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RESTATEMENT OF THE LAW  
COPYRIGHT

*Tentative Draft No. 4*

(March 2023)

SUBJECTS COVERED

- CHAPTER 4** Copyright Formalities (§ 40 (for reference only); §§ 42-45)
- CHAPTER 5** Duration of Copyright (§§ 49 and 52)
- CHAPTER 6** Copyright Rights and Limitations (§ 55 (for reference only); §§ 6.05, 6.07, 6.08, 6.11)
- CHAPTER 7** Copyright Infringement (§§ 7.01-7.04, 7.07)
- APPENDIX A** Statutory Appendix
- APPENDIX B** Black Letter of Tentative Draft No. 4
- APPENDIX C** Black Letter of Sections Approved by Membership

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1    **§ 7.03. Copying in Fact**

2       As stated in § 7.01(a), proving infringement of any of a copyright owner's exclusive  
 3 rights requires a plaintiff to prove ownership of a valid copyright and copying of protected  
 4 expression from the copyrighted work. Proving copying of protected expression requires the  
 5 plaintiff to prove both improper appropriation, as discussed in § 7.04, and copying *from* the  
 6 copyrighted work, referred to as "copying in fact."

7             (a) Proving copying in fact requires the plaintiff to prove some material was  
 8 copied from the plaintiff's copyrighted work or from another source that had been  
 9 copied (directly or indirectly) from the plaintiff's copyrighted work.

10          (b) A plaintiff may prove copying in fact directly or with circumstantial  
 11 evidence. Circumstantial evidence can consist of evidence of either:

12             (1) access and probative similarity, which requires showing that

13                 (A) the alleged copier had access to the plaintiff's copyrighted  
 14 work prior to or during the alleged copying, and

15                 (B) the similarities between the allegedly infringing material and  
 16 the plaintiff's copyrighted work are sufficient to support an inference  
 17 of copying; or

18             (2) striking similarity, which requires showing that the allegedly  
 19 infringing material is identical or so similar to plaintiff's copyrighted work  
 20 such that, considering all the circumstances, there is no reasonable explanation  
 21 for the identity or similarities other than copying from the plaintiff's work.

22             (c) If the defendant proves that the allegedly infringing material was  
 23 independently created rather than copied, directly or indirectly, from the plaintiff's  
 24 copyrighted work, there was no copying in fact from the plaintiff's work and  
 25 therefore no liability for copyright infringement.

26    **Source Note:**

27       Feist Publ'ns, Inc. v. Rural Tel. Serv. Co., 499 U.S. 340 (1991).

28    **Comment:**

29       a. *Generally.* The Copyright Act does not contain a statement of the elements of a prima  
 30 facie case of infringement. Courts have created a framework for the infringement analysis, see

1   § 7.01 of this Restatement. The U.S. Supreme Court has held that, in addition to proving  
2   “ownership of a valid copyright,” discussed in § 7.01 of this Restatement, proving copyright  
3   infringement requires the plaintiff to prove “copying of constituent elements of the work that are  
4   original.” *Feist Publ’ns, Inc. v. Rural Tel. Serv. Co.*, 499 U.S. 340, 361 (1991). Embedded within  
5   that component of the Supreme Court’s articulation of the *prima facie* case of infringement are  
6   two separate elements: copying *from* the copyrighted work and copying protected expression.  
7   Copying *from* the copyrighted work is the focus of this Section. Copying protected expression is  
8   the focus of § 7.04 of this Restatement.

9                 As stated in subsection (a) of the black letter of this Section, copying from the plaintiff’s  
10   copyrighted work can occur directly, or it can occur indirectly: through copying not from the  
11   plaintiff’s work but from another work that itself contains elements copied directly or indirectly  
12   from the plaintiff’s work. Throughout this Section, discussion of copying from the copyrighted  
13   work includes both direct and indirect copying.

14                 Proving that the material the defendant used in the alleged infringement was copied from  
15   the plaintiff’s copyrighted work is often referred to as proving “copying in fact” or “actual  
16   copying.” It does not infringe a copyrighted work for another work to be similar, or even identical,  
17   if elements were not copied *from* that copyrighted work. As with all elements of the *prima facie*  
18   case of infringement, the plaintiff must demonstrate copying in fact by a preponderance of the  
19   evidence, that is, it must be more likely than not that the defendant copied from the plaintiff’s  
20   copyrighted work.

21                 As explained in § 7.01, Comment *b*, the requirement to prove copying does not necessarily  
22   involve proving that anyone made a “copy” as that term is defined by the Copyright Act—i.e., a  
23   material object in which a work is embodied, see 17 U.S.C. § 101. For example, in a case asserting  
24   infringement of the public performance right, the plaintiff must prove that material performed by  
25   the alleged infringer was copied from the plaintiff’s copyrighted work, but there is no requirement  
26   to prove that the defendant created a “copy.” Thus, an acting company that publicly performs a  
27   copyrighted play “copies” from the play even if the performance is never embodied in any “copy”—  
28   i.e., because the performance is never recorded. The overlap in terminology may lead to confusion,  
29   but is common in the case law. In this Section, unless noted otherwise, the verb forms “copy” and  
30   “copying” refer to the act of copying from a plaintiff’s work, and not to the fixation of a “copy.”

1       In many situations, the plaintiff seeks to prove that the defendant who is alleged to have  
2 infringed engaged in copying in fact. The black letter of this Section, however, does not state that  
3 the plaintiff must prove that the *defendant* copied from the plaintiff's copyrighted work, because a  
4 defendant can in some circumstances commit direct infringement even when the alleged copying  
5 was done by someone other than the defendant. See § 7.01, Comment *c*. For example, a defendant  
6 who distributes infringing copies of the plaintiff's work to the public directly infringes the copyright  
7 owner's exclusive right to distribute copies under 17 U.S.C. § 106(3), even if the defendant did not  
8 itself copy from the plaintiff's work. In that case, the plaintiff must still prove copying in fact but  
9 by someone other than the defendant, although the plaintiff does not need to identify the specific  
10 individual who engaged in the copying. For ease of discussion, the Comments in this Section of the  
11 Restatement generally identify the defendant as the copier, though some direct-infringement cases  
12 involve alleged copying by third parties who may or may not be before the court.

13       Direct evidence of copying, as discussed in Comment *c*, is one way for a plaintiff to  
14 demonstrate the required element of copying in fact. Acknowledging that direct evidence of  
15 copying can be difficult to obtain, courts have also permitted copyright owners to demonstrate this  
16 required element through circumstantial evidence. Allowing a party to prove a required element  
17 of that party's case through circumstantial evidence is generally permissible throughout U.S. law,  
18 with courts often specifying the type of circumstantial evidence that can be used to satisfy a party's  
19 burden of proof on a particular element. Subsection (b) articulates two routes to proving copying  
20 in fact through circumstantial evidence that courts have formulated.

21       The first route for proving copying in fact through circumstantial evidence consists of proof  
22 of access to the plaintiff's copyrighted work and sufficient similarity between that work and the  
23 allegedly infringing use to support an inference that the defendant has in fact copied from the  
24 copyright owner's work; this degree of similarity is sometimes referred to by courts as "probative  
25 similarity." See Comments *d* to *f*. As explained in Comment *g*, the probative similarity required to  
26 prove copying in fact is different from the substantial similarity required to prove improper  
27 appropriation, the fourth element of the plaintiff's prima facie case of infringement. See §§ 7.01 and  
28 7.04 of this Restatement. Courts sometimes have not been particularly careful in separating the two  
29 ways in which the similarities between the plaintiff's copyrighted work and the allegedly infringing  
30 use are important in the prima facie case of infringement. In some cases, courts simply refer to the  
31 requirement of "substantial similarity" without specifying which element of the prima facie case they

1 are analyzing. Because a plaintiff's *prima facie* case of infringement involves proving both the  
2 element of copying from the plaintiff's copyrighted work (the element of copying in fact) and  
3 copying a sufficient amount of copyrightable expression from the plaintiff's copyrighted work (the  
4 element of improper appropriation), it is important to understand and separate the two different  
5 purposes of the assessment of similarity, and how those assessments differ.

6       The second route for proving copying in fact through circumstantial evidence requires the  
7 plaintiff to demonstrate that the allegedly infringing use is identical or so similar to the plaintiff's  
8 copyrighted work such that, in context, there is no reasonable explanation for the identity or the  
9 similarities other than copying from the plaintiff's work. Courts often refer to this type of  
10 circumstantial evidence as "striking similarity." See Comment *i*.

11       The rights granted to a copyright owner by the Copyright Act do not prohibit others from  
12 independently creating works similar to the copyright owner's work. No matter how similar the  
13 plaintiff's and the defendant's works are, if the defendant's work was created independently,  
14 without exposure to the plaintiff's work, the defendant has not infringed the copyright in the  
15 plaintiff's work. Subsection (c) states this rule. See Comment *j*.

16       *b. What constitutes copying.* Copying from a copyrighted work can take different forms.  
17 Most obviously, a defendant can manually, mechanically, or digitally replicate some or all of a  
18 copyrighted work in a new material object. For example, a defendant could write out in longhand  
19 an extract of the words printed in the hardcover edition of the plaintiff's novel, photocopy some  
20 or all of the pages of that novel, take a digital photograph of the plaintiff's painting, or use an audio  
21 recorder to record a singer singing the plaintiff's musical work. While the content of those copies  
22 or phonorecords might differ somewhat from the plaintiff's work (depending, for example, on the  
23 accuracy of the longhand copyist, on the lighting of the digital photograph, or on the notes achieved  
24 by the singer), the new material object produced by the defendant (the longhand notes, the  
25 photocopies, the photograph, and the audio recording) all embody the plaintiff's work in  
26 essentially identical form. In other cases, a defendant copies from the plaintiff's work (even if the  
27 defendant does not have a copy of that work in front of the defendant or close at hand) when the  
28 defendant, in creating a work of authorship, replicates elements of the plaintiff's work based on  
29 the defendant's memory of a previous encounter with the plaintiff's work.

30       As mentioned in Comment *a*, and as further detailed in § 7.01, Comment *b*, copying in fact  
31 can also occur even when the defendant does not produce any new "copy," i.e., any material object

1 embodying some or all of the plaintiff's copyrighted work. For example, a singer who memorizes  
2 a song she hears played on the radio and then sings that song in front of an audience at her next  
3 concert has copied from the musical work she heard, even if she has not embodied her performance  
4 in any material object. See § 7.01, Comment *b* (discussing the concept of the verb "copying"  
5 denoting an act required to be proven as a component of copyright-infringement analysis, versus  
6 the concept of the noun "copies" as denoting material objects in which a work is fixed).

7         *c. Direct evidence of copying in fact.* Direct evidence that there was copying in fact may  
8 come in the form of an admission by the defendant, testimony by someone who witnessed the  
9 defendant engage in the copying, or other evidence documenting the act of copying from the  
10 copyrighted work, such as photographs, video recordings, or audio recordings. Watermarking  
11 technology can also provide direct evidence of copying, as can copying of intentional misspellings  
12 or invented information, such as fictitious entries in a compilation of data or on a map.

13 **Illustrations:**

14             1. Visitor to a private art gallery takes a photograph of a copyrighted painting. The  
15 art gallery's surveillance camera records the photographing incident. The surveillance  
16 footage is direct evidence of copying in fact by Visitor.

17             2. Musicians record a recording session in which they create a musical work.  
18 During the session, Musicians discuss using components of a preexisting musical work that  
19 they have previously heard, and then incorporate those components into one of the songs  
20 they record during the session. The recordings of the session are direct evidence of copying  
21 in fact from the preexisting musical work.

22         *d. Circumstantial proof of copying in fact: access and probative similarity.* In place of  
23 direct evidence of copying, a plaintiff can prove circumstantially that the defendant copied from  
24 the plaintiff's copyrighted work by showing that the defendant had access to the plaintiff's work  
25 and that the two works share similarities that make it more likely than not that the defendant copied  
26 from the plaintiff's work. The rationale for this circumstantial proof is that if the defendant had  
27 access to the plaintiff's work, then the defendant had the opportunity to copy from that work, and  
28 sufficient similarities between the defendant's work and the plaintiff's work can demonstrate that  
29 the defendant took that opportunity and did, in fact, copy. A plaintiff meets its burden to prove  
30 copying in fact when the plaintiff's proffered evidence of access and "probative similarity"  
31 (described below) satisfy the finder of fact that the similarities between the two works are more

1 likely than not due to copying rather than to some other cause, such as “coincidence, independent  
2 creation, or prior common source.” *Skidmore v. Led Zeppelin*, 952 F.3d 1051, 1064 (9th Cir. 2020)  
3 (internal quotation marks omitted). Thus, a sufficient showing of access and probative similarity  
4 allows a finder of fact to infer, even in the absence of direct evidence, that it is more likely than  
5 not the defendant actually copied from the plaintiff’s work. Because proving copying in fact this  
6 way is based on circumstantial evidence, it is appropriate to consider the totality of all of the  
7 evidence presented when determining whether the plaintiff has proven this element of the *prima  
facie* case of infringement.

9 Many courts state that the plaintiff must show access and “substantial similarity,” see  
10 Comment g. See, e.g., *Peters v. West*, 692 F.3d 629, 633 (7th Cir. 2012) (discussing this  
11 terminology issue). The use of the phrase “substantial similarity” can cause confusion, however,  
12 as courts generally describe the improper-appropriation element of a copyright-infringement  
13 claim, discussed in § 7.04 of this Restatement, as requiring that the plaintiff show that audiences  
14 will perceive “substantial similarity” between the protected elements of the plaintiff’s work and  
15 elements of the defendant’s work. *Id.* These two separate similarity inquiries are not identical, for  
16 reasons explained in Comment g. Some courts avoid this potential confusion by using the label  
17 “probative similarity” to describe the similarity required (together with access) for circumstantial  
18 proof of copying in fact, and this Restatement adopts that approach.

19     e. *Proving access: generally.* A plaintiff can establish the access required to support  
20 circumstantial proof of copying in fact by offering either direct or circumstantial evidence of access.  
21 The plaintiff could introduce direct evidence showing that the defendant had access to the work—  
22 i.e., that the defendant actually encountered the subject work—such as testimony of a witness who  
23 saw the defendant observing the plaintiff’s work. Alternatively, a plaintiff could demonstrate access  
24 circumstantially by introducing evidence showing that there was a reasonable likelihood that the  
25 defendant observed the plaintiff’s work. See Illustration 3. A reasonable likelihood that the  
26 defendant observed the copyrighted work is more than a bare or mere possibility that the defendant  
27 might have observed the work. See Illustration 4. A plaintiff must offer evidence that the  
28 defendant’s access was *likely*; mere assertions, speculation, or conjecture of the defendant’s access  
29 to the copyrighted work are insufficient to prove access when relying on circumstantial evidence of  
30 copying in fact. Applying the burden of proof in this context can be helpful: the plaintiff’s evidence  
31 of access, whether direct or circumstantial, must make it more likely than not that the defendant

1 accessed the plaintiff's copyrighted work. This requirement of a likelihood of access by the  
2 defendant is justified because the plaintiff is seeking to support the inference that the defendant  
3 copied from the plaintiff's work without offering direct evidence to prove such copying.

4 **Illustrations:**

5       3. Plaintiff's copyrighted musical work is distributed only in hardcopy sheet music  
6 sold only in a single Retail Store. Retail Store's records indicate that it has sold 30 copies  
7 of the sheet music embodying Plaintiff's musical work. Retail Store employees testify that  
8 Defendant regularly visited Retail Store looking for sheet music in the genre of Plaintiff's  
9 musical work. This evidence is sufficient to demonstrate that it was likely that Defendant  
10 observed Plaintiff's copyrighted work.

11       4. Same facts as Illustration 3, except that there is no evidence that Defendant ever  
12 visited Retail Store, which is located a long distance from Defendant's domicile. The bare  
13 possibility that Defendant may have observed the work is insufficient to demonstrate the  
14 access required to support circumstantial proof of copying in fact.

15       Another approach to demonstrating access is to prove that the subject work has been so  
16 widely disseminated that a factfinder can infer the defendant likely had an opportunity to observe  
17 the subject work. The evidence required to show widespread dissemination can vary, but courts  
18 typically consider the work's commercial success and the work's "distribution through radio,  
19 television, and other relevant mediums." Loomis v. Cornish, 836 F.3d 991, 997 (9th Cir. 2016).  
20 Plaintiffs can also use "saturation in a relevant market in which both the plaintiff and the defendant  
21 participate" to demonstrate a likelihood that the defendant had an opportunity to view the  
22 copyrighted work. *Id.* See also *Peel & Co., Inc. v. Rug Market*, 238 F.3d 391, 397 (5th Cir. 2001)  
23 (holding that plaintiff raised a triable issue of access as to whether its rug design "was widely  
24 disseminated among those involved in the United States rug trade").

25       The mere fact that the work was published is, standing alone, insufficient to demonstrate a  
26 likelihood of access. Availability of the work on the internet is also, by itself, insufficient proof that  
27 the defendant had access to the plaintiff's copyrighted work. Furthermore, the timing of publication  
28 of the copyrighted work can defeat an assertion of widespread dissemination as proof of access, if,  
29 for example, the copyrighted work was published after the creation of the allegedly infringing use.

30       Relevant evidence that can support a claim of access varies from case to case. Because  
31 access is a component of circumstantial proof of copying in fact, an approach that looks at all of

1 the evidence is appropriate. In some contexts, showing access by a third party who is close to the  
2 defendant can support a claim of access. See Comment *f*.

3       *f. Proving access: access through intermediaries.* A plaintiff sometimes seeks to prove  
4 access by showing a chain of events that leads to a nexus between the defendant and the plaintiff's  
5 copyrighted work. As with other attempts to demonstrate access through circumstantial evidence,  
6 a plaintiff must show it was likely the defendant actually encountered the plaintiff's copyrighted  
7 work. "Reasoning that amounts to nothing more than a 'tortuous chain of hypothetical transmittals'  
8 is insufficient to infer access." *Bouchat v. Balt. Ravens, Inc.*, 241 F.3d 350, 354 (4th Cir. 2000)  
9 (quoting *Towler v. Sayles*, 76 F.3d 579, 583 (4th Cir. 1996)).

10       For example, if the creator of the allegedly infringing work is an employee, some courts  
11 infer that the creator had reasonable opportunity to observe the plaintiff's copyrighted work if a  
12 different employee of the same employer obtained access to the plaintiff's work and was in  
13 relatively close proximity, either physical or otherwise, with the employee who created the  
14 allegedly infringing work. See *Moore v. Columbia Pictures Indus.*, 972 F.2d 939, 942 (8th Cir.  
15 1992). That inference is sometimes referred to as the "corporate receipt" doctrine, although the  
16 reasoning has expanded to cover relationships that are not centered around corporate entities. In  
17 *Loomis v. Cornish*, 836 F.3d 991, 995 (9th Cir. 2016), the Ninth Circuit described the doctrine as  
18 "access through intermediaries." The court explained that there must be some overlap in the subject  
19 matter of the dealings between "the plaintiff and the intermediary and between the intermediary  
20 and the alleged copier" in order to allow an inference of access. *Id.* (quoting *Meta–Film Assocs., Inc. v. MCA, Inc.*, 586 F. Supp. 1346, 1358 (C.D. Cal. 1984)).

22       Not every circuit has adopted the "corporate receipt" doctrine, although no circuit appears  
23 to have expressly rejected the doctrine. Some circuits have, however, held that "[b]are corporate  
24 receipt . . . , without any allegation of a nexus between the recipients and the alleged infringers, is  
25 insufficient to raise a triable issue of access." *Jorgensen v. Epic/Sony Recs.*, 351 F.3d 46, 53 (2d  
26 Cir. 2003). As in all cases seeking to demonstrate access through circumstantial evidence, the  
27 question is whether the facts shown support an inference that access to the copyrighted work by  
28 the person alleged to have copied was more likely than not.

29       *g. Proving probative similarity.* If the plaintiff shows access to the copyrighted work, the  
30 degree of similarity between the allegedly infringing use and the plaintiff's copyrighted work must  
31 be sufficient, together with that evidence of access, to permit an inference that the creator of the

1 allegedly infringing material copied from the copyrighted work. (For a discussion of the similarity  
2 required to prove copying in fact in the absence of evidence that the defendant had access to the  
3 plaintiff's work, see Comment *i*).

4 In examining whether similarities provide circumstantial evidence of copying in fact,  
5 courts have permitted the similarities to "be based on the overlap of unprotectable as well as  
6 protectable elements." *Skidmore*, 952 F.3d at 1064. Caution is warranted when the similarities are  
7 based on unprotectable elements, however, because those similarities may be the result not of the  
8 defendant copying from the plaintiff's copyrighted work but rather the defendant copying from  
9 another source (e.g., another work that contains those unprotectable elements) or from nature, or  
10 they may result from coincidence driven by the nature of the works. For example, in a work that  
11 involves superheroes, the fact that the leading character in the defendant's work can fly would not  
12 alone support an inference of copying from an earlier work that also contains a character that can  
13 fly because flying often is a characteristic of a superhero; the ability to fly would be considered an  
14 unprotectable *scènes à faire* element for a superhero character. The more originality contained in  
15 the portion or portions of the copyrighted work that are alleged to have been copied, the more  
16 likely the similarities in the defendant's use are the result of copying. Further, it is important to  
17 note that if the only similarities between the allegedly infringing use and the plaintiff's copyrighted  
18 work are similarities of unprotectable elements, then the plaintiff's evidence is insufficient to prove  
19 the improper appropriation element of the *prima facie* case of infringement. See § 7.04 of this  
20 Restatement.

21 *h. The inverse ratio rule.* When a plaintiff attempts to prove copying by showing access  
22 and probative similarity, some courts have discussed an "inverse ratio" rule. Under this rule, the  
23 relationship between the degree of proof required to establish each of the two facts is inversely  
24 proportional: the court will require less evidence of probative similarity when a high degree of  
25 access is shown, and vice versa. Most circuits have either expressly rejected the rule or have  
26 discussed it and declined to apply it. The Second Circuit described the idea as a "superficially  
27 attractive apothegm which upon examination confuses more than it clarifies." *Arc Music Corp. v.*  
28 *Lee*, 296 F.2d 186, 187 (2d Cir. 1961).

29 Rejection of the inverse ratio rule's quasi-mathematical formula does not mean, however,  
30 that evidence of access and similarity should not be considered in relation to one another. As  
31 indicated in Comment *d*, in determining whether the plaintiff has carried its burden to prove

copying in fact through circumstantial evidence, it is appropriate to consider all of the evidence presented to show that the defendant copied from the plaintiff's copyrighted work. Some courts have expressly acknowledged that one side of the "inverse relationship between access and probative similarity" is appropriate, specifically the principle that "'the stronger the proof of similarity, the less the proof of access is required.'" *Jorgensen v. Epic/Sony Recs.*, 351 F.3d 46, 56 (2d Cir. 2003) (quoting Melville B. Nimmer & David Nimmer, *Nimmer on Copyright* § 13.03[D], at 13–77 (2002)). However, strict adherence to an inverse ratio rule threatens to support an inference of copying when such an inference is not warranted. This is particularly the case when there is overwhelming evidence of access, including an admission of access by the defendant. In such a case, there still must be sufficient evidence of similarity between the allegedly infringing use and the plaintiff's copyrighted work to support an inference that the defendant copied from the plaintiff's work. See *Peters v. West*, 692 F.3d 629, 635 (7th Cir. 2012) (noting that the Seventh Circuit has "never endorsed the other side of the inverse relation: the idea that a 'high degree of access' justifies a 'lower standard of proof' for similarity").

**Illustration:**

5. Defendant admits reading Plaintiff's copyrighted short story. Defendant's motion picture contains a similar number of characters to Plaintiff's story, but those characters' attributes and the entire plot of the motion picture are different from the characters and plot of Plaintiff's short story. Despite clear evidence of access to Plaintiff's copyrighted work, the lack of sufficient similarities between the motion picture and the short story means that Plaintiff has failed to prove the required element of copying in fact.

i. *Circumstantial proof of copying in fact: striking similarity.* As discussed above, circumstantial proof of the required element of copying in fact in the plaintiff's *prima facie* case of infringement can be shown by demonstrating access and similarity. See Comments *d* to *g*. Some courts have held that a factfinder may infer that the defendant copied from the plaintiff's work when an allegedly infringing use and the plaintiff's copyrighted work are so strikingly similar that the only logical explanation is that the defendant copied from the plaintiff's work. The burden of production then shifts to the defendant to provide an explanation for the similarity other than copying from the plaintiff's work. The relationship between striking similarity and the possibility of independent creation demonstrates why it may be appropriate in some circumstances to permit identical or strikingly similar works to be circumstantial evidence of copying in fact. If the

1 copyrighted work is sufficiently complex, nonroutine, or contains significant uncommon expression  
2 not found in other works, a later work that is identical or strikingly similar can be presumed to have  
3 been copied from the earlier work because independent creation is so implausible in such a case.  
4 See Illustration 6. Errors contained in the plaintiff's copyrighted work that are sufficiently  
5 distinctive and that are replicated in the alleged infringing use also can support a finding of the type  
6 of striking similarity that can demonstrate circumstantial evidence of copying in fact. However,  
7 even exact similarity between the allegedly infringing work and the plaintiff's copyrighted work  
8 does not qualify as the type of striking similarity required to prove copying in fact if the overlap  
9 between the works is commonplace or results from the two works drawing from a common source.  
10 See Illustration 7. A plaintiff must therefore show that the nature of the works at issue makes it  
11 unlikely that there are any reasonable explanations of the striking similarity other than copying. As  
12 the Second Circuit has stated, “[a] plaintiff has not proved striking similarity sufficient to sustain a  
13 finding of copying if the evidence as a whole does not preclude any reasonable possibility of  
14 independent creation.” *Gaste v. Kaiserman*, 863 F.2d 1061, 1068 (2d Cir. 1988).

15 **Illustrations:**

16       6. Painter creates an abstract painting involving complex interactions of colors and  
17 shapes that is unlike any other abstract painting previously produced. Company designs  
18 fabric with an image that resembles Painter's abstract painting extremely closely. In a suit  
19 for infringement, without additional evidence to demonstrate a potential alternative source  
20 for Company's designs or to negate Company's access to Painter's painting, the plaintiff's  
21 evidence is sufficient to demonstrate copying in fact by establishing striking similarity.

22       7. Toy Company A creates a set of three realistic-looking plastic farmyard animals:  
23 a horse, a pig, and a cow. Subsequently, Toy Company B creates a set of three realistic-  
24 looking plastic farmyard animals: a horse, a pig, and a cow. The animal toys in each of the  
25 two sets are strikingly similar in appearance. In a suit for infringement, because there are  
26 other explanations for the similarities, namely that both sets of toys copy from real-life  
27 animals and include three farmyard animals that are common for children's toys, the  
28 striking similarity alone is likely insufficient to demonstrate copying in fact.

29       *j. Independent creation and the plaintiff's burden to demonstrate copying in fact.* Courts  
30 sometimes state that independent creation is a “complete defense” to a claim of copyright  
31 infringement. See, e.g., *Rentmeester v. Nike, Inc.*, 883 F.3d 1111, 1117 (9th Cir. 2018). In this

1 context, the reference to independent creation as a “defense” does not mean that the defendant  
2 bears the burden of persuasion on the element of copying in fact. Rather, once the plaintiff has met  
3 its initial burden of proof by producing sufficient evidence to permit a finder of fact to conclude  
4 that the defendant copied from the plaintiff’s copyrighted work, the burden of production shifts to  
5 the defendant to proffer an alternative explanation for the circumstances of the work’s creation  
6 and potentially why there are similarities between the two works. Making that showing often  
7 requires the defendant to introduce additional evidence. Whether the defendant has provided  
8 sufficient evidence to rebut the evidence of copying offered by the plaintiff is ultimately  
9 determined by the burden of persuasion that rests with the plaintiff: on the basis of all of the  
10 evidence presented, the factfinder must determine whether it is more likely than not that the  
11 defendant copied *from* the plaintiff’s copyrighted work.

12 **Illustrations:**

13       8. Photographer A captures an image of an iceberg as a large chunk of ice is falling  
14       from the iceberg into the sea. Photographer B publishes on a website an image that looks  
15       strikingly similar to Photographer A’s photograph. In a suit for infringement, the evidence  
16       reveals that Photographer B was on board the same cruise ship as Photographer A, and  
17       captured the image that was published on the website at the same time that Photographer  
18       A captured her image. Although Photographer B’s photograph resembles Photographer A’s  
19       photograph extremely closely, the evidence of Photographer B’s independent creation  
20       means that Photographer A has failed to carry Photographer A’s burden of proving copying  
21       in fact.

22       9. Songwriter A creates and publishes the song “I Long for Clarity,” which enjoys  
23       wide distribution and significant commercial success. Ten years later, Songwriter B creates  
24       and publishes the song “Give Me Days of Ease” which Songwriter A asserts is an  
25       infringement of Songwriter A’s copyright in the song “I Long for Clarity.” Songwriter A  
26       presents expert testimony that the two songs share similarities. Songwriter B presents  
27       expert testimony that the similarities that the two songs share are due to both songs being  
28       similar to a much older and very popular song. If the evidence is in equipoise—it is just as  
29       likely that Songwriter B copied from Songwriter A as it is that Songwriter B copied from  
30       the older song, then Songwriter A has failed to carry Songwriter A’s burden to demonstrate  
31       by a preponderance of the evidence that Songwriter B has copied in fact.

1           10. Songwriter C creates and publishes the song “Making Rules,” which enjoys  
2 wide distribution and significant commercial success. Ten years later, Songwriter D creates  
3 and publishes the song “Taking Names,” which Songwriter C asserts is an infringement of  
4 Songwriter C’s copyright in the song “Making Rules.” Songwriter C presents expert  
5 testimony that the two songs share significant similarities, that those similarities are not  
6 common in the genre, and that Songwriter D once named the album on which “Making  
7 Rules” appears as a personal favorite. The only evidence Songwriter D offers is Songwriter  
8 D’s own testimony that Songwriter D did not copy from “Making Rules.” Under these  
9 circumstances, a reasonable jury could find that Songwriter D’s evidence of independent  
10 creation is insufficient, and that Songwriter C has presented sufficient evidence to support  
11 a finding that it is more likely than not that Songwriter D copied from the song “Making  
12 Rules.”

13           *k. Use of expert testimony in proving or disproving copying in fact.* Courts have permitted  
14 the use of expert testimony on the issue of copying in fact. In an important early decision, the  
15 Second Circuit established that “the testimony of experts may be received to aid the trier of the  
16 facts” on the issue of whether the “defendant copied from plaintiff’s copyrighted work.” Arnstein  
17 v. Porter, 154 F.2d 464, 468 (2d Cir. 1946). See also VMG Salsoul, LLC v. Ciccone, 824 F.3d  
18 871, 877 (9th Cir. 2016) (noting the evidence of expert reports submitted to support copying in  
19 fact). Expert testimony can help to reveal “similarities that a lay person might not ordinarily  
20 perceive.” Kay Berry, Inc. v. Taylor Gifts, Inc., 421 F.3d 199, 208 (3d Cir. 2005). Expert testimony  
21 can also be used in proving striking similarity that, as discussed in Comment *i*, can prove copying  
22 in fact. See Repp v. Webber, 132 F.3d 882, 890-891 (2d Cir. 1997).

23           *l. Copying in fact does not require proof of copier’s mental state.* A defendant whose  
24 actions constitute copyright infringement is liable for that infringement regardless of the mental  
25 state with which the defendant acted. In the context of the element of copying in fact, this means  
26 that the plaintiff does not need to prove the defendant intended to copy from the plaintiff’s  
27 copyrighted work, or that the defendant copied knowingly, recklessly, or negligently. This has led  
28 some courts to hold that copying in fact can be “subconscious” or “unconscious.” In all cases, the  
29 plaintiff must demonstrate sufficient facts to prove the element of copying in fact. If the plaintiff  
30 has shown sufficient evidence of access together with sufficient evidence of probative similarity,  
31 and there is no reasonable explanation for the similarities that does not involve copying from the

1 plaintiff's works, the plaintiff has carried its burden on this element, regardless of the defendant's  
 2 mental state at the time the copying occurred. Caution is warranted, however, when the plaintiff's  
 3 proof of copying in fact relies on a theory of subconscious or unconscious copying, particularly  
 4 when the evidence of similarities between the two works, while potentially sufficient, is slim, and  
 5 the evidence of access, while potentially sufficient, is marginal. The leading cases employing the  
 6 doctrine of subconscious copying do so in contexts in which access to the copyrighted work was  
 7 acknowledged and the similarities between the two works at issue were described by the courts as  
 8 striking, exactly alike, or identical. *ABKCO Music, Inc. v. Harrisongs Music, Ltd.*, 722 F.2d 988,  
 9 998 (2d Cir. 1983) (describing the similarities as "striking"); *Fred Fisher, Inc. v. Dillingham*, 298  
 10 F. 145, 147 (S.D.N.Y. 1924) (describing "the figure in each piece" as "exactly alike" and the  
 11 similarity as amounting to "identity").

### REPORTERS' NOTES

12 *a. Generally.* Comment *a* makes the point that the plaintiff does not need to identify who  
 13 the copier is in instances in which the source of the copies might be an unknown party—for  
 14 example, when the defendant is alleged to have directly infringed by distributing to the public  
 15 copies that were made by an unknown third party. If the text is identical to the copyrighted work  
 16 (or essentially so), then the plaintiff could likely meet its burden to demonstrate copying in fact  
 17 via striking similarity, see Comment *i*, without having to identify a person or company that had  
 18 access to the plaintiff's copyrighted work.

19 *d. Circumstantial proof of copying in fact: access and probative similarity.* Professor Alan  
 20 Latman suggested using the term "probative similarity" to describe the similarity required  
 21 (together with access) for circumstantial proof of the fact the defendant copied. Alan Latman,  
 22 "*Probative Similarity*" as Proof of Copying: Toward Dispelling Some Myths in Copyright  
 23 Infringement, 90 COLUM. L. REV. 1187, 1190 (1990). Examples of courts using the term "probative  
 24 similarity" include *Guzman v. Hacienda Recs. & Recording Studio, Inc.*, 808 F.3d 1031, 1037 (5th  
 25 Cir. 2015); *Zalewski v. Cicero Builder Dev., Inc.*, 754 F.3d 95, 101 (2d Cir. 2014); *Peter Letterese*  
 26 & Assocs., Inc. v. World Inst. of Scientology Enters., Int'l, 533 F.3d 1287, 1301 (11th Cir. 2008).  
 27 See also *Skidmore v. Led Zeppelin*, 952 F.3d 1051, 1064 (9th Cir. 2020) ("In the absence of direct  
 28 evidence of copying, which is the case here, the plaintiff 'can attempt to prove it circumstantially  
 29 by showing that the defendant had access to the plaintiff's work and that the two works share  
 30 similarities probative of copying.'") (quoting *Rentmeester v. Nike, Inc.*, 883 F.3d 1111, 1117 (9th  
 31 Cir. 2018) (emphasis added)).

32 *e. Proving access: generally.* For courts articulating the need for a reasonable likelihood  
 33 of access, see *Design Basics, LLC v. Lexington Homes, Inc.*, 858 F.3d 1093, 1106-1108 (7th Cir.  
 34 2017); *Guzman v. Hacienda Recs. & Recording Studio, Inc.*, 808 F.3d 1031, 1037 & n.4 (5th Cir.  
 35 2015); *Three Boys Music Corp. v. Bolton*, 212 F.3d 477, 482 (9th Cir. 2000); *Martinez v. McGraw*,

1 581 F. App'x 512, 514 (6th Cir. 2014) (referencing a “reasonable opportunity”); Ale House Mgmt.,  
 2 Inc. v. Raleigh Ale House, Inc., 205 F.3d 137, 144 (4th Cir. 2000); Towler v. Sayles, 76 F.3d 579,  
 3 582 (4th Cir. 1996) (holding that “it must be reasonably possible that the paths of the infringer and  
 4 the infringed work crossed”); Autoskill Inc. v. Nat'l Educ. Support Sys., Inc., 994 F.2d 1476, 1490  
 5 (10th Cir. 1993). More than speculation, conjecture, or a bare possibility is needed. Murray Hill  
 6 Publ'ns, Inc. v. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp., 361 F.3d 312, 316 (6th Cir. 2004); Jason v.  
 7 Fonda, 698 F.2d 966, 967 (9th Cir. 1983) (proof of more than a “bare possibility” of access is  
 8 needed); Jones v. Blige, 558 F.3d 485, 491 (6th Cir. 2009) (“[a] mere assertion of access,  
 9 unsupported by probative evidence is inadequate”). See also 11TH CIR. CIV. JURY INSTR. § 9.18  
 10 (2018) (stating that a “slight possibility” isn't enough).

11 In at least one opinion, the Second Circuit has set the required evidence at a seemingly  
 12 higher standard, requiring that “[i]n order to support a claim of access, a plaintiff must offer  
 13 significant, affirmative and probative evidence.” Jorgensen v. Epic/Sony Recs., 351 F.3d 46, 51,  
 14 55 (2d Cir. 2003) (quoting Scott v. Paramount Pictures Corp., 449 F. Supp. 518, 520 (D.D.C.  
 15 1978), aff'd, 607 F.2d 494 (D.C. Cir. 1979) (table)). Although in that opinion, the court also states  
 16 that “Access means that an alleged infringer had a ‘reasonable possibility’—not simply a ‘bare  
 17 possibility’—of hearing the prior work; access cannot be based on mere ‘speculation or  
 18 conjecture.’” Id (quoting Gaste v. Kaiserman, 863 F.2d 1061, 1066 (2d Cir. 1988)).

19 *Three Boys Music Corp.* is the case often cited for holding that a factfinder can infer the  
 20 defendant likely had a reasonable opportunity to observe the subject work when the work was  
 21 widely disseminated. *Three Boys Music Corp.*, 212 F.3d at 482 (citing for support 4 MELVILLE B.  
 22 NIMMER & DAVID NIMMER, NIMMER ON COPYRIGHT § 13.02[A], at 13–20–13–21; 2 PAUL  
 23 GOLDSTEIN, COPYRIGHT: PRINCIPLES, LAW, AND PRACTICE § 8.3.1.1., at 90-91 (1989)). Cases in  
 24 which courts have found the evidence presented did not amount to widespread distribution include  
 25 Art Attacks Ink, LLC v. MGA Ent. Inc., 581 F.3d 1138, 1144 (9th Cir. 2009) (sale of 2,000 T-  
 26 shirts per year not sufficient to prove a reasonable possibility of access through widespread  
 27 distribution); Rice v. Fox Broad. Co., 330 F.3d 1170, 1178 (9th Cir. 2003) (video that sold 19,000  
 28 copies over a 13-year period could not be considered widely disseminated); Jason v. Fonda, 526  
 29 F. Supp. 774, 776 (C.D. Cal. 1981) (book sales of no more than 2000 copies nationwide and no  
 30 more than 700 copies in Southern California did not create more than a bare possibility of access),  
 31 aff'd, Jason v. Fonda, 698 F.2d 966 (9th Cir. 1982).

32 The fact that a copyrighted work is available online has never been enough to establish  
 33 access absent other supporting evidence. See Design Basics, LLC v. Lexington Homes, Inc., 858  
 34 F.3d 1093, 1106-1107 (7th Cir. 2017) (holding the presence of architectural plans on the internet  
 35 was not itself enough to establish access); Bldg. Graphics, Inc. v. Lennar Corp., 708 F.3d 573, 580  
 36 (4th Cir. 2013) (same); Art Attacks Ink, Ltd. Liab. Co. v. MGA Enter. Inc., 581 F.3d 1138, 1145  
 37 (9th Cir. 2009) (holding presence of several designs on a website was not enough to establish  
 38 general publication because the website was not identified by search engines, took a long time to  
 39 load, and the defendant would have had to scroll down on the website to see the designs); Loomis  
 40 v. Cornish, 2013 WL 6044345, at \*12 (C.D. Cal. Nov. 13, 2013) (“The availability of a copyrighted

1 work on the Internet, in and of itself, is insufficient to show access through widespread  
 2 dissemination.”), aff’d, 836 F.3d 991 (9th Cir. 2016). The Ninth Circuit has expressly noted that  
 3 the element of access as an important part of the circumstantial evidence supporting a showing of  
 4 copying in fact has become “[a]s a practical matter . . . increasingly diluted in our digitally  
 5 interconnected world. Access is often proved by the wide dissemination of the copyrighted work.  
 6 Given the ubiquity of ways to access media online, from YouTube to subscription services like  
 7 Netflix and Spotify, access may be established by a trivial showing that the work is available on  
 8 demand.” *Skidmore*, 952 F.3d at 1068 (citation omitted).

9 In *Armour v. Knowles*, 512 F.3d 147, 153-154 (5th Cir. 2007), the court pointed to the  
 10 timing of the alleged access to the copyrighted work as predating the creation of the allegedly  
 11 infringing use to determine a lack of evidence of access.

12 Plaintiffs sometimes seek to prove access by demonstrating an uncharacteristically quick  
 13 creation of the infringing work. Courts have rejected this evidence, standing alone, as insufficient  
 14 proof of access. See, e.g., *Herzog v. Castle Rock Ent.*, 193 F.3d 1241, 1256 (11th Cir. 1999)  
 15 (rejecting plaintiff’s argument of access based on speed of creation by defendant); *JB Oxford &*  
 16 *Co. v. First Tenn. Bank Nat’l Ass’n*, 427 F. Supp. 2d 784, 796 (M.D. Tenn. 2006); *Corwin v. Walt*  
 17 *Disney World Co.*, 475 F.3d 1239, 1254 (11th Cir. 2007) (unusual speed not enough to overcome  
 18 defendant’s showing of independent creation). However, rapid development, together with other  
 19 evidence showing a likelihood of access, can be sufficient to support a finding of access. See, e.g.,  
 20 *Price v. Fox Ent. Grp., Inc.*, 2007 WL 241389, at \*8 (S.D.N.Y. Jan. 27, 2007) (unusual speed’s  
 21 probative value enhanced because a large number of both works’ characters have the same names  
 22 and one character in each work, both of whom are coaches, are in wheelchairs). See also *Tableau*  
 23 *Software, Inc. v. Any Aspect KFT*, 2008 WL 4287557, at \*2 (N.D. Cal. June 9, 2008) (inference  
 24 of copying found when defendant’s software was developed with unusual speed and also contained  
 25 identical code, including identical bugs).

26 *f. Proving access: access through intermediaries.* The Second, Fourth, and Ninth Circuits  
 27 have adopted the “corporate receipt” doctrine but also held “bare corporate receipt” is insufficient  
 28 to prove access. See *Jorgensen v. Epic/Sony Recs.*, 351 F.3d 46, 53 (2d Cir. 2003); *Bouchat v.*  
 29 *Balt. Ravens, Inc.*, 241 F.3d 350, 354 (4th Cir. 2000); *Towler v. Sayles*, 76 F.3d 579, 582-583 (4th  
 30 Cir. 1996) (“it must be reasonably possible that the paths of the infringer and the infringed work  
 31 crossed.”); *Loomis v. Cornish*, 836 F.3d 991, 995-996 (9th Cir. 2016) (rejecting a triable inference  
 32 of access when plaintiff only proved bare corporate receipt). The Eighth Circuit adopted the  
 33 “corporate receipt” doctrine, although it is unclear whether “bare corporate receipt” has been  
 34 rejected. *Moore v. Columbia Pictures Indus.*, 972 F.2d 939, 942 (8th Cir. 1992). The Third and  
 35 Fifth Circuits have yet to determine whether to adopt the doctrine although it has been proposed  
 36 in those Circuits. See *Cottrill v. Spears*, 87 Fed. Appx. 803, 806 n.6 (3d Cir. 2004); *McGaughey*  
 37 *v. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp.*, 12 F.3d 62, 65 (5th Cir. 1994). The Sixth Circuit has not  
 38 taken a published stance on the “corporate receipt” doctrine but adopted a “refusal to infer access  
 39 from bare corporate receipt.” *Jones v. Blige*, 558 F.3d 485, 492-493 (6th Cir. 2009) (adopting  
 40 *Glanzmann v. King*, 887 F.3d 265 (6th Cir. 1989) (unpublished)). The Seventh Circuit Court of

Appeals does not appear to have expressly discussed the corporate receipt doctrine but two Seventh Circuit district-court cases have adopted it (although neither case has rejected nor adopted bare corporate receipt). See FASA Corp. v. Playmates Toys, 912 F. Supp. 1124, 1168 (N.D. Ill. 1996); Hall v. Daniels, 2018 WL 3770068, at \*2 n.5 (N.D. Ill. Aug. 9, 2018). The First, Tenth, Eleventh, and D.C. Circuits appear to have no cases expressly discussing the doctrine of corporate receipt.

Intermediaries need not be employees of the same corporation. See, e.g., Gaste v. Kaiserman, 863 F.2d 1061, 1067 (2d Cir. 1988) (“Access through third parties connected to both a plaintiff and a defendant may be sufficient to prove a defendant's access to a plaintiff's work.”).

*g. Proving probative similarity.* The leading case developing the doctrine allowing consideration of uncopyrightable elements of an allegedly infringed work came from the Second Circuit in Laureyssens v. Idea Group, Inc., 964 F.3d 131, 139-140 (2d Cir. 1992). Several circuits have also clearly stated that unprotectable elements may be considered when determining whether the plaintiff has demonstrated copying in fact. See Tanksley v. Daniels, 902 F.3d 165, 173 (3d Cir. 2018); Dam Things from Den. v. Russ Berrie & Co., 290 F.3d 548, 562 (3d Cir. 2002); Positive Black Talk, Inc. v. Cash Money Recs., Inc., 394 F.3d 357, 370 n.9 (5th Cir. 2004) (adopting language from O.P. Sols., Inc. v. Intell. Prop. Network, Ltd., 1999 WL 47191, at \*3 (S.D.N.Y. Feb. 2, 1999)); Skidmore v. Led Zeppelin, 952 F.3d 1051, 1064 (9th Cir. 2020) (quoting Rentmeester v. Nike, Inc., 883 F.3d 1111, 1117 (9th Cir. 2018) (“To prove copying, the similarities between the two works need not be extensive, and they need not involve protected elements of the plaintiff's work.”)).

In dicta, the Tenth Circuit has also acknowledged that unprotectable elements of a plaintiff's work may be examined in the course of determining copying in fact. Gates Rubber Co. v. Bando Chem. Indus., 9 F.3d 823, 832 n.7 (10th Cir. 1993) (explaining that depriving the court the opportunity to consider unprotected elements also deprives the court of “probative, and potentially essential, information on the factual issue of copying.”).

The Eleventh Circuit appears to have never expressly discussed the issue of whether unprotected elements of copyright may be considered in similarity analysis. However, the Eleventh Circuit did recognize the distinction between probative and substantial similarity and only discussed the protectability of the similar elements in discussion of substantial similarity. See Bateman v. Mnemonics, Inc., 79 F.3d 1532, 1541 (11th Cir. 1996); MiTek Holdings, Inc. v. Arce Eng'g Co., 89 F.3d 1548, 1554 (11th Cir. 1996).

The First Circuit has rejected the idea that uncopyrightable elements may be considered when analyzing the facts for probative similarity. Johnson v. Gordon, 409 F.3d 12, 18-19 (1st Cir. 2005); see also Coquico, Inc. v. Rodriguez-Miranda, 562 F.3d 62, 67 (1st Cir. 2009) (“This originality requirement cuts across both the actual copying and substantial similarity branches of the second-step analysis”).

At times, the Second Circuit has employed an approach that collapses the similarity required as part of the circumstantial evidence of copying in fact and the substantial similarity required to show improper appropriation, which only considers protected expression from a plaintiff's copyrighted work (see § 7.04 of this Restatement). “Since a showing of substantial

1 similarity will necessarily include the lesser showing of probative similarity, there seems little  
 2 harm in combining the copying and infringement inquiries, as we have done in the past.” Twin  
 3 Peaks Prods. v. Publ’ns Int’l, Ltd., 996 F.3d 1366, 1372 n.1 (2d Cir. 1993). Compare Zalewski v.  
 4 Cicero Builder Dev. Inc., 754 F.3d 95, 101 (2d Cir. 2014) (“If two works are ‘substantially similar,’  
 5 *any* copying was wrongful. . . . By contrast, similarity that relates to unprotected elements is  
 6 probative only of copying—not wrongful copying . . .”) (emphasis added) with Fisher-Price, Inc.  
 7 v. Well-Made Toy Mfg. Corp., 25 F.3d 119 (2d Cir. 1994) (“In the context of deciding whether  
 8 the defendant copied at all (not just illegally copied), ‘similarity’ relates to the entire work, not just  
 9 the protectible elements.”).

10 The Fourth, Eighth, and D.C. Circuits have no cases on the issue of whether unprotected  
 11 elements may be used to prove factual copying. The lack of cases is, however, unsurprising because  
 12 none of the three Circuits have adopted a distinction between factual copying and improper  
 13 appropriation. See § 7.01, Comment *a*, of this Restatement and the Reporters’ Notes thereto.

14 *h. The inverse ratio rule.* The Second, Fifth, Seventh, Ninth, and Eleventh Circuits have  
 15 either declined to apply the inverse ratio rule after discussing it or have expressly rejected the rule.  
 16 Arc Music Corp. v. Lee, 296 F.2d 186, 187 (2d Cir. 1961); Guzman v. Hacienda Recs. &  
 17 Recording Studio, Inc., 808 F.3d 1031, 1040 (5th Cir. 2015); Peters v. West, 692 F.3d 629, 634-  
 18 635 (7th Cir. 2012) (discussing the circuits, and noting that the Seventh Circuit has never endorsed  
 19 the idea that “a ‘high degree of access’ justifies a ‘lower standard of proof’ for similarity”);  
 20 Skidmore v. Led Zeppelin, 952 F.3d 1051, 1066 (9th Cir. 2020); Beal v. Paramount Pictures Corp.,  
 21 20 F.3d 454, 460 (11th Cir. 1994).

22 While the Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit has not discussed the application of the  
 23 rule, the Eastern District of Virginia has expressly rejected it. Eaton v. Nat’l Broad. Co., 972 F.  
 24 Supp. 1019, 1026 n.12 (E.D. Va. 1997).

25 Only the Sixth Circuit may still be applying the inverse ratio rule. See Stromback v. New  
 26 Line Cinema, 384 F.3d 283, 293 (6th Cir. 2004). But the continued viability of the rule is in doubt  
 27 even in the Sixth Circuit. See, Enchant Christmas Light Maze & Mkt., 958 F.3d 532 n.1 (6th Cir.  
 28 2020) (stating “questions remain whether the inverse-ratio rule applies (or should apply) in our  
 29 circuit. But we do not answer them today . . .”).

30 Despite its rejection of the inverse ratio rule in 1961, the Second Circuit has more recently  
 31 acknowledged “an inverse relationship between access and probative similarity such that ‘the  
 32 stronger the proof of similarity, the less the proof of access is required.’” Jorgensen v. Epic/Sony  
 33 Recs., 351 F.3d 46, 56 (2d Cir. 2003) (citing NIMMER ON COPYRIGHT § 13.03[D], at 13-77 (2002)).  
 34 Notably, the court made that statement in the context of assessing the plaintiff’s claim of striking  
 35 similarity. See also Glover v. Austin, 289 Fed. App’x 430, 432 (2d Cir. 2008) (quoting *Jorgensen*  
 36 and finding plaintiff’s strong evidence of probative similarity coupled with some “considerably  
 37 weaker” evidence of access still sufficient to deny defendant’s summary-judgment motion); A  
 38 Slice of Pie Prods., LLC v. Wayans Bros. Ent., 487 F. Supp. 2d 41, 47 n.2 (D. Conn. 2007)  
 39 (discussing inverse relationship in context of whether similarities are striking). As discussed in  
 40 Comment *i*, in some contexts, it is possible for striking similarity to support an inference of copying

1 in fact with little, or perhaps no, evidence of access. Within the Second Circuit, many lower courts  
 2 cite to *Jorgensen*'s acknowledgement of the inverse relationship in contexts involving discussions  
 3 of striking similarity. See, e.g., *Gal v. Viacom Int'l, Inc.*, 518 F. Supp. 2d 526, 537 (S.D.N.Y.  
 4 2007) ("where the plaintiff has not demonstrated access, he or she must show that the works are  
 5 not just 'substantially similar' but 'strikingly similar.'"); *Krisko v. Marvel Ent., LLC*, 473 F. Supp.  
 6 3d 288, 302 (S.D.N.Y. 2020).

7 Endorsement of a rule that permits striking similarity to allow for less evidence of access is  
 8 not an embrace of the other side of the inverse ratio rule, namely, that strong evidence of access can  
 9 eliminate the need to show probative similarity. See also *Positive Black Talk, Inc. v. Cash Money*  
 10 *Recs.*, 394 F.3d 357, 371-372 n.10 (5th Cir. 2004) (noting that sufficiently striking similarity alone  
 11 may establish copying in fact, but a that "does not mean that the reverse is true—i.e., that a plaintiff  
 12 can establish factual copying by overwhelming proof of access without some showing of probative  
 13 similarity."); *GOLDSTEIN ON COPYRIGHT* § 9.2.1.1 (2022) (asserting the soundness of the inverse  
 14 ratio rule, and noting "It is unnecessary to accept the *reductio ad absurdum*—that proof of actual  
 15 access will make a showing of similarity entirely unnecessary—to accept the evidential expedient  
 16 that a strong showing of access can compensate for a weaker showing of similarities, so long as the  
 17 similarities are sufficiently strong to support an inference of copying.").

18 *i. Circumstantial proof of copying in fact: striking similarity.* "In order to show that two  
 19 songs are strikingly similar, a plaintiff must demonstrate that the alleged 'similarities are of a kind  
 20 that can only be explained by copying, rather than by coincidence, independent creation, or prior  
 21 common source.'" *Guzman v. Hacienda Recs. & Recording Studio, Inc.*, 808 F.3d 1031, 1039 (5th  
 22 Cir. 2015) (quoting *Selle v. Gibb*, 741 F.2d 896, 904 (7th Cir. 1984)).

23 The Tenth Circuit has described the similarities required for two works to be "strikingly  
 24 similar" in somewhat circular fashion: "Striking similarity exists when the proof of similarity in  
 25 appearance is so striking that the possibilities of independent creation, coincidence and prior  
 26 common source are, as a practical matter, precluded." *La Resolana Architects, PA v. Reno, Inc.*,  
 27 555 F.3d 1171, 1179 (10th Cir. 2009) (internal citations and quotations omitted). See also *Bouchat*  
 28 *v. Balt. Ravens, Inc.*, 241 F.3d 350, 355-356 (4th Cir. 2000).

29 The Seventh Circuit case law contains conflicting statements concerning the possibility of  
 30 striking similarity alone being sufficient to shift the burden to the defendant. In *Selle*, the court  
 31 stated that:

32 [A]lthough it has frequently been written that striking similarity *alone* can establish  
 33 access, the decided cases suggest that this circumstance would be most unusual.

34 The plaintiff must always present sufficient evidence to support a reasonable  
 35 possibility of access because the jury cannot draw an inference of access based  
 36 upon speculation and conjecture alone.

37 *Selle*, 741 F.2d at 901 (emphasis in original). In that same opinion the court later clearly states:  
 38 "Thus, although proof of striking similarity may permit an inference of access, the plaintiff must  
 39 still meet some minimum threshold of proof which demonstrates that the inference of access is  
 40 reasonable." *Id.* at 902.

1       In a later opinion, the Seventh Circuit discussed the language in *Selle*, and noted that what  
 2 concerned the court there was that “similarity may be striking without being suspicious,” *Ty Inc.*  
 3 v. *GMA Accessories, Inc.*, 132 F.3d 1167, 1170 (7th Cir. 1997):

4       What troubled us in *Selle* . . . is that two works may be strikingly similar—may in  
 5 fact be identical—not because one is copied from the other but because both are  
 6 copies of the same thing in the public domain. In such a case—imagine two people  
 7 photographing Niagara Falls from the same place at the same time of the day and  
 8 year and in identical weather—there is no inference of access to anything but the  
 9 public domain, and, equally, no inference of copying from a copyrighted work.

10      Id. The court then stated that “[a]ccess (and copying) may be inferred when two works are so  
 11 similar to each other and not to anything in the public domain that it is likely that the creator of the  
 12 second work copied the first, but the inference can be rebutted by disproving access or otherwise  
 13 showing independent creation.” Id. at 1171. Thus, the court in *Ty* contemplates the burden of  
 14 production shifting based on striking similarity alone.

15      Viewed one way, the rule that striking similarity alone, without any evidence of access,  
 16 can be sufficient to shift the burden of production to the defendant, is an extreme example of the  
 17 inverse ratio, i.e., the evidence of similarity is so overwhelming that no evidence of access is  
 18 necessary. Even some courts that have rejected a strict inverse ratio rule as a general matter have  
 19 retained this aspect of it. Compare *Arc Music Corp. v. Lee*, 296 F.2d 186, 187 (2d Cir. 1961)  
 20 (rejecting the inverse ratio rule), with *Jorgensen v. Epic/Sony Recs.*, 351 F.3d 46, 56 (2d Cir. 2003)  
 21 (noting one side of the “inverse relationship” between probative similarity and access: “the  
 22 stronger the proof of similarity, the less the proof of access is required”).

23      In situations in which errors shared by a plaintiff’s and a defendant’s work are advanced as  
 24 evidence of striking similarity, those errors must be sufficiently distinctive. See *Price v. Fox Ent.*  
 25 *Grp., Inc.*, 499 F. Supp. 2d 382, 386 (S.D.N.Y. 2007) (quoting *Mowry v. Viacom Int’l Inc.*, 2005  
 26 WL 1793773, at \*10 (S.D.N.Y. July 29, 2005) (quoting NIMMER ON COPYRIGHT § 13.02[B])).

27      *j. Independent creation and the plaintiff’s burden to demonstrate copying in fact.* Courts  
 28 have articulated the burden-shifting approach to the issue of independent creation in a variety of  
 29 ways. For example, in *Calhoun v. Lillenas Publ’g*, 298 F.3d 1228, 1233 (11th Cir. 2002), the court  
 30 refers to the affirmative defense of independent creation as “negating the *prima facie* case” and then  
 31 also states that once the defendant “offers evidence of independent creation,” the plaintiff “has the  
 32 burden of proving that the defendant] in fact copied . . . .” Id. See also *Miller v. Universal City*  
 33 *Studios, Inc.*, 650 F.2d 1365, 1375 (5th Cir. 1981) (“A defendant can rebut [a showing of copying]  
 34 by offering evidence that his work was independently created without reference to the prior work.”).

35      Some courts use the language of presumption to describe the burden shifting that is  
 36 appropriate:

37      When the plaintiff lacks direct evidence of copying, he can attempt to prove it  
 38 circumstantially by showing that the defendant had access to the plaintiff’s work  
 39 and that the two works share similarities probative of copying. Such proof creates

1           a presumption of copying, which the defendant can then attempt to rebut by proving  
 2           independent creation.

3         *Rentmeester*, 833 F.3d at 1117 (internal citations omitted). Viewed as a presumption, the burden of  
 4         production has shifted to the defendant, but the ultimate burden of persuasion on this element of the  
 5         *prima facie* case remains on the plaintiff. Even if a “presumption” applies, it may be the case that  
 6         all that the plaintiff has demonstrated is the possibility of copying; a reasonable jury could still rule  
 7         against the plaintiff. While the defendant need not introduce additional evidence, the defendant  
 8         may, nonetheless, introduce evidence supporting a different rationale for why the works are similar.

9         Even when labeling independent creation as a complete defense or an affirmative defense,  
 10       courts are also clear that the burden to prove copying remains on the plaintiff. See, e.g., *Skidmore*  
 11       v. *Led Zeppelin*, 952 F.3d 1051, 1064 (9th Cir. 2020) (“Because independent creation is a complete  
 12       defense to copyright infringement, a *plaintiff must prove* that a defendant copied the work.”)  
 13       (emphasis added). See also *Calhoun v. Lillenas Publ’g*, 298 F.3d 1228, 1233 (11th Cir. 2002).

14         *k. Use of expert testimony in proving or disproving copying in fact.* Other courts allowing  
 15       expert testimony on the issue of copying in fact include *Laureyssens v. Idea Grp., Inc.*, 964 F.2d  
 16       131, 140 (2d Cir. 1992); *Dam Things from Den., v. Russ Berrie & Co., Inc.*, 290 F.3d 548, 562  
 17       (3d Cir. 2002).

18         *l. Copying in fact does not require proof of copier’s mental state.* In an early case, the U.S.  
 19       Supreme Court held that “[i]ntention to infringe is not essential under the [Copyright] Act,” *Buck*  
 20       v. *Jewel-LaSalle Realty Co.*, 283 U.S. 191, 198 (1931).

21         The leading case in which a court held that there could be copyright infringement “based on  
 22       a theory of subconscious copying” is *Abkco Music, Inc. v. Harrisongs Music, Ltd.*, 722 F.2d 988,  
 23       997-999 (2d Cir. 1983). See *Selle v. Gibb*, 741 F.2d 896, 902 (7th Cir. 1984) (labeling *Harrisongs*  
 24       as involving a “theory of subconscious copying”). In *Harrisongs*, the Second Circuit affirmed a  
 25       finding of copyright infringement in the context of “subconscious infringement.” In *Selle*, the  
 26       Seventh Circuit affirmed the grant of defendants’ motion for judgment notwithstanding the verdict  
 27       when plaintiff attempted to rely on subconscious infringement but “failed both to establish a basis  
 28       from which the jury could reasonably infer that the [defendant] had access to his song and to meet  
 29       his burden of proving ‘striking similarity’ between the two compositions.” *Selle*, 741 F.2d at 902.

30         Judge Hand’s opinion in *Fred Fisher, Inc. v. Dillingham*, 298 F. 145 (S.D.N.Y. 1924), cited  
 31       in Comment *l*, involved a widely popular musical work, a portion of which had allegedly been  
 32       copied in the defendant’s composition. The court noted the strength of the plaintiff’s evidence of  
 33       copying: “Not only is the figure in each piece exactly alike, but it is used in the same way; that is,  
 34       as an ‘ostinato’ accompaniment. Further, the defendants have been able to discover in earlier  
 35       popular music neither this figure, nor even any ‘ostinato’ accompaniment whatever.” *Id.* at 147.  
 36       Those cases indicate that, for cases relying on a theory of subconscious copying, the evidence of  
 37       both access and similarity may need to be more substantial than what otherwise would be sufficient  
 38       under a different theory of copying.

1    **§ 7.04. Improper Appropriation**

2        As stated in § 7.01(a), proving infringement of any of a copyright owner's exclusive  
3 rights requires a plaintiff to prove ownership of a valid copyright and copying of protected  
4 expression from the copyrighted work. Proving copying of protected expression requires the  
5 plaintiff to prove both copying in fact, as discussed in § 7.03, and that the copying amounted  
6 to improper appropriation. Proving improper appropriation requires the plaintiff to prove  
7 that sufficient protected expression was copied from the copyrighted work such that there is  
8 a substantial similarity between the alleged infringing use and the copyrighted work.

9    **Source Note:**

10        17 U.S.C. § 501; Feist Publ'ns, Inc. v. Rural Tel. Serv. Co., 499 U.S. 340 (1991).

11    **Comment:**

12        *a. Generally.* The Copyright Act does not contain a statement of the elements of a prima  
13 facie case of infringement, and the required proof may vary based on which of the copyright  
14 owner's exclusive rights (i.e., the rights set out in 17 U.S.C. § 106) the copyright owner asserts the  
15 defendant has infringed. Courts have created a framework for the infringement analysis, see § 7.01,  
16 and that analysis requires a copyright owner to prove not only that there was copying *from* the  
17 copyrighted work (that is, copying in fact, which is discussed in § 7.03 of this Restatement) but  
18 also that the copying constituted improper appropriation, in that the copier appropriated a sufficient  
19 amount of protected expression from the copyrighted work. This is often referred to by courts as  
20 requiring a showing of improper appropriation, although other labels are sometimes used, such as  
21 "actionable copying," "unlawful copying," and sometimes simply "substantial similarity." The use  
22 of "substantial similarity" as a label for this element of the prima facie case is problematic as it  
23 can confuse the two instances in which the similarities between the copyrighted work and the  
24 defendant's allegedly infringing use are relevant: first, in the context of proving copying in fact  
25 through circumstantial evidence of access and similarity, see § 7.02 of this Restatement, and  
26 second, in the context of proving whether enough of the protected expression from the plaintiff's  
27 copyrighted work has been copied to constitute infringement. This Restatement uses the label  
28 "improper appropriation" to signal the purpose behind the inquiry into substantial similarity in this  
29 second context.

1       The black letter of this Section uses the phrase “infringing use” rather than “infringing  
2 work” or “infringing copy” because while some infringement claims are based on assertions that  
3 defendants have reproduced or distributed copies or phonorecords of the copyrighted work, other  
4 claims of infringement are based on claims that defendants have prepared derivative works,  
5 publicly performed or displayed plaintiffs’ copyrighted works, or engaged in copying in a context  
6 that does not otherwise create a new work. As made clear in the articulation of the *prima facie* case  
7 of infringement, to be an “infringing use,” the use that the defendant has engaged in must be  
8 encompassed within one of the exclusive rights granted to a copyright owner. See § 7.01(a)(1) of  
9 this Restatement.

10       As with the other elements of a *prima facie* case of infringement, the requirement to  
11 demonstrate improper appropriation through a showing of substantial similarity between the  
12 defendant’s allegedly infringing use and the plaintiff’s copyrighted work is not contained in the  
13 text of the Copyright Act. Instead, courts have developed the improper appropriation element and  
14 its varying articulations. Under any of the various articulations of this element that the federal  
15 courts have applied, a plaintiff need not show that the defendant created an exact duplicate of the  
16 copyrighted work, although such a showing likely satisfies the improper appropriation element of  
17 the *prima facie* case. See Comment *b*. Instead, the plaintiff need only show that enough protected  
18 expression contained in the copyrighted work was copied to render the defendant’s use  
19 “substantially similar.” As courts and commentators have recognized, “[t]he determination of the  
20 extent of similarity which will constitute a *substantial* and hence infringing similarity presents one  
21 of the most difficult questions in copyright law, and one which is the least susceptible of helpful  
22 generalizations.” *Burroughs v. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc.*, 683 F.2d 610, 623 (2d Cir. 1982)  
23 (quoting Nimmer on Copyright § 13.03(A)) (emphasis in original). Courts have employed a variety  
24 of different articulations for the inquiry into the required substantial similarity that the improper  
25 appropriation element involves. This Section explores the principles that underlie the improper  
26 appropriation element of a *prima facie* case of infringement. In the end, it is often not a particular  
27 label or phrasing of the test that decides the outcome in any particular case but rather the close,  
28 detailed analysis of the works in light of the underlying principles.

29       To prove improper appropriation, a plaintiff must demonstrate the required substantial  
30 similarity based on copying of protected expression. See Comments *c* through *e*. As discussed in  
31 § 13, Comment *d*, of this Restatement, protected expression can include nonliteral elements of a

1 copyrighted work. Consideration of nonliteral elements in the context of evaluating improper  
2 appropriation is discussed in Comment *d* of this Section. If only a de minimis amount of protected  
3 expression is copied, there can be no substantial similarity. See Comment *g*. However, simply  
4 copying more than a de minimis amount is not itself sufficient—the alleged infringing use must  
5 also meet the test of substantial similarity; if the allegedly infringing use is not substantially similar  
6 to protected expression in the plaintiff's copyrighted work, there is no improper appropriation, and  
7 thus there is no infringement. See Comments *i* through *l*.

8         *b. Complete duplication of the entire copyrighted work.* If the alleged infringing use is a  
9 wholesale duplication of the plaintiff's entire copyrighted work, without more, there is almost  
10 certainly the required substantial similarity to support a finding of improper appropriation. See  
11 Illustration 1. However, if the alleged infringing use has replicated the entire copyrighted work in  
12 a context that adds more expression and/or has sufficiently altered the copied protected expression  
13 (for example, by sufficiently altering the work's quality or clarity), a determination of whether the  
14 relevant audience will perceive substantial similarity will depend on the particular facts of the case.  
15 See Illustration 2; see also Comment *k* (discussing de minimis copying). Such additions and  
16 alterations may also be relevant to an analysis of fair use, discussed in § \_\_\_\_ of this Restatement.

17 **Illustrations:**

18         1. Computer Manufacturer A created a complex, copyrighted operating system for  
19 A's computers. In a suit against Computer Manufacturer B for infringing the copyright in  
20 A's operating system, A introduces evidence showing that B reproduced the entire  
21 operating system for use in B's computers. A has met its burden to establish the element  
22 of improper appropriation.

23         2. Photographer creates a copyrighted photograph. Movie Studio creates a full-  
24 length feature film in which Photographer's photograph appears, and Photographer sues  
25 Movie Studio for infringement. In the infringement suit, Photographer introduces evidence  
26 that the photograph appears in only one scene of the film, lasting 35 seconds. In that scene,  
27 the photograph appears in the background, hanging on the wall of an apartment where the  
28 scene is taking place. The photograph is in the distant background and is not in focus during  
29 much of the scene. In two shots during the scene, one lasting four seconds and the other  
30 lasting two seconds, the photograph is in focus but remains barely discernible. In the shot  
31 lasting four seconds, after one and a half seconds, the photograph is completely obstructed

1 by a prop in the scene. Photographer has not met its burden of showing the element of  
2 improper appropriation.

3       c. *Improper appropriation requires copying of protected expression.* “Not all copying . . .  
4 is copyright infringement.” *Feist Publ’ns, Inc. v. Rural Tel. Serv. Co.*, 499 U.S. 340, 361 (1991).  
5 As the U.S. Supreme Court has explained, “[t]he mere fact that a work is copyrighted does not  
6 mean that every element of the work may be protected.” *Id.* at 348. The plaintiff must establish  
7 that elements that the defendant copied from the plaintiff’s work were elements that are protected  
8 by copyright.

9       The Supreme Court has used the phrase “constituent elements of the work that are  
10 original,” *id.* at 361, to describe what must be copied in order for there to be infringement. As the  
11 Supreme Court made clear in *Feist*, originality is the *sine qua non* of copyright and is required by  
12 the U.S. Constitution’s Copyright Clause. For a work to be protected by copyright, it must contain  
13 originality. See §§ 5 to 8 of this Restatement (discussing the requirements of originality and  
14 fixation). For a copyrighted work to be infringed, the infringing use must copy original elements  
15 from the copyrighted work, i.e., elements of the copyrighted work that copyright protects. For a  
16 discussion of the scope of copyright protection generally, see Chapter 2 of this Restatement. As  
17 articulated by the Second Circuit, the plaintiff must demonstrate that “the copying is illegal  
18 because a substantial similarity exists between the defendant’s work and the protectible elements  
19 of plaintiff’s.” *Peter F. Gaito Architecture, LLC v. Simone Dev. Corp.*, 602 F.3d 57, 63 (2d Cir.  
20 2010). Recognizing the Supreme Court’s holding that originality is constitutionally required for  
21 copyright protection, and integrating it into the infringement analysis, the Sixth Circuit has held  
22 “it is a constitutional requirement that a plaintiff bringing an infringement claim must prove  
23 ‘copying of constituent elements of the work *that are original.*’” *Kohus v. Mariol*, 328 F.3d 848,  
24 853 (6th Cir. 2003) (quoting *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 361) (emphasis in original).

25       In addition to protecting only original elements of a copyrighted work, the Copyright Act  
26 does not extend protection to “any idea, procedure, process, system, method of operation, concept,  
27 principle, or discovery, regardless of the form in which it is described, explained, illustrated, or  
28 embodied,” 17 U.S.C. § 102(b). In copyright law, the label “expression” is used to identify  
29 protected elements of a work and to distinguish them from unprotected elements, which are given  
30 the general label “ideas.” For a summary, and a division of the general category of “ideas” into the  
31 three subcategories of “ideas,” “methods,” and “facts,” see §§ 12 and 14 to 16 of this Restatement.

1 Copyright law also excludes additional elements of works from copyright protection, such as  
2 pictorial, graphic, or sculptural elements contained in a useful article when those elements cannot  
3 be separated from the utilitarian aspects of the article, and elements of a work that constitute an  
4 edict of law. See §§ 10 and 19 of this Restatement. As a result, courts sometimes describe the  
5 improper appropriation element of the plaintiff's *prima facie* case as requiring that the plaintiff  
6 demonstrate the defendant copied "protected" or "protectable" expression. As articulated by the  
7 Seventh Circuit, "[i]f the copied parts are not, on their own, protectable expression, then there can  
8 be no claim for infringement." *Peters v. West*, 692 F.3d 629, 632 (7th Cir. 2012) (citing *Peter F.*  
9 *Gaito Architecture, LLC v. Simone Dev. Corp.*, 602 F.3d 57, 61 (2d Cir. 2010)); see also *Gottlieb*  
10 *Dev. LLC v. Paramount Pictures Corp.*, 590 F. Supp. 2d 625, 631 (S.D.N.Y. 2008) ("When similar  
11 works resemble each other only in unprotected aspects—for example, when similarities inhere in  
12 ideas, which are by definition unprotected, or in expression that is not proprietary to plaintiff—the  
13 defendant prevails." (citing *Bill Diodato Photography, LLC v. Kate Spade, LLC*, 388 F. Supp. 2d  
14 382, 390 (S.D.N.Y. 2005))). In some instances, the "copied parts" of the plaintiff's work might be  
15 the selection, arrangement, or coordination of unprotectable material, because copyright in a  
16 compilation protects an original selection, arrangement, or coordination, even if the material  
17 compiled is not protectable. See § 4 of this Restatement.

18 As discussed in § 17 of this Restatement, when protecting particular expression in a work  
19 of authorship would have the effect of extending protection to an unprotectable element of that  
20 work, such as an idea or method, then the scope of copyright does not extend to that particular  
21 expression under the doctrine of merger. Merger applies when there is only one way, or very few  
22 ways, of expressing an unprotectable element; the key inquiry is not exactly how many alternatives  
23 there are, but rather whether the range of viable alternatives is so constrained that granting  
24 copyright would effectively bar others from expressing the unprotected element. In such a case,  
25 that expression is said to have merged with the unprotectable element to which it is linked. Because  
26 a plaintiff must demonstrate that the defendant copied protectable expression from the plaintiff's  
27 copyrighted work, the doctrine of merger can be relevant to the improper appropriation element of  
28 the *prima facie* case if expression that would otherwise be protectable is not protected because of  
29 merger. See § 17 of this Restatement.

30 As discussed in § 18 of this Restatement, the scope of copyright protection for a work of  
31 authorship does not extend to any element of expression in that work that: (a) is standard, stock,

1 customary, stereotypical, or common in the treatment of a particular subject or given topic;  
2 (b) flows naturally from unprotectable elements in the work; or (c) is dictated by external factors.  
3 These unprotected elements within a work are referred to as *scènes à faire*. Because a plaintiff  
4 must demonstrate that the defendant copied protectable expression from the plaintiff's copyrighted  
5 work, the *scènes à faire* doctrine can be relevant to the determination of improper appropriation as  
6 those copied elements that are *scènes à faire* should be filtered out prior to evaluating the  
7 similarities. If, however, the defendant has copied the way in which the plaintiff has expressed the  
8 same *scènes à faire* element (e.g., copying word for word the dialog between two entirely  
9 stereotypical superheroes), the similarity of that expression is relevant to the determination of  
10 improper appropriation. See § 18 of this Restatement.

11 If the only similarities between a plaintiff's copyrighted work and a defendant's allegedly  
12 infringing use are the presence of the same unprotected elements in both works (including facts,  
13 ideas, expression that has merged with unprotected elements, *scènes à faire* elements, etc.), then  
14 the defendant has not copied any protectable expression from the plaintiff's work and there is no  
15 improper appropriation. However, if the plaintiff's selection or arrangement of particular  
16 unprotected elements is original, then the defendant could be liable for infringement if the defendant  
17 has copied the plaintiff's original selection or arrangement of those unprotected elements.

18 *d. Levels of abstractions in the context of evaluating claims of infringement of nonliteral  
elements of a work.* Copyright protection extends beyond the literal elements of a copyrighted  
19 work. Describing the boundary between protectable expression and unprotectable idea is often  
20 done using the concept of levels of abstractions contained within a work. The source of the  
21 “abstractions test” is a decision involving alleged infringement of a play by a motion picture. Judge  
22 Learned Hand authored the decision for the court:

24 Upon any work . . . a great number of patterns of increasing generality will fit  
25 equally well, as more and more of the incident is left out. The last may perhaps be  
26 no more than the most general statement of what the play is about, and at times  
27 might consist only of its title; but there is a point in this series of abstractions where  
28 they are no longer protected, since otherwise the playwright could prevent the use  
29 of his “ideas,” to which, apart from their expression, his property is never extended.

30 Nichols v. Universal Pictures Corp., 45 F.2d 119, 121 (2d Cir. 1930). As a later Second Circuit  
31 opinion described, “takings from a protected source . . . can occur at varying levels of abstraction

1 from the concrete realization of the original, . . . the more remote in abstraction the taking is from  
2 the original, the less likely that it will constitute a taking of protected expression.” CCC Info.  
3 Servs., Inc. v. Maclean Hunter Mkt. Reps., Inc., 44 F.3d 61, 69 (2d Cir. 1994). Defining the precise  
4 line between copyrighted expression and uncopyrightable idea is not the point of the abstractions  
5 test, rather the concept of a series of levels of abstractions helps to conceptualize the point along a  
6 continuum at which the alleged infringing use is similar to the copyrighted work. A court must  
7 then decide whether that particular point on the continuum is on the protectable side of the line  
8 and can thus support a finding of improper appropriation. See generally Nash v. CBS, 899 F.2d  
9 1537, 1540 (7th Cir. 1990) (“Sometimes called the ‘abstractions test,’ Hand’s insight is not a ‘test’  
10 at all. It is a clever way to pose the difficulties that require courts to avoid either extreme of the  
11 continuum of generality.”).

12 Initially articulated in a case involving a play (*Nichols*), courts have employed the  
13 abstractions test as part of the analysis of the improper-appropriation element of the *prima facie*  
14 case of infringement in cases involving other types of works. In the computer-software context, in  
15 which cases often involve allegations of infringement based on nonliteral elements of the work, in  
16 many circuits, that abstractions test is part of a three-step analysis, referred to as “abstraction-  
17 filtration-comparison.” Computer Assocs. Int’l, Inc. v. Altai, Inc., 982 F.2d 693, 706 (2d Cir. 1992)  
18 (holding that “district courts would be well-advised to undertake a three-step procedure”). Courts  
19 have indicated that “[t]he abstractions test is especially well suited to the dissection of computer  
20 programs because the test breaks down a program in a way that parallels the typical development  
21 of a program.” Gates Rubber Co. v. Bando Chem. Indus., Ltd., 9 F.3d 823, 834 (10th Cir. 1993)  
22 (adopting the abstraction-filtration-comparison test). The abstraction-filtration-comparison test  
23 labels the second step “filtration,” as discussed in Comment e.

24 *e. Filtering out unprotected elements.* The need to compare only protectable elements  
25 common to the plaintiff’s work and the defendant’s use results in courts filtering out unprotected  
26 elements and comparing the remaining protected elements from the copyrighted work with the  
27 material that was included in the defendant’s allegedly infringing use to determine whether the  
28 required substantial similarity is present. As the Ninth Circuit has described, “[t]o conduct a  
29 copyright infringement analysis, the factfinders ask ‘whether “the *protectible elements, standing  
30 alone*, are substantially similar”’ and ‘disregard the non-protectible elements.’” Skidmore v. Led  
31 Zeppelin, 952 F.3d 1051, 1070 (9th Cir. 2020) (citations omitted) (emphasis in original). Courts

1 also sometimes refer to this step in the analysis as “dissecting” the elements alleged to have been  
2 copied to exclude those that are not protected by copyright. See, e.g., *Brown Bag Software v.*  
3 *Symantec Corp.*, 960 F.2d 1465, 1476-1477 (9th Cir. 1992) (discussing “dissection” in the context  
4 of the substantial similarity inquiry and for “the purpose of defining the scope of plaintiff’s  
5 copyright”).

6 Filtering out unprotected elements prior to the similarity comparison is prominent in cases  
7 involving computer software. See, e.g., *Computer Assocs. Int’l v. Altai Inc.*, 982 F.2d 693 (2d Cir.  
8 1992); *Kepner-Tregoe, Inc. v. Leadership Software, Inc.*, 12 F.3d 527 (5th Cir. 1994). It is the  
9 second step in the abstraction-filtration-comparison test often employed in cases involving  
10 allegations of nonliteral infringement of computer software. But the step of filtering out  
11 unprotected elements is employed not just in cases involving computer software; courts  
12 appropriately engage in filtering prior to comparing the alleged similarities in cases involving  
13 various types of copyrighted works. See, e.g., *Rentmeester v. Nike, Inc.*, 883 F.3d 1111 (9th Cir.  
14 2018) (photographs); *Cavalier v. Random House, Inc.*, 297 F.3d 815, 822 (9th Cir. 2002) (literary  
15 works); *Harney v. Sony Pictures Television, Inc.*, 704 F.3d 173 (1st Cir. 2013) (photographs);  
16 *Coquico, Inc. v. Rodriguez-Miranda*, 562 F.3d 62, 68 (1st Cir. 2009) (plush toys).

17 In engaging in the filtering out of unprotected elements, care must be taken to not take that  
18 dissection to the extreme, as this “would result in almost nothing being copyrightable because  
19 original works broken down into their composite parts would usually be little more than basic  
20 unprotectible elements like letters, colors and symbols.” *Boisson v. Banian, Ltd.*, 273 F.3d 262, 272  
21 (2d Cir. 2001). In cases involving assertions of copyright in the compilation of unprotected  
22 elements, such as facts or expression that are in the public domain, originality in the selection,  
23 coordination, or arrangement of those unprotected elements is protected expression. See § 4 of this  
24 Restatement. Thus, while copying the unprotected elements in a compilation—i.e., the facts or other  
25 public-domain material—cannot be the basis of a finding of improper appropriation, copying the  
26 protected elements—i.e., the original selection, coordination, or arrangement of the unprotected  
27 elements—can satisfy this element of the *prima facie* case of infringement. As the Second Circuit  
28 has described, “while the infringement analysis must begin by dissecting the copyrighted work into  
29 its component parts in order to clarify precisely what is not original, infringement analysis is not  
30 simply a matter of ascertaining similarity between components viewed in isolation.” *Tufenkian*  
31 *Imp./Exp. Ventures, Inc. v. Einstein Moomjy, Inc.*, 338 F.3d 127, 134 (2d Cir. 2003).

1       In evaluating whether the plaintiff has shown improper appropriation, it does not matter  
2 which step is done first, the identification of what is protectable (for example, the step of filtering  
3 discussed in Comment *e* or the step of identifying levels of abstraction discussed in Comment *d*),  
4 or the identification of similarities between the plaintiff's copyrighted work and the defendant's  
5 alleged infringing use. What matters is that to the extent the alleged infringing use and the  
6 copyrighted work share similarities, those similarities must be of protected elements. Compare  
7 *Tufenkian*, 338 F.3d at 134-135 ("The court, confronted with an allegedly infringing work, must  
8 analyze the two works closely to figure out in what respects, if any, they are similar, and *then*  
9 determine whether these similarities are due to protected aesthetic expressions original to the  
10 allegedly infringed work, or whether the similarity is to something in the original that is free for  
11 the taking.") (emphasis added), with *id.* at 134 ("while the infringement analysis must *begin* by  
12 dissecting the copyrighted work into its component parts in order to clarify precisely what is not  
13 original, infringement analysis is not *simply* a matter of ascertaining similarity between  
14 components viewed in isolation").

15       *f. Burden of proof and defense arguments concerning protectability of copied elements.* To  
16 make out a prima facie case of infringement, the plaintiff must demonstrate that the work allegedly  
17 infringed is protected by a valid copyright, see § 7.02 of this Restatement. The plaintiff must also  
18 demonstrate that the defendant's copying from that copyrighted work constituted improper  
19 appropriation, which includes demonstrating that the particular elements of the copyrighted work  
20 that were copied in the infringing use are protected by the work's valid copyright. For example, if  
21 the work is an original compilation of unprotected facts, the plaintiff must show that the copied  
22 elements contained in the infringing use were original selection, coordination, or arrangement of  
23 those facts. See § 4 of this Restatement.

24       The defendant may assert that even though the plaintiff's work is protected by a valid  
25 copyright, the particular material that was copied from the plaintiff's copyrighted work is not  
26 subject to copyright protection. The basis for that lack of copyright protection can vary based on  
27 the facts of the case. For example, a defendant may assert that the copied material was only  
28 unprotected ideas, and not protected expression. Alternatively, a defendant may assert that the  
29 copied material is not protected because of the merger doctrine or because the material was *scènes  
à faire*. See Comments *g* and *h*. It is appropriate to require the defendant to identify its arguments  
30 concerning the lack of protectability of the copied elements, as it may highlight a deficiency in the  
31

1 plaintiff's prima facie case, but requiring the defendant to specify the grounds for its claim that the  
2 copied material is unprotected does not translate into an assignment of the burden of proof on the  
3 element of improper appropriation to the defendant. At the same time, a defendant cannot simply  
4 assert that the material is unprotected. The defendant must explain the basis for such assertion and  
5 provide additional evidence when appropriate. Once the defendant effectively challenges the  
6 protectability of the copied elements, the question to be decided is a legal one: if the copied  
7 material is not protected by copyright, that copying cannot form the basis for a finding of improper  
8 appropriation necessary to satisfy the plaintiff's burden of proof on that element. See also § 7.01,  
9 Comment *f.*

10         *g. Merger in the context of the prima facie case of infringement.* The argument that particular  
11 expression the defendant copied from the plaintiff is unprotected due to merger is best understood  
12 as a legal argument, countering the plaintiff's showing of improper appropriation. See Comment *f.*  
13 A plaintiff can defeat a defendant's assertion of merger by demonstrating that there are sufficient  
14 ways to express the same idea or other unprotected elements such that protection of the expression  
15 at issue would not have the effect of protecting unprotectable material. See N.Y. Mercantile Exch.,  
16 Inc. v. Intercontinental Exch., Inc., 497 F.3d 109, 117 n.9 (2d Cir. 2007) ("We need not determine  
17 how many expressions would be too many for application of the merger doctrine. The appropriate  
18 inquiry focuses not on the exact quantity of possible expressions but on the effect of granting  
19 copyright protection; we ask whether 'protection of expression would inevitably accord protection  
20 to an idea.'" (internal citations omitted)); Lexmark Int'l, Inc. v. Static Control Components, Inc.,  
21 387 F.3d 522, 536 (6th Cir. 2004) ("The question . . . is not whether *any* alternatives theoretically  
22 exist; it is whether other options practically exist under the circumstances.").

23         In some decisions, courts consider merger arguments in the context of determining whether  
24 the plaintiff's copyright is valid, which is the first element of the prima facie case. See § 7.02 of  
25 this Restatement. In other decisions, courts analyze the merger doctrine in the context of the  
26 improper appropriation element of the prima facie case—i.e., whether the defendant has copied a  
27 sufficient amount of protected expression from the plaintiff's copyrighted work. If considered as  
28 part of the first element of the prima facie case, and if merger is found as to all potentially  
29 protectable elements, the result is that the plaintiff lacks a valid copyright and there can be no  
30 infringement. This type of total invalidation on the basis of merger is rare. More commonly, if the  
31 court has concluded that the plaintiff's proof of a valid copyright is sufficient, the court may still

1 consider an argument of merger as relevant to the improper appropriation element of the prima  
2 facie case because particular expression in the copyrighted work that is found to have “merged”  
3 with unprotected elements would not be considered when evaluating whether a sufficient amount  
4 of protectable expression was copied. Such merged elements would be filtered out prior to  
5 comparing the alleged infringing use. See Comment *d*.

6 As the Second Circuit has noted, considering merger in the context of analyzing whether  
7 there is improper appropriation (rather than in the context of whether there is a valid copyright)  
8 “will normally provide a more detailed and realistic basis for evaluating the claim that protection  
9 of expression would inevitably accord protection to an idea.” *Kregos v. Associated Press*, 937 F.2d  
10 700, 705 (2d Cir. 1991). Other courts have cited the importance of having the factual setting of at  
11 least two works (the copyrighted work and the alleged infringing use) for comparison and decision  
12 of the difficult line-drawing between idea and expression, and the closely related question of  
13 whether the two have merged. See, e.g., *Hart v. Dan Chase Taxidermy Supply Co., Inc.*, 86 F.3d  
14 320, 322 (2d Cir. 1996) (expressing a preference for evaluating merger at the infringement stage  
15 when the court has “all the contested forms of expression before it”).

16 In some cases, courts have held that the effect of finding merger is a requirement of a  
17 heightened proof by the plaintiff of the level of similarity, insisting that the defendant’s work be  
18 nearly or virtually identical to the plaintiff’s work. See, e.g., *Yankee Candle Co. v. Bridgewater  
Candle Co.*, 259 F.3d 25, 36 (1st Cir. 2001) (“[T]he plaintiff has the heavy burden of showing  
‘near identity’ between the works at issue.”). These cases are problematic, given the Copyright  
21 Act’s command that “in no case” should copyright protection extend to unprotected elements. 17  
U.S.C. § 102(b). Permitting expression that has merged with unprotected elements to be the basis  
23 of an infringement finding could result in copyright protecting elements of a work that the statute  
24 mandates remain unprotected. *Morrissey v. Procter & Gamble Co.*, 379 F.2d 675, 679 (1st Cir.  
25 1967).

26 In other cases, courts have been more discerning, finding that some copied elements have  
27 merged and are therefore unprotected but that other copied elements remain protected by  
28 copyright, leading the court to conclude that the protection for the plaintiff’s work is “thin” and,  
29 as a result, the plaintiff is required to show virtual identity between the alleged infringing use and  
30 the copyrighted work in order to find improper appropriation. See, e.g., *Design Basics, LLC v.  
Kerstiens Homes & Designs, Inc.*, 1 F.4th 502, 503 (7th Cir. 2021) (copyrighted architectural plans

1 with many *scènes à faire* and merged elements leading court to require virtual identity). See  
2 Comment *l*, discussing the virtual-identity standard.

3 **Illustration:**

4       3. Plaintiff asserts Defendant infringed its copyrighted quilting pattern consisting  
5 of squares and triangles arranged into the shape of a wreath. Defendant asserts that there  
6 was merger of expression and there were unprotected elements in the way that the quilting  
7 pattern arranged public-domain shapes (squares and triangles). Plaintiff introduces into  
8 evidence multiple patterns with different expressions, all arranging squares and triangles  
9 in the shape of a wreath, showing that the copyrighted pattern is only one of many ways to  
10 express a quilted wreath design using triangles and squares, and that protection of  
11 Plaintiff's arrangement would not have the effect of protecting the idea of a wreath quilt  
12 using triangles and squares. Plaintiff has carried its burden to demonstrate the copying of  
13 protectable elements in its copyrighted work.

14       *h. The scènes à faire doctrine in the context of the prima facie case of infringement.* When  
15 a plaintiff has put forth a prima facie case for infringement, the defendant might attempt to rebut  
16 the plaintiff's proof of improper appropriation by asserting that the elements copied from the  
17 plaintiff's work were only unprotected *scènes à faire* elements. For example, whether an element  
18 of a particular type of work or the treatment of a particular topic is common, customary, stock,  
19 standard, or stereotypical would seem to be a question subject to proof through the introduction of  
20 evidence. A defendant could introduce into evidence multiple earlier works of the same type or on  
21 the same topic to demonstrate that many or all of the elements in common between the plaintiff's  
22 copyrighted work and the defendant's alleged infringing use are also present in those earlier  
23 examples, meaning that they should be deemed unprotectable *scènes à faire* and there is no  
24 improper appropriation even if the defendant copied those *scènes à faire* elements from the  
25 plaintiff's work, rather than from the earlier examples. Similarly, the assertion that an element of  
26 a work is dictated by external factors could be supported either by evidence regarding what those  
27 external factors are for the works at issue, or how those external factors dictate the element that is  
28 asserted to be *scènes à faire*. See § 18, Comment *f*, of this Restatement.

29       However, many cases decide the *scènes à faire* question without reference to any factual  
30 evidence. This appears particularly true with respect to familiar genres and topics (for example,  
31 stories about detectives, spies, superheroes, war, action movies, and so forth), for which courts are

1 comfortable in many cases deciding, without consulting any evidence from the parties, whether  
2 certain elements of a work are sufficiently common or standard and thus are *scènes à faire*.  
3 Conversely, in cases involving more complicated works, such as computer software, expert  
4 testimony introduced by the parties is often relied upon in making the determination whether  
5 elements are *scènes à faire*. Use of expert testimony on this issue is also common in cases involving  
6 musical works. See, e.g., *Skidmore*, 952 F.3d at 1070-1071; *New Old Music Grp., Inc. v. Gottwald*,  
7 122 F. Supp. 3d 78, 95 (S.D.N.Y. 2015).

8 Section 18, Comment *c*, of this Restatement discusses the nature and scope of the *scènes à*  
9 *faire* exclusion from copyright protection, including the caution against applying the doctrine too  
10 broadly so as to inappropriately exclude the particular way in which an author expresses a *scènes*  
11 *à faire* element.

12 *i. Substantial similarity.* All circuits require a plaintiff to show substantial similarity  
13 between the alleged infringing use and the plaintiff's protected expression as part of the *prima facie*  
14 case of infringement, although courts vary in their articulation of what that showing entails. Courts  
15 acknowledge the difficulty in defining with any specificity the standard for assessing when  
16 similarity becomes "substantial" because the "determinations will necessarily turn on the unique  
17 facts of each case." *Rentmeester*, 883 F.3d at 1121. See also *Peter Pan Fabrics, Inc. v. Martin Weiner*  
18 Corp.

19 , 274 F.2d 487, 489 (2d Cir. 1960) (noting that "[t]he test for infringement of a copyright is  
20 of necessity vague."). How much similarity is required to constitute improper appropriation varies  
with the nature of the copyrighted work and the defendant's alleged infringing use.

21 Courts often invoke a standard that employs an observer of the two works, asking whether  
22 that hypothetical observer would consider the works to be substantially similar. The characteristics  
23 of that observer are described with varying formulations based on the facts of the case. In many  
24 instances, courts identify the observer as the average layperson, sometimes using the shorthand  
25 label "ordinary observer test" for that formulation of the substantial similarity inquiry. See, e.g.,  
26 *Peter F. Gaito Architecture, LLC v. Simone Dev. Corp.*, 602 F.3d 57, 66 (2d Cir. 2010) (quoting  
27 *Knitwaves, Inc. v. Lollytogs Ltd.*, 71 F.3d 996, 1002 (2d Cir. 1995)) ("In applying the so-called  
28 'ordinary observer test,' we ask whether 'an average lay observer would recognize the alleged copy  
29 as having been appropriated from the copyrighted work.'"). In other instances, courts make clear  
30 that the relevant observer is not the average layperson, because fundamentally the perspective by  
31 which to judge similarity should be "the perspective of the works' intended audience." *Dawson v.*

1 Hinshaw Music Inc., 905 F.2d 731, 735 (4th Cir. 1990). Using the perspective of the intended  
2 audience as a lens through which to evaluate whether the similarity is substantial comports with  
3 protecting the copyright owner from the economic harm that comes from copying: if the average  
4 member of the intended audience would consider the defendant's work a substitute for the plaintiff's  
5 copyrighted work, this is the type of harm that copyright is designed to protect the copyright owner  
6 against. For example, cases consider the appeal to children relevant to the question of substantial  
7 similarity for works whose primary audience is children. See, e.g., *Sid & Marty Krofft Television*  
8 v. *McDonald's Corp.*, 562 F.2d 1157, 1166 (9th Cir. 1977); *Aliotti v. R. Dakin & Co.*, 831 F.2d  
9 898, 902 (9th Cir. 1987); *Atari, Inc. v. N. Am. Philips Consumer Elecs. Corp.*, 672 F.2d 607, 619  
10 (7th Cir. 1982); *Lyons P'ship, L.P. v. Morris Costumes, Inc.*, 243 F.3d 789 (4th Cir. 2001).

11 In some cases, courts articulate a test that involves asking ““whether an “ordinary observer,  
12 unless he set out to detect the disparities, would be disposed to overlook them, and regard [the]  
13 aesthetic appeal as the same.””” *Peter Gaito*, 602 F.3d at 66 (citations omitted). However, such a  
14 formulation risks improperly permitting the copying of protectable elements in a new context in  
15 which the aesthetic appeal is different, yet a finding of improper appropriation would be  
16 appropriate. For example, consider the case of a copyrighted story that is made into a full-length  
17 motion picture, using the same characters, detailed plot, and dialogue, without the authorization of  
18 the copyright owner. That motion picture may have quite a different aesthetic appeal from the short  
19 story, but nonetheless, the creation of the motion picture would constitute improper appropriation  
20 because it copied protected elements from the short story, making the movie substantially similar  
21 to the story. Even though watching the movie may not be a substitute for reading the story for the  
22 average target audience member, nor have the same aesthetic appeal as the story, a finding of  
23 improper appropriation in that context would be supported by the facts.

24 Courts also find a substantial similarity exists on the basis of literal or verbatim copying of  
25 protected expression, whether or not the defendant's entire work was substantially similar to the  
26 plaintiff's entire work. As the Second Circuit has noted, “[t]he concept of similarity embraces not  
27 only global similarities in structure and sequence, but localized similarity in language. In both  
28 cases, the trier of fact must determine whether the similarities are sufficient to qualify as  
29 substantial.” *Twin Peaks Prods., Inc. v. Publ'ns Int'l, Ltd.*, 996 F.2d 1366, 1372 (2d Cir. 1993).

30 In conducting the “substantial similarity” analysis, however, it remains important to  
31 distinguish between the protectable expression copied from the copyrighted work, which can form

1 the basis of a finding of improper appropriation, and ideas, themes, or other unprotectable elements  
2 copied from the copyrighted work, which cannot form the basis of a finding of improper  
3 appropriation regardless of their audience appeal. In cases involving copyrighted works with  
4 significant unprotectable elements, the Second Circuit has invoked a standard of a “more  
5 discerning observer,” or required that the application of the test be “more discerning,” in order to  
6 guard against an inappropriate finding of substantial similarity based on unprotected elements.

7 Courts have held that substantial similarity can be determined as a matter of law, and  
8 sometimes even at the pleading stage, particularly when both a complete copy of the plaintiff’s  
9 copyrighted work and the alleged infringing use are before the court. See, e.g., *Peter Gaito*, 602  
10 F.3d at 63 (granting defendant’s motion to dismiss, noting that “it is entirely appropriate for a  
11 district court to resolve [the question of substantial similarity] as a matter of law, ‘either because  
12 the similarity between two works concerns only non-copyrightable elements of the plaintiff’s  
13 work, or because no reasonable jury, properly instructed, could find that the two works are  
14 substantially similar.’ Warner Bros. Inc. v. Am. Broad. Cos., 720 F.2d 231, 240 (2d Cir. 1983).”).

15 *j. The intrinsic and extrinsic tests developed by the Ninth Circuit.* The Ninth Circuit has  
16 broken down the improper appropriation inquiry into a “two-part analysis consisting of the  
17 ‘intrinsic test’ and ‘extrinsic test.’” *Rentmeester*, 883 F.3d at 1118. The Fourth and Eighth Circuits  
18 have also, at times, employed the dual intrinsic and extrinsic tests. To prevail under this approach,  
19 a plaintiff must prove substantial similarity under both tests, in addition to proving copying in fact,  
20 *id.*, and the other elements of a *prima facie* case of infringement. See § 7.01 of this Restatement.

21 Over the decades, the Ninth Circuit has refined the nature of each of these two similarity  
22 inquiries. Today, “[t]he extrinsic test assesses the objective similarities of the two works, focusing  
23 only on the protectable elements of the plaintiff’s expression.” *Rentmeester*, 883 F.3d at 1118. In  
24 the extrinsic test, the court first filters out the unprotectable elements of the plaintiff’s work. See,  
25 e.g., *Cavalier v. Random House, Inc.*, 297 F.3d 815, 822-823 (9th Cir. 2002) (noting the  
26 unprotected elements include ideas and concepts, material in the public domain, and *scènes à faire*  
27 elements). The court then compares the remaining protectable elements to corresponding elements  
28 of the defendant’s work in assessing whether there are sufficient similarities “in the objective  
29 details of the works.” *Rentmeester*, 883 F.3d at 1118. The Ninth Circuit has identified the extrinsic  
30 test as one that can be decided by the court as a matter of law. *Id.*

1       In contrast to the extrinsic component, the Ninth Circuit’s test also requires “intrinsic  
2 similarity,” which the court describes as requiring “similarity of expression from the standpoint of  
3 the ordinary reasonable observer, with no expert assistance.” *Jada Toys, Inc. v. Mattel, Inc.*, 518  
4 F.3d 628, 637 (9th Cir. 2008). The Ninth Circuit has articulated the intrinsic test as involving “a  
5 more holistic, subjective comparison of the works to determine whether they are substantially  
6 similar in ‘total concept and feel.’” *Rentmeester*, 883 F.3d at 1118 (quoting *Cavalier*, 297 F.3d at  
7 822). The reference to “concept” should not be misunderstood as translating into protecting the  
8 concept of a work, or concepts contained in a work, as the Copyright Act expressly prohibits  
9 protection for “any idea, procedure, process, system, method of operation, *concept*, principle, or  
10 discovery, regardless of the form in which it is described, explained, illustrated, or embodied in  
11 [the copyrighted] work.” 17 U.S.C. § 102(b) (emphasis added); see § 14 of this Restatement.  
12 Similarly, the reference to “feel” should not be misunderstood as translating into protection of the  
13 style or general feel of a work, as such components are at a level of abstraction that is too far  
14 removed from expression to be protected by the work’s copyright. See Comment *d*, discussing  
15 abstractions. Rather, the attention to “total concept and feel” can best be understood as  
16 acknowledging that copying of an original combination of elements can be actionable even if  
17 copying of those elements in isolation would not be. See *Tufenkian*, 338 F.3d at 134 (noting that  
18 “the total-concept-and-feel locution functions as a reminder that, while the infringement analysis  
19 must *begin* by dissecting the copyrighted work into its component parts in order to clarify precisely  
20 what is not original, infringement analysis is not *simply* a matter of ascertaining similarity between  
21 components viewed in isolation.”) (emphasis in original).

22       The extrinsic and intrinsic tests as refined and employed by the Ninth Circuit today align  
23 with other circuits’ approaches to analyzing improper appropriation by ensuring that only  
24 protectable elements are considered as a basis for finding substantial similarity (encompassed  
25 within the objective orientation of the extrinsic test), and engaging in a comparison of the  
26 copyrighted work and the infringing use in context with careful consideration of protectable  
27 elements that might exist in the selection and arrangement of unprotected elements (the more  
28 holistic subjective comparison within the intrinsic test). Care should be taken with language from  
29 earlier Ninth Circuit opinions concerning the nature of the extrinsic and intrinsic tests, as it may  
30 not reflect the court’s current application of those tests.

1        Courts employing the dual extrinsic and intrinsic similarity tests may use them as a way to  
2 dismiss the plaintiff's claim either at the pleading stage or at summary judgment, finding that the  
3 works lack extrinsic similarity and the case must be decided against the plaintiff. See, e.g.,  
4 *Rentmeester*, 883 F.3d 1111 (affirming the grant of defendant's motion to dismiss under Federal  
5 Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6) because of a lack of extrinsic similarity).

6        *k. Improper appropriation requires copying of substantial, non-de minimis protectable*  
7 *expression.* Copyright law permits some copying of insignificant portions of protectable  
8 expression from the plaintiff's work. "Even where the fact of copying is conceded, no legal  
9 consequences will follow from that fact unless the copying is substantial." *Newton v. Diamond*,  
10 388 F.3d 1189, 1193 (9th Cir. 2004). If the protected expression copied is de minimis, there cannot  
11 be, as a matter of law, the substantial similarity necessary to establish improper appropriation. See  
12 *Bell v. Wilmott Storage Servs., LLC*, 12 F.4th 1065 (9th Cir. 2021) ("'[A] taking is considered de  
13 minimis only if it is so *meager* and *fragmentary* that the average audience member would not  
14 recognize the appropriation,' i.e., the works could not be said to be substantially similar." (quoting  
15 *Fisher v. Dees*, 794 F.2d 432, 434 n.2 (9th Cir. 1986) (emphasis in *Bell*)).

16        In determining whether copying of protected expression is de minimis, courts examine the  
17 amount of the copyrighted work that is copied and the observability of the copied content in the  
18 defendant's alleged infringing use. The Second Circuit has referred to a "quantitative threshold"  
19 when considering whether the copying was de minimis. *Ringgold v. Black Ent. Television, Inc.*,  
20 126 F.3d 70, 74 (2d Cir. 1997) ("de minimis can mean that copying has occurred to such a trivial  
21 extent as to fall below the quantitative threshold of substantial similarity, which is always a  
22 required element of actionable copying"). However, even if the quantity of protected expression  
23 copied is small, if that expression is material and observable, the copying is not de minimis. *Dun  
& Bradstreet Software Servs., Inc. v. Grace Consulting, Inc.*, 307 F.3d 197, 208 (3d Cir. 2002)  
25 (discussing both the quantitative and qualitative materiality of the amount copied). See also *Harper  
& Row Publishers, Inc. v. Nation Enters.*, 471 U.S. 539 (1985) (infringement affirmed based on  
27 copying approximately 300 to 400 words from a 200,000-word book). Determining whether the  
28 defendant's copying was de minimis will depend on the facts of the particular case. For example,  
29 if the defendant's allegedly infringing use is in a motion picture, the analysis could involve  
30 examining the length of time the plaintiff's copyrighted work is observable in the film, as well as  
31 factors such as focus, lighting, camera angles, and prominence. See *Sandoval v. New Line Cinema*

1 Corp., 147 F.3d 215, 217 (2d Cir. 1998) (finding copying in movie of entire copyrighted  
2 photographs to be de minimis; photographs “appear fleetingly and are obscured, severely out of  
3 focus, and virtually unidentifiable”); see also Solid Oak Sketches, LLC v. 2K Games, Inc., 449 F.  
4 Supp. 3d 333 (S.D.N.Y. 2020) (finding copying in video games of copyrighted tattoos on athletes’  
5 arms to be de minimis; tattoos depicted were significantly reduced in size and image quality).

6 Demonstrating improper appropriation is a component of the *prima facie* case of  
7 infringement applicable to all categories of protected works and all of the exclusive rights granted  
8 to a copyright owner. Because the de minimis doctrine is typically considered in the context of  
9 assessing whether a sufficient amount of protectable expression has been copied in order to  
10 determine whether the plaintiff has proven improper appropriation, the doctrine is applicable to all  
11 infringement cases. As discussed in § 56, Comment *g*, of this Restatement, this includes assertions  
12 of infringement of sound-recording copyrights in a practice commonly known as “sampling.” See,  
13 e.g., VMG Salsoul, LLC v. Ciccone, 824 F.3d 871, 884 (9th Cir. 2016). But see Bridgeport Music,  
14 Inc. v. Dimension Films, 410 F.3d 792 (6th Cir. 2005).

15 Courts sometimes refer to the de minimis doctrine as a “defense.” See, e.g., Dun &  
16 Bradstreet Software Servs., Inc. v. Grace Consulting, Inc., 307 F.3d 197, 208 (3d Cir. 2002). Given  
17 that the doctrine is a component of analyzing whether the required substantial similarity has been  
18 shown, the doctrine is best viewed as a legal rebuttal raised by the defendant to the plaintiff’s  
19 required showing of substantial similarity, on which the plaintiff bears the burden of proof as part  
20 of the *prima facie* case even when the defendant asserts that the copying was de minimis. See  
21 Comment *f*. See also *Bell*, 12 F.4th at 1074 (“Our circuit and the majority of our sister circuits do  
22 not view the de minimis doctrine as a defense to infringement, but rather as an answer to the  
23 question of whether the infringing work and the copyrighted work are substantially similar so as  
24 to make the copying actionable.”).

25 The Ninth Circuit has held that the de minimis doctrine can only be raised in the context  
26 of substantial similarity and at no other time. *Bell*, 12 F.4th at 1068 (9th Cir. 2021) (“once  
27 infringement is established, . . . de minimis use of the infringing work is not a defense to an  
28 infringement action.”). However, the doctrine of *de minimis non curat lex* (the law cares not for  
29 trifles), which denies a plaintiff relief for technical but trivial violations of the plaintiff’s rights, “is  
30 part of the established background of legal principles,” *Wis. Dep’t. of Revenue v. William  
31 Wrigley, Jr., Co.*, 505 U.S. 214, 231 (1992). The Second Circuit has recognized that in copyright

1 law, the de minimis doctrine can excuse trivial, everyday activities that might otherwise technically  
2 constitute infringement, and is an “important aspect of the law of copyright.” On Davis v. The  
3 Gap, Inc., 246 F.3d 152, 173 (2d Cir. 2001) (noting that “[m]ost honest citizens in the modern  
4 world frequently engage, without hesitation, in trivial copying that, but for the de minimis doctrine,  
5 would technically constitute a violation of law.”).

6 *l. Approaches to similarity when plaintiff’s work contains a significant proportion of*  
7 *unprotected elements.* When a work contains a significant proportion of public-domain or other  
8 unprotected elements, courts employ a variety of tools to ensure that a finding of improper  
9 appropriation is based upon only protected elements. One such tool, discussed in Comment *e*, is  
10 rigorous filtering or dissection. Another tool is use of the perspective of the “more discerning  
11 observer” to assess whether there is substantial similarity when the copyrighted work contains  
12 significant public-domain or other unprotected elements. See Comment *i*. The concern is that a  
13 mere “average” observer may be misled into finding similarities based on those unprotected  
14 elements when what is required is substantial similarity of protected expression.

15 Courts may also decide that the copyright in the plaintiff’s work is so “thin” that the standard  
16 to be employed in evaluating improper appropriation should be that of “virtual identity” rather than  
17 merely “substantial similarity.” When only a narrow range of original expression is possible,  
18 copyright protection is said to be “thin” because the copyrighted work contains few protectable  
19 features. Conversely, “the greater the range of creative choices that may be made, the broader the  
20 level of protection that will be afforded to the resulting” work. *Rentmeester*, 883 F.3d at 1120. Thin  
21 protection is common in works that have only a small amount of originality, including some  
22 compilations of facts or data, *Feist Publ’ns, Inc. v. Rural Tel. Serv. Co.*, 499 U.S. 340, 349 (1991);  
23 are depictions of the natural world, *Satava v. Lowry*, 323 F.3d 805 (9th Cir. 2003); or are infused  
24 with unprotectable elements, such as architectural plans and computer programs. See, e.g., *Design*  
25 *Basics, LLC v. Kerstiens Homes & Designs, Inc.*, 1 F.4th 502, 503 (7th Cir. 2021) (architectural  
26 plans with many *scènes à faire* and merged elements); *Apple Computer, Inc. v. Microsoft Corp.*,  
27 35 F.3d 1435, 1439 (9th Cir. 1994) (computer software). Cf., e.g., *BUC Int’l Corp. v. Int’l Yacht*  
28 *Council Ltd.*, 489 F.3d 1129, 1148 (11th Cir. 2007) (noting that “[v]irtual identicity,” as adopted  
29 in this circuit, applies to ‘claims of compilation copyright infringement of nonliteral elements of a  
30 computer program.’” (quoting *Mitek Holdings, Inc. v. Arce Eng’g Co.*, 89 F.3d 1548, 1558 (11th  
31 Cir. 1996), but holding that the standard for compilations, generally, is substantial similarity).

1        All of these approaches reflect that the plaintiff's burden to demonstrate substantial  
2 similarity is more difficult to carry when the copyrighted work contains only a minimal amount of  
3 original expression. See, e.g., *Concrete Mach. Co. v. Classic Lawn Ornaments, Inc.*, 843 F.2d 600,  
4 606-607 (1st Cir. 1988) (quoting *Sid & Marty Krofft Television v. McDonald's Corp.*, 562 F.2d  
5 1157, 1167 (9th Cir. 1977) (explaining that when there are only a limited number of ways to  
6 express an idea, "the burden of proof is heavy on the plaintiff who may have to show 'near identity'  
7 between the works at issue.").

8        *m. Use of expert testimony in proving or disproving improper appropriation.* Courts have  
9 permitted the use of expert witnesses on some aspects of the inquiry into improper appropriation  
10 and have, in general, been more willing to allow the use of experts in cases involving works, such  
11 as computer software, for which lay factfinders may struggle to assess whether the similarity in  
12 elements protected by copyright crosses the line into improper appropriation. Courts have  
13 expressed concern, however, that expert testimony could usurp the factfinder's role in the  
14 determination of substantial similarity; this concern animates the approach used by courts in  
15 determining for what purposes expert testimony is permissible.

16        The Second Circuit considered the use of experts in the copyright-infringement analysis in  
17 *Arnstein v. Porter*, 154 F.2d 464 (2d Cir. 1946), a case involving alleged infringement of a musical  
18 work in which the court articulated that the plaintiff had to prove "(a) that defendant copied from  
19 plaintiff's copyrighted work and (b) that the copying (assuming it to be proved) went to [sic] far  
20 as to constitute improper appropriation." Id. at 468. On the initial inquiry—i.e., proof that  
21 defendant copied in fact from plaintiff's work—the *Arnstein* court permitted expert testimony:  
22 "On this issue, analysis ('dissection') is relevant, and the testimony of experts may be received to  
23 aid the trier of the facts." Id. See § 7.03, Comment 1, discussing the use of expert testimony in  
24 proving copying in fact. On the second prong—i.e., proof that the copying is improper, the *Arnstein*  
25 court held that "the test is the response of the ordinary lay hearer; accordingly, on that issue,  
26 'dissection' and expert testimony are irrelevant." Id. While the Second Circuit held that expert  
27 testimony concerning "dissection" was "irrelevant," the court nonetheless held that expert  
28 testimony could play a narrow role in helping the factfinder understand how a lay audience would  
29 perceive the similarities and differences between the plaintiff's and the defendant's works. The  
30 *Arnstein* court stated that "[e]xpert testimony of musicians may also be received, but it will in no

1 way be controlling on the issue of illicit copying, and should be utilized only to assist in  
2 determining the reactions of lay auditors.” Id. at 473.

3 When the work is addressed to a particular audience that could perceive the work  
4 differently than an “ordinary observer” (for example, because that audience possesses specialized  
5 expertise or because that audience is young children), courts have acknowledged that lay  
6 factfinders may be aided in their evaluation of whether the relevant audience will perceive the  
7 defendant’s use as substantially similar to the plaintiff’s copyrighted work by expert testimony on  
8 “the tastes and perceptions of the intended audience.” Dawson v. Hinshaw Music Inc., 905 F.2d  
9 731, 736 (4th Cir. 1990) (cautioning that “a court should be hesitant to find that the lay public does  
10 not fairly represent a work’s intended audience”). See also T-Peg, Inc. v. Vt. Timber Works, Inc.,  
11 459 F.3d 97, 116 (1st Cir. 2006) (recognizing that “the need for expert testimony may be greater  
12 in cases involving complex subject matters where an ordinary observer may find it difficult to  
13 properly evaluate the similarity of two works without the aid of expert testimony”).

14 Cases involving computer software are an example of when the courts have broadened the  
15 role that experts may play in the improper-appropriation inquiry in light of the intended audience’s  
16 specialized expertise. The court in Computer Associates International, Inc. v. Altai, Inc., 982 F.2d  
17 693 (2d Cir. 1992), noted that the ordinary-observer standard “may well have served its purpose  
18 when the material under scrutiny was limited to art forms readily comprehensible and generally  
19 familiar to the average lay person,” but as to computer programs, district courts must have  
20 “discretion . . . to decide to what extent, if any, expert opinion, regarding the highly technical  
21 nature of computer programs, is warranted in a given case.” Id. at 713. In cases involving computer  
22 programs, the Second Circuit held that “the trier of fact need not be limited by the strictures of its  
23 own lay perspective.” Id. Other circuits have also allowed expert testimony concerning different  
24 aspects of the improper-appropriation inquiry in cases involving computer software. See, e.g.,  
25 Gates Rubber Co. v. Bando Chem. Indus., Ltd., 9 F.3d 823, 834-835 (10th Cir. 1993) (noting that  
26 in most cases involving computer programs, expert testimony will be helpful to the court in  
27 applying an abstractions test); Whelan Assocs., Inc. v. Jaslow Dental Lab’y, Inc., 797 F.2d 1222,  
28 1233 (3d Cir. 1986) (holding that in “copyright cases involving exceptionally difficult materials,  
29 like computer programs,” expert testimony would be admissible).

30 The Ninth Circuit and other circuits that have required proof of both extrinsic and intrinsic  
31 similarity, see Comment *j*, allow expert evidence on the extrinsic part of that dual inquiry. Those

1 circuits explain that acceptance of expert evidence is appropriate because the extrinsic test requires  
 2 “analytical dissection of a work,” *Williams v. Gaye*, 895 F.3d 1106, 1119 (9th Cir. 2018), and  
 3 depends on objective criteria such as “the type of artwork involved, the materials used, the subject  
 4 matter, and the setting for the subject,” *Rottlund Co. v. Pinnacle Corp.*, 452 F.3d 726, 731 (8th Cir.  
 5 2006). The Ninth Circuit has gone so far as to suggest that expert testimony may be *necessary* in  
 6 some cases for the plaintiff to carry its burden on the extrinsic test. *Williams*, 895 F.3d at 1137  
 7 (stating that “we require parties to present expert testimony in musical infringement cases for a  
 8 reason” after noting that it is “unrealistic to expect district courts to possess even a baseline fluency  
 9 in musicology”). See also *Swirsky v. Carey*, 376 F.3d 841, 849 (9th Cir. 2004) (noting that the  
 10 extrinsic test is met, “[s]o long as the plaintiff can demonstrate, through expert testimony that  
 11 addresses some or all of [the constituent elements of a musical work] and supports its employment  
 12 of them, that the similarity was ‘substantial’ and to ‘protected elements’ of the copyrighted work.”).

13 Courts that require proof of intrinsic similarity have declined to permit expert testimony,  
 14 however, on the question of intrinsic similarity, because intrinsic similarity does not depend on the  
 15 “type of external criteria and analysis which marks the extrinsic test.” *Rottlund*, 452 F.3d at 731.  
 16 See also *Sid & Marty Krofft Television Prods., Inc. v. McDonald’s Corp.*, 562 F.2d 1157, 1164  
 17 (9th Cir. 1977) (in intrinsic test, “analytic dissection and expert testimony are not appropriate.”).  
 18 As discussed in Comment *j*, the intrinsic similarity requirement is focused, instead, on “similarity  
 19 of expression from the standpoint of the ordinary reasonable observer, with no expert assistance.”  
 20 *Jada Toys, Inc. v. Mattel, Inc.*, 518 F.3d 628, 637 (9th Cir. 2008). Unlike circuits that do not use  
 21 the dual requirement of extrinsic and intrinsic similarity, the Ninth Circuit has not yet clearly held  
 22 that expert evidence can be used to aid the ordinary-observer analysis when a case involves  
 23 computer software.

## REPORTERS’ NOTES

24       *a. Generally.* The Second Circuit has long used the label “improper appropriation” for this  
 25 element of the *prima facie* case of infringement. *Arnstein v. Porter*, 154 F.2d 464, 468 (2d Cir.  
 26 1946) (cautioning not to confuse the “two separate elements essential to a plaintiff’s case . . . :  
 27 (a) that defendant copied from plaintiff’s copyrighted work and (b) that the copying (assuming it  
 28 to be proved) went too far as to constitute improper appropriation.”). The Third and Seventh  
 29 Circuits also have adopted that label. See, e.g., *Incredible Techs., Inc. v. Virtual Techs., Inc.*, 400  
 30 F.3d 1007, 1011 (7th Cir. 2005); *Kay Berry, Inc. v. Taylor Gifts, Inc.*, 421 F.3d 199, 208 (3d Cir.  
 31 2005). At times, the Ninth Circuit has also discussed the need for the plaintiff to show “improper

1 appropriation,” albeit quoting Second Circuit case law. See, e.g., *Three Boys Music Corp. v.*  
 2 *Bolton*, 212 F.3d 477, 482 (9th Cir. 2000) (quoting *Arnstein*).

3 Determining whether copying is “improper” could be aided by a fuller evaluation of the  
 4 context of the use and the type of copyrighted work allegedly infringed. Instead, this fuller  
 5 contextual consideration often takes place in the analysis of a fair-use defense. Prior to the  
 6 solidification of fair use as an affirmative defense, fair use was considered to be a doctrine relevant  
 7 to a determination of whether the plaintiff had established a *prima facie* case of infringement.  
 8 Indeed, in the *Nichols* case itself, the case that is the source of the “abstractions test” discussed in  
 9 Comment *d*, the court states that in the context of less than full copying of the verbatim of an entire  
 10 work “[t]he question is whether the part so taken is ‘substantial,’ and therefore not a ‘fair use’ of  
 11 the copyrighted work . . . .” *Nichols v. Universal Pictures Corp.*, 45 F.2d 119, 121 (2d Cir. 1930).

12 Courts have identified the problematic labeling of the different uses of “similarities” in the  
 13 various articulations of the infringement test. See, e.g., *Laureyssens v. Idea Grp., Inc.*, 964 F.2d  
 14 131, 140 (2d Cir. 1992) (“The presence of a ‘substantial similarity’ requirement in both prongs of  
 15 the analysis—actual copying and whether the copying constitutes an improper appropriation—  
 16 creates the potential for unnecessary confusion . . . .”).

17 Several circuits articulate a clear two-step test for evaluating substantial similarity: “the  
 18 first step ‘requires identifying which aspects of the artist’s work, if any, are protectible by  
 19 copyright,’ [and] the second ‘involves determining whether the allegedly infringing work is  
 20 ‘substantially similar’ to protectible elements of the artist’s work.’” *Kohus v. Mariol*, 328 F.3d  
 21 848, 855 (6th Cir. 2003) (quoting *Sturdza v. United Arab Emirates*, 281 F.3d 1287, 1295 (D.C.  
 22 Cir. 2002)); see also *Boisson v. Banian, Ltd.*, 273 F.3d 262, 267-268 (2d Cir. 2001); *Concrete  
 23 Mach. Co., v. Classic Lawn Ornaments, Inc.*, 843 F.2d 600, 606 (1st Cir. 1988). The Sixth Circuit,  
 24 which has adopted this approach, describes it as “really just a refinement of the ordinary observer  
 25 test that, as its initial step, parses from the work the elements neither afforded copyright protection  
 26 nor properly considered in the ordinary observer test.” *Stromback v. New Line Cinema*, 384 F.3d  
 27 283, 294 (6th Cir. 2004).

28 Other cases noting the difficulty of determining when the similarities are substantial include  
 29 *Peter F. Gaito Architecture, LLC v. Simone Dev. Corp.*, 602 F.3d 57, 63 (2d Cir. 2010) and *Warner  
 30 Bros, Inc. v. Am. Broad. Cos.*, 654 F.2d 204, 208 (2d Cir. 1981). See generally Clark Asay, *An  
 31 Empirical Study of Copyright’s Substantial Similarity Test*, 13 U.C. IRVINE L. REV. 35 (2022).

32 *b. Complete duplication of the entire copyrighted work.* As one commentator has put it,  
 33 “[i]f such duplication is literal or verbatim, then clearly substantial similarity exists.” MELVILLE  
 34 B. NIMMER & DAVID NIMMER, *NIMMER ON COPYRIGHT* § 13.03[A][1]. Interestingly, cases in  
 35 which copying of an entire copyrighted work may not be sufficient involve claims that the  
 36 appearance of the copyrighted work in the infringing use was merely *de minimis*. See, e.g., image  
 37 quality issue: *Gottlieb Dev. LLC v. Paramount Pictures Corp.*, 590 F. Supp. 2d 625, 631 (S.D.N.Y.  
 38 2008) (duplication in motion picture of copyrighted images on pinball machine found *de minimis*);  
 39 *Ringgold v. Black Ent. Television, Inc.*, 126 F.3d 70, 75 (2d Cir. 1997) (duplication in audiovisual  
 40 work of copyrighted image found to not be *de minimis*).

1       Illustration 1 is based on *Apple Computer, Inc. v. Franklin Computer Corp.*, 714 F.2d 1240  
 2 (3d Cir. 1983). Illustration 2 is based on *Sandoval v. New Line Cinema Corp.*, 147 F.3d 215 (2d  
 3 Cir. 1998).

4       *c. Improper appropriation requires copying of protected expression.* In addition to the  
 5 Sixth Circuit, the Eighth Circuit has also expressly noted that the proof of copying of protected  
 6 expression is required by the U.S. Constitution. *Frye v. YMCA Camp Kitaki*, 617 F.3d 1005, 1008  
 7 (8th Cir. 2010).

8       *d. Levels of abstractions in the context of evaluating claims of infringement of nonliteral  
 9 elements of a work.* The Tenth Circuit has further noted that “the abstraction test does not identify  
 10 the protectable elements of a program. Rather, it is merely one tool that can be utilized to  
 11 accomplish this task. Abstraction is particularly useful in enabling a court to filter out ideas and  
 12 processes from protectable expression.” *Gates Rubber Co. v. Bando Chem. Indus., Ltd.*, 9 F.3d  
 13 823, 834 (10th Cir. 1993).

14       *e. Filtering out unprotected elements.* In *Brown Bag Software v. Symantec Corp.*, 960 F.2d  
 15 1465, 1475-1476 (9th Cir. 1992), the Ninth Circuit described the dual role that dissection can play,  
 16 first noting its role in “comparing similarities and identifying infringement” but also “for the  
 17 purpose of defining the scope of plaintiff’s copyright.” It is important to note that courts sometimes  
 18 invoke the concept of “dissection” in different and confusing ways. For example, in *Arnstein*, the  
 19 Second Circuit indicated that “dissection” was appropriate in the context of analyzing what has  
 20 come to be referred to as “copying in fact.” *Arnstein v. Porter*, 154 F.2d 464 (2d Cir. 1946). In that  
 21 context, the Second Circuit used “dissection” to indicate the permissible use of experts. But in the  
 22 context of improper appropriation, the court stated that “the test is the response of the ordinary lay  
 23 hearer; accordingly, on that issue, ‘dissection’ and expert testimony are irrelevant.” *Id.* at 468.

24       *g. Merger in the context of the prima facie case of infringement.* For an example of a case  
 25 analyzing merger in the context of deciding whether there is a valid copyright, and concluding that  
 26 the asserted copyright was not valid, see *Pyrotechnics Mgmt., Inc. v. fireTEK*, 2022 WL 138060  
 27 (W.D. Pa. Jan. 14, 2022).

28       The Second Circuit also has noted that a leading treatise on copyright law viewed treating  
 29 merger in the context of whether actionable infringement has occurred as “the better view.” *Kregos  
 30 v. Associated Press*, 937 F.2d 700, 705 (2d Cir. 1991) (citing NIMMER ON COPYRIGHT  
 31 § 13.03[B][3], at 13–58 (1990)).

32       Labeling the merger argument a “defense,” however, does not mean that the defendant  
 33 carries the burden of proof. The defendant must effectively present the merger argument, but the  
 34 nature of that defense is a rebuttal to the evidence offered by the plaintiff to prove the required  
 35 element in the *prima facie* case that the defendant has copied protected expression from the  
 36 copyrighted work. If the court concludes that the defendant’s merger argument is correct, then the  
 37 plaintiff has failed to carry the plaintiff’s burden of proving copying of protected expression, at  
 38 least as to the material that the court concludes has merged with unprotected elements of the work.  
 39 See § 7.01, Comment *f*, of this Restatement.

The Ninth Circuit has used the label “defense” to apply to the merger doctrine as a way to define the argument as one appropriately considered in the context of the “copying” component of an infringement action. *Ets-Hokin v. Skyy Spirits, Inc.*, 225 F.3d 1068, 1082 (9th Cir. 2000). The Ninth Circuit set up a dichotomy between: (1) merger being considered when analyzing copyrightability or (2) merger being more properly treated as a defense to infringement. *Ets-Hokin*, 225 F.3d at 1082. The court then cited, as support for the treatment of merger as a defense, case law that considered merger in the context of the second “copying” component of the *prima facie* case, rather than the first component that requires a valid, copyrighted work. *Id.* One case that the Ninth Circuit cites as supporting the treatment of merger as a defense is *Kregos v. Associated Press*, 937 F.2d 700, 705 (2d Cir. 1991). *Ets-Hokin*, 225 F.3d at 1082 (using “accord” as a signal for the citation and noting, parenthetically, that the case held “that the merger doctrine relates to infringement, not copyrightability”). The Second Circuit did not label merger as a defense, but, as noted by the Ninth Circuit, considered merger in the context of “determining whether actionable infringement ha[d] occurred.” *Kregos*, 937 F.2d at 705. That context is the improper-appropriation element of the *prima facie* case, and specifically the comparison of the expression that the defendant is alleged to have copied with the expression contained in the copyrighted work. Because the plaintiff bears the burden of proof of establishing both copyrightability and copying, the defendant can raise defense arguments as to either of those elements. If the defendant asserts the merger argument in the context of copyrightability, that would also be a defense. Thus, considering merger in either prong of the *prima facie* case (copyrightability or copying) are defense arguments, both would be examples of the defendant rebutting plaintiff’s *prima facie* case. See § 7.01, Comment e, of this Restatement.

Decisions in the First and Fifth Circuits indicate that merger can be considered in the copyrightability component of the analysis. In 1992, the Fifth Circuit noted that it had applied merger at least once before to determine that the plaintiff’s work did not have a valid copyright. *Mason v. Montgomery Data, Inc.*, 967 F.2d 135, 138 n.5 (5th Cir. 1992) (“[B]ecause the idea and its expression embodied in plaintiff’s maps are inseparable, ‘the maps at issue are not copyrightable.’”) (citing *Kern River Gas Transmission Co. v. Coastal Corp.*, 899 F.2d 1458, 1460 (5th Cir. 1990)); see also *Veeck v. S. Bldg. Code Cong. Int’l Inc.*, 241 F.3d 398, 407 (5th Cir. 2001) (“In this circuit, the merger doctrine has been applied to the question whether a work was copyrightable at the time of its creation, preventing a copyright from attaching in the first place, rather than as an infringement defense focusing on merger at the time of copying.”); *Yankee Candle Co. v. Bridgewater Candle Co.*, 259 F.3d 25, 35 (1st Cir. 2001); *Morrissey v. Procter & Gamble Co.*, 379 F.2d 675, 678 (1st Cir. 1967). That case law, however, does not definitely hold that merger is not also an appropriate consideration in the context of the “copying” prong of the *prima facie* case.

Many cases, including ones from both the First and Fifth Circuits, analyze merger arguments in the context of the “copying” prong of the infringement analysis. See, e.g., *Yankee Candle Co.*, 259 F.3d at 36; *Eng’g Dynamics, Inc. v. Structural Software, Inc.*, 26 F.3d 1335, 1345 (5th Cir. 1994), opinion supplemented on denial of reh’g, 46 F.3d 408 (5th Cir. 1995). See also *Gates Rubber Co. v. Bando Chem. Indus., Ltd.*, 9 F.3d 823, 836 (10th Cir. 1993) (applying merger

1 in the context of the “filtering” step in the “abstraction-filtration-comparison” procedure often  
 2 employed in cases involving alleged infringement of nonliteral elements of computer software).

3 There are also other circuit-court opinions that discuss the defendant’s arguments  
 4 concerning merger in the section of the opinion labeled “defenses.” See, e.g., John G. Danielson,  
 5 Inc. v. Winchester-Conant Props., Inc., 322 F.3d 26, 42-43 (1st Cir. 2003). Those opinions do not  
 6 contain any analysis or reflection on whether merger is a defense or who bears the burden of proof  
 7 on the issue of merger.

8 Sometimes, courts are not specific on why merger results in a rejection of the plaintiff’s  
 9 infringement claim: a failure to have a copyrighted work or a failure to demonstrate copying of  
 10 protected expression. See Ellison Educ. Equip., Inc. v. Tekservices, Inc., 903 F. Supp. 1350, 1360  
 11 (D. Neb. 1995) (“There are extremely limited ways in which to depict a candy cane and still be able  
 12 to express the idea. Therefore, an attempt to copyright the expression of a candy cane is essentially  
 13 an attempt to copyright the idea. Because plaintiff cannot appropriate the idea of a candy cane, the  
 14 Court concludes that defendant has not engaged in copyright infringement of plaintiff’s design.”).

15 In *Kay Berry, Inc. v. Taylor Gifts, Inc.*, 421 F.3d 199, 209 (3d Cir. 2005), the court  
 16 articulated a burden-shifting component related to a defense argument concerning merger, stating  
 17 that the plaintiff was “entitled to the opportunity to demonstrate” that the work at issue was not  
 18 “the unavoidable expression of a common idea.”

19 In addition to the First Circuit case cited in Comment g, *Yankee Candle Co. v. Bridgewater*  
 20 *Candle Co.*, 259 F.3d 25, 34 n.5 (1st Cir. 2001), cases that have indicated that expression that has  
 21 merged with unprotectable elements can be the basis for a finding of infringement if there is  
 22 identical copying can be found in the Ninth and Seventh Circuits. See, e.g., *Sid & Marty Krofft*  
 23 *Television Prods., Inc. v. McDonald’s Corp.*, 562 F.2d 1157, 1168 (9th Cir. 1977) (“[w]hen idea  
 24 and expression coincide, there will be protection against nothing other than identical copying of the  
 25 work.”); see also *Frybarger v. IBM Corp.*, 812 F.2d 525, 530 (9th Cir. 1987); *Atari, Inc. v. N. Am.*  
 26 *Philips Consumer Elecs. Corp.*, 672 F.2d 607, 616 (7th Cir. 1982) (“where idea and expression are  
 27 indistinguishable, the copyright will protect against only identical copying”); *Reed-Union Corp. v.*  
 28 *Turtle Wax, Inc.*, 77 F.3d 909, 914 (7th Cir. 1996); *Incredible Techs. v. Virtual Techs.*, 400 F.3d  
 29 1007, 1014 (7th Cir. 2005). As noted in Comment g, those cases are problematic, given the  
 30 Copyright Act’s command that “in no case” should copyright protection extend to unprotected  
 31 elements. 17 U.S.C. § 102(b). However, more recent opinions in the First and Seventh Circuits  
 32 reject comparison in the substantial-similarity analysis of elements of the copyrighted work that  
 33 have merged with unprotectable elements, and instead require copying of protected elements, see  
 34 *Design Basics, LLC v. Kerstiens Homes & Designs, Inc.*, 1 F.4th 502, 503 (7th Cir. 2021), or have  
 35 expressly stated that “the merger doctrine will, where applicable, prevent copyright protection to a  
 36 work.” *Soc’y of Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Inc. v. Gregory*, 689 F.3d 29, 53 (1st Cir. 2012).

37 Illustration 3 is based on *Thimbleberries, Inc. v. C & F Enterprises, Inc.*, 142 F. Supp. 2d  
 38 1132, 1138 (D. Minn. 2001). “[A]s Thimbleberries easily demonstrates, the pattern which it seeks  
 39 to protect represents only one of many ways to express a quilted wreath design. Thimbleberries’  
 40 counsel presents by affidavit at least nine other wreath patterns for quilters, all of which markedly

1 differ from the Countryside Wreath not only in their arrangement of squares and triangles (and in  
 2 other instances, octagons and rectangular bars), but also in the shape and design of the center  
 3 opening and the presence, design and positioning of the bow and other decorative additions.”).

4 An example of a court analyzing whether there was any original expression in the selection,  
 5 coordination, or arrangement of elements that had merged with unprotectable elements (and  
 6 finding none) is *BellSouth Advertising and Publishing Corporation v. Donnelley Information  
 7 Publishing, Inc.*, 999 F.2d 1436, 1444 (11th Cir. 1993) (“the elements of selection, coordination  
 8 and arrangement identified by the district court, and purportedly copied by Donnelley, as a matter  
 9 of law, do not display the originality required to merit copyright protection.”).

10       *h. The scènes à faire doctrine in the context of the prima facie case of infringement.* For  
 11 examples of courts deciding that elements in a work were *scènes à faire* without additional  
 12 evidence, see *Frye v. YMCA Camp Kitaki*, 617 F.3d 1005, 1008 (8th Cir. 2010) (referring to the  
 13 elements as “required or at least standard to the plays’ shared hero-on-a-quest plot, medieval  
 14 theme, and summer campfire setting” without reference to any specific examples); *Stromback v.  
 15 New Line Cinema*, 384 F.3d 283, 296 (6th Cir. 2004) (referring to the elements of the work as  
 16 “common themes and ideas throughout literature” without considering any specific evidence or  
 17 examples in which those common themes and ideas occur); *Cavalier v. Random House, Inc.*, 297  
 18 F.3d 815, 824 (9th Cir. 2002) (referring to the “general premise of a child, invited by a moon-type  
 19 character, who takes a journey through the night sky and returns safely to bed to fall asleep” as a  
 20 “basic plot idea” without consulting additional evidence from the parties); *Hoehling v. Universal  
 21 City Studios, Inc.*, 618 F.2d 972, 979 (2d Cir. 1980) (concluding that the “claimed similarities  
 22 relate to random duplications of phrases and sequences of events” and are “merely scenes a faire”  
 23 because it is “virtually impossible to write about a particular historical era or fictional theme  
 24 without employing certain ‘stock’ or standard literary devices,” but not considering examples of  
 25 those claimed similarities that occur elsewhere); *Warner Bros. Inc. v. Am. Broad. Cos., Inc.*, 654  
 26 F.2d 204, 207 (2d Cir. 1981) (superheroes); *Whitehead v. Paramount Pictures Corp.*, 53 F. Supp.  
 27 2d 38, 46-47 (D.D.C. 1999) (police-car chase scenes in action movies).

28       *i. Substantial similarity.* The articulation of the observer varies in the case law. See, e.g.,  
 29 *Kay Berry, Inc. v. Taylor Gifts, Inc.* 421 F.3d 199, 208 (3d Cir. 2005) (“the fact-finder must  
 30 decide . . . with the perspective of the ‘lay observer,’ whether the copying was ‘illicit,’ or ‘an  
 31 unlawful appropriation’ of the copyrighted work”) (internal citation omitted); *Universal Athletic  
 32 Sales Co. v. Salkeld*, 511 F.2d 904, 907 (3d Cir. 1975) (discussing the response of “the ordinary lay  
 33 person.”). Both the Second Circuit and the Eleventh Circuit commonly use the articulation of an  
 34 “average lay observer.” See, e.g., *Peter F. Gaito Architecture, LLC v. Simone Dev. Corp.*, 602 F.3d  
 35 57, 66 (2d Cir. 2010) (quoting *Knitwaves, Inc. v. Lollytogs Ltd. (Inc.)*, 71 F.3d 996, 1002 (2d Cir.  
 36 1995)); *Oravec v. Sunny Isles Luxury Ventures, L.C.*, 527 F.3d 1218, 1224 (11th Cir. 2008)  
 37 (quoting *Original Appalachian Artworks, Inc. v. Toy Loft, Inc.*, 684 F.2d 821, 829 (11th Cir. 1982)).

38       The average observer sometimes is described as the target audience for the works at issue.  
 39 See, e.g., *Knitwaves*, 71 F.3d at 1005 (describing the view of the differences and similarities in  
 40 fabric designs on sweaters as concerning “the average observer—or, more specifically, to the

average consumer of these sweaters"). Employing the perspective of the audience for the work can also be seen in cases that do not, necessarily, have specific characteristics. See, e.g., VMG SalSoul, LLC v. Ciccone, 824 F.3d 871, 874 (9th Cir. 2016) (gauging whether the "average audience" would recognize the appropriation, quoting Newton v. Diamond, 388 F.3d 1189, 1192 (9th Cir. 2004)). The idea of focusing on the lay audience because of the economic consequences can be seen in the seminal case of Arnstein v. Porter, 154 F.2d 464 (2d Cir. 1946), in which the court observed that even if there had been proof of copying in fact:

[T]hat is not enough; for there can be "permissible copying," copying which is not illicit. . . . The plaintiff's legally protected interest is . . . his interest in the potential financial returns from his compositions which derive from the lay public's approbation of his efforts. The question, therefore, is whether defendant took from plaintiff's works so much of what is pleasing to the ears of lay listeners, who comprise the audience for whom such popular music is composed, that defendant wrongfully appropriated something which belongs to the plaintiff.

*Id.* at 472.

Cases using a more discerning observer test include *Boisson v. Banian, Ltd.*, 273 F.3d 262, 271 (2d Cir. 2001); *Tufenkian Imp./Exp. Ventures, Inc. v. Einstein Moomjy, Inc.*, 338 F.3d 127, 130 (2d Cir. 2003); *Folio Impressions, Inc. v. Byer Cal.*, 937 F.2d 759, 766 (2d Cir. 1991) ("since only some of the design enjoys copyright protection, the observer's inspection must be more discerning"). The Ninth Circuit has also noted that although "the Second Circuit's 'ordinary observer' and 'more discerning ordinary observer' tests differ somewhat from our two-part extrinsic/intrinsic test for substantial similarity, its reasoning, at least in the context of fabric designs, is persuasive, and it guides our comparison of the designs in this case." *L.A. Printex Indus., Inc. v. Aeropostale, Inc.*, 676 F.3d 841, 850 (9th Cir. 2012). For a discussion of the extrinsic/intrinsic test, see Comment *j*.

Courts have acknowledged that what makes similarities sufficiently "substantial" varies from one case to the next. "We do not have a well-defined standard for assessing when similarity in selection and arrangement becomes 'substantial,' and in truth no hard-and-fast rule could be devised to guide determinations that will necessarily turn on the unique facts of each case." *Rentmeester v. Nike, Inc.*, 883 F.3d 1111, 1121 (9th Cir. 2018). The First Circuit provided an interesting summary of potential considerations:

Slight or trivial variations between works will not preclude a finding of infringement under the ordinary observer test. The sine qua non of the ordinary observer test is the overall similarities rather than the minute differences between the two works. At times, the existence of only minor differences may itself suggest copying, indicating that the infringer attempted to avoid liability by contributing only trivial variations. This is not to suggest that an artist cannot avoid infringement by intentionally making substantial alterations in the design of a copyrighted work so as to provide a substantially different expression of the idea embodied in the copyrighted work. Yet, it is only when the points of dissimilarity not only exceed

the points of similarity, but indicate that the remaining points of similarity are (within the context of plaintiff's work) of minimal importance either quantitatively or qualitatively, that no infringement results.

*Concrete Mach. Co. v. Classic Lawn Ornaments, Inc.*, 843 F.2d 600, 608 (1st Cir. 1988) (internal quotations, citations, and alterations omitted).

Comment *i* identifies that a substantial similarity may be found even if the defendant's work, as a whole, is not substantially similar to the plaintiff's copyrighted work, as a whole, if there has been sufficient verbatim or literal copying of parts of the plaintiff's work. The Nimmer treatise labels this "fragmented literal" similarity (for example, some but not all lines of dialogue copied from a play and used in a movie), as distinguished from another type of similarity, which it labels "comprehensive nonliteral" similarity (for example, detailed plot and characters copied from a book and used in a movie, without any copying of any of the actual text of the book). MELVILLE B. NIMMER & DAVID NIMMER, *NIMMER ON COPYRIGHT* § 13.03[A]. Some courts have quoted the Nimmer treatise for those labels. See, e.g., *Twin Peaks Prods., Inc. v. Publ'ns Int'l, Ltd.*, 996 F.2d 1366, 1372 (2d Cir. 1993); *Jacobsen v. Deseret Book Co.*, 287 F.3d 936, 943 (10th Cir. 2002) (noting that "[b]ecause '[n]o easy rule of thumb can be stated as to the quantum of fragmented literal similarity permitted without crossing the line of substantial similarity,' whether works are substantially similar is 'a classic jury question.'") (quoting *NIMMER ON COPYRIGHT* § 13.03[A][2]).

*j. The intrinsic and extrinsic tests developed by the Ninth Circuit.* The Fourth and Eighth Circuits have also, at times, employed the "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" tests. *Universal Furniture Int'l, Inc. v. Collezione Europa USA, Inc.*, 618 F.3d 417, 435 (4th Cir. 2010) (citing *Lyons P'ship, L.P. v. Morris Costumes, Inc.*, 243 F.3d 789, 801 (4th Cir. 2001)); *Frye v. YMCA Camp Kitaki*, 617 F.3d 1005, 1008 (8th Cir. 2010) (citing *Hartman v. Hallmark Cards, Inc.*, 833 F.2d 117, 120 (8th Cir. 1987)).

In *Rentmeester v. Nike, Inc.*, 883 F.3d 1111, 1118 (9th Cir. 2018), Ninth Circuit stated that "only" the extrinsic test can be decided as a matter of law, and thus it is the only test relevant in ruling on a motion to dismiss for lack of improper appropriation. However, the case cited for that proposition, *McCulloch v. Albert E. Price, Inc.*, 823 F.2d 316, 319 (9th Cir. 1987), states that extrinsic similarity "may often be decided as a matter of law," and that "the intrinsic test 'is uniquely suited for determination by the trier of fact. . . .' (quoting *Sid & Marty Krofft Television Prods., Inc. v. McDonald's Corp.*, 562 F.2d 1157, 1166 (9th Cir. 1977)))." *McCulloch* does not say that there can never be a case in which intrinsic similarity can be decided as a matter of law. *McCulloch*, 823 F.2d at 319. Additionally, the case that is the genesis of the extrinsic and intrinsic similarity tests states that the extrinsic test "may often be decided as a matter of law." *Sid & Marty Krofft Television Prods., Inc. v. McDonald's Corp.*, 562 F.2d 1157, 1164 (9th Cir. 1977) (emphasis added).

Comment *j* cautions against reliance on earlier Ninth Circuit cases because those cases described the intrinsic test as examining similarity in the ideas of the two works, and the extrinsic test as examining similarity in their expression. See, e.g., *McCulloch v. Albert E. Price, Inc.*, 823 F.2d 316, 319 (9th Cir. 1987). A similarity in the idea of the copyrighted work and the idea of the

1 alleged infringing use is not, however, required for there to be improper appropriation. What is  
 2 required is a similarity between the defendant's infringing use and the protected *expression* in the  
 3 plaintiff's copyrighted work. The articulation of the extrinsic test as focused on the similarity of  
 4 "ideas" stems from the case that birthed the extrinsic and intrinsic similarity tests, *Sid & Marty*  
 5 *Krofft Television Prods., Inc. v. McDonald's Corp.*, 562 F.2d 1157, 1164 (9th Cir. 1977). In that  
 6 case, the court provided as an example of when there would not be a "similarity of ideas"—which  
 7 it calls the objective test—a nude statue, which the court stated embodies the simple idea of "a  
 8 plaster recreation of a nude human figure." *Id.* It then compared that to "[a] statue of a horse or a  
 9 painting of a nude," which the court stated "would not embody this idea and therefore could not  
 10 infringe." *Id.* While subsequent decisions initially repeated the description of the extrinsic test as  
 11 involving an inquiry into the similarity of "ideas," see, e.g., *Litchfield v. Spielberg*, 736 F.2d 1352,  
 12 1356 (9th Cir. 1984), later decisions dropped that language in favor of other language from the *Sid*  
 13 & *Marty Krofft Television Prods.* decision that focused on the objective details of the works. That  
 14 language explains the extrinsic test as focusing on "specific criteria which can be listed and  
 15 analyzed. Such criteria include the type of artwork involved, the materials used, the subject matter,  
 16 and the setting for the subject." *Sid & Marty Krofft Television Prods.*, 562 F.2d at 1164. See also  
 17 *L.A. Printex Indus., Inc. v. Aeropostale, Inc.*, 676 F.3d 841, 852 (9th Cir. 2012) (noting that as the  
 18 court's "precedent has evolved, the extrinsic test considers the objective expressive similarities").  
 19 Thus, the earlier articulations of the extrinsic test are confusing, potentially unhelpful, and not  
 20 consistent with modern copyright-infringement analysis.

21       k. *Improper appropriation requires copying of substantial, non-de minimis amount of*  
 22 *protectable expression.* The de minimis doctrine stems from the legal maxim *de minimis non curat*  
 23 *lex*—"the law does not concern itself with trifles." *Newton v. Diamond*, 388 F.3d 1189, 1193 (9th  
 24 Cir. 2004). See also *Castle Rock Ent., Inc. v. Carol Publ'g Grp., Inc.*, 150 F.3d 132, 138 (2d Cir.  
 25 1998) (citing *Ringgold v. Black Ent. Television, Inc.*, 126 F.3d 70, 75 (2d Cir. 1997)); *Tufenkian*  
 26 *Import/Export Ventures, Inc. v. Einstein Moonjy, Inc.*, 338 F.3d 127, 131 (2d Cir. 2003) (quoting  
 27 *Castle Rock Ent., Inc. v. Carol Publ'g Grp., Inc.*, 150 F.3d 132, 137-138 (2d Cir. 1998)); *Gottlieb*  
 28 *Dev. LLC v. Paramount Pictures Corp.*, 590 F. Supp. 2d 625, 631 (S.D.N.Y. 2008). See *Warner*  
 29 *Bros. Inc. v. Am. Broad. Cos., Inc.*, 720 F.2d 231, 242 (2d Cir. 1983).

30       The Ninth Circuit has discussed the application of the de minimis concept and has  
 31 concluded that it "is properly used to analyze whether so little of a copyrighted work has been  
 32 copied that the allegedly infringing work is not substantially similar to the copyrighted work and  
 33 is thus non-infringing." *Bell*, 12 F.4th at 1068. The First Circuit has termed de minimis copying as  
 34 "the converse of substantial similarity." *Mgmt. Sys., Inc. v. ASP. Consulting LLC*, 560 F.3d 53,  
 35 59 (1st Cir. 2009). This description of de minimis copying as the "converse" of substantial  
 36 similarity could lead one to believe that so long as the copying is more than de minimis, the  
 37 copying must be sufficiently substantial. This, however, is not correct. Copying that is more than  
 38 de minimis can, nonetheless, not be enough for there to be substantial similarity.

39       In describing the standard for determining what amount of copying qualifies as de minimis,  
 40 in *Bell v. Wilmott Storage Services*, the Ninth Circuit quoted from *Fisher v. Dees*, 794 F.2d 432

(9th Cir. 1986): “a taking is considered de minimis only if it is so *meager* and *fragmentary* that the average audience member would not recognize the appropriation.” *Bell*, 12 F.4th 1074-1075 (emphasis in *Bell*). Then it added its own interpretation: “i.e., the works could not be said to be substantially similar.” Id. Other courts have not used the standard of “recognizable” to test for de minimis, and have found uses to qualify as de minimis even when the plaintiff’s work is clearly, albeit fleetingly, recognizable. See, e.g., *Gottlieb Dev. LLC v. Paramount Pictures Corp.*, 590 F. Supp. 2d 625, 631 (S.D.N.Y. 2008). Additionally, what is required to satisfy the improper-appropriation element of the *prima facie* case of infringement is “a substantial similarity,” articulated in subsection (a) of the black letter of this Section. While that substantial similarity can be between the defendant’s work and the plaintiff’s copyrighted work as a whole, as noted in Comment *i*, a substantial similarity can also be shown on the basis of literal or verbatim copying of a substantial amount of protected material, but of less than the whole work.

In order to meet the required substantial similarity, the Second Circuit has also stated that there must be copying that is both quantitatively and qualitatively sufficient to support the legal conclusion of actionable copying. See *Castle Rock Ent., Inc. v. Carol Pub. Grp., Inc.*, 150 F.3d 132, 138 (2d Cir. 1998) (quoting *Ringgold v. Black Ent. Television, Inc.*, 126 F.3d 70, 75 (2d Cir. 1997)). This articulation can be viewed as a different way to state that the copying must be of protectable expression (the qualitative component) and the copying must involve more than de minimis amount of material (the quantitative component). See *id.* The Second Circuit often uses the quantitative/qualitative formulation in the context of discussing a claim of de minimis copying. It should not be taken to mean that copying of protected expression of more than a de minimis amount is sufficiently substantial to constitute improper appropriation.

For cases discussing the de minimis doctrine in the context of allegations of infringement of copyrighted computer software, see *Situation Mgmt. Sys., Inc. v. ASP. Consulting LLC*, 560 F.3d 53, 59 (1st Cir. 2009) (noting that “de minimis copying is best viewed not as a separate defense to copyright infringement but rather as a statement regarding the strength of the plaintiff’s proof of substantial similarity.”); *Computer Assocs. Int’l, Inc. v. Altai, Inc.*, 982 F.2d 693, 715 (2d Cir. 1992) (affirming the district court’s ruling that copied, copyrightable elements of a computer program were de minimis).

In the *Sandoval* case, the Second Circuit stated that: “To establish that the infringement of a copyright is de minimis, and therefore not actionable, the alleged infringer must demonstrate that the copying of the protected material is so trivial ‘as to fall below the quantitative threshold of substantial similarity, which is always a required element of actionable copying.’” *Sandoval v. New Line Cinema Corp.*, 147 F.3d 215, 217 (2d Cir. 1998) (quoting *Ringgold*, 126 F.3d at 74). While this appears to place the burden of proof on the defendant, the case involved an appeal from the grant of the defendant’s motion for summary judgment. In that context, the defendant was seeking to negate the plaintiff’s infringement case.

There are many examples of courts applying the de minimis doctrine in the context of analyzing whether there is the required substantial similarity to support a finding of infringement, and often using the phrase “de minimis copying.” See, e.g., *id.*; *Situation Mgmt. Sys., Inc.*, 560

1 F.3d at 59. Comment *k* notes that while in *Bell* the Ninth Circuit expressly confined the de minimis  
 2 doctrine in copyright law to the context of the substantial-similarity inquiry, the general legal  
 3 principle of *de minimis non curat lex* (“the law cares not for trifles”) may be applicable in other  
 4 contexts. In reaching its conclusion in *Bell*, the Ninth Circuit discussed several opinions from other  
 5 circuits in which those courts analyzed assertions that the copying was de minimis in the context  
 6 of determining whether a substantial similarity had been shown. *Bell*, 12 F.4th at 1076-1077.  
 7 However, none of those cases exclude the possibility that the general legal principle of *de minimis*  
 8 *non curat lex*, as opposed to a doctrine of “de minimis copying,” could be applicable to other types  
 9 of trivial copying, and the Second Circuit has endorsed that possibility:

10       The de minimis doctrine is rarely discussed in copyright opinions because  
 11 suits are rarely brought over trivial instances of copying. Nonetheless, it is an  
 12 important aspect of the law of copyright. Trivial copying is a significant part of  
 13 modern life. Most honest citizens in the modern world frequently engage, without  
 14 hesitation, in trivial copying that, but for the de minimis doctrine, would technically  
 15 constitute a violation of law. We do not hesitate to make a photocopy of a letter  
 16 from a friend to show to another friend, or of a favorite cartoon to post on the  
 17 refrigerator. Parents in Central Park photograph their children perched on José de  
 18 Creeft’s Alice in Wonderland sculpture. We record television programs aired while  
 19 we are out, so as to watch them at a more convenient hour. Waiters at a restaurant  
 20 sing “Happy Birthday” at a patron’s table. When we do such things, it is not that  
 21 we are breaking the law but unlikely to be sued given the high cost of litigation.  
 22 Because of the de minimis doctrine, in trivial instances of copying, we are in fact  
 23 not breaking the law. If a copyright owner were to sue the makers of trivial copies,  
 24 judgment would be for the defendants. The case would be dismissed because trivial  
 25 copying is not an infringement.

26 On *Davis v. The Gap, Inc.*, 246 F.3d 152, 173 (2d Cir. 2001). See also *Ringgold v. Black Ent.*  
 27 *Television, Inc.*, 126 F.3d 70, 74 (2d Cir. 1997) (acknowledging that “de minimis in the copyright  
 28 context can mean what it means in most legal contexts: a technical violation of a right so trivial  
 29 that the law will not impose legal consequences”); *Knickerbocker Toy Co. v. Azrak–Hamway*  
 30 *Int’l, Inc.*, 668 F.2d 699, 703 (2d Cir. 1982) (denying relief under de minimis doctrine when  
 31 defendant had made a copy of plaintiff’s work, but copy was never used).

32       The *Wisconsin Department of Revenue* decision, quoted in Comment *k*, did not involve a  
 33 claim of copyright infringement, but rather involved a state taxing statute, which, like the  
 34 Copyright Act, did not have a statutory exception for de minimis violations. *Wisconsin Dep’t of*  
 35 *Revenue v. William Wrigley, Jr., Co.*, 505 U.S. 214, 231 (1992). In that case, the U.S. Supreme  
 36 Court rejected the argument that the general de minimis principle cannot be applied when a statute  
 37 does not contain an express, de minimis exception.

38       *I. Approaches to similarity when plaintiff’s work contains a significant proportion of*  
 39 *unprotected elements.* See *Universal Athletic Sales Co. v. Salkeld*, 511 F.2d 904, 908 (3d Cir.

1 1975) (“[B]etween the extremes of conceded creativity and independent efforts amounting to no  
 2 more than the trivial, the test of appropriation necessarily varies.”).

3 Many Circuits have noted that when the copyrighted work involves only a minimal amount  
 4 of protected expression, the plaintiff’s burden of proving improper appropriation is a heavy one.  
 5 For example, in *Kay Berry, Inc. v. Taylor Gifts, Inc.* 421 F.3d 199, 209 (3d Cir. 2005), the Third  
 6 Circuit articulated that heavy burden, quoting from a First Circuit opinion (*Concrete Mach. Co. v.*  
 7 *Classic Lawn Ornaments, Inc.*, 843 F.2d 600, 606-607 (1st Cir. 1988)) that, in turn, quoted from a  
 8 Ninth Circuit opinion (*Sid & Marty Krofft Television v. McDonald’s Corp.*, 562 F.2d 1157, 1167  
 9 (9th Cir. 1977)). See also *First Am. Artificial Flowers, Inc. v. Joseph Markovits, Inc.*, 342 F. Supp.  
 10 178, 186 (S.D.N.Y. 1972) (“[A] copyright on a work which bears practically a photographic  
 11 likeness to the natural article . . . is likely to prove a relatively weak copyright. This is not to say  
 12 that, as a matter of law, infringement of such a copyright cannot be inferred from mere similarity  
 13 of appearance, but only that the plaintiff’s burden will be that much more difficult to sustain  
 14 because of the intrinsic similarities of the copyrighted and accused works.”).

15 In a concurring opinion, Judge Watford went so far as to state that the “substantial-  
 16 similarity framework applies only to works with broad copyright protection, while the virtual-  
 17 identity standard governs thin copyrights.” *Skidmore*, 952 F.3d at 1080 (Watford, J., concurring).

18 *m. Use of expert testimony in proving or disproving improper appropriation.* In the *Dawson*  
 19 case cited in Comment *m*, the Fourth Circuit explained the need for experts in certain cases:

20 [A] district court must consider the nature of the intended audience of the plaintiff’s  
 21 work. If, as will most often be the case, the lay public fairly represents the intended  
 22 audience, the court should apply the lay observer formulation of the ordinary  
 23 observer test. However, if the intended audience is more narrow in that it possesses  
 24 specialized expertise, relevant to the purchasing decision, that lay people would  
 25 lack, the court’s inquiry should focus on whether a member of the intended  
 26 audience would find the two works to be substantially similar. Such an inquiry may  
 27 include, and no doubt in many cases will require, admission of testimony from  
 28 members of the intended audience or, possibly, from those who possess expertise  
 29 with reference to the tastes and perceptions of the intended audience.

30 *Dawson v. Hinshaw Music Inc.*, 905 F.2d 731, 736 (4th Cir. 1990). In addition to the Ninth Circuit,  
 31 the First Circuit has noted the routine use of experts in cases involving musical works. *Johnson v.*  
 32 *Gordon*, 409 F.3d 12, 18 (1st Cir. 2005).

33 The D.C. Circuit has also noted “[a] growing number of courts now permit expert  
 34 testimony regarding substantial similarity in cases involving computer programs, reasoning that  
 35 such testimony is needed due to the complexity and unfamiliarity of computer programs to most  
 36 members of the public . . . .” *Sturdza v. United Arab Emirates*, 281 F.3d 1287, 1300-1301 (D.C.  
 37 Cir. 2002).

38 Additional opinions articulating the prohibition on using expert testimony on the intrinsic-  
 39 similarity analysis because the intrinsic test examines the works for similarity of expression from  
 40 the standpoint of the ordinary, reasonable observer, with no expert assistance, include *Skidmore*

1 as Tr. for Randy Craig Wolfe Tr. v. Led Zeppelin, 952 F.3d 1051, 1064 (9th Cir. 2020); Jada Toys,  
2 Inc. v. Mattel, Inc., 518 F.3d 628, 637 (9th Cir. 2008); Apple Comput., Inc. v. Microsoft Corp., 35  
3 F.3d 1435, 1442 (9th Cir. 1994); Funky Films, Inc. v. Time Warner Ent. Co., L.P. 462 F.3d 1072,] 1077  
4 (9th Cir. 2006); Olson v. Nat'l Broad. Co., Inc., 855 F.2d 1446, 1448-1449 (9th Cir. 1988).

5 In an early Ninth Circuit case involving computer software, Judge Snead suggested that  
6 expert testimony should be allowed to aid juries in assessing intrinsic similarities in computer  
7 programs. Brown Bag Software v. Symantec Corp., 960 F.2d 1465, 1478 (9th Cir. 1992) (Sneed,  
8 J., concurring). The Ninth Circuit has also permitted the use of a court-appointed expert special  
9 master in a case involving computer software. See Johnson Controls, Inc. v. Phoenix Control Sys.,  
10 Inc., 886 F.2d 1173, 1176 (9th Cir. 1989). The Ninth Circuit more recently has held in a computer-  
11 software case that expert opinion alone cannot be used to satisfy the “burden of proof production  
12 under the intrinsic test.” Antonick v. Elec. Arts, Inc., 841 F.3d 1062, 1067 (9th Cir. 2016). In  
13 *Antonick*, the court distinguished the case at bar from another Ninth Circuit opinion “holding  
14 expert testimony admissible in a case in which the relevant works themselves were in  
15 evidence . . . .” Id. at n.4 (citing Lucky Break Wishbone Corp. v. Sears Roebuck & Co., 373 F.  
16 App’x 752, 755-756 (9th Cir. 2010)). In a footnote in *Antonick*, the Ninth Circuit also noted the  
17 plaintiff’s argument that “experts should be allowed to help juries assess the holistic similarity of  
18 technical works such as computer programs,” but the court concluded that, given circuit precedent  
19 barring expert testimony to aid in the intrinsic analysis, the defendant’s argument “must be  
20 addressed to an en banc court.” *Antonick*, 841 F.3d 1062, 1067 n.4.

1   **§ 7.07. Violation of the Attribution and Integrity Rights Granted to Author of a Statutory  
2   Work of Visual Art**

3           **(a) To prove a claim of a violation of any of the author's rights of attribution or rights  
4   of integrity, a plaintiff must demonstrate that:**

5               **(1) he or she is an author of the work, and**

6               **(2) the work is a “work of visual art.”**

7           **Depending on the nature of the claim, the plaintiff must also prove the elements set  
8   forth in subsection (b), (c), or (d).**

9           **(b) To prove a claim of violation of an author's right of attribution, the author of a  
10   “work of visual art” must demonstrate that the defendant:**

11               **(1) prevented the author from claiming authorship of a “work of visual art”;**

12               **(2) used the author's name as the author of a “work of visual art” that the  
13   author did not create; or**

14               **(3) used the author's name as the author of a “work of visual art” when the  
15   work has been distorted, mutilated, or otherwise modified in a manner that is  
16   prejudicial to the author's honor or reputation.**

17           **(c) To prove a claim of violation of an author's integrity right against modification of  
18   a “work of visual art,” the author of the work must demonstrate that the defendant  
19   (1) intentionally (2) distorted, mutilated, or otherwise modified the work (3) in a way that is  
20   prejudicial to the author's honor or reputation.**

21           **(d) An author seeking an injunction to prevent destruction of a “work of visual art”  
22   must prove that the work is of recognized stature. An author seeking damages for an act of  
23   destruction that has already occurred must further show that the defendant (1) destroyed  
24   such a work (2) intentionally or through gross negligence.**

25   **Source Note:**

26           17 U.S.C. §§ 101, 106A, 113(d), 411, 412, 501, 502, 504, and 505.

27   **Comment:**

28           *a. Generally.* Section 6.11 of this Restatement discusses the five distinct rights protected  
29   under 17 U.S.C. § 106A, the first three of which are commonly grouped under the label “right of  
30   attribution,” and the last two under the label “right of integrity.” Because these rights are only

1 granted to authors, and extend only to works that meet the statutory definition of a “work of visual  
2 art,” 17 U.S.C. §§ 101 and 106A, subsection (a) of the black letter of this Section states that to  
3 prevail on a claim that any of those rights were violated, the plaintiff must first establish that (1) he  
4 or she is the author (2) of a “work of visual art.” See H.R. Rep. No. 101-514 (1990), reprinted as  
5 1990 U.S.C.C.A.N. 6915, 6923 (“Consistent with the general rule that the plaintiff has the burden  
6 of establishing the basic elements of a cause of action, the author ordinarily has the burden of  
7 showing that the particular work falls within the definition set forth in the bill.”).

8 The statutory definition of what constitutes a “work of visual art” is discussed in § 6.11,  
9 Comment *b*, of this Restatement. Because the definition of “work of visual art” excludes works  
10 made for hire, subsection (a) of the black letter of this Section uses “he or she” to signal that the  
11 author must be a human individual. See also § 6, Comment *c*, of this Restatement (discussing the  
12 exclusion of nonhumans from authorship status under the Copyright Act).

13 As in § 6.11, this Section uses the term “statutory work of visual art” to signal that only a  
14 subset of the items that might ordinarily be labeled as works of visual art are protected under the  
15 Visual Artists Rights Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-650, 104 Stat. 5089, 5128 (VARA). As  
16 indicated in § 6.11(b), and discussed in § 6.11, Comment *g*, of this Restatement, the rights granted  
17 to authors of statutory works of visual art are not transferable (although they may be waived). 17  
18 U.S.C. § 106A(e). Thus, generally only authors can be in a position to assert violations of 17  
19 U.S.C. § 106A.

20 Subsection (b) of the black letter of this Section sets out the additional elements that a  
21 plaintiff must demonstrate to prevail on a claim for violation of one of the three distinct rights of  
22 attribution granted in 17 U.S.C. § 106A(a)(1)(A), (a)(1)(B), and (a)(2). “Prevented the author from  
23 claiming authorship of a ‘work of visual art’” in subsection (b)(1) of the black letter reflects the  
24 statutory provision that grants the right “to claim authorship of that work,” 17 U.S.C.  
25 § 106A(a)(1)(A). For example, removing the name of an author who has claimed authorship of a  
26 statutory work of visual art by putting their name on such a work would amount to preventing the  
27 author from claiming authorship. The formulation “used the author’s name as the author of a ‘work  
28 of visual art’ that the author did not create” in subsection (b)(2) of the black letter reflects the  
29 statutory provision contained in 17 U.S.C. § 106A(a)(1)(B). The formulation “used the author’s  
30 name as the author of a ‘work of visual art’ when the work has been distorted, mutilated, or

1 otherwise modified in a manner that is prejudicial to the author's honor or reputation" in subsection  
2 (b)(3) of the black letter reflects the statutory provision contained in 17 U.S.C. § 106A(a)(2).

3 Subsections (c) and (d) of the black letter of this Section set out the additional elements  
4 that a plaintiff must demonstrate to prevail on a claim for violation of one of the two distinct rights  
5 of integrity. Specifically, subsection (c) of the black letter reflects the statutory provision granting  
6 integrity rights against intentional distortion, mutilation, or modification of a statutory work of  
7 visual art, 17 U.S.C. § 106A(a)(3)(A), and explains that the plaintiff must establish that the  
8 defendant (1) intentionally (2) distorted, mutilated, or otherwise modified the work (3) in a way  
9 that is prejudicial to the author's honor or reputation.

10 Subsection (d) of the black letter reflects the statutory provision granting integrity rights  
11 against destruction of works of recognized stature, 17 U.S.C. § 106A(a)(3)(B), and explains that a  
12 plaintiff bringing a claim to prevent a destruction from occurring must establish that the statutory  
13 work of visual art is of recognized stature, as discussed in § 6.11, Comment *e*, of this Restatement.  
14 Subsection (d) of the black letter also reflects the statute's further requirements (in addition to  
15 recognized stature) for a claim based on an alleged destruction that has already occurred that the  
16 plaintiff must show that the defendant (1) destroyed the work (2) intentionally or through gross  
17 negligence.

18 *b. Burdens of proof.* Although the statute sets forth the elements required to establish a  
19 violation of any of the rights granted in 17 U.S.C. § 106A, it does not expressly identify the burden  
20 of proof on those elements. The legislative history indicates that Congress intended for the plaintiff  
21 to bear the burden of establishing those elements: "Consistent with the general rule that the plaintiff  
22 has the burden of establishing the basic elements of a cause of action, the author ordinarily has the  
23 burden of showing that the particular work falls within the definition set forth in the bill." H.R.  
24 Rep. No. 101-54, at 13. With respect to establishing, for example, that the work involved in the  
25 case is a "work of visual art," Congress explained that "a photographer will have the burden of  
26 showing that a photographic image is produced for exhibition purposes," as required by the  
27 statutory definition, and "a printmaker who creates a limited edition must show that the edition  
28 consists of 200 or fewer copies," as statutorily required. *Id.*

29 *c. Prejudice to honor or reputation.* Prejudice to honor and reputation is relevant to claims  
30 under both the rights of attribution and integrity. To prevail on a claim for a violation of the right  
31 described in subsection (b)(3) of the black letter of this Section, a plaintiff must demonstrate that

1 the defendant used the author's name as the author of a statutory work of visual art when the work  
2 has been distorted, mutilated, or otherwise modified in a manner that is prejudicial to the author's  
3 honor or reputation. To prevail on a claim of violation of the right described in subsection (c) of  
4 the black letter, the plaintiff must demonstrate that the defendant intentionally distorted, mutilated,  
5 or otherwise modified the work in a manner that is prejudicial to the author's honor or reputation.  
6 17 U.S.C. § 106A(a).

7 There are two potential ambiguities in the statutory text as to exactly when the need for the  
8 plaintiff to demonstrate prejudice to his or her honor or reputation arises. The first is that the  
9 statutory language "distortion, mutilation, or other modification" of the work "which would be  
10 prejudicial to [the author's] honor or reputation" is arguably grammatically unclear as to whether  
11 the requisite prejudice applies only to a "modification" or also to any "distortion" or "mutilation."  
12 After considering the legislative history, the First Circuit concluded that the "prejudice" requisite  
13 applied to all three acts, so that distortion or mutilation of a work of visual art would be actionable  
14 only if it would cause such prejudice. *Mass. Museum of Contemp. Art Found., Inc. v. Büchel*, 593  
15 F.3d 38, 53 (1st Cir. 2010). The court found that this interpretation was in keeping with the  
16 language of the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, the text of  
17 which informed the adoption of 17 U.S.C. § 106A. See § 6.11, Comment *a*, of this Restatement.

18 The second ambiguity in the statutory text concerns 17 U.S.C. § 106A(a)(3)(A)—stating  
19 that "any intentional distortion, mutilation, or modification of th[e] work is a violation" does not  
20 "explicitly require a showing of prejudice when the alteration already has occurred and damages,  
21 rather than injunctive relief, would be the appropriate remedy." *Mass. Museum*, 593 F.3d at 53.  
22 The First Circuit concluded that the prejudice requirement applied to both injunctive relief and  
23 claims for damages. See *Mass. Museum*, 593 F.3d at 54 ("Given the stated purpose of the  
24 legislation and the similar depiction of the integrity right in the Berne Convention, we conclude  
25 that Congress intended the prejudice requirement to apply to the right of integrity whether the  
26 remedy sought is injunctive relief or damages.").

27 Turning to the nature of the prejudice that a plaintiff must demonstrate, the legislative  
28 history suggests that the inquiry should "focus on the artistic or professional honor or reputation  
29 of the individual as embodied in the work that is protected," and "examine the way in which a  
30 work has been modified and the professional reputation of the author of the work." H.R. Rep. No.  
31 101-514, at 15, as reprinted in 1990 U.S.C.C.A.N. at 6925-6926 (footnotes omitted). In practice,

1 this means determining “whether such alteration would cause injury or damage to plaintiffs’ good  
2 name, public esteem, or reputation in the artistic community.” *Carter v. Helmsley-Spear, Inc.*, 861  
3 F. Supp. 303, 323 (S.D.N.Y. 1994), aff’d in part, vacated in part, rev’d in part, 71 F.3d 77 (2d Cir.  
4 1995). The plaintiff need not be well known or have preexisting standing in the community to  
5 claim harm to his or her reputation. See *id.* See also § 6.11, Comment *f*, of this Restatement,  
6 discussing the meaning of “prejudice to honor or reputation.”

7         *d. Intentional distortion, mutilation, or modification, and intentional or grossly negligent  
8 destruction.* The author has the right to “to prevent any intentional distortion, mutilation, or other  
9 modification of that work which would be prejudicial to his or her honor or reputation, and any  
10 intentional distortion, mutilation, or modification of that work.” 17 U.S.C. § 106A(a)(3)(A).  
11 Congress explained in the legislative history that:

12             [T]he right of integrity extends only to [ . . . ] acts or omissions [ . . . ] committed with  
13 respect to the work at issue. Thus, for example, while an author may assert the right  
14 where his or her work is destroyed in a fire caused for the purpose of collecting  
15 insurance on the work, the author may not assert the right where the fire is caused  
16 by someone accidentally forgetting to turn off a coffee pot.

17 H.R. Rep. No. 101-514, at 6926. Because the defendant’s state of mind is a statutory requirement,  
18 establishing the required mental state is an element of the plaintiff’s *prima facie* case.

19         In contrast to the statutory language of 17 U.S.C. § 106A(a)(3)(A), the language of 17  
20 U.S.C. § 106A(a)(3)(B) states that an author has the right “to prevent any destruction of a work of  
21 recognized stature, and any intentional or grossly negligent destruction” of such a work “is a  
22 violation of that right.” Because the language of 17 U.S.C. § 106A(a)(3)(B) states that the author  
23 has the right to “prevent any destruction of a work of recognized stature,” but then states that only  
24 an “intentional or grossly negligent destruction” is a “violation” of that right, the First Circuit has  
25 interpreted that provision to mean that while an author can sue for damages for the destruction of  
26 a work of recognized stature only if the destruction was intentional or grossly negligent, the author  
27 could sue for an injunction to prevent the threatened destruction of the work regardless of the  
28 mental state with which that destruction would occur. *Mass. Museum*, 593 F.3d at 55-56. As a  
29 result, a plaintiff seeking damages for a destruction that has already occurred would have to  
30 establish that the destruction was intentional or grossly negligent, while a plaintiff seeking to  
31 enjoin a proposed destruction would not need to establish the mental state with which the

1 destruction might occur. See Comment *e*. No other court appears to have disagreed with that  
2 interpretation, and subsection (d) of the black letter of this Section follows that approach.

3       *e. Available remedies.* Section 501(a) of the Copyright Act provides, in part, that:

4           Anyone who violates any of the exclusive rights of the copyright owner as provided  
5           by sections 106 through 122 [of the Copyright Act] or of the author as provided in  
6           section 106A(a), . . . is an infringer of the copyright or right of the author, as the  
7           case may be.

8       17 U.S.C. § 501(a). That section also provides that “for purposes of this chapter (other than section  
9       506), any reference to copyright shall be deemed to include the rights conferred by section  
10      106A(a).” As a result, the provisions of 17 U.S.C. § 502 governing preliminary and permanent  
11      injunctions in copyright-infringement cases, of 17 U.S.C. § 503 governing impoundment and  
12      disposition of infringing articles in copyright-infringement cases, and of 17 U.S.C. § 504 governing  
13      damages and profits remedies in copyright-infringement cases all apply by their terms to claims for  
14      violations of 17 U.S.C. § 106A rights. See Chapter 9 of this Restatement, discussing remedies.

15       Copyright registration is not required to bring an action for a violation of the rights granted  
16      under VARA, or to be eligible for an award of statutory damages and attorney’s fees. 17 U.S.C.  
17      §§ 411(a) (imposing registration prerequisite on instituting civil actions for copyright infringement  
18       “[e]xcept for an action brought for a violation of the rights of the author under section 106A(a)”);  
19      412 (tying availability of statutory damages and attorney’s fees to timing of registration in action  
20       “other than an action brought for a violation of the rights of the author under section 106A(a”).  
21      See also *Carter*, 71 F.3d at 83.

22       The First Circuit has interpreted the statute as not providing a claim for damages for an  
23      attribution violation. See *Mass. Museum*, 593 F.3d at 55 (“VARA does not provide a damages  
24      remedy for an attribution violation. Where the statutory language is framed as a right ‘to prevent’  
25      conduct, it does not necessarily follow that a plaintiff is entitled to damages once the conduct  
26      occurs.”). The court did not, however, exclude the availability of damages from other sources. See  
27      id. at 56 (“In failing to provide a damages remedy for any type of violation of the moral right of  
28      attribution, Congress may have concluded that artists could obtain adequate relief for the harms of  
29      false attribution by resorting to the Copyright Act and other traditional claims.”). This means that  
30      the only remedy available *under VARA* for a violation of the rights identified under the label “right  
31      of attribution” is an injunction “to, inter alia, assert or disclaim authorship of a work.” Id. at 55.

1       In the case of a violation of either of the rights identified in subsections (c) and (d), an  
2 author is eligible for an award of damages as provided by the Copyright Act. Those damages could  
3 be actual damages or statutory damages. See §§ 9.03 and 9.04 of this Restatement. See also *Mass.*  
4 *Museum*, 593 F.3d at 55. While actual damages and statutory damages may compensate for  
5 different types of harms, see *Narkiewicz-Laine v. Doyle*, 930 F.3d 897, 904 (7th Cir. 2019) (noting  
6 that statutory damages are “unrelated to the artist’s pecuniary interests” and that actual damages  
7 compensate for actual financial harm), § 504 of the Copyright Act makes it clear that an author  
8 who prevails on a claim under the rights identified in subsections (c) and (d) of the black letter  
9 of this Section must elect either actual damages or statutory damages, as that author is precluded  
10 from recovering for *both* actual and statutory damages for the same work. 17 U.S.C. § 504  
11 (defendant is “liable for *either* . . . actual damages . . . or . . . statutory damages”) (emphasis  
12 added). Courts have noted that statutory damages may be particularly appropriate in cases  
13 involving violations of VARA, “when no actual damages are proven or they are difficult to  
14 calculate.” *Cohen v. G & M Realty L.P.*, 320 F. Supp. 3d 421, 443 (E.D.N.Y. 2018), aff’d sub  
15 nom. *Castillo v. G&M Realty L.P.*, 950 F.3d 155 (2d Cir. 2020). The Seventh Circuit noted that  
16 statutory damages comport with “the statute’s purpose to protect the ‘moral rights’ of artists—  
17 rights ‘unrelated to the artist’s pecuniary interests.’” *Narkiewicz-Laine v. Doyle*, 930 F.3d 897,  
18 904 (7th Cir. 2019) (citing *Kelley v. Chi. Park Dist.*, 635 F.3d 290, 296 (7th Cir. 2011)). Statutory  
19 damages can be awarded in an amount of not less than \$750 or more than \$30,000, as the court  
20 considers just. 17 U.S.C. § 504. A court in its discretion may also assess statutory damages of not  
21 more than \$150,000 if the destruction was willful. 17 U.S.C. § 504(c)(2). See *Hanrahan v.*  
22 *Ramirez*, 1998 WL 34369997, at \*3 (C.D. Cal. June 3, 1998). See §§ 9.02 (discussing rules  
23 applicable to injunctive relief) and 9.04, Comment e (discussing willfulness and the relationship  
24 between statutory damages and actual damages and profits) of this Restatement.

25       The right to claim damages for a violation of the right against destruction of a work of  
26 recognized stature “is narrower than the right to prevent destruction of such works. While an artist  
27 may ‘prevent *any* destruction of a work of recognized stature,’ [(emphasis in original)] only an  
28 ‘*intentional or grossly negligent destruction* of that work’” gives rise to a claim for damages. *Mass.*  
29 *Museum*, 593 F.3d at 55-56 (emphasis added). This also means that injunctive relief may be  
30 available prior to the destruction. A plaintiff would need to present evidence suggesting a  
31 likelihood of destruction. See also § 9.02 of this Restatement. This may also explain why the

1 statute imposes an obligation on the owner of the building to try to give the author advance notice.  
2 See § 6.11, Comment *h*, of this Restatement. Destruction by natural factors such as rain, and the  
3 case of works that can be removed from a building, are treated specially by the statute. See 17  
4 U.S.C. § 106A(c); § 6.11, Comments *d* and *e*, of this Restatement.

5 *f. Sovereign immunity.* Section 501 of the Copyright Act provides that:

6 Anyone who violates any of the exclusive rights . . . of the author as provided in  
7 section 106A(a) . . . is an infringer of the . . . right of the author . . . As used in this  
8 subsection, the term “anyone” includes any State, any instrumentality of a State,  
9 and any officer or employee of a State or instrumentality of a State acting in his or  
10 her official capacity. Any State, and any such instrumentality, officer, or employee,  
11 shall be subject to the provisions of this title in the same manner and to the same  
12 extent as any nongovernmental entity.

13 17 U.S.C. § 501. That provision makes clear that states can violate 17 U.S.C. § 106A rights, and  
14 § 511 of the Act embodies Congress’s intent to subject states to suits in federal court for such  
15 violations. 17 U.S.C. § 511 (providing that “[a]ny State . . . shall not be immune, under the  
16 Eleventh Amendment of the Constitution of the United States or under any other doctrine of  
17 sovereign immunity, from suit in Federal court by any person . . . for a violation of any of the  
18 exclusive rights of a copyright owner provided by sections 106 through 122.”); see also 17 U.S.C.  
19 § 501 (“For purposes of this chapter (other than section 506), any reference to copyright shall be  
20 deemed to include the rights conferred by section 106A(a.”).

21 The U.S. Supreme Court has limited the effect of Congress’s attempt to abrogate state  
22 sovereign immunity for copyright-infringement claims. Although Congress provided in the  
23 Copyright Act that a state or instrumentality thereof is subject to the provisions of the Act “in the  
24 same manner and to the same extent as any nongovernmental entity,” 17 U.S.C. § 501(a), the  
25 Supreme Court held in *Allen v. Cooper*, 140 S. Ct. 994 (2020), that Congress lacks power under  
26 Article I of the U.S. Constitution to abrogate states’ sovereign immunity from copyright-  
27 infringement lawsuits, *id.* at 1002, and found no evidence in the legislative record of a pattern of  
28 state infringement of copyright sufficient to support abrogation of state sovereign immunity under  
29 Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment, *id.* at 1006-1007. The logic of that decision would appear  
30 to apply equally to claims for violations of 17 U.S.C. § 106A.

With respect to the federal government, the Second Circuit has held that VARA does not apply to the United States because the language in 17 U.S.C. § 501 defining “anyone” to include states and their instrumentalities, officers, and employees does not mention federal entities. Thompson v. United States, 795 Fed. App’x 15, 18 (2d Cir. 2019) (unpublished) (“The Government (including the USPS specifically) is not liable under VARA.”). See also § 9.01 of this Restatement.

### REPORTERS’ NOTES

*a. Generally.* While the rights granted under 17 U.S.C. § 106A endure, generally, only for the life of the author, as described in § 6.11 Comment *i*, there are scenarios in which the rights granted by § 106A are “coextensive with the rights conferred by section 106,” 17 U.S.C. § 106A(d)(2), and thus last after the author’s death. In addition, because all of the rights granted in 17 U.S.C. § 106A run until the end of the calendar year, a claim might be brought after the author’s death but later in that calendar year. The statute is not clear on who would be in the position to assert those rights, but that person would need to prove an appropriate connection to the author, which would presumably be done under the terms of the author’s will or by the applicable rules of intestate succession. Cf. 17 U.S.C. § 201(d)(1) (expressing rule for post-mortem succession of copyright ownership).

*c. Prejudice to honor or reputation.* According to the legislative history, in the case of a work of recognized stature, modification of the work “will generally establish harm to honor or reputation.” H.R. Rep. 101-514, reprinted as 1990 U.S.C.C.A.N. 6915, 6926.

Professor Nimmer discusses the first ambiguity described in Comment *c* in Nimmer on Copyright. See MELVILLE B. NIMMER & DAVID NIMMER, NIMMER ON COPYRIGHT § 8D.06[C][1].

*e. Available remedies.* The First Circuit’s conclusion that the Visual Artists Rights Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-650, 104 Stat. 5089, 5128 (VARA), does not provide a damages remedy for an attribution violation relies on what it terms Professor Nimmer’s “surmise” and “speculation” (Mass. Museum of Contemp. Art Found., Inc. v. Büchel, 593 F.3d 38, 55 (1st Cir. 2010), citing NIMMER ON COPYRIGHT § 8D.06[B][1]) and on a reading of the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, which admittedly provides latitude on remedies for violations of moral rights to Berne Convention member States. Professor Nimmer’s conclusion was tentative. He wrote: “Perhaps the implication is that whereas an integrity violation could give rise to a monetary recovery, failure to attribute is remediable solely through injunction. If that conclusion were intended, Congress certainly could have expressed its intent less obliquely.” This reading of the statute as not allowing an author to claim damages under VARA for an attribution violation limits Congress’s intent in protecting attribution. Moreover, it is far from obvious that an injunction is always the best option. What if a work has already been distributed in several copies to different buyers, for example? Though the statute could certainly have been written in clearer terms, there are many fact patterns in which the payment of damages would seem adequate. The statute need not be read as prohibiting the award of damages for violations of the right of attribution.

1        As discussed in § 6.11, Reporters' Note to Comment *h*, of this Restatement, 17 U.S.C.  
2        § 113(d)(3) provides that the "Register of Copyrights shall establish a system of records whereby  
3        any author of a work of visual art that has been incorporated in or made part of a building may  
4        record his or her identity and address with the Copyright Office."

5        *f. Sovereign immunity.* On the application of the Eleventh Amendment in this context, see  
6        also Scott v. Cal. African Am. Museum, 2015 WL 12806471, at \*3 (C.D. Cal. July 24, 2015). For  
7        a parallel case in the patent context, see Seminole Tribe of Fla. v. Florida, 517 U.S. 44, 58 (1996).  
8        The path available to a plaintiff relying on *Ex parte Young*, 209 U.S. 123 (1908), is similarly  
9        limited in scope. See Whole Woman's Health v. Jackson, 142 S. Ct. 522, 525 (2021) (explaining  
10      that the "narrow" exception in *Ex parte Young* "does not normally permit federal courts to issue  
11      injunctions against state-court judges or clerks.").