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Description of Context

Write: a 4-5 page description of the context and circumstances of your field research experience. Did it match your expectations from the literature? How did you feel? How did people respond to you?

DESCRIPTION OF CONTEXT

The Scratch Academy-LA is located at 2324 Cotner Ave. on the Westside of Los Angeles. Turning off the busy Pico Boulevard the Academy is at first difficult to find, the front entrance is cloaked by a large chain fence covered in black plastic. Only when you enter the gates and enter into a little courtyard can you see a sign that says “REHAB,” and you might still be wondering if you are in the right place^[1]. That is, unless you know that R.E.H.A.B. stands for “Real Experiences in Hip-hop And Beats” (RehabProjects 2009).

“Like other ‘rehab’s’, we too serve as an ‘institution’ and a place of ‘growth, development, and re-invention’. We see the need to provide our culture with a commonplace for creative outlet and collaboration and we feel as though our community and our music is based on the idea of constant re-creation and re-establishment. One might say: Hip Hop is in a state of REHAB” (RehabProjects 2009).

When you enter into the academy there is a circular desk to your right where the staff answer phones and welcome students. Usually Dil or Carlos is sitting at the front desk. To your right is a black stage; this is where the students perform at graduation. The interior is decorated with graffiti, records, and recycled materials.

As you make your way further into the long narrow room you will come to a horseshoe of turntables resting on metal barrels. This is where most of the classes take place. The 152 class, which I have been sitting in on for this folk religion class, takes place further back, in the backroom. This is a dark room with couches, a set of turntables, and some digital DJing equipment.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF FIELD RESEARCH EXPERIENCE^[2]

During the months of January and February I sat in on the 101 DJ class. This was a beginner class for students who have little experience with DJing. During the months of March and April I sat in on the 152 class. This is a class for students who understand the basics of DJing and have already mastered putting together some sets of music. The 152 class prepares the students for booking DJ gigs. There were 5 students in this Thursday night class: DJ Kid Fish, DJ Epic Twelve, DJ Nix, DJ Lost Angel, and Mr. Zero. The class met from 8-10 pm, but would often go longer. The teachers for this class were DJ Hapa and DJ Denkym, both are experienced DJs who helped found this school; Hapa is the Executive Director. Each week the students would

be given a challenge in which they had to come with prepared music and work together as a team. Often the challenges included time constraints or strange equipment the DJs also had to work with.

LITERATURE EXPECTATIONS

I have only recently, within the past six months, been researching this community. From what I can gather it is not only about the music, but also about the experienced community. One of the most helpful resources I have found on this community for this class was an article in a recent edition of *Culture and Religion* entitled, “Two Turntables and a Microphone: Turntablism, Ritual and Implicit Religion” by Elonda Clay.^[3] This article explores the implicit religion found in DJ Turntable battles.

Clay recognizes that just like the contemporary forms of religiosity, “the cultural practices of hip hop answers the desire for intensity and embodiment, provides a sense of belonging, creates a context for existential wrestling and truth-seeking, creates spaces to consume and play, promote values that groups or communities hold in common, and produce relevant representations of religious visual and material culture” (Clay 2009:35). I have seen all of this exhibited at the Scratch Academy.

I gather that there are different paradoxes found within the hip-hop community. For example, on the one hand you can find the commodification of material wealth and the celebration of violence within the hip-hop community. And on the other hand, there is the seeking of excellence, unity and knowledge within the same community. The Scratch Academy seems to promote the later, though there are some influences of the former, mainly desires for wealth and fame.

Some of the roots of these paradoxes are also found within the roots of organizations like the Universal Zulu Nation, an international hip-hop awareness group. Afrika Bambaataa, an ex-gang member who founded the Zulu Nation recognizes this tension when he states:

"When we made Hip Hop, we made it hoping it would be about peace, love, unity and having fun so that people could get away from the negativity that was plaguing our streets (gang violence, drug abuse, self hate, violence among those of African and Latino descent). Even though this negativity still happens here and there, as the culture progresses, we play a big role in conflict resolution and enforcing positivity" (ZuluNation.com 2009).

Both Hip Hop and the Zulu nation were birthed out of an urban context, which has many facets.

Clay describes energy as playing a large role in the gift economy of the hip hop culture, “For live shows to be perceived as efficacious there is an expectation between performers and participating crowds to engage in the reciprocal exchange of energy and to work towards the increase of momentum in the ritual space, thus making room for the potential emergence of social intensity.” (Clay 2009:32). This is what first peaked my interest in exploring DJs in the first place. I was fascinated by their interactions with the crowds. They know their material very well but at the same time they do not stick to a plan, they respond to and interact with the crowd

they are playing to. I have been keeping an ear open to how the teachers are teaching this to their students. Hapa described it to me once by using the phrase, “a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down.” He said, you need to know what amount of sugar and what amount of medicine to give the audience (Hapa 2008).

Another quality described in my research that I see exhibited at the Scratch Academy is the willingness to share information among the DJs. The Scratch Academy is open between 11am and 8pm for students to come and practice on the equipment. Often during this time you will see students working together, admiring and teaching one another what they have learned. In an interview with DJ QBert, one of the early legends of Scratch DJing, he describes this aspect of the community. culture. The interviewer asked if there were a lot of secrets kept from other DJs, if QBert had things that he didn’t want to give away. His response was, “A lot of people may want to hold secrets back and not let people know, but that's kind of greedy. We like to let everyone know and spread the knowledge. It lets the art form grow. You give and you receive. It's kind of cool to just help people out” (Klein 1999). This articulates the ambiance of what I have found at the Scratch Academy.

HOW DID YOU FEEL/HOW DID PEOPLE RESPOND?

I have felt incredibly welcomed by this community. The first time I visited, back in December, I stayed for three hours interviewing DJ Hapa because we had made such a great connection. The second time I visited I was nervous to just walk in. Hapa was the only person I had met and I did not know what I would do if he was not there. I did not know how to describe myself. I sat in on the end of one of the classes. After the class I got into a conversation with one of the Teaching Assistants, Ver5e. I was surprised when he had heard about me, “the girl who was making the pastor-DJ connection.” I ended up staying again for a few hours. I asked a lot of questions about DJing, but I was surprised that the DJs were also interested in talking to me about spirituality as well.

Sitting in on the 101 class felt really comfortable because Hapa had informed the class that I would be there. By the end of the six-week class I had gotten to know a handful of the DJs by name. One of the longest conversations I had was with DJ Mark Luv, a veteran DJ who grew up in Los Angeles. He is in his 40s and is clearly well respected by the other DJs. Mark is a member of the Universal Zulu Nation. A few weeks ago Mark requested for an “interview part 2” and we sat down for a few more hours talking with one another.

When I came to sit in on the 152 class it was a little intimidating because the class was much smaller and the setting was in the back room. I was used to just sitting, taking notes and observing in the 101 class, so I was a little surprised when the teacher asked me to introduce myself to the group. In both classes I was very open about how much I have to learn about music and that I am a seminary student doing research for a class. From the way that people nod their heads and smile when I make the connection between pastors and DJs, I feel that I am being received well.

The events that have the most energy at the school have been the graduations. I have been to three graduations. They usually take place about every two months. I have also now interacted with a bunch of DJs outside of the Scratch Academy as well at some of their events. They have been very welcoming to me. Many seem very eager to answer questions about DJing or help me with my project.

APPENDIX: SCRATCH

(This is an excerpt from the paper I wrote for Dr. Bolger's MC520: New Church Movements class in Winter 2009.)

In order to understand the Scratch Academy's purpose it is important to have some background of the Hip Hop movement. Hip Hop is a musical genre that began in New York City in the late 1970s. It was the era of rock and disco, neither of which resonated with the young people who lived in the Bronx (Jay 1998). Many say the founder of this type of music was DJ Kool Herc who was from Kingston, Jamaica. Herc began to notice a specific section of the song, named the "bridge," or the "break," which the audience seemed to really connect with. [4] So using multiple record players he found a way to continuously loop the breaks of songs together to create a new song. [5] Herc had found a way to create music by using other people's songs. Jam Master Jay, the founder of the Scratch Academy, says that "Hip hop was the funk and the soul of anybody's music" (Jay 1998).

It used to be that in order for aspiring DJs to learn the trade they had to find experienced DJs to teach them. Over the years, as DJing has become more popular, it has also become a lot more accessible. According to DJ Hapa, the Executive Director of the LA Scratch Academy, many DJs now enter in and do not know the art and culture of DJing, which is why the Scratch Academy was created in 2002 (Hapa 2008). Hapa sees part of the task of the Scratch Academy is, "to elevate the DJ as a musician and the turntable as an instrument. We also aim to educate our local community about hip-hop culture. Up until recently, people saw DJs as jukeboxes. There's so much more than that in the art form" (Sonksen 2005). According to the website the mission of the Scratch DJ Academy is to offer "education and access" (Scratch.com 2009).

The format for the classes are "half lecture and lab" (Scratch.com 2009). Michael Cannady, who is now the Chief Strategy Officer for the Scratch Music Group, says, "Our curriculum was designed to help students learn both correctly and quickly. It's true that you can learn a lot of these skills from a friend who DJs or maybe even on your own, but learning from Scratch is quicker and [we] make sure you learn the right way" (Courtney 2007).

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[1] Pictures are from the Rehab Project Blog (RehabProjects 2009).

[2] For more background on the history of Hip Hop and the Scratch Academy see “Scratch” in the Appendix.

[3] Just to reinforce the point about community, the reason I came across this article is because I was reading an article about the Scratch Academy and it mentioned Dr. Mark Katz, a professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. I sent an email to Dr. Katz, who was doing research on a book called *Groove Music* that will be coming out this year. I told him what I was researching and he passed this along to me because he thought it connected with my topic.

[4] In an interview, Herc describes how he noticed the break, “So I started playing from a dance floor perspective. I always kept up the attitude that I’m not playing it for myself, I’m playing for the people out there” (Channel4Books 1999).

[5] This is where we get the concept of “break-dancing.”