized in and mediated through the DIY studio – becomes the site which offers Sonal an opportunity to bring together his multiple understandings of and commitments to the collective in ways that are recognizable to an Indian and global market. The DIY studio then, becomes a means to bring together a sociality of the cypher, the commitments of the local, and the imaginary of the global together into tense but productive negotiations.

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Dr. Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology, Goldsmiths, University of London. His published writings, films, and exhibitions engage with urban life, digital media circulations, youthful becoming, racialized difference, and gendered performance. His forthcoming book, *The Globally Familiar: Digital Hip Hop, Masculinity, and Urban Space* (Duke University Press, 2020), documents the ways in which working class young men productively take up hip hop's five elements as a way to reflexively self-fashion themselves as gendered and racialized subjects in India's rapidly changing capital city.

Dr. Jaspal Naveel Singh is a hip hop head and sociolinguist currently working at the University of Hong Kong. His research investigates embodied language use in its socio-cultural contexts to shed light on the ways in which voice and narrative produce and challenge masculine ideologies and social power in global cultures. He has published his work in several academic journals and books and his book *Transcultural Voices: Narrating Hip Hop Culture in Complex Delhi* will come out in 2021. Jaspal's most recent research explores beatboxing as a 'language.'

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<sup>i</sup> All the names of research participants used in this article are pseudonyms.

<sup>ii</sup> B-boy, also known as breakboy or breakdancer, is a term used to describe those who have taken up hip hop's element of dance, which has its roots in several African diasporic movement traditions.

<sup>iii</sup> Rapping or MCing, as we describe in more detail in the subsequent section, is hip hop's poetic and musical form. It is often imagined as hip hop rather than one element of it.

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<sup>iv</sup> In 1984 mobs attacked, tortured, raped and lynched members of Delhi's Sikh population. The pogroms took place after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. PM Gandhi's assassination was precipitated by the Indian state's raid on the Golden Temple, the holiest Sikh shrine located in Amritsar, Punjab, on the grounds that the Sikh separatist movement was using the temple as its base. During the pogroms in Delhi, Sonal's grandfather was killed. For more on the 1984 anti-Sikh violence, see Tatla (2006).

<sup>v</sup> The Sikh Punjabi community has lived in West Delhi since the traumatic partition of the British colonial Raj which saw the formation of India and Pakistan as separate nation-states. This community were once farmers in what is now Pakistan and, since partition and resettlement, have made their urban livelihoods through small scale commerce and services (for more on Punjabi community of Delhi, see Kaur 2007).

<sup>vi</sup> Chandigarh is the capital city of the state of Punjab and is one of the centres for hip hop influenced music production in India.

<sup>vii</sup> Honey Singh is a highly successful professional Indian musician and film actor. His songs are often regarded as promoting misogyny and violence. Most Delhi hip hop heads we engaged with in the field dismiss him as fake and commercial. He has become, for many, a symbol of the antithesis of 'real' hip hop in India.