

Derivative Music and Speculative Hip Hop

In 2006, after Jay-Z and many other hip hop artists had made the champagne brand Cristal a symbol of luxury in the Black community during the previous decade, a manager at the champagne house that produced Cristal was asked by *The Economist* about rappers name-checking their brand. “We can’t forbid people from buying it” was his snide response. Both classist and racist, this comment was rightfully considered an insult by the hip hop community and denunciations were swift. Jay-Z joined in the chorus, but also sought to capitalize on the situation. Ace of Spades, Jay-Z’s champagne alternative, would eventually net him more than \$300 million in 2021 when he sold half of it to LVMH, the French luxury goods conglomerate. Notably, the value of Ace of Spades was not established by Jay-Z’s efforts as a traditional spokesperson; in fact, for years it was unclear whether he was officially involved with the company or not. Emblematic of the financial logic now embedded within cultural texts in the era of derivative media, Jay-Z earned that big payday through lyrical speculation. It was clever wordplay, narrative use of the gangster genre, visual incorporation into music videos, political critique (such as reclaiming the slur *spade*), and other *formal* and *thematic* means of investing Ace of Spades with value. This is but one of the many brands Jay-Z has turned into a speculative venture, within a broader lyrical marketplace that supports many such musician-speculators. Word choices within lyrics are converted into fungible assets; multiplied by hundreds of rappers in thousands of songs, the textual marketplace becomes speculative. Opportunities arise within film and television as well. The goal of this section is to begin imagining and interrogating the scale of this cultural stock exchange that merges the formal and the financial.

Previous chapters have established the political-economic conditions of financialization that give the context for the following three case studies, each of which analyzes a distinct form of derivative media. In this chapter, the “lyrical

speculation” of hip hop is explored. In the next, the “mise-en-synergy” of reflexive sitcoms is analyzed. In the last, the “intellectual property management” of “brand-scape blockbusters.” Financial logic, I argue, is embedded not just within the organization and management of the cultural industries, but within the very form of cultural texts. Derivative media is structured by speculation. It is no longer the case that products and brands are simply incorporated into popular media texts, commodifying the text, a process that has been occurring for over a century. In the era of financialization, the text is now designed to facilitate the speculative process of buying and selling product placements, branding opportunities, cross-promotion, corporate synergy, and other economic relationships. Intertextuality creates supply and demand, which facilitates so many opportunities for exchange and investment that a speculative marketplace is formed. The text is, in effect, securitized through intertextuality, as discussed below. To modify a famous Walter Benjamin quote, the work of art in the age of financialized securitization exhibits textual tendencies of speculation.

These case studies are not meant to suggest that economic factors wholly determine the content of the cultural text, nor that creative workers blindly adhere to industrial constraints. On the contrary, these case studies have been chosen because they exhibit a keen sense of their economic context, reflexively commenting on the financial conditions of their creation and their social surroundings, thereby resisting the cultural, social, and especially the economic restrictions foisted upon them. Obvious examples could have been chosen to demonstrate derivative media, such as talk shows or reality shows, which are more explicit in their cross-promotion and corporate synergy. *The Biggest Loser* (2004–present), for example, is a competitive weight-loss reality show turned global franchise with forty different national or regional variations and has been shown to foster anti-fat attitudes and stereotyping¹ and to promote both dangerous ideas about health² and a deluge of product placements—over five hundred in a single season.³ There’s little redeeming cultural value to be found in this franchise, or in many of the franchises that populate our screens—often simplistic stories that fetishize superheroes, the police, or the wealthy.

In contrast, the case studies I’ve chosen here demonstrate a conflicted sense of opposition-*to* yet exploitation-*of* their corporate conditions, a sort of calculating complicity. Because capitalism transforms resistance and conflict into profit, these case studies—despite their antagonism, and perhaps *because* of their antagonism—advance the cause of cultural financialization through their innovative forms, while also offering educational and subversive commentary on the same process. Personally, I really enjoy Jay-Z, *30 Rock*, *The Matrix*, *The LEGO Movie*, and other examples below. I think they’re smart, fun, and informative, which is more than we can expect from a lot of popular culture. And I think hip hop, comedy, and science fiction in general are under-acknowledged sources of philosophy and critical thought. However, their bleeding-edge nature is also what makes them ripe

for exploitation in a capitalist system hungry for novel inputs. Their complexity builds the possibility of metrics and data, creating opportunities for speculative transactions. Recalling Braudel's claim that financial expansion is a sign of autumn for an economic regime, one of the fundamental questions of this project is to ask what autumnal culture looks like. This chapter and the next two suggest that it looks a lot like hip hop, reflexive comedy, and branded blockbusters: texts that are entrepreneurial, speculative, and, above all, derivative. These are not just economic descriptors, but formal qualities of cultural texts in a financial age.

DIGITAL HUMANITIES AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF INTERTEXTUALITY

To glimpse the vast scale of this speculation, chapters 5, 6, and 7 incorporate methods from the digital humanities in addition to traditional textual and industrial analysis. Though the field of media studies has been slow to utilize digital tools in comparison to other fields, there is a growing body of work demonstrating the value of supplementing traditional methods with digital affordances.⁴ Spanning from historical data-mining to shot-counting to visualizing international distribution flows, the content of these projects ranges widely, but most are rooted in the scale that database technology provides. "When working with the flexible form of the database," Tara McPherson writes, in one of the first explicit engagements with media studies and digital humanities, "scholars reimagine connections between research and analysis that are not necessarily based on the structure of a linear argument, but may be multiple, associative, digressive, even contradictory."⁵ However, before a database can be assembled, difficult and inevitably biased decisions must be made about the content of the database, for as Lisa Gitelman's elegant book title asserts, "*Raw Data* Is an Oxymoron."⁶

Reducing the complex character of human experience into digital means is fraught, to say the least. Though there are many opportunities opened, there are also many possible pitfalls. Computers "cannot tolerate the ambiguity typical of humanities texts and interpretative methods,"⁷ argues Johanna Drucker, and thus, "what is considered data—that is, what is available for analysis—is as substantive a consideration as what is revealed by its analysis."⁸ Consequently, humanists who work with digital tools are challenged to "make explicit many of the premises on which those understandings are based in order to make them operative in computational environments."⁹ Without careful consideration, digital humanists can perpetuate a bias of the empirical sciences, in which data are held to be mere representations of preexisting facts. On the contrary, "humanistic inquiry acknowledges the situated, partial, and constitutive character of knowledge production."¹⁰ Drucker's 2009 book *SpecLab: Digital Aesthetics and Projects in Speculative Computing*, which detailed the many experimental humanities projects at the University of Virginia, reminds us that speculation can mean much more

than financial risk; when founded on the principles and values of the humanities, such as subjectivity, ambiguity, and historical knowledge, humanists are uniquely positioned to build speculative software that intervenes in, rather than merely replicating, the computational culture that increasingly results in totalizing systems. “The next phase of cultural power struggles,” Drucker argues, “will be embodied in digital instruments that model what we think we know and what we can imagine.”¹¹

In the spirit of this nonrepresentational, interpretation-based model of humanistic data formation, I have undertaken a series of database-informed analyses of derivative media. Influenced by the concepts of “distant reading” and “cultural analytics,” I aim to investigate questions of intertextuality and economy on a scale that would not be possible without computation.¹² Software is used to digitally catalog and visualize cultural data, harvested from online databases such as Genius (a website that catalogs and offers quantitative access to popular music lyrics, primarily hip hop) and IMDb (the Internet Movie Database, which contains various types of data for most television shows and films). These crowdsourced databases are some of the most extensive catalogs of the intertexts, references, metatexts, paratexts, and product placements that comprise derivative media. For my purposes, I catalog and visualize this intertextuality to lend a degree of scale to my otherwise historical, theoretical, and interpretative approach. With the assistance of digital tools, I’m able to both dig deep into solitary texts, discovering and quantifying micro-relationships, while also mapping broad, macro-cultural dynamics as a result of this wide-ranging data. Ultimately, the political economy of intertextuality is mapped via the database form and expressed via data visualization.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HIP HOP:
JAY-Z, BUSINESSMEN, AND BUSINESS, MAN

Hip hop has received its fair share of academic study,¹³ particularly on the politics of racialization, identity, and representation.¹⁴ Tricia Rose’s *The Hip Hop Wars* provides a comprehensive overview of these issues by looking at the most common debates about hip hop, including violence, sexism, racism, class, values, and authenticity.¹⁵ Materialism and consumerism within hip hop is another common issue; condemnations of its materialism have accompanied hip hop throughout its history, particularly in conservative media, while defenses of this overt consumerism often tend toward illuminating the broader context in which rappers, typically young Black men, engage in such ostentatious display. “Their flaunting of wealth,” Ekow Eshun argues, “is intended as provocation against a society that has striven to confine the aspirations of black people.”¹⁶ For Mark Anthony Neal, this materialism contributes to a “hip-hop cosmopolitanism” that is “undergirded by desires for physical, social, and economic mobility” and challenges “stridently parochial notions of masculine identity (and gender) in hip-hop.”¹⁷ Or in the words of one of

our greatest critics, Greg Tate, “Hip-hop is inverse capitalism. Hip-hop is reverse colonialism. . . . Hip-hop is the perverse logic of capitalism pursued by an artform. Like capitalism, hip-hop converts raw soul into store rack commodity.”¹⁸ Beyond ideological interpretations such as these, however, analyses of the way hip hop’s broader economic and industrial dimensions interact with its cultural aspects are not as common.

Scholars often note that like blues, jazz, gospel, funk, soul, and rock before it, hip hop arose out of Black communities before being heavily commercialized and incorporated into white American culture. As Norman Kelley notes, Black music operates within a “structure of stealing . . . a continuous replay of the uncontested and lucrative expropriation of Black cultural forms by whites.”¹⁹ As hip hop grew in popularity in the 1980s, young white entrepreneurs created independent music labels to release early rap music: Corey Robbins (Profile Records), Tommy Silverman (Tommy Boy Records), Arthur Baker (Streetwise), Stu Fine (Wild Pitch Records), and Aaron Fuchs (Tuff City). While some Black entrepreneurs did set up their own labels, and employed Black staff, once the major record labels recognized the popularity and profit potential of hip hop over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, exploitation and consolidation set in, as evidenced in table 5.1.

Nearly all of the significant hip hop labels were acquired by one of the major labels, which have now consolidated into the Big 3 labels, as discussed in chapter 3. Incorporated within larger, primarily white companies, Black labor was reduced, with little profit making it back to the Black community. Even the “rap moguls” who fostered their own hip hop rosters and empires, such as Jermaine Dupri, Russell Simmons, and Sean Combs, were eventually incorporated into the major label machinery: “media moguls by name, millionaires by bank balance, but paid staff nevertheless.”²⁰ By 2001, *Black Enterprise* calculated that the entire Black entertainment industry was worth a mere \$189.75 million, while rap music alone generated \$1.8 billion for the conglomerates, a dramatic case of racialized and financialized extraction.²¹

Hip hop replicates the deplorable pattern of white corporate exploitation of Black music, but it differs in an important way from previous incarnations: hip hop developed concurrently with the rise of neoliberalism and financialization, and its form, style, and structure have come to explicitly exhibit properties of its economic context. In addition to being a rich musical style and complex cultural form, hip hop is not just subject to business processes, it is itself consciously a business process. Brand integration, intermedial synergy, franchise dynamics, collaborative speculation, entrepreneurial identity—in hip hop, these aren’t economic strategies that a faceless corporation insists its creative artists partake in, these are fundamental building blocks of the form, as essential as rhythm and rhyme. As Jay-Z astutely raps, “I’m not a businessman, I’m a business, man!”²² Though there is a noticeable lack of political economic analysis of hip hop in academia, another

TABLE 5.1 Hip Hop Labels, Founders, and Corporate Owners

Year established	Label	Founder(s)	Eventual parent company
1981	Tommy Boy	Tom Silverman	Warner
1983	Def Jam	Russell Simmons, Rick Rubin	Universal
1985	Priority Records	Bryan Turner, Mark Cerami, Steve Drath	Universal
1986	Cold Chillin'	Tyrone Williams, Len Fichtelberg	Warner/Sony
	Ruthless Records	Easy-E	Sony
1989	LaFace Records	L.A. Reid, Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds	Sony
	Ruffhouse Records	Chris Schwartz, Joe Nicolo	Sony
1990	Lench Mob Records	Ice Cube	Universal
1991	Cash Money	Ronald "Slim" Williams, Bryan "Birdman" Williams	Universal
	Death Row Records	Dr. Dre, The D.O.C., Suge Knight	Warner
	Loud Records	Steve Rifkind, Rich Isaacson	Universal
1993	So So Def	Jermaine Dupri	Sony
1994	Bad Boy	Sean Combs	Sony
1995	Rawkus Records	Brian Brater, Jarret Myer	Universal/Sony
	Roc-A-Fella	Jay-Z, Kareem Burke, Damon Dash	Universal
	Doggy Style	Snoop Dogg	Universal
1996	No Limit	Master P	Universal
	Aftermath	Dr. Dre	Universal
1997	Murder Inc.	Irv Gotti	Warner
1998	Ruff Ryders	Joaquin Dean, Darrin Dean, Chivon Dean	Universal
1999	Definitive Jux	El-P, Amaechi Uzoigwe	Universal
	Shady Records	Eminem	Universal
2001	Aquemini/Purple Ribbon	Outkast	Universal
2003	G-Unit Records	50 Cent	Universal
2004	Top Dawg	Anthony Tiffith	Universal
	GOOD Music	Kanye West	Universal
2005	Young Money	Lil Wayne	Universal
2007	1017 Records	Gucci Mane	Warner
2009	Maybach Music Group	Rick Ross	Warner

valuable source of insight is available: the artists themselves. “Interestingly,” Kelley notes, “it has been rappers who have most clearly articulated their keen awareness of the lopsided condition of black creativity and the lack of economic rewards.”²³

Jay-Z (Shawn Carter) formed Roc-A-Fella Records with Damon Dash and Kareem Burke in 1995. Unable to secure a record deal on a professional label, Roc-A-Fella pressed and sold their own records locally, before joining with Priority Records to jointly release Jay-Z’s debut album, *Reasonable Doubt*, in 1996. In the decade following, he would release a new album nearly every year, with each going platinum. *Volume 2: Hard Knock Life* in 1998 was his commercial high-water mark, selling over ten million units; *The Blueprint* in 2001, featuring production from some of hip hop’s greatest beat-makers, including Timbaland, Just Blaze, and Kanye West, is likely his critical apex. Despite claims of retirement with 2003’s *The Black Album*, Jay-Z continues to release albums, but focuses more on business opportunities, branding extensions, and lucrative tours.

In 2005, Jay-Z sold Roc-A-Fella to Def Jam and, as part of the deal, he became president and CEO of the historic hip hop label Def Jam. By then, Def Jam had been merged with the historic reggae label Island, the historic jazz and blues label Mercury, and more than a dozen others under the umbrella Island Def Jam Music Group, itself owned by Universal Music Group. Far from a figurehead, Jay-Z successfully reinvigorated the label’s roster, signing Nas, Kanye West, Ne-Yo, Rick Ross, Young Jeezy, and Rihanna, who has charted more weeks at No. 1 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 than the Beatles. In 2009, he left Def Jam after signing a massive \$150 million “360-degree deal” with Live Nation that covered touring, recording, merchandising, and managing other artists under a new joint venture with Live Nation called Roc Nation. The deal also involved 775,434 shares of Live Nation (valued at over \$10 million), with an option to purchase 500,000 more, a clear sign of the financial stakes involved in such a gigantic deal.²⁴ Jay-Z’s wealth has been propelled by his prolific artistic and entrepreneurial output, which now spans eighteen albums, six films, nineteen tours, and dozens of businesses, including Roc-A-Fella Records, Rocawear, 40/40 Club, Brooklyn Nets (part owner), Budweiser Select (brand director), Armand de Brignac, Roc Nation, *Decoded* (a book), Roc Nation Sports, and Tidal, a music streaming service.

The extent of Jay-Z’s financial success is so hallowed that he earned himself a full-length book by a *Forbes* journalist fawning over his business acumen and claiming that Jay-Z’s “story is the American dream in its purest form, a model for any entrepreneur looking to build a commercial empire.”²⁵ A telling commentary in and of itself, the book is focused on Jay-Z’s business ventures, not his music. Two stories are of interest to my analysis, the first being Jay-Z’s attempt at soliciting a partnership with Iceberg, an Italian clothing brand, in the late 1990s. Having mentioned its name in verse and having worn the clothing at well-publicized events, Jay-Z expected that a mutually beneficial deal could be struck. Rebuffed, he established his own line of clothing instead, Rocawear, along with his partners

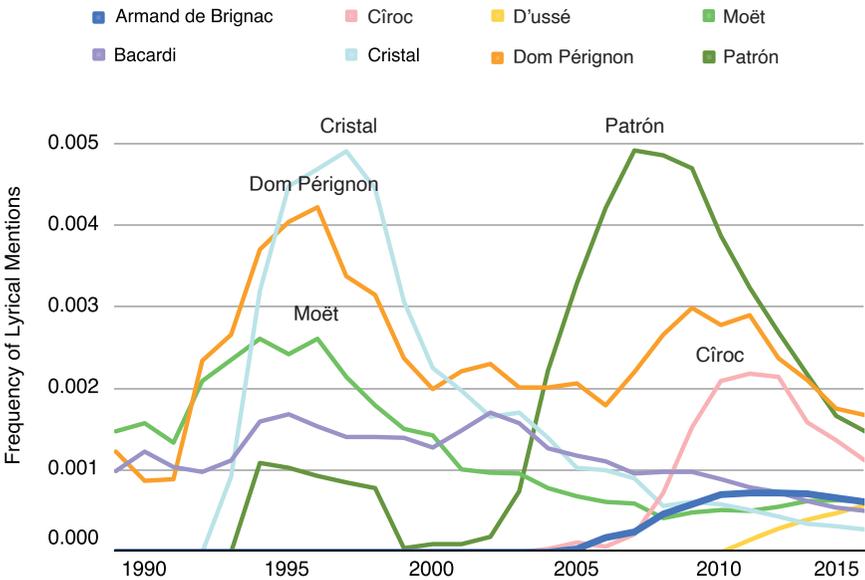
at Roc-A-Fella. As you might imagine, the free advertising in the form of Jay-Z lyrics was significant, and Rocawear earned over \$80 million within its first eighteen months. In 2005, it was sold to the licensor Iconix for \$204 million.²⁶ This successful lyrical speculation sets the stage for exploring the practice at a much broader scale.

AUTHENTICITY WITH A SPLASH OF SPECULATION: VISUALIZING ALCOHOL BRANDING

Before delving into this lyrical speculation data, it's worth pausing to review some financial terminology. As discussed in chapter 2, a security is a basic financial instrument that holds a type of monetary value. The three essential forms are the equity security, such as a stock or share (a fractional ownership position in a corporation); the debt security, such as a bond or mortgage (a creditor relationship to a government or corporation); and the derivative, a financial instrument that dismantles any asset into individual attributes and trades them without trading the asset itself (contracts such as futures, forwards, options, swaps, and shorts). *Securitization* refers to the process by which a financial instrument is created by pooling together multiple types of debt into one security that can then be traded. An infamous example is the mortgage-backed obligation (MBO), a type of derivative formed when individual mortgages with varying levels of risk are pooled together, then parceled into various sub-pools (or tranches), each of which can be traded. This process caused havoc in the financial crisis of 2007–8 when the risk assessment process of many MBOs was corrupted and many banks and investors were overleveraged in the housing market, contributing to the spreading financial contagion. I argue that this financial logic has spread to cultural texts, and securitization occurs through intertextuality. This is not an actual security, of course—you can't invest in this referential market (yet)—but the argument is that the same logic is apparent: take an underlying asset, unbundle it from its direct relationship to labor, rebundle it as an abstracted financial asset, and then buy/sell/trade/speculate it in various ways. Power is diverted from the underlying asset (in this case, the text), away from labor (in this case, the author), and harnessed by a speculative system (in this case, the financialized media system) as a security (in this case, marketplaces of lyrical speculation).

Returning to the Cristal affair that began this chapter, this securitization logic will be demonstrated with an analysis of alcohol branding in hip hop lyrics, showing how a broad market of speculative exchange was developed from the pool of individual lyrics. The digital tool being used here is the online service Rap Stats,²⁷ a database of hip hop lyrics that allows users to query the corpus and compare the frequency of keywords and phrases. This application is similar to the Google Ngram Viewer, a web platform that allows users to keyword search Google's five-million-plus, multi-language book corpus ranging back to

FIGURE 5.1. Lyrical mentions of major liquor brands in hip hop lyrics, 1988–2015.
Data: Genius.com.



the year 1500. There are multiple limitations to this type of technology and methodology; simple errors in optical character recognition or automating metadata, for instance, can skew results wildly, not to mention larger issues of what types of sources are included or not included in any corpus.²⁸ For my purposes, as a humanist rather than a scientist, I'm not looking to use the Rap Stats data to conclusively *prove* anything, but to isolate small patterns with which questions can be asked and broader interpretations can be suggested. In this case, my intention is to visualize shifts in the popularity of certain brands as determined by the frequency of their placement in hip hop lyrics and then draw conclusions about the “securitization” of the cultural text based on these speculative patterns. For instance, figure 5.1 compares the prevalence of the word *Cristal* in hip hop lyrics compared to rival alcohol brand names, to demonstrate a clear inflection point in 2006–7 that corresponds to the previously mentioned scandal and the speculative effort that followed in its wake.

By 2006, Cristal was already losing its status as the signifier of luxury, but figure 5.1 indicates that in the wake of the scandal, two of hip hop's biggest moguls capitalized on the opportunity. Sean Combs, whose many monikers include “Puff Daddy” and “Diddy” and who consistently tops *Forbes's* list of “Hip-Hop's Wealthiest Artists,” partnered with multinational alcoholic beverage corporation Diageo in 2007 to take over the brand management of the vodka Cîroc in exchange for a 50/50 revenue split. Through lyrical mentions in songs and product placement in videos across his Bad Boy roster and label (owned by Warner Music Group), along

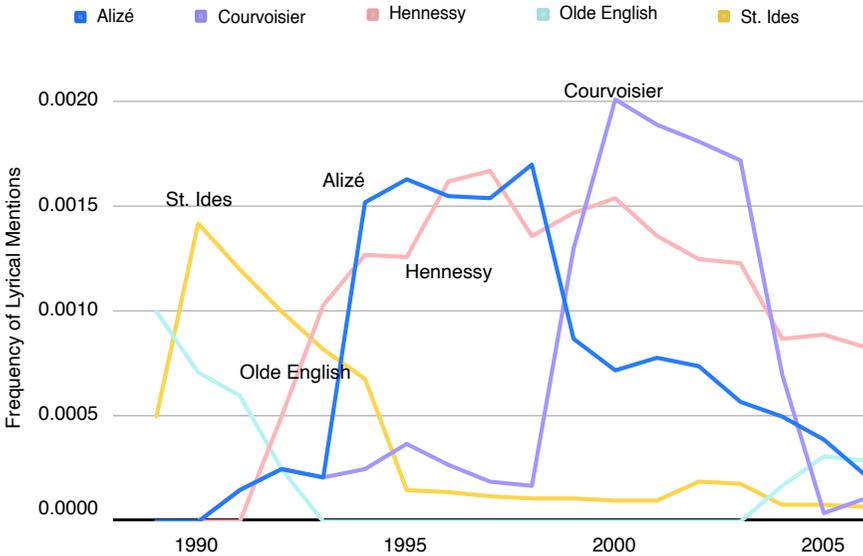
with television commercials he starred in, Combs raised sales of the brand from fifty thousand cases a year to nearly two million.²⁹

Jay-Z had also attempted a vodka partnership a few years earlier, through his Roc-A-Fella company, but Armadale Vodka was not a success, despite the countless mentions given to it by Jay-Z and his associates. Shortly after the Cristal slight, Jay-Z pursued a different tactic; instead of outright sponsorship, he would hide his relationship with a new brand and present the aura of authenticity. In 2006, Jay-Z banned Cristal from his 40/40 nightclubs and released a music video for the song “Show Me What You Got,” which, in addition to the usual display of exotic locales, mafia-inspired imagery, expensive cars, and scantily clad women, featured Jay-Z being offered a bottle of Cristal, dismissing it, and revealing a gold bottle of Armand de Brignac. In another song from the same album, “Kingdom Come,” Jay-Z addresses the controversy directly: “Fuck Cristal, so they ask me what we drinking / I thought dude’s remark was rude okay / so I moved on to Dom, Krug Rosé.”³⁰

Jay-Z cloaked his investment in Armand de Brignac through a proxy company and denied financial involvement. Rather than a paid brand ambassador, he presented himself as a connoisseur of champagne with the cultural authority within the hip hop community to anoint the true heir to Cristal.³¹ By rebranding an inexpensive champagne as “Ace of Spades,” with a much higher price tag, Jay-Z repurposed a racial slur (“spade”) into a high-margin business. By 2009, in his song “On to the Next One,” he was more forthright, both in his indictment of Cristal and in his overt branding: “I used to drink Cristal, the muh’fucker’s racist / So I switched gold bottles on to that Spade shit.”³² In 2014, it was widely reported that Jay-Z had just bought Armand de Brignac, though deeper reporting suggested that he had an investment stake in the company all along, and had only just increased that investment to majority ownership, once the brand grew to become the profitable symbol of luxury Jay-Z envisioned.³³ “To launch a champagne in the U.S.,” the head of one of France’s largest online wine retailers claims, drolly, “you either need three or four centuries of history, or have a big rapper behind you.”³⁴

Of course, many different liquor brands are mentioned in music lyrics, and the rate at which they are incorporated into both hip hop and popular music more generally is increasing, as witnessed in the concern of public health researchers³⁵ and the close analysis of market researchers.³⁶ As figure 5.1 demonstrates, the lyrical mention of liquor in hip hop is a competitive market. A few brands have maintained their status over the years, such as Hennessy and Bacardi, but for the most part, liquor brands rise and fall in symbolic stature. When segmented, consumer patterns emerge. For instance, in figure 5.2, the malt liquor brands Olde English and St. Ides are seen as popular icons of the “gangsta rap” era, when hip hop authenticity was represented by rugged descriptions of the lived experience of young men in Black neighborhoods, for whom potent, affordable malt liquor

FIGURE 5.2. Symbolic stature of liquor brands in hip hop lyrics, 1988–2006. Data: Genius.com.



was prominent. By the mid-1990s, as the “corporate rap” era began, and the notion of hip hop authenticity shifted to signifiers of luxury, Alizé and Courvoisier rose in popularity.

A pertinent example, the cognac Courvoisier received its biggest promotion in the form of a hit song in 2002, “Pass the Courvoisier Part II,” by Busta Rhymes, Diddy, and Pharrell Williams. Featuring the brand in the title, the heavily repeated chorus, and the music video, the song is considered to have helped raise sales of Courvoisier by 20 percent.³⁷ A clear example of speculation, Busta Rhymes didn’t get paid to write the song, but Russell Simmons’s advertising agency dRush had just established a relationship with the advertising agency that marketed Courvoisier. Once the song rose to No. 11 on the *Billboard* Hot 100, Busta Rhymes was awarded a promotional deal. Examples such as these, dating back to Run-DMC’s song “My Adidas” in 1986, which resulted in a million-dollar endorsement contract after the song’s rise in popularity, are why entrepreneurial hip hop artists and associates use rap lyrics as speculative enterprises. “We’ve made a lot of money for a lot of companies over the years,” explains Kareem Burke of Roc-A-Fella Records in 2002. “Since we have so much influence, we can make money for ourselves by expanding our businesses. No more Belvedere Vodka or Cristal Champagne in our music or videos.”³⁸ Shortly thereafter, Sean Combs would get involved with Ciroc, Jay-Z with Armand de Brignac, along with a host of other, less successful attempts by a litany of rappers. In 2012, Jay-Z added another French liquor to his portfolio, entering into a brand partnership with D’ussé, a cognac owned by Bacardi. With mentions in

songs by rappers outside of his RocNation roster, including a song named “D’usse” by Lil Wayne, Jay-Z has succeeded in inserting another status signifier into the rap lexicon. Whether or not it is a fad on the scale of Courvoisier, or a stalwart like Hennessy, will depend on the right mix of speculative tactics and clever semantics.

PROMOTIONAL VEHICLES: LYRICAL SPECULATION AND AUTOMOTIVE BRANDING

Another key signifier in hip hop is the luxury automobile. Ubiquitous in music videos and on album covers, automobiles are even more common in rap lyrics as symbols of wealth and upward mobility. Again, visualizing automobile references allows us to discern market characteristics, as demonstrated in figure 5.3.³⁹ An immediate observation is the clear decline in automobile references during the financial crisis in 2007–8. As credit markets tightened, unemployment grew, and houses were foreclosed upon, hip hop appears to have muted its largesse during the Great Recession. Automobile references continue to sag for a few years following the crisis, and even a few years later, when Jay-Z released his collaborative album with Kanye West entitled *Watch the Throne* in 2011, it was widely received with criticism for its ostentatious materialism during a time of economic suffering. Released a week after the U.S. credit rating was downgraded and the stock market fell dramatically as a result, *Watch the Throne*’s gilded, Givenchy-designed album art and self-confessed “luxury rap / the Hermes of verses” was derided. The album was called “chillingly out of touch . . . income-gap raps,”⁴⁰ a “royal waste,”⁴¹ a “brand partnership mixed uneasily with social advocacy”⁴² that “contains King Midas delusions.”⁴³ Sociologist Jennifer C. Lena delivered a blunt summation: “two fatuous, wealthy rappers celebrating their good fortune in the face of massive global inequality.”⁴⁴ Other critics were more charitable, with the *New York Times* acknowledging that *Watch the Throne* “tempers its bombast with both reflection and inventiveness,”⁴⁵ and *Time* describing it as “two men grappling with what it means to be successful and black in a nation that still thinks of them as second class.”⁴⁶ Similarly, Ava DuVernay, director of *Selma* (2014) and *13th* (2016), called it a “Black Nationalist Masterpiece for the New Millennium,” celebrating its militancy, pride, and brash Black empowerment.⁴⁷

An example of this contradictory impulse that relates back to our automobile visualization is in Jay-Z’s verse on “Otis.”⁴⁸ “Viva Mexico, Cubano / Dominicano, all the plugs that I know,” Jay-Z begins, alluding to international drug suppliers. “Driving Benzes with no benefits / Not bad, huh, for some immigrants?” he continues, working a reference to Mercedes Benz into his immigration tale, before concluding: “Build your fences, we diggin’ tunnels / Can’t you see we gettin’ money up under you?” Figure 5.4 indicates that Mercedes, with over forty-five hundred mentions in total, is by far the most popular automobile referenced in hip hop, and while it is safe to assume that in many instances the brand is merely used as a signifier of wealth, here Jay-Z uses it to weave a complex commentary and celebration of minorities achieving extralegal success outside of the confines of an oppressive

FIGURE 5.3. Lyrical mentions of automobile brands in hip hop lyrics, 1996–2013. Data: Cuepoint.

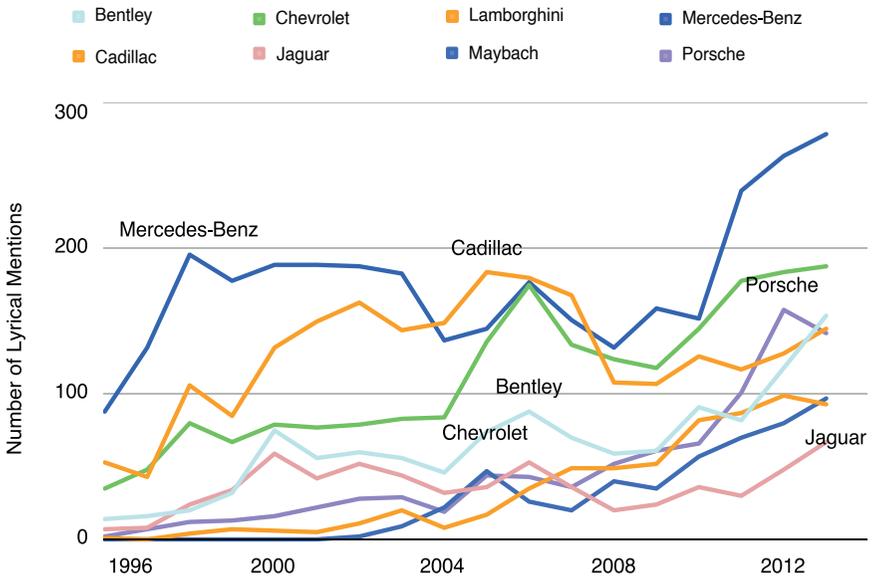
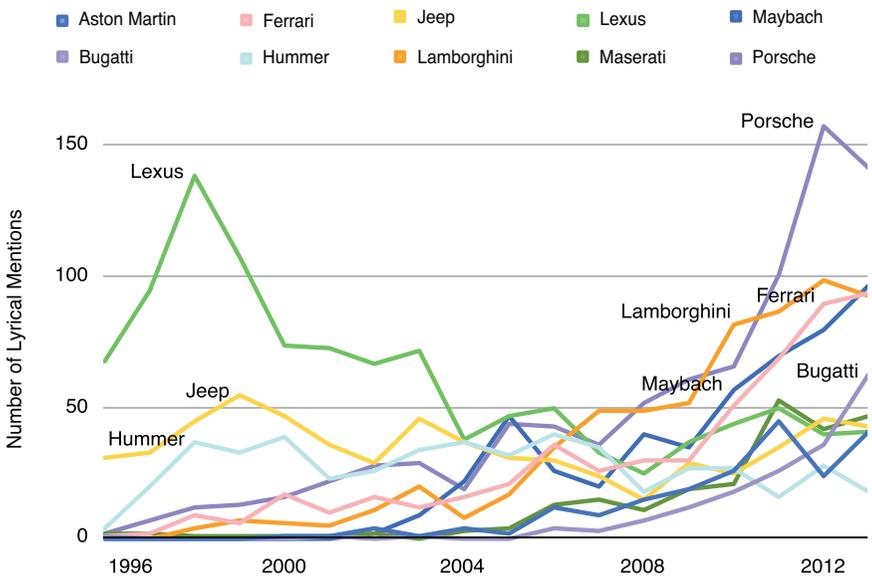


FIGURE 5.4. Rise and fall of automobile brands in hip hop lyrics, 1996–2013. Data: Cuepoint.



white society. Jay-Z alludes to cross-border cartels, his own drug-dealing past, and the necessity of undocumented immigrants having to fend for themselves “off-the-grid.” Driving a Mercedes without benefits, then, is a symbol of an independent, freewheeling wealth achieved in a dangerous occupation that doesn’t provide health or pension benefits—quite the opposite.

Furthermore, Jay-Z defines himself as an immigrant—which, for a descendant of a community forced to “immigrate” on a slave ship, as a Texas textbook once phrased it, is a bold symbol of solidarity.⁴⁹ In 2011, immigration policy was a contentious, front-page issue; since then, the allusion to walls and fences has proved even more salient. This political resonance extends beyond just the lyrics; the music video for “Otis” involves Jay-Z and Kanye West disassembling, modifying, and then joyriding in a \$350,000 Maybach 57, with a title card stating that the car would be auctioned for East African drought disaster relief. It is thus another example of a luxury automobile being used not just for signification of wealth, but as political commentary. Then again, “Otis” also contains the Jay-Z lyric “New watch alert: Hublots / Or the big face Rollie, I got two of those,” glamorizing six-figure watches in a vacuous display of conspicuous consumption. The lavish fabric weaved with these manifold references is conflicted, complicit, and contradictory.

Similar to how broad temporal patterns can be discerned from alcohol brand mentions, the rise and fall of certain automobile brands, as seen in figure 5.4, suggest shifts in speculative opportunities. In the 1990s and early 2000s, rugged American brands like Hummer (General Motors) and Jeep (Chrysler) were quite popular, while the Japanese brand Lexus (Toyota) was the luxury car of choice, in addition to the aforementioned Mercedes. As the recovery following the recession took hold, automobile references rebounded, but a far more exorbitant and exclusive portfolio of European sports car brands took prominence, such as Porsche (Germany), Lamborghini (Italy), Ferrari (Italy), Maybach (Germany), Aston Martin (British), and Bugatti (French). Not just brief occurrences in lyrics, but entire songs were titled and based around this new breed of luxury car: “Bugatti” by Ace Hood was a hit song in 2013; Chief Keef, Trey Songz, Wale, and Rick Ross have all recorded a song with “Aston Martin” in the title; and Future, Chief Keef, Meek Mill, and Rick Ross have all recorded a song with “Maybach” in the title. Rick Ross even named his label at Warner “Maybach Music Group.”

A final, simple, but telling observation to be made about these visualizations of alcohol and automobiles in hip hop lyrics: references rise and fall in stable patterns of discernible supply and demand. Of course, one would expect that shifts in popularity would influence the choice of liquor brands within lyrics, but the smooth, systematic rise and fall of brands, in conjunction with the advent of branding opportunities, indicates the rising speculative potential of intertextuality. Musician-speculators both shape and are shaped by a marketplace of opportunities to sell. When composing music, musicians write lyrics that may or may not mention a brand name; that brand name may or may not involve a current or future financial relationship; and the choice of what brand name to use is both exchangeable and replaceable, decided upon by many factors, including cleverness, popularity, thematic resonance, and possible economic gain. In a financialized system that produces derivative media, lyrics are rendered fungible assets and securitized into a speculative instrument.