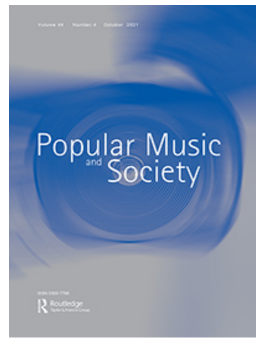

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Saturation Season: Inclusivity, Queerness, and Esthetics in the New Media Practices of Brockhampton

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ABSTRACT
Following the self-release of their *Saturation* album trilogy in 2017, American hip-hop group Brockhampton broke through to an international audience. The period of the trilogy's release – known as "Saturation Season" – is notable for the large body of creative content the group produced and released online. In this article, the authors demonstrate how the group's new media practices query the boundaries that separate amateurs and professionals, consumers and producers, and fans and artists, raising a range of questions concerning digitalization, (social) inclusion, and the democratization of culture. Emphasis is placed on exploring the contradictory effects of the digital turn in popular music.

KEYWORDS
audiovisual esthetics; fandom; hip-hop; inclusion; digitalization; queerness

The proliferation of digital technologies in the past few decades has had undeniable effects on cultural practices, on social interaction and participation, and on the ways in which communities are organized. Alongside such shifts in how we live our lives there has been a considerable change in how music entwines with broader social and cultural circumstances, as the affordability and accessibility of digital technologies have resulted in new modes of producing, distributing, and consuming music. Accordingly, the emergence of new opportunities for cultural participation prompts a range of questions regarding the role of digital technologies in the democratization of culture (see, for example, Baym; Bruns; Jenkins and Carpentier; Leyshon; Prior, *Popular Music*). In this article, we investigate connections between digitalization and cultural democracy by addressing issues relating to new media channels, social inclusion and exclusion, and the politics of identity in contemporary mainstream hip-hop, with a particular focus on the American group Brockhampton and what their new media practices reveal about the sociocultural implications of the Internet as a site for musical performance and experience.

Brockhampton formed circa 2014, and currently comprise thirteen officially recognized members.[1] In 2017, the group's self-produced and self-released *Saturation* album trilogy – *Saturation*, *Saturation II*, and *Saturation III* – ensured their breakthrough to an international and mainstream audience (with *Saturation III* debuting at #15 on the *Billboard* 200 chart). All three albums were recorded and released in 2017, and this period – on which we focus – is known affectionately by fans as "Saturation Season." Our investigations are

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organized along three primary avenues of inquiry that aim to explore the multifaceted nature of Internet-based popular music practices in relation to ideas about the potential of digital technologies to democratize cultural production and consumption. Firstly, we address Brockhampton's employment of new media channels to display their creative processes and connect with audiences. All members of the group lived together in Los Angeles throughout 2017, recording and live-streaming their creative activity to provide fans frequent access to their daily working lives as well as granting their audience the ability to influence the creation of new music during recording sessions. Secondly, we call attention to the group's queer positioning within the hip-hop genre, which is achieved primarily through online modes of engagement that facilitate diversification and foster communality. Thirdly, we investigate the audiovisual esthetics of music videos associated with the *Saturation* trilogy, which share an anachronistic, home-made, and amateurish look that starkly contrasts the group's otherwise digital savviness. We argue that the esthetics of outmoded technologies underpin Brockhampton's representation of nonnormative (queer, multiracial) identities within mainstream hip-hop, while also promoting an amateur DIY image that belies the group's decidedly consistent digital performance strategies and commercial professionalism.

In order to provide a holistic exploration of the digital enterprise of Brockhampton, we analyze the group's multimedia output alongside the online discourse that characterizes their reception. Our interdisciplinary methodological approach combines digital ethnography with perspectives from cultural studies and media studies within a critical musicological framework attuned to how the politics of identity are mediated through popular music esthetics. Rather than affirm the myth of the Internet as an egalitarian, fundamentally democratic arena of participatory culture, we build upon recent research into how online contexts intensify both inclusive and exclusory discourses around music (Baym; Born and Haworth; Prior, *Popular Music*). We thus engage closely with the ambiguities resulting from Brockhampton's performance and production practices, and our discussion of the group invites a critique of the intersection between digitalization and cultural democracy by demonstrating how strategies of online engagement can simultaneously contest and uphold existing definitions of authorship, authenticity, and inclusion in hip-hop music and culture.

Staging Inclusivity: Live-Streaming Creative Processes and Fan Participation

In addition to aiding the rapid expansion of digital folk culture (Prior, "Rise" 401), the increase of Internet use in everyday life has precipitated a growth in nonprofessional cultural production online. Amateur practitioners employing web technologies to develop and share the fruits of their creative labor have been variously labeled prosumers (Curran), produsers (Bruns), or new amateurs (Prior, "Rise"). Tracing the communication technologies that enable more direct contact between artist and audience alongside the economic shifts that make creative equipment increasingly affordable, Nick Prior observes that the emergence of new amateurs "makes for a denser cultural life, where pluralized expressions of creativity are bubbling up amongst a diversifying body of creators" ("Rise" 403). The case of Brockhampton aptly exemplifies how the Internet provides opportunities for independent artists to compete in a global creative

environment, and also highlights the ways in which digital technologies factor into the diversification of contemporary hip-hop in terms of both musical style and the articulation of identity.

Prevailing narratives surrounding Brockhampton consistently emphasize their conception as a born-online phenomenon. The group's formation was partially enabled by recruitment on hip-hop fan forums, a fact that is mythologized as evidence for the band's digital competencies and innovation as prosumerist children of the Internet (Coley; Cotte; Easter). The impression of the group as digital natives is further emphasized by their prolific production in new media channels: members of the group perform highly active digital lives, using both collective and individual accounts across social media platforms, especially Twitter and Instagram, to share photographs, videos, messages, and work-in-progress. Brockhampton's principal image throughout Saturation Season revolved around a group of friends living together in a house-cum-multimedia studio in Los Angeles, equipped with basic production gear, varied multimedia skills, and a strong work ethic. Between May and the year-end of 2017, Brockhampton developed and released the three albums known collectively as the *Saturation* trilogy, a boxset with accompanying demos and alternative versions (*Saturation Drafts*), twelve official (and several unofficial) music videos, a making-of documentary (*Saturation Documentary*), a four-part short film series (*Helmet Boy*), and a full range of merchandise. Additionally, they undertook a fourteen-date US tour (Jennifer's Tour). The group's extensive creative activity was meticulously documented on social media, through social networking posts, photographs, and live-streamed video footage (much of which has been archived online by fans).

Releasing music independently during this period (prior to signing with RCA in 2018 for the chart-topping album *Iridescence*), Brockhampton exhibited a strength-in-numbers ethos. The individuals that comprised Brockhampton ostensibly committed to a full-time practice of collaborative creative activity, forming a lively production network – the so-called "Brockhampton factory" – that was "all art all the time" (Easter). Within the collective, a graphic designer, a photographer, a web designer, a manager, and creative assistants also participated in the group's performances in various contexts. For instance, the group's creative assistant Kevin Doan dances in the "Junky" video, and was mistaken to be "in" Brockhampton by interviewer Nardwuar (who is popularly known for his meticulous research into artists). This misattribution exemplifies the widespread uncertainty and apparent instability of the boundaries of membership in Brockhampton, which in turn reinforces the group's mediated endorsement of inclusivity.

Attesting to the communality of Brockhampton's creative work, journalistic accounts of the band remark upon the group's DIY strategies and work ethic throughout Saturation Season in a manner congruent with heroic narratives of musical composition as labor (Mandle; Moore). The group compounds such a narrative by reflecting on their in-house production practice with pride: producer Romil Hemnani's Instagram page featured an image of his disheveled bedroom studio with the caption "saturation studio aka my room" (@romilhemnani). The multimediated Saturation Season is thus attributed a consistent backdrop, as the Brockhampton factory itself becomes the key staging location for the production of various cultural artifacts. This hotbed of creative activity has reached near-mystical status among the fan community. Some individuals have even

attempted to locate the house in Los Angeles (gherrera1; PretendDemand) as though undertaking a kind of pilgrimage to visit the site of such esteem and symbolic value. The Saturation Season period of in-house production is also narrativized by a developed-for-web documentary series on the group, *American Boyband* (2017), in addition to behind-the-scenes footage and social media image posts, which serves to authenticate the tight-knit creative community committed to the Saturation project.

Such carefully curated releases are supplemented by live-streamed footage. Kevin Abstract's Instagram Live account was used to film part of the recording process of the song "Stupid," a 45-minute video of which is archived on YouTube (Over Saturated). This footage showcases not only the democratic participation of Brockhampton members but also the group's willingness to include their fans in creative processes and decision-making. In this recording session, Romil Hemnani loops and develops the basic beat of the track, experimenting with additional textural layers, while vocalists write hooks and bars. The studio setup is notably amateur, and the furnishings suggest a repurposed bedroom (consistent with the image of "Romil's bedroom" chronicled on Instagram). Individuals come and go, but present for most of the video are producer/DJ Romil Hemnani and vocalists Kevin Abstract, Merlyn Wood, Matt Champion, then-rapper Ameer Vann,[2] and videographer Ashlan Grey. Around 3:30, the main keyboard loop is recorded and Kevin Abstract sings the hook vocal seemingly spontaneously. By 6:20, he has tracked the vocal, the producer has pitchshifted it up an octave, and the song's chorus is roughly in place. From 8:50, Merlyn Wood improvises some interjecting backing vocals, trying out vocal sounds somewhere between nonsense and scat phrasing. Meanwhile, Romil Hemnani completes the beat layers (hi-hat, snare, and kick) by 10:00. At Kevin Abstract's suggestion, Merlyn Wood sits down at the microphone to "put that underneath the chorus," then asks whether to rap gibberish or seek out words. In response, Kevin Abstract (reading real-time fan comments on the video) informs him that "they say do the mumble, whatever you're saying." In this way, fans are briefly invited to join the musical creativity in the moment of composition. However, the performers later refuse some commenters' request to "take the autotune off" the lead vocal. Kevin Abstract directs Merlyn Wood's vocals (talking over his recording) and issues various commands to Romil Hemnani concerning editing and sample treatment. The hook loop produced around 13:00 differs little from the final version of the track, with all note placement and timbral layers fairly cemented: it seems that the material captured in this recording session is the same as on the track later released on *Saturation III*.[3]

Although not all tracks were subject to the same "making-of" live-stream, the creative interactions in this video suggest an embrace of fan opinion beyond typical boundaries. The band members remain firmly in charge of their musical decision-making, but it is noteworthy that viewers of the stream appear to have influenced the finished record. Fans were ostensibly included in the creative process (however briefly and symbolically) and granted the opportunity to co-create the song. Regardless of the extent to which fans' suggestions actually impacted the end result, placing such a collaborative process on display in social media promotes the group's image as embracing more inclusive forms of artist-fan interaction.

Brockhampton's prominent social media presence contributes to generating what Chris Rojek, building on Stanley Milgram's ideas of "familiar strangers," refers to as "relationships of presumed intimacy between media figures and network spectators" (13), thus raising a range of issues concerning parasocial interaction and the boundaries between artists and fans. In Rojek's terms, the relationship between Brockhampton and their fans may amount to a form of manufactured authenticity, an "artificial environment, based upon the obliteration of spatial divisions and emotional barriers to elicit the veneer of co-presence and open exchange between familiars" (15). As he suggests, participation in online contexts allows individuals to "conduct relationships, often of appreciable emotional intensity, with familiar strangers with whom [they] pass through life, but never directly encounter" (15). The resulting presumed intimacy, however, is often exploited by celebrity figures to "disguise hidden motivations and objectives" and "advance power over others by means of the display of emotional identification" (138). In the case of Brockhampton, the band members' accessibility and geniality also function as a marketing strategy, encouraging fans to undertake further interaction with the group's media catalog (to maintain parasocial relationships with the members, for example, or keep updated on their latest news). Moreover, the presumed intimacy generated by their online interaction belies a relatively conventional approach to product manufacture and sales, glossing over the commercial potential of Brockhampton merchandise, music releases, and concert tickets.[4] In this sense, the group's close engagement with fans may divert attention from the ways in which some traditional artist/audience power dynamics are maintained.

From another perspective, the social media engagement that the group affords fans exemplifies P. David Marshall's observation of the shift from active to interactive audience participation which is typical of new media cultures (13–17). But even if Brockhampton's digital transparency and mediated inclusivity demonstrate how "new media has heralded a transformation of contemporary culture through a democratization of cultural expression" (Marshall 27), there are evident tensions in such ideas of cultural democracy. The ambiguities that emerge in Brockhampton's creative practices and fan interaction recall Nancy Baym's persuasive argument that "strategies of control and participation are interwoven in complex ways" (110). While the group has "teased" sections of unreleased studio recordings on social media, the development of fan-made full-length composites of this material has elicited significant backlash from the band. For example, in December 2018, Brockhampton members expressed frustration concerning fans' curation of various snippets of unreleased material into an EP uploaded to Spotify under the name Break Hamptons (theatheistfreak).[5] This instance demonstrates the point that even artists who "collaborate with audience members, positioning them not as passive consumers but as active co-participants in a shared enterprise" tend to "pick and choose from both controlling and participatory strategies in different combinations and with different weights, as they try to set the boundaries of participation in their relationships with audiences" (Baym 110).

During Saturation Season, Brockhampton rarely acknowledged fan content creation such as artwork, writing, or cover versions. The band's selective approval of fan co-creation amounts to what Baym calls a territorializing strategy, whereby artists "seek to control the sites where audiences engage in their fan practices and possibly the practices themselves" (110). Such a strategy can be achieved in ways that "validate fans' creativity

and productive capacities" while also ensuring "that intellectual property is managed on artists' own terms" (Baym 113). The democratizing potential of Internet technologies is thus highlighted and mobilized in ways that "achieve *accelerated intimacy* between spectators and media figures" (Rojek 15, italics preserved), in turn (at least partially) obscuring the ways in which Brockhampton retain control over content production. Overall, Brockhampton appear to defend a relatively traditional understanding of the artist as sole content creator that consequently dissuades the body of popular music prosumers inspired by the precedent they set for new amateur success in hip-hop. This calls into question the sincerity of the sentiment of inclusivity that underpins the group's widespread popularity and success. Notwithstanding this friction, the notion of inclusivity runs as a common thread throughout the group's output, and also factors into their articulation of hip-hop authenticity and navigation of the politics of identity.

Queering the Hip-Hop Mainstream

If the accessibility and flexibility of online communication make it possible for an increasingly broad variety of voices and sentiments to reach vast audiences, it follows that this state of affairs holds undeniable political potential for expanding the purview of cultural democracy. This point comes to the fore in Natalie Fenton's research into the centrality of online networks for the proliferation of radical politics, in which she addresses "an emergent sense of the political that resides in multiple belongings (people with overlapping memberships linked through a myriad of networks) and flexible identities (characterised by inclusiveness and a positive emphasis on diversity and cross-fertilisation)" (149). Along these lines, the digital modes of consumption and distribution now characterizing popular music culture ensure the global circulation of cultural texts charged with sociopolitical potential (radical or reactionary alike), generating online communities and networks that allow for close connections between large numbers of geographically dispersed people. In response to Fenton's assertion that the Internet has resulted in "ever more complex networks of intensely expressive and often highly personalised forms of oppositional activism" (149), we direct attention toward elements of Brockhampton's output and performances that politicize expressions of personal identity in ways that promote inclusivity and diversity within a mainstream hip-hop domain which, at least historically, has been characterized by narrow boundaries for participation.

It is close to a truism that hip-hop music in mainstream channels of popular consumption has been associated with a limited range of individual identities, primarily (and, one might add, conspicuously) those that are Black, male, and heterosexual. Imani Perry outlines this issue when she identifies the prominence in hip-hop music of "a version of black urban masculinity, complicated by the American exploitation of black male identity and fraught with sexist troping" (118). Given that hip-hop emphasizes (inter)personal authenticity "through the depictions of life it offers, through the aspirations and hopes it articulates, or through the language, clothing, and body politics of the artists, who operate as cultural signifiers" (Perry 89), the genre's ideal of "keeping it real" has frequently been attained through heteronormative, homophobic, and misogynistic posturing. Against this backdrop, however, there has flourished a rich (if less visible) tradition of rappers cultivating representations of identity that transgress strictures

related to gender, sexuality, and race (Hawkins; Smalls). Such diversity is extended and showcased by Brockhampton, whose members provide various performances of personal identity that have been described as "achingly sincere" (Coley). Boasting Grenadian and Northern Irish members and an openly gay rapper alongside heterosexual and cismale Black Americans (the paradigmatic figure of mainstream US hip-hop), the group engages the politics of gender, sexuality, and race in ways that contribute to the further expansion of both representational repertoires and opportunities for participation in the hip-hop mainstream.

The capacity of hip-hop for fostering diversity is aptly exemplified by the group's queer representational strategies, which are manifest in their songs, music videos, live performances, and social media posts alike.[6] The term "queer" is understood in this article in a similar sense to that outlined by Stan Hawkins, as a "mechanism for plurality, with actions and performances involved that require critical attention . . . activated as a verb, as much as an adjective" (15; see also Jarman-Ivens 15–16; Leibedseder 9–12). Queering norms through musical texts and performances involves a "layering of identity [that] results in an expansion of the possibilities for social formation – blurring 'real' identities teases and taunts when it comes to staging the 'real self'" (Hawkins 15). For Shanté Smalls, queerness can work "as an antithesis to 'real' hip hop identity" (1–2). Granted that queerness in hip-hop holds the capacity to unsettle the heteronormative underpinnings of the genre's prevailing paradigm of authenticity, however, the queer potentiality of "realness" itself emerges as a principal concern. In her study of online communities of alterity, Jessa Lingel points out that in "ball culture, the word *realness* historically referred to the ability to perform a particular gender convincingly" (Lingel 114, italics preserved; see also Hawkins 205–07 on ball culture in hip-hop). Just as ball culture and drag performance manifest clearly the performative nature of gender, Brockhampton's work can be viewed as implicated – and implicative – within a process of queering discourses of hip-hop authenticity.

This is demonstrated by the group's subversive adoption of the "boyband" epithet (for instance, in the documentary title *American Boyband* and the tagline "the hardest working boyband in show business" used for promotional materials and merchandise). In interviews, members of the group emphatically defend their status as a boyband (Cotte; Easter), which purports to acknowledge (as they explicitly do on record) mainstream musical influences such as One Direction while subverting expectations concerning the identity dynamics of boyband performers. Proudly adopting this devalued designation (see Duffett) distinguishes the group as outsiders within the hip-hop genre, as their embrace of mainstream status overturns ideals of authenticity that are linked to subcultural credibility. Partly, the significance of Brockhampton's self-identification as a boyband relates to the queer resonances associated with such groups, whose innocent and youthful esthetics frequently confront cultural anxieties about androgyny and homoeroticism (Moos). Brockhampton's embrace of the label thus serves to accentuate their queer positioning, while also challenging distinctions between "real" hip-hop and "inauthentic" commercial pop.

Moreover, the group is explicit in their performances of queer-inclusivity, for example by producing merchandise inscribed with the word "Gay" or rainbow flag coloring. Indeed, Brockhampton demonstrate the queer potential of popular music performance by wearing their politics on their sleeves or, perhaps more precisely, their chests. At their

Coachella Festival performance in 2018, each performer in the group wore a bulletproof vest displaying a single word: for example, Kevin Abstract, who is openly gay, presented the term "FAGGOT." The appropriation or reclamation of stereotypes and slurs inherently configures a critique of identity clichés. Following hip-hop's long tradition of reclaiming and undermining the power of hegemonic language (Judy), Kevin Abstract on several occasions adopts "faggot" as the most prominent insult targeting homosexuals and a slur used prominently to demean performers who stray from heteronormative articulations of masculinity (Smalls 5). His embrace of the homonegative term in the song "Stupid" arguably contributes to subverting its emasculatory power (Rogalski). Narrating in first-person in "Cash," he reports lived experience of homophobia during his Mormon upbringing in Texas. The transparency and conspicuousness with which he employs homophobic slurs laments the inevitability of his reception in a conventionally homophobic environment and provides a model of self-awareness for the audience. For Kevin Abstract (and the group at large), acknowledging one's alterity represents a defense mechanism against the ideological violence of US kyriarchy. Recall that the word "faggot" was written on a bulletproof vest: he ostensibly protects himself by anticipating homophobic discrimination, and thus refashions authenticated notions of self-identity as his personal strength in familiar hip-hop fashion (Perry 102–04).

By placing alterity on display and championing queered, collective, and inclusive attitudes in various ways, Brockhampton contribute to reinforcing expanding notions of cultural democracy. The group's promotion of counterhegemonic constructions of sexual identity, which are unavoidably politicized in the homonegative context of hip-hop (Rogalski), seems to flourish especially in online and social media contexts. Brockhampton's online audience communities, such as the lively subreddit devoted to fandom of the band, frequently replicate positive expressions of Kevin Abstract's gay sexuality and/or queerness. Brockhampton fandom thus exemplifies Johnson and Cloonan's reminder that, through communal uses of music, "[a]lienation is not necessarily alienating" (115). In this sense, the group's culturally mediated performance of queer identity can be understood as one of many "forms of radical politics that embrace difference [but] are still founded on a level of commonality" (Fenton 152). Fans who interact with Brockhampton's cultural production and embrace the group's queer positionality "are drawn together by common elements in their value systems and political understandings" (152). On the formation of such online communities, Fenton argues that "the space of new media enables a broader range of voices and types of material to be communicated to a wider audience without the constraints of needing to comply with or follow a particular political creed or direction other than the expression of an affinity with a particular cause" (152).

Through engagement with digital fora associated with Brockhampton, fans are able to generate expressive discourses of queerness that reinforce the group's emphasis on inclusivity. More broadly, the group's considerable commercial success indicates that they appeal to a diverse audience, attracting fans from mainstream hip-hop's general body of listeners. There is perhaps a comparison to be made between white audiences' passionate appropriation of Black experiences of urban America (endemic to hip-hop) and the associations that fans with normative identity experiences (e.g., white, cisgendered, heterosexual) make with Brockhampton's digital staging of alterity. While queer identities have prompted significant discrimination in dominant cultural contexts, the

band keenly avoids vilifying non-queer participants. Rather, Kevin Abstract's bluntest expressions of homosexual desire are somewhat moderated on record by the normative, hypermasculine (and, at times, aggressively misogynistic) lyrics of fellow vocalists. This does not necessarily present a complete depoliticization of Kevin Abstract's queerness, but rather indicates a broader solidarity within the group that upholds the ideals of inclusivity and collective participation while simultaneously maintaining and expanding the lyrical themes historically associated with hip-hop.

Brockhampton's repertoire mobilizes narratives of sexuality and gender (as well as ethnicity and race) that afford comparisons with other artists grouped under the umbrella term "queer hip-hop" (see Smalls). Hawkins describes queer hip-hop as comprising "a community that animates the historically homophobic domain of hip hop," arguing that "these artists' videos are replete with naïve and mischievous codes, which parody identity" (198). The "struggle for diversification" that Hawkins (198) identifies in the work of queer hip-hop artists is mirrored in Brockhampton's output, whose endorsement of diversity is intensified by the creative and interactional possibilities afforded by digital technologies. Smalls suggests that the future of queer hip-hop will be built on the foundation of the recent "shift from the total power of major record labels to a more experimental and quirky Internet interface [which] has made it possible for 'weird' to become 'cool' and profitable for the artist" (17), a point that further highlights the role of online channels in providing opportunities for resituating queer identities from the margins of hip-hop to its mainstream center.

Along these lines, and in addition to confronting stereotypes and prejudices through in-your-face imagery and explicit lyrics, Brockhampton playfully employ naïve, mischievous, and bizarre esthetic codes that prohibit readings of normativity. Specifically, the Saturation Season music videos embrace a retro amateurism that reframes the past in ways that widen esthetic, cultural, and social possibilities in the present. In an effort to explicate this facet of Brockhampton's creative practices, we now address how the esthetics of outmoded technologies simultaneously factor into the group's articulation of nonnormative identities and contribute to ensuring their mainstream appeal.

The Esthetics of Outmoded Technologies: Reimagining the Past, Reshaping the Present

The official music videos of the *Saturation* trilogy share a cohesive set of amateurish audiovisual esthetics, drawing upon early MTV-era music video, home documentary footage, and independent filmmaking. Notably, considering the availability and low cost of smartphones and cameras with HD video capabilities, this esthetic is not borne out of necessity or practicality. Rather, the anachronistic stylization of DIY esthetics pursued by Brockhampton results from deliberate creative decisions, as is evidenced by the consistency of such esthetics across their music videos during this period: "Boogie," "Face," "Gold," "Gummy," "Heat," "Junky," "Lamb," "Rental," "Star," "Swamp," and "Sweet" all share this amateurish esthetic.

The group's most viewed video released during Saturation Season is "Gold," which has over 16 million views on YouTube as of September 2021. "Gold" exemplifies well the visual elements that contribute to an anachronistic "home made" look, most notably the use of a 4:3 aspect ratio – a format having been standard since the invention of moving

picture cameras, but phased out in the 21st century as a 16:9 aspect ratio became the standard for widescreen television and cinema – and oversaturated colors combined with a grainy, low image quality. The video begins with an appearance from the group's webmaster Robert Ontenient, who opens each video from the *Saturation* period with the spoken statement "Me llamo Roberto," in a phatic introductory gesture. As the video progresses, group members are depicted in different settings: (sub)urban streets (see Figure 1); an indistinct, colorfully lit "club" (a repurposed bedroom); and superimposed on a green-screen background (see Figure 2). The scenes in the streets recall 1980s and 1990s skateboarding videos and home video footage, and the low-quality green-screen effects, especially, evoke the visual production technologies of a bygone era. In classic hip-hop style, the group performs and poses for the camera, their eccentric home-made costuming – including a Batman costume, a bathrobe, cardboard boxes, an orange ski mask, and various wigs – working in tandem with the pre-Internet esthetics to accentuate their articulation of queer and othered identities within contemporary hip-hop.

Considering Carolyn Dinshaw's argument that amateurism and queerness "are mutually reinforcing terms" (5), it is clear that Brockhampton's playful self-fashioning confronts the norm of earnest "self-aggrandizement so popular in hip hop music" (Perry 66). Their excessive parodying of identity further queers the boundaries of "realness" within the genre by highlighting the "struggle for diversification" that Hawkins (198) finds intrinsic to queer hip-hop performances. At the same time, however, Brockhampton's promotion of plurality and inclusivity are framed within an esthetic paradigm that reinforces the group's credibility as hip-hop performers. Their amateurism is, in fact, staged with a consistency and precision that concedes the skill involved in mobilizing the esthetic signatures of outmoded technologies in ways that tread a fine line between innovation and maintaining long-standing hip-hop tropes.

Musically, "Gold" combines a modern hip-hop style with retro-conscious sonic elements such as vinyl crackle and hiss. These sonic elements, Justin Williams argues, call attention to a given track's participation in the traditional and highly valued hip-hop practice of musical borrowing, and "textually signals that some of the song has its roots

Figure 1. Screenshot from "Gold."

Figure 2. Screenshot from "Gold."

elsewhere, that elements have been borrowed, and most likely sampled" (209). While it is not confirmed that "Gold" samples any preexisting music, the presence of vinyl surface noise on the track is still esthetically significant. Williams refers to this musical trope as "vinyl aesthetics," further suggesting that the vinyl surface noise functions as a "signifier of hip-hop authenticity" (209) which evokes the practices (turntablism, scratching) that emerged with the early evolution of hip-hop in the 1970s. Coupled with the anachronistic visuals, this sonic element is key in establishing an esthetic that registers as "authentic" within a hip-hop paradigm that tends to favor artists who "overtly celebrate their peers, ancestors, and musical pasts" (Williams 218). Crucially, these esthetics ground Brockhampton's articulation of queer and multiracial identities within familiar esthetic tropes and safeguards against disparaging claims about their music not being "real hip-hop" (such claims being likely to emerge from audiences who are skeptical toward a social and musical broadening of the genre).

On the whole, the audiovisual esthetics of "Gold" can be interpreted as a deliberate distancing from the more polished, evidently digitally-produced texts that abound in the contemporary hip-hop mainstream. This is not at all to suggest that digital technologies are not employed by Brockhampton in the production of audiovisual content. On the contrary, what is significant is how the employment of digital technologies is obscured by creative choices that foreground the esthetic signatures of outmoded technologies.

Addressing comparable esthetic tendencies, Ian Reyes discusses the lo-fi ideal that defined the sound of 1990s black metal bands, arguing that these groups "pursued not just any kind of amateur, low-fidelity work. Rather, [they] reified only particular sounds, creating an ugly, raw, grim aesthetic specific to the dominant sensibilities of extreme metal at the time" (247). A similar argument can be put forth with regard to Brockhampton, whose lo-fi and amateurish visual signature is conspicuously consistent, organized around particular markers of lo-fi while avoiding others. Fan culture developing around an appreciation of the group's anachronistic (often proudly bizarre) audiovisual esthetic, then, partly hinges on a sense of community shared by those who are "in the know" and "get it." In identifying Brockhampton's audience as "kids of color; some of them are

queer kids; some of them are just like angsty kids who hate their school" (*American Boyband*), Kevin Abstract highlights the subcultural, outsider positioning purportedly shared by the group and their fans, even if Brockhampton's broad appeal is demonstrated by their commercial success. What's more, their mainstream success is arguably achieved partly due to their eccentric style. According to Reyes, the valorizing of "low-budget amateurism rather than big-budget virtuosity is suspiciously convenient for artists from the margins of a subculture desiring to be heard by the center" (251). Indeed, Brockhampton's visually lo-fi music videos form an integral part of the oppositional esthetic that has propelled the group into the hip-hop mainstream. It seems that it is precisely the staging of the nonnormative and subcultural that, somewhat ironically, has ensured their tremendous mainstream appeal: reviews of *Iridescence* (2018), which debuted at the top of the *Billboard* 200 chart, highlight Brockhampton's "musical experimentation" (Rosebury) and "refusal to conform" (Lyons). Likewise, the group's music videos have been positively described as "shockingly frivolous" (Coley) and "bizarre" (Giulione), with such commentary further contributing to positioning Brockhampton as outsiders within the mainstream.

Interestingly, the digital era has seen a variety of similar esthetic and ideological developments across a range of genres. In a study of the esthetic, communicative, and social dimensions of Internet-mediated music, Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth point to a reaction in the mid-2000s against the perceived modernism of earlier forms of electronically and/or digitally produced music, which "took the form of a turn to pre-internet, and in some cases pre-digital, performance, recording, and distribution media (the three never entirely separable)" (605). The music genres that Born and Haworth investigate "reframe aspects of twentieth- and twenty-first-century music and cultural history through the subtle redeployment of earlier and outdated musical, sonic, and cultural signifiers," and they are "defined in part by a turning away from the internet and digital formats" (605). However, their study "reveals a paradox: for it is in the lively discursive spaces of the internet that the conceptual and aesthetic theories ... were elaborated, through commentary and debate on underground blogs and publications" (Born and Haworth 605). Resonating with Born and Haworth's account, Brockhampton fandom thrives on Internet forums and social platforms, and is further stimulated by the group's own frequent participation in discussions on various Internet platforms.

Read against the group's prominent online presence and digital modes of production and distribution, Brockhampton's anachronistic audiovisual esthetics emerge as a nostalgia for the past, not with the aim to reproduce the esthetic ideals of bygone eras but as a means for diversification. Moreover, employing these creative techniques within hip-hop, which celebrates "old school" sounds and styles, functions particularly as an authenticating device (Perry 55). Writing about the genre hypnagogic pop, Born and Haworth describe similar ideologies:

> [I]t was less about recovering a particular "sound" that has been "lost" to digitization ... rather, it entailed the idea of technology as itself a portal to the past and an inscription of an era's cultural values. Central to this stance was ... the "lo-fi" home cassette tape, a format associated with the 1980s and the genesis of portable music. H-pop artists cultivated a knowing aesthetic centred around the material quirks of the format, embracing tape flutter, hiss, and distortion. (629)

The esthetics of the pre-Internet era, then, indicates distinctiveness within a primarily online cultural arena. This is exemplified by Brockhampton's music videos, as in "Gold," where the group does not pursue an accurate recreation or emulation of music videos of any previous time in particular, but rather merge retro elements with modern sound production techniques. Anachronistic visuals and vinyl surface noise are combined with a modern hip-hop sound characterized by, for example, the prominent sub-bass and the distinct spatial positioning of individual elements of the beat. This juxtaposition disrupts any notion of decades past, resulting in an esthetic expression that reimagines the past rather than replicates it. Reyes identifies, in the 1990s black metal scene, a similar yearning for a past that never was:

> [T]he 1990s were also the years of digital audio's ascendancy. . . . Black metal coalesced around an emerging nostalgia for the authenticity imagined to infuse classic recordings from previous generations. . . . The sound could not well be described as "retro." Rather than valorizing established classics, it (re)collected the past counter-hegemonically, re-evaluating "bad" sounds and remembering a genre that never was, thus bringing it into being. (252)

As Reyes notes, reimagining the past provides a counter-hegemonic capacity to reshape the present by bringing a past that never was into being. Following on from this perspective, Brockhampton's selectively outdated audiovisual esthetics are entwined with (and indeed form part of) their digital staging of nonnormative (queer, multiracial) identities. The deliberateness of the videos' anachronistic, naïve, DIY esthetics is amplified by the digital context within which they are produced, distributed, and consumed. Such a pronounced asynchrony, Dinshaw would argue, holds the capacity to expand our tolerance for queer temporal possibilities (6). This point holds true as much for hip-hop videos and digital fan communities as for the medieval manuscripts that are the focus of Dinshaw's study, as exemplified by how Brockhampton's blurring of temporal, technological, and esthetic boundaries encourages alternative ways of being in the world. While authenticating Brockhampton's work in line with the ideological and esthetic foundations of hip-hop, then, their anachronistic and amateurish esthetics both indicate a subversion of the heteronormative dimensions of the hip-hop mainstream and position them as pioneers within the terrain of this ever-broadening genre.

Conclusion

By investigating three interrelated aspects of Brockhampton as a primarily Internet-based popular culture phenomenon, we have aimed to provide a nuanced account of the multivalent implications of the digital turn in popular music. As we have attempted to demonstrate, Brockhampton's social media use, fan engagement, and queer esthetics activate narratives concerning the democratizing potential of digital technologies. Not least, the immense commercial success of the group following their self-released *Saturation* trilogy prompts consideration of the digital domain as an arena that provides independent (and/or amateur) musicians with opportunities for achieving mainstream popularity and recognition. Ostensibly, routes to success that bypass traditional cultural intermediaries or gatekeepers might facilitate increased social inclusion, diversity, and equality.

This is far from a one-sided effect, however, considering that the politics of identity that play out in online fan cultures appear intensified rather than dissolved. The continued stratification of the popular music sphere under digital conditions is asserted by Prior, who argues that "[t]he Internet is not the flat, open and indiscriminate domain cyber-utopians once thought it to be. … In many ways, it imports, replicates and reinforces existing divisions as well as produces new ones" (*Popular Music* 54). Such an understanding of the Internet as intensifying the social dimensions of musical experiences is also identified by Born and Haworth, who argue that "the internet encourages and expands the material, discursive and social mediation of music" and that "the web as a medium stimulates an intensification, expansion and democratization of [music's] discursivity – whether the discourse is aesthetic, critical, political, commercial or playful – inciting participation, and speeding up its production and circulation" (611). As Prior reminds us, however, it is "not the case that everyone is suddenly making music in a kind of DIY free-for-all merely because these technologies exist. Like the myth of the Internet as an open and participatory space of unbridled freedom, such claims autonomise technology" (*Popular Music* 88). The myth about the democratizing capacity of the Internet does not only autonomize technology, but also diverts attention from the human activities that give rise to such myths in the first place. By operating in the shadows cast by narratives about the democratizing impact of digitalization, artists are able to repackage and expand their commercial activities under the guise of endorsing more egalitarian modes of cultural production and audience engagement.

Brockhampton's close interaction with fans, queering of hip-hop authenticity, and digital staging of amateurism tread a fine line between the politics of inclusion and exclusion, between openness and control, as well as between cultural democratization and the economic incentives of platform capitalism. Insofar as the novel and potentially subversive aspects of the group's practices obscure the ways in which normative values and capitalistic systems are upheld, it could be argued that Brockhampton exploit democratic values in tokenistic gestures of communality. By the same token, the group's digital performances fuel commercial interest through the development of parasocial intimacies that lay the foundation for what Rojek describes as a "gestural economy," where commercial motives are disguised (137ff). It is evident that counter-hegemonic discourses and socialities can be appropriated and exploited in the interest of capital. The widespread increase in everyday Internet use associated with processes of cultural digitalization leaves users more open to commercial exploitation, whether encountering difficulty to gain income from their creative labor (Prior, "Rise" 401) or through the mass-market appropriation of subcultural practices (Lingel 65).

Nonetheless, commercial sites and practices also provide grounds for expressions of identity and community, considering that "the creation of discursivity and socialities online takes place largely inside commercial social media platforms" (Born and Haworth 642). In the case of Brockhampton, fans exert labor, commit time, and spend money in support of the group as part of an exchange for creative experiences that reaffirm politics of inclusivity and tolerance. While such experiences may not necessarily form part of an active political project, the solidarity that, for instance, non-queer fans enact in the creative and commercial support of Kevin Abstract's expressions of homosexual desire radically advances the normalization of queer identities in hip-hop. Partially on account

of the interactional possibilities enabled by social media and Internet communities, Brockhampton's digital staging of queerness becomes celebrated and supported even by the genre's mainstream audience.

By these means, performances of inclusion and diversity become entangled in esthetic-political discourses of tolerance that obscure Brockhampton's relatively traditional approach to product manufacture and retaining creative control during the period of their mainstream emergence. One of the most significant points to emerge from our study is thus that the digital turn in popular music culture produces multiple, simultaneous, and often contradictory effects. Viewing the strategies and socialities of Saturation Season in the context of wider trends of online political engagement suggests a gradual and limited advance in the scope of cultural democracy, rather than some dramatic digital revolution. On some level, however, the group's display of new amateur success, esthetic plurality, and queer identities is indeed able to rupture long-standing boundaries for inclusion in the hip-hop genre. In at least this sense, Brockhampton's diverse deployment of internet technologies enables broadening participation in this cultural sphere.

Notes

1. As of May 2021, Brockhampton consists of performers Kevin Abstract, Matt Champion, Dom McLennon, Merlyn Wood, Bearface, and Joba; producers Romil Hemnani, Jabari Manwa, and Kiko Merley; creative director HK; photographer and videographer Ashlan Grey; webmaster Robert Ontenient; and manager Jon Nunes. These roles are not exclusive: for instance, Jabari Manwa has been credited for vocals and Joba for production. At least three additional creative assistants – Weston Freas, Nick Lenzini, and Kevin Doan – are publicly involved in Brockhampton's creative outputs and new media practices. Note that several of the group members collaborated under the designation AliveSinceForever before forming Brockhampton.
2. In May 2018, Brockhampton announced the departure of Ameer Vann, following allegations of relations with a minor and sexual misconduct (Lyons; Mandle). These allegations, paired with Ameer Vann's frequently misogynistic lyrics, warrant further discussion of how hegemonic ideals and circumstances can be upheld within a group that, in other ways, promotes social plurality and equality.
3. The *Saturation Documentary*, however, shows Kevin Abstract (perhaps re-)recording the hook vocals in a different location and at a different time of day (2:26:10). Nonetheless, the vocals improvised in this initial session provide a basis for guiding the track's composition, and do not differ in rhythm or melody.
4. Brockhampton have produced several large, expensive merchandise collections which typically sell out rapidly: journalist Jordan Sowunmi notes that, at two Toronto concerts in 2018, the "merch line dwarfs the line for drinks."
5. The responses of group members to fan creation are not consistent throughout Brockhampton's career. For example, in February 2021, creative director HK live-streamed his responses to an "unreleased tracker" (a fan-made spreadsheet archiving various Brockhampton teasers, snippets, and leaks) via the platform Twitch.
6. See Joshua Bote's "5 Queerest Moments" for one account of Brockhampton's musical and lyrical expressions of queerness.

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