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Deconstructing Hip-Hop:

Black Popular Music beyond the Politics of Ghetto Discourses

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Ethnomusicology

by

Samuel Robert Michel Lamontagne

2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Deconstructing Hip-Hop:

Black Popular Music beyond the Politics of Ghetto Discourses

by

Samuel Robert Michel Lamontagne

Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnomusicology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Timothy D. Taylor, Chair

Through historical and political contextualization, this dissertation aims at deconstructing dominant hip-hop discourses, and their role in the legitimization of the socioracial order. The objective of this work is not solely to critique conservative understandings of hip-hop, but all limited and reductive understandings of hip-hop, including so-called progressive ones. By critically interrogating dominant hip-hop discourses, I not only intend to reveal their biased reliance on ideologies of difference

involving race, class, and gender, but also make room for more complex and just understandings of hip-hop. Therefore, by critically interrogating dominant hip-hop discourses and their connections to larger systems of power, the deconstruction work achieved in this dissertation intends to open the door for reimagination work. Relying on archival research, and oral histories with hip-hop participants, this deconstruction work aims to show the wrong ways we've commonly been thinking about hip-hop, and to urge to provide new ways to think about it. Focusing on ghetto discourses as particular constructions of Blackness mediated through race, class, and gender, the dissertation analyzes how most commonly accepted understandings of hip-hop are constructed in relation to ghetto discourses.

The dissertation of Samuel Robert Michel Lamontagne is approved.

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2022

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Vita

Education

2013-15 M.A. in Anthropology, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS, Paris)

2010-13 B.A. in Anthropology, Université Lumière Lyon 2

Selected Publications

Book

2016 *Los Angeles au-delà de la beat-scene: Anthropologie des musiques électroniques*. Paris: Éditions Vase.

Articles and Book Chapters

2021 "France through Race: Beyond Colorblindness." *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 42(2): 98–104.

2020 "'Banlieue is the new cool': Grand Paris et instrumentalisation des musiques électroniques." *Jef Klak, Revue de critique sociale et d'expériences litteraires*: 1–23.

- Translated in 2021, "Grand Paris and Electronic Dance Music: Nightlife Policies, Neoliberal Urban Planning, and the Gentrification of the Banlieues." *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 13(1): 129–142.

2019 "Hypermasculinity in Los Angeles Gangsta Rap: An Intersectional Approach." In *Gender, Differences, Identities, and DIY Cultures*, edited by Paula Guerra and Thiago Pereira Alberto, 449–455. KISMIF: An Approach to Underground Music Scenes 4. Porto: University of Porto.

2019 "Los Angeles ville de musiques électroniques? Invention du genre musical beat scene et production d'une image sociale de la ville." *Haizebegi, Revue annuelle d'anthropologie de la musique* 6: 143–161.

2018 "Mustache Mondays: Politics of Dancing." *Terrain Vague* 4: 16–20.

Translation

2021 Co-translator (with Elvina Le Poul) of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "La recherche s'aventure en terres indigènes. Perspectives maories sur l'exploration scientifique coloniale." *Jef Klak, revue de critique sociale et d'expériences littéraires*.

2018 Co-translator (with Elvina Le Poul) of Robin D.G. Kelley, "Les Feux qui Forgèrent Iceberg Slim: Biographies en clair-obscur d'un mac de Los Angeles." *Jef Klak, revue de critique sociale et d'expériences littéraires*.

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2018 Teaching Associate, UCLA:

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Ethnomusicology 25, Prof. Benjamin Doleac, Fall 2018

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Ethnomusicology & Chicana/o Studies M108A, Prof. Nolan Warden, Spring 2018

Music and Media
Ethnomusicology 30, Prof. Timothy D. Taylor, Winter 2018

Selected Conference Papers

2021 Panel Chair, "'…Where I Can and Can't Go': Kanye West and Space,'" IASPM-US Annual Conference, May 20. (via Zoom)

2020 "Electronic Instruments and the Sonic Cultures of Techno, House and Hip-Hop." Sound Instruments and Sonic Cultures, National Science and Media Museum, Bradford, United Kingdom, December 14. (via Zoom)

2019 "Nightlife Policies, Creative City and the Instrumentalization of Cultural Activity: The Particular Case of Parisian Live Music." IASPM-US Annual Conference, New Orleans Jazz Museum, New Orleans, March 10.

2018 "The Sound of the Favela: Carioca Funk and its Discursive Construction in the West." Society for Ethnomusicology 63rd Annual Meeting, Hotel Albuquerque, Albuquerque, November 15.

2018 "Issues of Gender and Race in the Particular Case of Los Angeles Gangsta Rap." International Conference KISMIF, Universidade do Porto, Porto, Portugal, June 7.

2018 "French Rap and Non-Whiteness: Negotiating the National Universalist Ideal of France." Society for Ethnomusicology Southern Californian and Hawaiian Chapter, Pomona College, Pomona, February 25.

Selected Guest Lectures

2021 "Réflexions à partir d'une recherche hip-hop à Los Angeles: Expérience racisée et savoirs situés." Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Paris, May 28. (via Zoom)

2021 "Diaspora africaine francophone, post-colonialisme, et musique." French & Francophone Studies Department, UCLA, April 6. (via Zoom)

2020 "Cross-Racial Musical Collaborations: Rethinking Black and Brown Solidarity in Los Angeles." For seminar "L.A. Music Scenes: Music, Communities and Heritage in Los Angeles," La Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Centro de Investigaciones sobre América del Norte y el Área de Estudios de la Globalidad, September 18. (via Zoom)

Introduction

In a recent lecture introducing the class "Rap, Race, and Reality with Public Enemy's Chuck D," H. Samy Alim asked the question: "What is hip-hop culture?" Going even further I asked myself "what is hip-hop?" Behind these deceptively simple questions stood the will to challenge and complicate our most basic understandings of hip-hop, too commonly taken for granted (Alim 2022). Following Alim, and his intention of moving away from prescriptive definitions – in particular the one anchoring hip-hop in the five traditional elements (DJing, Dancing, Rapping, Graffiti, and Knowledge) – I found myself questioning hip-hop through its relation to cultural politics. In this way, in the wake of Stuart Hall's pioneering work, when asking "what is hip-hop?" I wouldn't rely on a descriptive way to understand hip-hop, as it would imply that the meaning is "inscribed inside its form" (Hall 2002:190). Instead of attempting to look for hip-hop's meaning within itself, I chose to focus on the relations of cultural power (ibid.). The advantage of this position is that it allows me to complicate questions of authenticity, and to contextualize hip-hop within power dynamics. This perspective entails entirely giving up on decoding the supposed hidden meaning of hip-hop, to center the power dynamics within which hip-hop is given multiple, changing, complex, and often contradictory meanings (Perry 2004:1). My approach thus understands hip-hop as "more than sound; [and as] a complex system of mean(ing)s and ends that mediate our relationships to one another, to space, to our histories and historical moment (Redmond 2013:1).

Relying on the literature of cultural studies, I focus on power dynamics and relations through cultural matters, and specifically through hip-hop. As such, "ideology" is one of my central concerns throughout this dissertation. Referring to "ideology" can be confusing, because the word can have different meanings (Storey 2006). From Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' conception of "ideology" as the distorting ideas of the ruling class implicitly concealing the processes of capitalist exploitation, to Antonio Gramsci's, Louis Althusser's, or Paul Ricoeur's reconceptualizations, the term has been associated with issues of power. Across the dissertation I essentially use "ideology" in the sense that society's power structures don't solely rely on the application of force but on the construction of knowledge, validating and legitimating the socioracial order. In that sense, I look at how culture – and in particular how hip-hop – has been embedded in cultural politics, that is, how cultural matters can't be separated from power dynamics involving class, race, gender, generation, and other ideologies of difference. Grounded in Foucault's classic knowledge/power relationship (Foucault 1980), I've attempted to understand hip-hop through the construction of knowledge and its connection to power. Through historical and political contextualization, I have meant to deconstruct dominant hip-hop discourses – that is the popular vocabulary through which hip-hop is spoken about in society (Hall 2021 [1978]:67) – and their role in the legitimization of the socioracial order. The objective of this work is not solely to critique conservative understandings of hip-hop, but all limited and reductive understandings of hip-hop, including so-called progressive ones.

By critically interrogating dominant hip-hop discourses, I not only attempt to reveal their biased reliance on power asymmetries involving race, class, and gender, but

also make room for more complex and just understandings of hip-hop. Or in the words of hip-hop feminist Joan Morgan, to produce hip-hop scholarship "brave enough to fuck with the grays" (Morgan 1999:59), and articulate pain and resistance with agency, community, love, and pleasure. In that sense, the dissertation doesn't limit itself to the critique of dominant hip-hop discourses. Centering hip-hop participants' perspectives as cultural theorization in itself, I also aim at reimagining hip-hop from the space of their experience considered as expertise. Throughout the dissertation, I center participants' perspectives through archival research, ethnographic fieldwork, and oral history interviews. Thus engaging in what James G. Spady called "hiphopography," the dissertation attempts to "engag[e] the community in its own terms, […] assum[ing] that the culture creators of Hip Hop are quite capable of telling their own story," and as such, taking "the values, aesthetics, thoughts, narratives, and interpretations of the culture creators [as] our starting point" (Alim 2006:969-970). At its core, hiphopography decenters scientific authority and ideas of "objective knowledge," to make room for hip-hop participants' situated interpretations and theorizations. Set on an equal footing with participants', the scholar's analytical practice – at best – adds another layer of reflexivity to the already complex and multi-layered perspectives of participants. Embedded in making hip-hop research accountable to hip-hop communities first, hiphopography's approach thus tends to prioritize allegiance towards those communities rather than the institutional spaces of the academy. Hiphopography thus helps us grapple with difficult questions, here formulated by H. Samy Alim: "How have we as scholars reproduced the hierarchies that we are trying to dismantle? How has our methodology silenced and disempowered the very folks we claim to be giving voice to and empowering?" (Alim 2006:12).

The deconstructive route I've taken can sometimes seem complex and challenging. However, I want to emphasize that it stems from an effort to develop a framework that considers hip-hop's complexities. It also stems from an effort to break away from the epistemic violence of social sciences (Spivak 1988). As an activity producing knowledge, scholarship has generally been deeply invested in the reproduction of structures of power, notably by taking for granted ideologies of difference (whether it be race, gender, or class). From that assessment came the will to consciously and thus theoretically break away from such ideologies, and as such, attempt to achieve what Christina Sharpe calls wake work: "[W]e are often disciplined into thinking through and along lines that reinscribe our own annihilation [...] We must become undisciplined. [...] I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme [...]. With that analytic we might imagine otherwise from what we know now" (Sharpe 2016:13). Put another way, with Audre Lorde's words, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 1984), and for that reason we can no longer afford to take for granted the epistemological framework of ideologies of difference we've inherited from the systems of power responsible for the continuous domination of entire social groups and need to imagine our own tools in order to produce just and transformative scholarship.

Therefore, by critically interrogating dominant hip-hop discourses and their connections to larger systems of power, the deconstruction achieved in this dissertation intends to open the door for reimagination work (Kelley 2002; Savage 2021). Through hiphopography, relying on archival research, ethnographic fieldwork, and oral histories with hip-hop participants, this deconstruction/reimagination work aims to show the

wrong ways we've commonly been thinking about hip-hop, and to urge to provide new ways to think about it. Through such methods, this work is comparable to what artist Chuck D of politically conscious rap group Public Enemy has described as "myth busting" when discussing his approach to teaching about hip-hop and pushing back against the oversimplistic ways and frameworks hip-hop is usually thought through. As hip-hop exists in the mainstream more than ever before, and at the same time is increasingly marked by institutionalization processes through large museum and university projects, today is a moment of solidification for common hip-hop knowledge and historiography, and thus for dominant understandings of hip-hop to be reproduced and perpetuated. Now is then a perfect time to critically interrogate our most deeply rooted and taken for granted understandings of hip-hop, while at the same time making room for the voices of hip-hop participants themselves.

Interdisciplinary, the dissertation relies on various disciplinary fields and bodies of theory. Largely speaking, I engage with Black studies, cultural studies, music studies, hip-hop studies, critical race theory, sociology, anthropology, history, Black feminism, urban studies, and postcolonial studies. Through these fields I engage in a wide range of conversations. While focused on race, the dissertation is careful to understand it in relation to other ideologies and systems of power such as class, and gender. Through a particular look at hip-hop, the dissertation examines popular culture dynamics through a larger contextualization in American history, social structures, hip-hop communities, and the market place.

By centering the critical voices of hip-hop participants, I hope to provide a framework for the revision of hip-hop scholarship, and for complicating the study of

hip-hop, notably by paying closer attention to historical details and ambiguities, the social constructions that overdetermine our understandings of hip-hop, and the power dynamics they're linked to. Reckoning with this, the dissertation looks at hip-hop as a contested category, and attempts moving away from prescriptive constructions of hip-hop. In this sense, hip-hop is never taken to be one thing, and is instead taken to be a cultural practice around which multiple interacting and often opposing parties, opinions, interests, and positions are articulated. Untangling these articulations and these complexities, lies at the heart of the dissertation. Furthermore, taking a close look at hip-hop as a Black cultural form, the dissertation questions the conceptions of Blackness underlying such constructions. First, by emphasizing racialization processes, it notably shifts away from an understanding of race as a cultural condition to an understanding of race as a socio-political condition with cultural implications. Then, beyond foregrounding power dynamics and the very socio-economic conditions they create and their link to hip-hop culture, the dissertation reexamine the association between hip-hop culture, poverty and crime, to refocus the analysis on race as a category of experience, agency and community.

The deconstructive work carried out in this dissertation led me to pay particular attention to ghetto discourses. In that sense, I've explored how the "ghetto" as an idea (or as a set of ideas) has been central to the dominant constructions of hip-hop. Then, in order to deconstruct hip-hop's dominant constructions, I undertake to study the interrelations between hip-hop and the "ghetto," which leads me to critically study ghetto discourses and their role in the ideological normalization of the socioracial order. Focusing on ghetto discourses as particular constructions of Blackness mediated

through race, class, and gender, I analyze how most commonly accepted understandings of hip-hop are constructed in relation to those ghetto discourses. By confronting dominant hip-hop constructions with hip-hop artists and participants' perspectives, I show how they have continuously provided critical engagement through their experience and expertise.

This dissertation is the result of nearly 10 years of research in Los Angeles. I first moved to the U.S. in 2012 as part of an exchange program between my university in France and UCLA. I was still a musician at the time (rapping and producing), so I took advantage of this year to explore the hip-hop and electronic dance music scenes of Los Angeles. My research interest in L.A. hip-hop directly came from this first year, when my own musical practices led me to explore various hip-hop worlds in the city. The following year, as I started a master's program in Anthropology in Paris, it felt natural to have my research focus on L.A. music scenes. At the heart of this was my two-fold interest in researching this particular topic while at the same time deepening my connection to those musical worlds. If my involvement in L.A. hip-hop scenes goes back to 2012, I officially started conducting fieldwork in 2014. Then, when I started my Ph.D. at UCLA in 2016, I spent even more time involving myself in L.A. music communities. Although I stopped rapping and producing as a musician, I've been involved in L.A. hip-hop scenes in multiple ways. In that sense, my involvement and my research were never limited to my position as a "researcher." Across the years I've been involved in various hip-hop spaces as a DJ, radio producer and host (on dublab radio in particular), community organizer with We Love Leimert, KAOS Network and the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra, event organizer with various venues and spaces, and music producer

with the labels Preference Records and The Village Records. These multiple roles and positions allowed me to interact with a lot of different people involved in the hip-hop worlds, and to develop relationships not solely based on my research. It also allowed me to not only pay attention to the artists' perspectives, but to a variety of participants', all responsible for the organization and existence of hip-hop worlds (Becker 1982). Beyond the rappers, producers, and DJs, I sought to take into account less obvious perspectives, such as radio promoters, community organizers, label owners, event promoters, music industry professionals, fans, studio engineers, and journalists. Rather than solely centering the artists, this allowed me to take into account a wider range of perspectives depending on various categories of actors, with specific perspectives according to their given field of activity and social position (Hughes 1984).[1]

More than methodological, the conscious choice to deeply invest myself in L.A. music communities was also ethical, in the sense that I prioritized my allegiance towards those communities rather than towards the university. As the COVID-19

[1] When considering oral history and interviewing work, it's important to add that the situation of enunciation is never neutral or transparent. The content of the conversation, and the ways it is narrated always depend on a complex set of circumstances, including the social positions of both the speaker and the listener/researcher, their respective interests in engaging in an oral history project, the particular situation and the larger stakes of such a project (Bazin 2008:271). The complexities of the situation of enunciation can't be taken for granted, and further require to cross-reference sources and perspectives.

pandemic shut everything down in 2020, I somewhat lost proximity to those circles, especially as I couldn't physically be in the U.S. due to visa issues. However, despite this "pandemic break" my involvement with those communities is long-term and not dependent on the production of a dissertation or any type of scholarly work. My research isn't limited to my writing, but as it engages with archival projects and oral history interviews also more directly contributes to producing materials that hopefully can more directly benefit the communities and individuals I've been working with.

Through my involvement I've recorded about 130 oral history interviews with various participants of L.A. hip-hop communities, I've also had access to the personal archives of different people. Although I have visited multiple institutions such as the Los Angeles Public Library, or UCLA libraries, I've been rather disappointed by the lack of hip-hop archival materials. This again speaks of cultural politics, what cultural forms are considered deserving – or important enough – to be properly archived and preserved. The Internet, and specialized web community spaces carrying digital archival projects such as *WestCoastPioneers* have been an important resource. The countless interviews available online also helped me fill the gaps when I couldn't access particular artists or individuals. Rap magazines such as *Vibe*, *Rap Pages*, *The Source*, or industry reports such as the *Gavin Report* or *Billboard* have also been essential sources for me to complicate dominant hip-hop constructions.

The dissertation consists of five chapters. The first chapter resituates conservative interpretations of hip-hop within the dominant ghetto discourse of "ghetto pathology." It starts by demonstrating the ideological ground of dominant ghetto discourses defining the "ghetto" through pathology, and thus as a problem and threat to society. It

then shows how, in the wake of the civil rights legislation, the consensus around "ghetto pathology" has served to justify punitive policy shifts and the reformulation of the institutionalization of anti-Blackness. Shifting to the cultural field by focusing on rap, the chapter then shows how conservative attacks on rap have largely relied on the discourse of ghetto pathology, and for that reason have been invested in the upholding of its ideological project. Understanding ghetto pathology as a particular racist, sexist and classist construction of Blackness, this chapter further examines how Black inner city men have been specifically targeted as *the* threat to society, and how this targeting has contributed to the erasure of other segments of the Black community, including Black women, Black queer people, and their specific conditions. Further, understanding the dominant construction of hip-hop through ghetto pathology also allows to critically reflect on the understanding of hip-hop as an expression of Black urban masculinity, a problematic understanding, participating in erasing the contribution of Black women and queer people. Through archival research, the chapter confronts the perspectives of rap critics with those of hip-hop artists, who continuously articulated critical outlooks on dominant ghetto discourses and the conservative interpretations they give rise to.

The second chapter studies how the dominant construction of rap as a threat to society justified its policing. In continuity with the previous chapter, the second chapter focuses on the cultural politics around rap in the broader ideological context of ghetto pathological discourses and their relation to the criminalization of Black inner city youth. Through a revised conception of "moral panic" this chapter re-situates historically the complexity and ambivalent dynamics constituting moral panics around rap in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, the common conception of "moral panic" not only

tends to minimize the plurality of reactions *against* rap, but also usually overlooks the supporting voices from counter-oppositions. Relying on a distinct conception of "moral panic" as an arena of contested debates considering the dynamic interaction between various parties with diverging opinions and interests, the second chapter re-examines the moral panics around rap. It does so by foregrounding the voices of hip-hop artists and confronting them with anti-rap perspectives. While rethinking the ambivalence of moral panics, the chapter still resituates their ground in ideological dynamics, notably by focusing on those moral panics' pervasive consequences on rap's commercial organization, its cultural marginalization and its institutional policing and criminalization. Through a focus on ghetto pathological discourses, the chapter examines those moral panics in relation to the "underclass" debate and the War on Drugs panic, through which the criminalization of Black inner youth was justified. For that reason, the chapter thinks the criminalization of rap as going hand in hand with the criminalization of the social group associated to it. In other words, it reflects on how the construction of Black inner city youth as a social problem plays into the criminalization of rap, and from there, how the criminalization of rap participates in the criminalization of this very social group.

Further questioning the relationship between the "ghetto" and hip-hop, the third chapter looks to explore other prevailing understandings of hip-hop as mediated through ghetto discourses. While cast in positive and politically progressive terms, certain assumptions of ghetto discourses have largely relied on limiting constructions of Black culture and Blackness. In this chapter I identify and critique one key assumption of ghetto discourses most commonly taking part in the construction of hip-hop as a

simple cultural adaptation to particular ghetto social conditions and material constraints. Although well-meaning, often formulated as defenses against conservative critiques, this assumption nonetheless constructs hip-hop through all-encompassing cultural generalizations, totalizing explanations, as well as decontextualized and deterministic interpretations, therefore failing to acknowledge hip-hop's full complexity. The chapter attempts to achieve two things. It first critically deconstructs this aforementioned assumption, and situates it historically in the 1960s urban ethnography and ghetto anthropology literature to show how it provided deterministic and functionalizing constructions of hip-hop. Second, by focusing on hip-hop practitioners' perspectives, it centers their agencies as a way to counteract the assumption that hip-hop would merely be a creative response to socioeconomic conditions.

The fourth chapter argues that mothers, through their labor and practices, played a major role in the development of hip-hop practitioners' agencies and their hip-hop practice. Centering hip-hop mothers' labor, I explore the environment and conditions through which hip-hop practitioners learned about and developed knowledge about music which later allowed them to pursue their own practice. Building on Black feminist thought and activism, I connect the centrality of mothers' labor in the emergence of hip-hop culture to the longstanding centrality of Black women's labor in the struggle for racial justice. By centering hip-hop mothers, the chapter further reckon with the legacy of erasure of Black women's labor. In that sense, the chapter critically deals with dominant masculinist historical narratives silencing Black women's stories and contributions to hip-hop, and questions the institutionalization of Black women's erasure in the archival record. To counter these erasing dynamics and center hip-hop

mothers' perspectives, I rely on the memoirs of Verna Griffin, Afeni Shakur, and Beverly Broadus Green, mothers to three of the most important West Coast hip-hop artists: Dr. Dre, Tupac Shakur, and Snoop Dogg. Shedding light on their lives, experiences, struggles, and feelings, their memoirs are not only key sources to center their voices, but also to resituate their labors and practices in the context of their children's hip-hop practice and beyond.

The fifth and final chapter, through a more direct hiphopographic focus, discusses a range of themes that emerged from conversations with hip-hop participants. While the chapter starts with a brief methodological discussion about hiphopography, it then investigates how hip-hop participants first encountered and engaged with hip-hop in Los Angeles, how their passion for it developed over time, and how they became hip-hop practitioners themselves. From their initial encounters through media like TV or the radio in the home, I focus on how their engagement with hip-hop then evolved from interactions with the media to various public spaces in the city where hip-hop was taking place. In that sense, I explore how the development of their hip-hop practice went hand in hand with community building. This discussion around hip-hop practice and community further evolves in dealing with what hip-hop meant to them, and how, as young racialized Angelenos, hip-hop was a cultural resource helping them create a new sense of consciousness in relation to the sociopolitical conditions of the 1980s. By centering the participants' voices, their hip-hop practices clearly appear as ways to refuse the ghetto pathologies that were projected upon them by dominant interpretations of hip-hop. Finally, the last part of the chapter explores gangsta rap as a moment of radical transformation for L.A. hip-hop. Based on participants' perspectives

as well as gangsta rappers' own perspectives, I attempt to deal with the many complexities and ambiguities about gangsta rap, notably its ambivalent reliance on ghetto pathologies.

If the dissertation contributes to anything it is to seriously think about hip-hop, and more generally Black popular culture, through a lens that refuses to take for granted constructions grounded in systems of power that perpetuate themselves through knowledge and culture. It is a big claim, and I hope this dissertation at least comes close to it. Another contribution I believe this dissertation accomplishes is to try to understand music – and more generally cultural matters – through the complexity of historical, political, and situational dynamics through which it is articulated. Finally, my goal with this dissertation is to offer perspectives which on the one hand examine Black culture in relation to the structural oppressive system of anti-Blackness, and on the other, to never limit our understandings of Black culture and Black life to the effects of anti-Blackness. To close this introduction on this idea, I chose a quote from Christina Sharpe's 2016 book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, precisely expressing the tension between the force of anti-blackness in determining Black life, and the agency of Black communities in not only continuously refusing anti-Black-defined worlds but also in imagining new ones, notably through their artistic and cultural practices (Kelley 2002). "We are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to this overwhelming force, we are not only known to ourselves and to each other by that force" (Sharpe 2016:134).

Chapter 1

Rap Music and the Ghetto Pathology Panic: Black Cultural Politics through Race, Gender, and Class

Whether it is in popular culture, in mainstream and specialized press, or in scholarship, hip-hop and the "ghetto" (also referred to as the "slum," "inner city," "hood," or "street") have been taken as inherently connected. Although what their relationship is about can vary widely according to different spheres of opinion and analysis, all tend to agree on the basic idea that the two are deeply interrelated. Given this relationship, it is rather curious that few works have critically questioned how the "ghetto" as an idea and image – or a set of ideas and images – plays into understandings of what hip-hop is, and what it is about. Expanding on the work of Tricia Rose and Eithne Quinn, I aim at questioning the relationship between hip-hop and the "ghetto" as mediated through ghetto discourses strongly invested in ideological dynamics, that is, in the normalization of the socioracial order. Tracing the rise and evolution of the state-sponsored "ghetto pathology" and crime moral panic, the chapter deconstructs the racist logic at the heart of the dominant construction of the ghetto, and its connection to the dominant interpretations of rap. In this way, the chapter critically analyzes how, as a discourse, "ghetto pathology" provides "the language and stereotypical explanatory terms" through which the ghetto and rap have been understood and talked about in the 1980s and 1990s mainstream (Hall 2021 [1978]:67).

At the outset, it's important to clarify that "ghetto pathology" here isn't taken to be real in itself. Throughout the chapter, "ghetto pathology" refers to the panic discourse around the ghetto and its residents. Based on Stanley Cohen's definition of a moral

panic, put forward by the state and the media, "ghetto pathology" is understood as a stereotypical discourse constantly defining the ghetto and its residents as a threat to society, and as such, is an ideological vehicle justifying the implementation of law and order crusades to increase social control (Cohen 1972:9). This chapter therefore explores the cultural politics of rap and how the dominant "ghetto pathology" discourse central in 1980s and 1990s conservative readings of rap exemplify the wider systemic power asymmetries of American society. Following Ruth Wilson Gilmore, the chapter centers the following question: are the issues underlying the hysteria around ghetto pathology and rap "'moral' ones – or are they racial, economic, political?" (Gilmore 1999:171). By focusing on ghetto pathology as particular constructions of Blackness mediated through race, class, and gender, I critically examine how Black inner city men have been systematically identified as *the* threat to society, and how this obsessive targeting has contributed to the erasure of Black women, Black queer people, their specific conditions and essential contributions to hip-hop culture. More generally, by reflecting on the dialectic between spatial constructions of Blackness and racialized constructions of space, the chapter further investigates how the marginalization of Black culture in the United States goes hand in hand with the marginalization and criminalization of Black life. Through archival research, the chapter confronts the perspectives of rap critics with those of hip-hop artists, who have continuously articulated critical outlooks on dominant ghetto discourses and the conservative interpretations they give rise to.

The chapter is divided in several sections. It starts by demonstrating the ideological ground of dominant ghetto discourses defining the "ghetto" through pathology, and thus as a problem and threat to society. It then shows how, in the wake

of the civil rights legislation, the consensus and moral panic around "ghetto pathology" have served to justify punitive policy shifts and the reformulation of the institutionalization of anti-Blackness understood as a "regime of violence that positions Black people as internal enemies of civil society" (Douglass *et al.* 2018). Shifting to the cultural field by focusing on rap, the chapter then shows how mainstream media attacks on rap have largely relied on the ghetto pathology discourse, and for that reason have been invested in the upholding of its ideological project. Finally, by exploring the longstanding conflation of musical and racial discourses in the construction of Blackness as deviance through music, it concludes on an opening resituating rap in a larger historical look at Black cultural politics.

The dominant construction of the ghetto as racial deviance

Although originally pertaining to Jews' confinement, "ghetto" has for more than a half-century overwhelmingly been associated with Black American urban realities (Duneier 2016). Ubiquitous in social sciences and popular culture, the term can easily appear as self-evident. Critically returning to the term and its common uses in social sciences, Loïc Wacquant notes how "ghetto" refers to a loose combination of various socio-urban dynamics (Wacquant 2011). Indeed, "ghetto" can denote – separately or at the same time – an impoverished urban area, an ethnic enclave, a product of segregation and larger repressive politics, a set of group-specific institutions, and a certain cultural specificity (Duneier 2016; Wacquant 2011).

Identifying this polysemy as semantic confusion, Wacquant concludes on the analytical inadequacy of "ghetto" in scholarship and undertakes to specify it by forging a

concept with defined theoretical grounds. Wacquant's work is essential in clarifying the debate and in understanding "ghetto"'s unstable meanings and uses across eras and areas. If I agree with his assessment of the analytical inadequacy of "ghetto," I don't think we can discard its common usages, even when deemed inconsistent. Indeed, despite its polysemy, given its prevalence in public and academic discourses, we can't get around the fact that "ghetto" still operates. And although Wacquant's strong (re)conceptualization is especially useful in studying ghettos' systemic dynamics, what I intend to do here is somewhat different. Rather than seeking to make "ghetto" an analytical concept, I take its unstable descriptive uses as the starting point of the analysis. In other words, I'm less interested in imposing a sociologically-defined "ghetto" concept, than examining the ideological grounds of the prevailing constructions underlying its common uses, and their role in legitimating the socioracial order. In an attempt to examine "ghetto" in the wider context of the construction of knowledge and its connection to power, I thus follow Stuart Hall's definition of discourses as "ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society" (Hall 1997:6).

Regardless of the term employed to refer to it, the Black presence in the American metropolis has recurrently been cast as a national social problem by the state and mainstream media. From the late nineteenth century up to the present, dominant discourses about the ghetto, whether in public and political debates, popular culture, or academia, have centered upon pathology, bad values, urban decay, poverty,

dysfunctional family structure and crime (Kelley 1997:16). Intersecting with class and gender, pathological discourses about the ghetto more largely belong to the logic of racial difference through which Blackness is naturalized and understood as the embodiment of deviance (Moten 2008:212). Thus inevitably racialized, dominant ghetto discourses rely on interrelated racial and spatial dimensions – such that they depend on what George Lipsitz has formulated as the "racialization of space and the spatialization of race" (Lipsitz 2007).

If as a place, the ghetto refers to a particular area of the city, it just as much refers to the people who live in that area and their presumed ways of life. In that sense, the way the state and the media primarily portray the ghetto through urban decay, lawlessness, and social ruin can't be separated from the racialized and gendered figures stereotyping its residents. The reductive ghetto tropes of the welfare queen, the jezebel, and the matriarch associated with Black women and those pertaining to Black men such as the unemployed good-for-nothing youth, the drug-addict, the criminal, the absent father and the gang-member all work as personified embodiments of the ghetto's dysfunctionality (Vargas 2006:23). Echoing age-old racial stereotypes (e.g. the sambo, the sapphire, the buck), ghetto tropes have served to normalize the dominant perception of Black life as indolent, irresponsible and violent (Kelley 1997:3).

Although often taken as a given, ghetto pathology doesn't stem from ghetto residents themselves, but is a discourse put forth by the state and supported by a segment of the media, through which they reduce ghetto residents to behaviors deemed pathological, dysfunctional and deviant. As Howard Becker has shown, deviance is not the behavior itself, but a result of the labeling of this behavior as deviant (Becker

1963:9). Rather than common-sense distinctions between "good" and "bad," deviance depends on the definition of normality, and the establishment of norms (Becker 1963:3). Ghetto pathology then isn't only a monolithic construction that has very little to do with the ghetto and the actual lives of people there, it is also constructed in opposition to a particular definition of normality or functionality. The idea of the ghetto as a place of out of control sexuality, unbridled violence and criminality, lack of family structure, debased culture, absence of work ethic, and perverted values is constructed in opposition to the idea of mainstream America as defined by patriarchal norms, the nuclear family, respectability, legality, and the valorization of education and hard work as linked to notions of righteous success.

The understanding of social groups through their presumed adherence or deviation from "mainstream values" stems from the ability of a dominant group to establish its own definition of normality (what's considered to be right versus what's considered to be wrong). Parodying "mainstream America" to make it appear as dysfunctional, Charles P. Henry pointed out the gap between the construction of "mainstream America" and the actuality of its behaviors and practices (Henry 1990:12). Through his caricaturing reversal, he shows that the supposed functionality or normality of mainstream America is just as absurd as the supposed dysfunctionality or deviance of the ghetto, and results from opposing monolithic constructions. Then, the labeling of different groups or segments of society as functional or dysfunctional, sane or pathological, normal or deviant, is eminently political. The marginalization of the ghetto, as a process objectifying ghetto's pathology as an intrinsic quality, is thus embedded in class, race and gender power relations. The ghetto then shouldn't be taken

as autonomous in itself but in relation to asymmetrical power interdependencies. In that I agree with Wacquant when he writes: “the ghetto results not from ecological dynamics but from the inscription in space of a material and symbolic power asymmetry” (Wacquant 2011:2).

Then, the ghetto isn’t simply the outcome of the mass migration of millions of African Americans (between 1914 and 1970) fleeing the racial terror of the South in the hope of finding better living conditions in cities (Wilkerson 2010). If it constituted the unskilled low-wage labor necessary for the factory economy to operate, the growing Black urban population and its de facto close proximity to its white counterpart, has been the repository of white fear and hostility. Rather than based on preferential cultural and ethnic regrouping, the ghetto, while maintaining a stigmatized group in a relationship of domination, is a socio-spatial institution historically organizing Black Americans’ containment and exploitation. As Wacquant puts it: the ghetto is a “device that employs space to reconcile two antinomic functions: 1) to maximize the material profits extracted out of a category deemed defiled and defiling, and 2) to minimize intimate contact with its members so as to avert the threat of symbolic corrosion and contagion they are believed to carry” (Wacquant, 2001:7).

However, throughout American modern history, the source of the ghetto’s plight has consistently been located in its so-called pathology rather than in systemic dynamics. Examples of this are *The Negro Family* (1965), through which Daniel Patrick Moynihan identified a “matriarchal structure” as the root of urban Black Americans’ “tangle of pathology,” and consequently, as the root of their poverty; and more generally, anthropologist Oscar Lewis “culture of poverty” arguments’ huge following

(Small *et al.* 2010:7).[2] In such undertakings, ghetto pathology, through a rather arbitrary selection of behaviors and traits, comes to be defined as the value system or the cultural norms for an entire social group, such that the ghetto and its residents are not only made responsible for their conditions, but also appear as completely alien to mainstream society. Defined in this manner, the "ghetto" is inserted in a causal chain in which its so-called pathology is thought to trigger its poverty, and its poverty thought to catalyze crime (Hinton 2016:20). Through the conflation of behavior with culture (Kelley 1997), the erasure of systemic dynamics behind individualistic readings and psychological reductionisms (Bourgois 2001), such reasoning, as supported by scholarship and sensationalist media coverage, has been the matrix of deep policy shifts. Identifying pathology as the root of ghetto's plight but also as the root of the national problem the ghetto represents, the ghetto pathology discourse has consistently defined the ghetto as a threat to society requiring national action. As explicitly formulated in Moynihan's report subtitle *The Case for National Action*, "culture of poverty" arguments generally called for federal intervention.

Systemic dynamics

In *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime* (2016), Elizabeth Hinton has shown how the major domestic policy shifts leading to the rise of mass incarceration, resulted not solely from Republican conservatism but rather from a bipartisan consensus and

[2] Moynihan's "matriarchal structure," as Tera W. Hunter has shown, is an expression of how from the days of slavery until today, "Black deviations from nuclear family structure continue to be pathologized" (Hunter 2016:153).

panic over ghetto pathology, poverty and crime. Going back to the 1960s, she identifies the era marked by a promise of social change, with the civil rights legislation and the progressive programs of President Johnson's Great Society as the entry point to the increasing implementation of punitive policies. Indeed, despite acknowledging historical racial discrimination and systemic inequality's link to poverty, the policies established to remedy it targeted so-called ghetto pathology as the ill to cure. "In other words, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations aimed to change the psychological impact of racism within individuals rather than the impact of the long history of racism within American institutions" (Hinton 2016:31). As a result, the combination of social programs and welfare services with crime control measures would make Johnson's "War on Poverty" a simultaneous "War on Crime," which despite being framed in a general and undifferentiated way, disproportionately targeted low-income and racially marginalized neighborhoods: Black Americans and Latinx especially.

The official reaction to the 1965 Watts rebellion and subsequent urban uprisings of the late-1960s moved the national debate from discrimination and inequality to social disorder and crime, and further marked a turn towards more punitive policy shifts (Hinton 2016:77). "State, media, and intellectuals of the late 1960s [...] worked hard to characterize people agitating for justice as morally wrong rather than politically dissident" (Gilmore 2007:90). The dominant rhetoric on the uprisings – which cast them as an attack on national security rather than as political organization for justice and protesting against policing and socioracial marginalization (Gilmore 1999:175) – served to discredit social programs as rewarding ghetto pathology and thus reinforced

the consensus about its supposed role in crime.[3] In this ideologically produced moral panic, the ghetto pathology discourse thus came to define the ghetto as a double threat to society. In the dominant rhetoric, the ghetto was presented as a direct threat to public safety, to the security of the nation's "good and responsible" citizens, and at the same time, as its debased values and dysfunctional culture could spread, it was also presented as a threat to the moral order of society. Therefore, the increased investment of policymakers in law enforcement and penitential programs has been legitimized through the rationale to protect the "great American ideal" and its future, from the barbarism of an inner enemy. Ironically, as structurally organized oppression was made into self-defense, the white elites appeared as the victims of the lower-class Black population – the victimization of the dominant group went along the criminalization of the dominated group (Kelley 1992:1406; Gilmore 1999:175). Intersecting with class, the implicit racial dimension of this logic conceals how whiteness is constructed as the norm through the marginalization of Blackness. However, the rising Black American urban population, the end put to Jim Crow by the civil rights, and the immediate urban uprisings, all represented potential disruptions of the socioracial order. Then, rather than a mere response to ghetto poverty and crime, the policy shifts initiated in the 1960s should more specifically be contextualized through those larger social transformations and the fear of displacement they constituted.

[3] This led to the criminalization of Black activists, notably by the creation of special programs like COINTELPRO, which targeted revolutionary groups like the Black Panthers as well as cultural organizations in the inner city.

By institutionalizing the ghetto pathology panic, the domestic policy reorientations then speak about the project to reassert the status quo. With Stuart Hall, the ideological dimension of the ghetto pathology moral panic becomes clear: "It represents a way of dealing with diffuse social fears and anxieties – by projecting or displacing them on to the stigmatized social group. It crystallizes such fears and anxieties – by providing them with a simple and concrete, identifiable social 'object'" (Hall 2021 [1978]:66). Contextualizing the ideological background enfolding the policy shifts initiated in the 1960s is key to critically apprehending the criminalization of low-income urban neighborhoods. Indeed, in combination with crime control measures, the social policies passed by Democrats laid the groundwork for the institutionalization of the ghetto pathology panic, and the heightened policing of inner city dwellers, which in time, would make it easy for Republicans and overtly conservative politics to further retreat from social programs and invest more deeply in punitive measures. Eventually turning the War on Poverty into a war on the poor (Katz 1989), the escalating fight against urban crime kept being implemented through the disinvestment from social welfare programs and rehabilitative services, the strengthening and modernization of law enforcement, and the expansion of the carceral state (Gilmore 2007).[4] Rather than

[4] Linking drugs with crime, the Nixon administration, while creating the Drug Enforcement Agency (1973) and introducing a War on Drugs, kept targeting urban communities by increasing the implementation of patrol and surveillance programs. Launching a War on Gangs, the Ford administration intensified the criminalization of Black inner city youth to the point of making "young Black inner city men" the typical criminal profile. By the time Carter took office, incarceration appeared as the only

structural change, by "individualizing disorder into singular instances of criminality" (Gilmore 1999:176), policymakers kept presenting police increase and prison building as the only answer. Progressively leading to the militarization of the inner city and the mass incarceration of its residents, such orientations reached their peak under the Ronald Reagan administration (Hinton 2016:307).

Reagan and the crack era

The 1980s reformulation of "culture of poverty" arguments into the "underclass" debate foregrounded the ghetto pathology panic over the Black urban poor, and continued their dominant portrayal as lazy, dependent, deviant and criminal (Wilson *et al.* 2001:15946). The construction of social services as rewarding dependency served to justify their dismantlement, and placed an emphasis on individual responsibility instead.[5] Along growing concern about crime, such rhetoric deepened the punitive orientation and targeting of racially marginalized urban areas, which in many ways, resonated with the

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answer to crime. The Carter administration constituted a continuation rather than a departure from such directions, and despite expressing concerns over social inequality, it largely pursued the union of social services with punitive measures, and the investment in law enforcement.

[5] This more largely echoed Reagan's neo-liberal reforms, which limited government intervention in the economy and implemented tax-cuts for the rich (Lamontagne 2019:451). If such reforms aimed at encouraging investments from the upper-class in order to create jobs and opportunities for the working-class (Johnson 2013:128), they resulted in worsening poverty rates along lines of class and race.

longstanding association of crime with Blackness. Indeed, the age-old belief in Black criminality as an innate racial quality (Muhammad 2010), had been reformulated through the colorblind rhetoric of individual responsibility and cultural pathology. How could this be about race? After all, racism had been defeated with the civil rights, and the growing Black middle-class and rising Black college enrollment were undeniable testaments of it. However, when, at the Annual Meeting of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, Reagan made the following remarks: "We must never forget the jungle is always there waiting to take us over. Only our deep moral values and strong institutions can hold back that jungle and restrain the darker impulses of human nature" (Reagan 1981:845), he clearly expressed that what wasn't supposed to be about race, namely the ghetto pathology panic, was in fact *all* about race. As noted by Stuart Hall: "Race is the prism through which the crisis is perceived. It is the justifying scheme by means of which the crisis is analysed and explained" (Hall 2021 [1978]:65). Formulated as a crisis, the moral panic must then be understood as "a moment which has to rely on law and coercion, since the very foundations of social consensus [are said to] have been eroded" (ibid.). Following comments on the rise of crime, the weakening of the family structure, and the prime role of law enforcement in defending the "American civilization," Reagan's remark explicitly revealed the racial implicit at the heart of the poverty and crime panic, the policy shifts it justified, and their profound ideological grounding. The reformulation of the institutionalization of anti-Blackness in colorblind terms allowed for the establishment of mass incarceration as the new Jim Crow (Alexander 2010).

As young Black individuals whose experiences were directly affected by such shifts, hip-hop artists constantly articulated critical perspectives in the public sphere through their art, as well as in interviews and debates. Addressing these issues in relation to the 1992 L.A. uprisings, Sista Souljah provided an alternative outlook to dominant accounts. Speaking on Donahue-hosted PBS special "The Issue Is Race," she linked the panic over Black inner city youth to their mass incarceration, and presented the uprisings as a politically-driven demand for justice:

> "I think America has to stop painting young Black people as being uncivilized and irrational, which is what they've done in the coverage of this story in Los Angeles. We have to look at the fact that Black people didn't just run outside and burn their houses because they were angry. The Beverly center was wrecked and that's in a white area. Korean businesses were targeted because that Korean woman shot and killed Latasha Harlins, and she was convicted of the crime and she did not one day in jail. We got twenty-five percent of our Black male population behind bars, doing exorbitant sentences for small crimes, and we don't get justice. These are the reasons why these people were attacked" (Sista Souljah 1992).

Responding to the TV host during a 1991 live CNBC interview, Ice Cube further politically contextualized the anger expressed in uprisings and Black music as demands for structural social change, by connecting contemporary systemic racism to the afterlives of slavery (Hartman 2007):

> "You see the anger but you don't understand the anger, that's the problem. People don't take time, people think that the 1960s we got all the rights that we needed and everything is alright. No, you can't give me a wound and throw a band-aid over it, you gotta heal the wound. We lost four hundred years" (Ice Cube 1991).

Across eras, different cities, districts and neighborhoods came to embody America's "ghetto problem." Los Angeles, as the home of the Watts rebellion, a strong center for the Black Panther Party activity, and later, because of its identification to the "crack epidemic," the "gang capital," and the 1992 uprisings, has recurrently appeared as the face of the ghetto as racial menace in the dominant imagination. For this reason,

ghetto pathology discourses have largely centered around Los Angeles. In relation to this, the city has been the national theater for the deployment of punitive measures, programs like COINTELPRO aiming at disrupting political and cultural organization in Black and Brown Los Angeles, and specialized militarized units like SWAT, first mobilized as a counterinsurgency force, later redirected to police urban crime, drugs and gangs, alongside units like LAPD's CRASH and LASD's Operation Safe Streets (Davis 2006 [1990]; Domanick 1994; Gilmore 2007; Felker-Kantor 2018).

Reagan's War on Drugs was nowhere as pervasive and brutal as in Los Angeles. The dominant portrayal of gangs presented them as highly structured criminal organizations controlling the drug market. However, despite this dominant portrayal, studies have shown that only one in four drug dealers was actually an active gang member (Davis 2006 [1990]:313; Klein and Maxson 2006). Participating in the erasure of the deep socio-historical roots of gang membership in Los Angeles (Quicker and Batani-Khalfani 2022), the dominant portrayal of gangs participated in their public demonization and dehumanization.[6] As Mike Davis showed in his book *City of Quartz*,

[6] In the 1980s, gang membership became inherently associated to criminal activity. As it reduces gangs to crime, this association is highly problematic – especially as it erases gang membership as a socio-cultural organization with deep historical roots. Indeed, Black and chicano clubs in L.A. had existed since at least the 1930s, and formed gendered-peer groups through which people socialized. They were also linked to self-defense against white racist clubs and gangs which terrorized racialized neighborhoods.

mainstream descriptions of gangs often resorted to panic: "Although gang cohorts are typically hardly-more than high-school sophomores, politicians often compare them to the 'murderous militias of Beirut'" (Davis 2006 [1990]:268). Numerous rappers affiliated with gangs in Los Angeles spoke on their reality. While addressing the negative impact of gang violence, their perspectives showed gangs as socializing peer groups, and further contextualized their historical roots and the socio-economic conditions they were tied to. In the face of the dominant portrayal, their perspectives allow to humanize gang members. In 1988, Ice-T declared in an *Upfront* TV interview:

> "I don't have any problems with the kids being in units and groups, because sometimes the gangs make up for what a family didn't. But then the violence is something that we can't tolerate because we're just brothers out there killing brothers" (Ice-T 1988).

Affiliated with the Rollin 60s Crip gang, rapper CJ Mac echoed comparable views in his documentary *C-Walk: It's a Way of Livin'* (2003):

> "Some kids gangbang to belong to something [...] The gang lifestyle isn't as negative as it's portrayed [...] and hey, this guy may be a gang member but he's playing football just like you and your friends get together and play football. [...] As far as teenagers are concerned, gangbanging has always been kinda like a so-called cool thing to do. The gang members at school they got the girls, they're the tough guys, they're fighting and this and that, so it's easy for a kid to look at that lifestyle and say 'hey I want to be like that, this guy is getting respect'" (CJ Mac 2003).

As gangs became increasingly identified with drug sale, they were drastically targeted by policymakers and law enforcement as *the* public enemy. The subsequent skyrocketing implementation of legislation against gangs facilitated their criminalization, and through it, the policing of entire communities. As Donna Murch

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The erasure of all this stems from the increased demonization of "gangs" as a criminalized, racialized and gendered category (Alonso 2010).

argued, “defining the war on drugs as a war on gangs justified the criminalization of everyday life in Black and Brown Los Angeles” (Murch 2015:167). As gang membership was defined as an exclusively Black and Latinx activity, its de facto racialization went hand-in-hand with its criminalization. This totalizing perception of gangs made racial profiling the norm, and thereby, every young Black inner city man a suspect. In the 2002 documentary *Eazy-E: The Life and Timez of Eric Wright*, MC Ren and Ice Cube critically articulated the racial targeting Black inner city youths experienced. MC Ren declared: “A lot of people think because you wear a baseball cap, and you wear khakis and sneakers you’re going to rob somebody, or you’re going to sell dope, or you’re going to make a drive-by shooting” (MC Ren 1989). Ice Cube continued: “We’re dealing with the stereotypes. The stereotypes that all young Blacks just because they dress a certain way are gang bangers, and that’s unjust” (Ice Cube 1989). In 1993, Ice-T expressed similar perspectives on the *Video Music Box* show, emphasizing how white fears contribute to the dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth: “As long as white people look at me, I’m a nigga, I’m their worst nightmare” (Ice-T 1993). Very real examples of this racial targeting were the Gang Reporting Evaluation and Tracking system, a computerized list created in 1985, which by 1992, had almost half of Black men under twenty-five in L.A. County listed as gang members (Murch 2015:164), and Operation Hammer, a 1988 gang suppression operation which funded mass arrests through large police raids and gang sweeps aggressively cracking down on South L.A.

and East L.A. neighborhoods with warlike firepower (Alonso 2010:159).[7] In an N.W.A interview from 1989, Ice Cube addressed police harassment and brutality in South Central L.A.: "The way the LAPD handled the gang sweep a while back, they picked Black kids at random. If you were in a certain age bracket and you looked a certain way, you went to jail, just so they can keep their statistics up" (Ice Cube 1989).

The reductive association of Black inner city men with crime had a gendered dimension which played into their systematic criminalization and incarceration. If Black men were more directly identified as direct threats to society, their mothers (i.e. Black women) were identified as the generating force not only giving birth, but rearing them into threats. We then see how the "matriarchal structure" argument put forth by Moynihan in the 1960s was reiterated in the War on Drugs. Although crime is a point of focus of the ghetto pathology panic and the policies it justified, the emphasis on criminalization/incarceration, by centering Black inner city men has also led to the erasure of Black women's and Black queer people's specific conditions. This speaks of how gender and sexuality play into Blackness' politics of hypervisibility and invisibility (Woodward 2015).

In the wake of such criminalization, young men of color were massively removed from their communities. Nearly growing by 500 percent between 1982 and 2000, California's inmate population correlated the state's major investment in prison

[7] At the height of Operation Hammer, over 1000 policemen were sent to South Los Angeles. "Over the course of the next six months, law enforcement jailed over eighteen thousand people, declaring over half of the arrests as 'gang related'" (Murch 2015:168).

construction (Gilmore 2007:7). The War on Drugs then effectively worked as a catalyst to incarceration and to the transformation of L.A. into a city of inmates, with the largest jail system in the world (Lytle Hernández 2017).[8] However, despite the panic over crime and drugs, the official statistics show a steady decrease of drug use since the mid-1970s, and of crime rate since 1980 (Gilmore 1999:173; Gilmore 2007:7). Then why such booming arrest and incarceration rates? Adding to the moral panic explanation, Ruth Wilson Gilmore posited an additional argument: sentencing was not dependent on the rise of crime itself, but on the rise of punitive laws and measures widening what counted as crime. "The explanation that new kinds of sentences – is to say the concerted action of lawmakers – rather than crises in the streets produced the growth in prison" (Gilmore 2007:20). In California, the Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention (STEP) Act of 1988, Proposition 184 "the three strike law" of 1994, Proposition 21 (Gang Violence and Juvenile Crime Prevention Act) of 1998, and gang injunctions, drastically targeted

[8] As Kelly Lytle Hernández has shown in her book *City of Inmates*, Los Angeles' relationship with human caging is much older than what we've explored here. The city was the country's carceral capital as soon as the 1950s, and already was home to one of the largest jail system in the nation by 1910. Furthermore, incarceration has to be coupled with draconian immigration and border control, and the targeting of Latinx, who are the main population of the largest immigrant detention system on earth (Lytle Hernández 2017:2).

gangs and drug offenses with mandatory sentencing (Lam 2015:9).[9] On a national level, hyper-criminalization and mass incarceration would carry on well into the 1990s and 2000s, as Bush's expansion and privatization of the carceral state (Hinton 2016:321) and Clinton's 1994 Crime Bill did nothing but boost incarceration rates (Kitwana 2002:57).[10]

But if crime and drug use went down, then why such major investments in law enforcement and prisons? Ruth Wilson Gilmore offers two main explanations for this punitive shift in California: 1) Racism, and anti-Blackness in particular, and 2) economic growth and the profit potential of prisons (Gilmore 1999:174). Further, she more largely replaces prison growth in the restructuring of the golden state's political economy, shifting from what she calls military Keynesianism to carceral Keynesianism (Davis

[9] "Starting in 1980, the incarceration rate of drug offenders increased by an astonishing 1,100 percent over the next two decades, resulting in just under a half million drug-war inmates by 2003" (Tucker et al. 2010:171).

[10] The 1994 Crime Bill was drafted by then Senator Joe Biden, who himself described it as "the most significant federal effort to deal with violent crime in America that has ever been undertaken" (NBC News 2019, 1:01). Offering funding to states increasing the number of prison beds, the 1994 Crime Bill effectively incentivized them to build more prisons and to increase incarceration rates and periods, notably through mandatory sentencing (Kitwana 2002:57).

1986; Gilmore 2007).[11] In this way, Gilmore ties the moral panic explanation to a social and economic crisis one, to both of which mass incarceration was developed as a "solution." In 1988, commenting on the War on Drugs and the criminalization of inner city youth, Ice-T offered similar perspectives, by connecting the moral panic around crime with the capitalist structure of society and its necessary dependence on racial and class exploitation:

> "In order for society to work you have to have three different classes, you have to have poor, middle-class, and rich. In order for a capitalist society to work you have to have crime, which keeps the cops employed. A war makes money for the economy, if we have good crime we flourish, [so] they sell fear to us. […] When they had a gang problem in L.A., they said 'it's on the rise,' and what happened was the cops got four million dollars to sweep for two nights" (Ice-T 1988).

By feeding into the concern over urban crime and drugs, the state-supported "crack epidemic" moral panic functioned as a way to rationalize repression (Murch 2015). At the center of this criminalizing and incarcerating turn lay the logic that the "problem" stemmed from within inner city communities rather than from systemic dynamics: deindustrialization, globalization, and white flight, which since the 1970s had brought about disinvestment and the rise of unemployment and poverty (Gilmore 1999:178). The matter here is not to "paint a noble, unblemished portrait of the Black urban poor" (Kelley 1997:4) by denying or lightening the existence of social suffering,

[11] Until the 1960s, California's economic stability had mainly relied upon the defense and military industries, agriculture, strong consumption levels, and resource extraction industries (Davis 1986; Gilmore 2007). However, deindustrialization and globalization created surpluses in capital, land, labor, and state power, resulting in a social and economic crisis, which prisons were supposed to be a solution to.

violence, criminal activity, drug use, and informal economies, but to understand them in relation to systemic conditions. By separating the drug health crisis from the "crack epidemic" moral panic, Clarence Lusane distinguished the challenges and worsening conditions faced by L.A. racial urban communities from the law and order rationales of the War on Drugs (Lusane 1991). Hip-hop artists constantly engaged in critically decentering dominant discourses as well. Tupac's definition of "Thug Life," by foregrounding systemic injustice, flipped the dominant meaning of the word from its stigmatizing and criminalizing sense:

> "When I'm saying 'thug' I mean not criminal, someone that will beat you over the head, I mean the underdog. The person that has nothing to succeed, he's a thug. […] It doesn't have anything to do with the dictionary version of 'thug.' To me 'thug' is my pride, not being someone that goes against the law, not being someone that takes, but being someone that has nothing" (Tupac Shakur 1994).

The War on Drugs, however, can't be reduced to the sole cooptation of white fears and lack of solidarity. As various segments of the Black community bought into the dominant "crack epidemic" narrative, they've also played a significant role in supporting punitive policymaking and its aftermath. Spatially removing themselves from the inner city, the Black upper- and middle-classes have traditionally embraced pathological discourses about the ghetto and the sense of threat associated with its residents. Manifested through the assertion of normative values and dissociation from the Black lower-class, the Black middle-class' dreams of racial uplift have long been embedded in politics of respectability failing to challenge society's racism at its core (Vargas 2006:145). The adherence to the War on Drugs logic was nonetheless not limited to the Black upper- and middle-class. In the midst of the sharp socioeconomic decline and public health crisis, the punitive shift justified by the "crack epidemic" panic, may well have been appearing as the only initial available option to respond to the desperate life

conditions of inner city dwellers. Through the instrumentalization of "fear, anger, and disorientation," the state-supported "crack epidemic" panic greatly divided Black L.A. along "lines of age, class and faith" (Murch 2015:170). Then, while it's important to emphasize the diversity of the Black community, its wide range of experiences, and the fractures sometimes resulting from different social positions on the one hand, it is on the other hand necessary to separate social positions from political positionings as they are not linked in an absolutely causal manner. In the documentary *Leimert Park* (2006), the L.A.-based community artist and activist Kamau Daáood described the climate of the time in terms that echo such considerations:

> "We were getting bombarded with imagery of gang and drug stuff during the 1980s, you know, that the community was totally infested with gang and drugs, which you cannot deny that these were elements out there but it was such a heavy focus on one aspect of something that was happening. After so much of that, it was instilling fear in people, and even the community itself had bought into this idea of their own community" (Kamau Daáood 2006).

Ghetto pathology panic and hip-hop

From the 1960s on, dominant constructions of Blackness became increasingly articulated through ghetto discourses. The "ghetto" had long been part of public consciousness, and had extensively been represented through popular culture. Starting in the 1960s however, it came to polarize American racial issues like never before, and thus became the central repository of society's racial fears and fantasies.[12] In these

[12] As examples, we can quote Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of Gods* (1902), and Richard Wright's best-seller *Native Son* (1940) whose plots centered on ghettos' realities, often featuring violence, poverty and crime. Further, beyond the work of Black

terms, the rising weight of the ghetto pathology panic in political and public debates went along with its increasingly structuring presence in popular culture. The coexisting abhorrent and alluring force of the "ghetto" would allow – through the investment of the market – for ghetto ethnography's huge sales, the success of Iceberg Slim's (Robert Beck) pioneering street fiction novels, and later, Blaxploitation blockbuster movies.

First appearing as nothing more than an unimportant soon-to-be forgotten fad, hip-hop, through the investment of the music, movie and advertising industries was not only growing in accessibility and popularity but also developing into a "billion-dollar enterprise" (Keyes 2004:2). If the latent anxiety towards hip-hop manifested itself in occasional spikes, by 1985, the attention around fights occurring at theaters showing *Krush Groove* and during Run DMC's 1986 national "Raising Hell" tour made the hysteria bubble pop. As the opposition between rap's detractors and advocates intensified, the debates surrounding it rapidly turned into a full-blown moral panic bringing into play various parties with diverging positions and interests. As hip-hop artists and inner city residents themselves understood hip-hop as theirs and as originating from their communities, the growing interpretation of rap through the ghetto pathology panic by the media strongly opposed the perspectives hip-hop artists. As we'll see in the next chapter, from the clashing opinions of a range of moral entrepreneurs, artists, politicians, journalists, scholars, and regulatory agencies, emerged a cacophonous dissensus (McRobbie and Thornton 1995:560).

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authors, the ghetto appeared in many mainstream works from white authors, which also majorly contributed to its construction.

Increasingly, rap was presented as dangerous and as inciting violence and antisocial behaviors in a large segment of mainstream media. In a 1985 *New York Times* article, journalist Clifford May commented on incidents happening at *Krush Groove* showings. After connecting rap music to "a particular Black community" (read: ghetto), he identifies rap as the source of scuffles, and quotes scholar Thomas Pettigrew to back his argument: "[rap] can inspire 'a state of generalized arousal. It can whip people up'" (May 1985). In 1986, a Long Beach Run DMC concert involving rival gangs seems to have been a tipping point. Following the concert, rap's coverage exploded. In an organized TV encounter, a CBS host discussed with Run DMC and Nelson George. His opening question: "What's happening? Why is this violence? And is it in any way linked to the music or the people who are going to your concerts?" The concern over rap grew with the rising popularity of artists like N.W.A, Ice-T, and 2 Live Crew, whose explicit violent and sexual first-person raps came to be known as gangsta rap and Miami bass. In a segment of the media, rap was described as promoting misogyny, homophobia, sexual misconduct, drug-use, gang activity, and disdain for law enforcement, and as such was presented as a threat to society bringing about violence but also perverting the nation by glorifying bad values. An overview of rap's critics, however, demonstrates that the dangers associated with rap had everything to do with it being perceived as the unmediated voice of ghetto youth (Rose 1994:126), and as such, as an expression of ghetto pathology. In that sense, through the pundits' critiques we can see how the ghetto pathology panic provided the vocabulary for the dominant interpretations of rap. Hip-hop artists constantly engaged dominant perspectives in critical ways.

Perhaps the clearest articulation of such perceptions are three 1990 *Newsweek* articles, whose outlook on hip-hop defines it through the terms of the ghetto pathology panic discourse. In the first one, the authors set out to explore the "rap attitude," which they define as:

> "a new musical culture, filled with self-assertion and anger, [that] has come boiling up from the streets," and continue with: "[the] thumping, clattering, scratching assault of rap – music so postindustrial it's mostly not even played [...] is a rhythmic chant, a rhyme set to a drum solo, a rant from the streets about gunning down cops" (Adler and Foote, 1990:56).

Here, the very downplaying of rap's artistic significance takes part in its cultural discrediting. Described as mere rhythmic talks and repetitive beats based on mindless music technology uses and misuses (sampling and scratching), rap appears as barely more than noise, and surely as devoid of any degree of musical wit or talent. In those lines, rap appears as nothing more than an inarticulate expression of ghetto fury. Further, the authors add:

> "[Rap culture] primarily is a working-class and underclass phenomenon, a response to the diminishing expectations of the millions of American youth who forgot to go to business school [...] If they had ever listened to anything except the homeboys talking trash [...] we might have a sensible discussion with them; but they haven't so we can't" (Adler and Foote, 1990:59).

The authors position rap as reflecting young Black men, perceived as irresponsible, uneducated, gang-affiliated, and whose life plans don't go further than a commitment to criminal endeavor. Perceptions emphasized by the second *Newsweek* article: "rap is mostly produced by young Black men – and one quarter of their homeboys end up in serious troubles with the law" (Gates 1990:60). Titled "Decoding Rap Music," this article frames rap as a cultural enigma and offers to decipher it. Much like the first one, it does so in othering terms, by reinforcing the distinction between us/them, norm/deviance, American civilization/ghetto. Rap artists often were

confronted to such views about their music and themselves, and critiqued how these stereotypical perspectives connected to larger racist assumptions that were projected onto them. In 1993, Tupac Shakur expressed his opinion about the panic around him and his music:

> "It's just about loud rap music, tattoo-having thugs, it's not even about me no more, it's about some nightmare that these people are having [...] this has nothing to do with me" (Tupac Shakur 1993).

The third *Newsweek* article "America's Slide into the Sewer," relies on graphic depictions of the 1989 Central Park jogger gang rape case to sound the alarm about the dangers of rap music, about 2 Live Crew's music in particular. Not only does the author hold rap responsible for encouraging violence against women and perverting America's values, but he also equates rappers to the Central Park Five on the basis of their shared social background – that is, being young Black men from the inner city:

> "Where can you get the idea that sexual violence against women is fun? From a music store, through Walkman earphones, from boom boxes blaring forth the rap lyrics of 2 Live Crew [...] Fact: Some members of a particular age and social cohort – the one making 2 Live Crew – stomped and raped the jogger to the razor edge of death, for the fun of it" (Will 1990:64).[13]

Closing his demonstration by pointing the supposed cultural root of the problem, he pins it all on the supposed lack of structure of the Black family:

> "Half of all Black children live in single-parent households headed by women. The Black family is falling apart, teen pregnancy regularly ruins lives, the rate of poverty is steadily rising and 2 Live Crew is selling corruption [and] self-hate" (Will 1990:64).

[13] The Central Park Five were wrongfully accused and convicted, and released after years of incarceration (Dwyer 2019).

Again, the author was reiterating the "matriarchal culture" Moynihan argument, identifying Black women as the root of Black culture's "tangle of pathology." To support their argument, detractors frequently quoted rap lyrics. Taken out of context, their selection often focused on shocking lyrics, the ones most likely to prove their point about the dangers of rap. In that sense, their lyrical selection not only simplified the wide range of themes found in rap, but also interpreted their meaning through the vocabulary of the ghetto pathology panic. As Ice Cube explained in 1993 in a never aired interview for ABC:

> "All rap music is not about that. You're just taking a section of it. It's like all movies aren't pornos. So you're just taking a portion and exposing that [...] Everything is not the same, there's the good, the bad, the ugly" (Ice Cube 1993).

Oftentimes described as an easy path to success and wealth by media critics, rap has long been implicitly associated with lawlessness. In this way, pundits have considered rap just as morally corrupted and corrupting as sanctioned criminal activities. In this way, the emphasis critics put on rappers' past criminal involvements or current troubles with the law reflected their will to associate rap with crime (Eklund Koza 1999:75). After presenting gangsta rap as "the rap style of a ghetto world where everybody's got a gun, women are bitches and shooting cops is fair game," a 1993 CBS report drew parallels between Snoop Dogg and Tupac's legal issues and their professional activity as rappers. While showing images of the two in handcuffs and under police supervision, the reporter comments: "[Snoop] has also just been indicted for murder in Los Angeles [...] [Tupac] Shakur has also been charged with shooting two off duty cops in Atlanta." Speaking of the relentless association between rappers and crime in the media, Snoop Dogg declared on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in 1994:

> "There's a certain part of my life of which I took the wrong route, and drifted into the wrong side of life but I was blessed enough to bank back off of that, still be alive, and get the chance to do something positive" (Snoop Dogg 1994).

In 1993, Ice-T echoed similar views about the negative profiling of rappers in the media:

> "[They] attack somebody Black, attack kids from the streets that have created another kind of music and [who] are trying to come up, and they say 'you're not doing it the way I would like you to do it.' But every kid that's in a studio, that's from the ghetto, I don't care what they're saying on that record, they're doing something positive, they're not in the streets no more and they're getting out of trouble" (Ice-T 1993).

In 1989, on *The Arsenio Hall Show* Ice-T also presented rap as a legitimate way to not only help himself, but help his community, by giving others an activity to focus on and earn a living. He thus offered an understanding of rap as a self-help activity in response to police harassment, unemployment, and mass incarceration:

> "I got my production going, and I'm trying to get all my homeboys, you know a lot of them are filtering in and out of the penitentiary system and they're coming back, lot of them will never be back on the streets, but I'm trying to help them, so I got like a mission" (Ice-T 1989).

Through these *Newsweek* excerpts, we can clearly see how pundits' reactionary interpretations have understood rap as a metaphor for the ghetto as racial deviance. Put another way, the symbolic dangers associated with the ghetto – a.k.a. the ghetto pathology discourse – have continuously been mediated through dominant interpretations of rap. To be sure, graphic and offensive styles, songs about sex, drugs, and crime were not a novelty but rather a constant of American popular culture and music. Music genres like country for example, or action films, have featured just as much violence, sexism and homophobia as rap. However, while "other genres are interpreted as satirical or artistic, rap music is considered offensive and threatening" (Dunbar *et al.* 2016:281). Even for genres that caused a great deal of controversy like

heavy metal, it was seen as dangerous for individuals (linked to suicide in particular), while rap was understood as a threat to society altogether (Binder 1993). Pointing at the hypocrisy behind the pundits' singling out of rap, Ice Cube asked why they attacked rappers and not other musicians singing offensive lyrics or actors starring in violent films: "Well I don't think Al Pacino is a gangster, and he does *Scarface*, so why me?" (Ice Cube 1993). In a 1994 MTV interview, Tupac also spoke of the way the media pigeonholed rappers as "gangsta" for their lyrical content and character portrayals, but not non-rapper artists, singing gangster narratives or playing gangster characters: "Is Frank Sinatra a gangsta singer? Is Steven Seagal a gangsta actor?" (Tupac Shakur 1994). During a live interview on CNBC in 1991, Ice Cube further discussed how rap, contrary to other forms of entertainment, was taken at face value:

> "Taking rap music literally for everything that's said is like taking TV literally. You have TV programs and you have the news, with rap music you have the same thing. Of course the TV programs are [for the] most part fiction and the news is real. With my records you have both, you have the news and you have the fictional things that happen and that's a part of life in a lot of cases" (Ice Cube 1991).

Critically deciphering the pundits' views, rappers addressed the racial implicit behind their attacks, and how the cultural politics of rap were grounded in race. In the interview and video compilation *Straight From the Hood* (1991), Ice Cube clearly articulated that in relation to rap censorship: "How you gon' censor something and not censor another thing [...] It kinda makes it seem like if you're white you can do it but if you're Black you can't" (Ice Cube 1991).

The matter is then not to deny the violence of gangsta rap and its ghetto iconography (Loza et al. 1993), but to separate them from their dominant interpretation through the ideological lens of the ghetto pathology discourse. Further, following bell

hooks, we can question why the blame placed on gangsta rap was limited to an association with the "ghetto," and not understood in the wider context of America as a capitalist, sexist, homophobic and violent society as a whole (hooks 1994). Particularly, through their deployment of anti-sexist and anti-homophobic rhetorics, rap critics took part in the demonization of rap and the social segment most associated with it: young Black inner city men. By racializing gender and sexual politics, the cooptation of women and LGBT people's rights not only identified sexism and homophobia in inner city communities as more brutal and pernicious and thus as requiring policing, but also contributed to the normalization of mainstream forms of sexism and homophobia (Alim et al. 2017:9). Again, the matter here is not to deny the presence of sexism and homophobia in rap or in inner city communities, but to separate them from a racist ghetto pathological lens, and instead, contextualize them in the larger American social system of cisheteropatriarchy. In 1991, on *Slammin' Rap Video Magazine,* rapper Yo-Yo while talking about sexism in rap further addressed patriarchal oppression as a society-wide phenomenon, and encouraged cross-racial feminist solidarity:

> "Unity is a big partnership with sisterhood. I'm not just talking about Black sisters, I'm talking about sisters in general, we should all join hands and become as one because we all live and feel the same pain and hurting, we all demand the same respect" (Yo-Yo 1991).

Additionally, foregrounding an intersectional reading, Kimberlé Crenshaw has critiqued such arguments for participating in the erasure of Black women and their specific conditions: "despite the superficial defense of the prosecution as being concerned with the interests of women, nothing about the anti-[rap] movement is about Black women's lives" (Crenshaw 1997:262).

In the dominant imagination, as put forth by media pundits, rap has been constructed as both a symptom *and* a reproducing cause of ghetto pathology, and therefore as a menace to social order (Quinn 2005:19). For this reason, it is no coincidence that the popularity of L.A. gangsta rap in the late 1980s went along with growing concern and controversy. Indeed, as the locus of the national crack and gang panic, Los Angeles was perceived as the epitome of America's ghetto problem, and consequently, was a symbolically fertile ground for cultivating the association between rap and ghetto pathology. As rap was read in direct relation to crime, drugs and gangs, the panic over it fed into the "crack epidemic" panic, and conversely.[14] As profoundly marked by dominant ghetto discourses, it is then easy to understand dominant readings of hip-hop as not only entrenched in the ideological framework of the ghetto pathology panic, but involved in its reproduction as well. Therefore, we can understand the dominant conservative interpretation of rap as embedded in power dynamics, and thus, in the upholding of the status quo. As taking part in sustaining the fears about urban crime and moral decay, the dominant interpretations of rap reinforced the supposed need for punitive measures. And as we'll see in the next chapter, beyond just being at the core of the moral panic around rap, the ghetto pathology discourse also went hand in

[14] Alongside crime-oriented sensationalistic media coverage, TV shows and movies, rap has been caught up in a complex arena of ideologically-grounded discourses. The dramatization of reality-based events by the media industry participated in what Kevin Glynn has called "tabloid culture" as a hybridization of news report, documentary, crime show, and serial drama styles (Glynn 2000:2). Shows like *Cops*, *America's Most Wanted*, or the movie *Colors* have taken part in that.

hand with its criminalization. More largely, we'll see how the criminalization of Black Americans and of Black cultural forms are grounded in the same ideological discourses about Black crime and pathology.

Opening: Black music and racial deviance

Beyond the ghetto pathology discourse, the understanding of Blackness as racial deviance has continuously been reproduced through dominant readings of Black cultural practices, music in particular. And beyond rap, the overlap between racial and musical discourses has been key in the longstanding construction of Blackness through music. Thereby, the symbolic danger associated with Blackness has persistently been mediated through Black music and its own mediations – whether it be records, performances, press, and any practice relating to it, such as particular dance, fashion or talking styles (Radano 2000:461). Coon songs in the late nineteenth century and ragtime in the early twentieth century (Radano 2000:461) have embodied this sense of threat in dominant interpretations; a perception that would be reproduced onto following musical cultures like jazz, rock 'n' roll, and hip-hop.

As part of a series of pieces on "the dangers of jazz," John McMahon's article "Unspeakable Jazz Must Go!" published in a 1921 issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* perfectly illustrates this perception:

> "It is degrading. It lowers all the moral standards. […] They [jazz music and dancing] call out the low and rowdy instinct," only to later decry: "the sensual stimulation of the abominable jazz orchestra with its voodoo-born minors and its direct appeals to the sensory centers, and if you can believe that youth is the same

> after this experience as before, then God help your child…" (McMahon 1921:116).[15]

In the mid-1950s, after a short recording career, Elvis Presley's friend Jimmie Rodgers Snow turned to religion, became a pastor and preached against the ills of rock 'n' roll, about which he declared:

> "It is a contributing factor to our juvenile delinquency of today […] [because] I know the evil feeling that you feel when you sing it, I know the lost position that you get into and the beat. If you talk to the average teenager today and you ask them what it is about rock 'n' roll music that they like, the first thing they'll say is: the beat, the beat, the BEAT!"

In the same period, Asa Carter, a segregationist politician from Alabama, bluntly expressed the racial undertones of such ideas: "the obscenity and vulgarity of the rock 'n' roll music is obviously a means by which the white man and his children can be driven to the level of the negro. It is obviously negro music."[16]

Through these pundits' quotes, the fears associated with Black music become crystal clear. From early on, for conservative critics, Black music has represented a sort of mystical force, thought to awaken primal urges in people, leading to violence, sexual and antisocial behaviors. In the critics' views, whites could fall victim to Black music's irresistible sonorities and rhythms – placed under its detrimental influence they risked succumbing to the meanest vices, thus putting whole society at risk. Pundits' worst fear

[15] I want to thank Robert Fink for introducing me to this historical source.

[16] Archival materials seen in the Arte France documentary *Black music*.

was that Black music would get into the youth, corrupt them; and as the responsibility to uphold the national order fell on white youth, their corruption meant the corruption of America's future (Maira 2014:247). Through such considerations, perceived as a sonic virus contaminating people, diverting them from the nation's "good values," Black music has long functioned as a metaphor for racial threat to society in the dominant imagination. As a figuration of the dangers of Blackness, panics over Black music has long been a *cheval de bataille* of dominant ideology. In that sense, fears of Black music have stood for fears of Black Americans' prospects of social mobility, and thus called for the reassertion of the social order. Embodying fears of the spread of savagery over civilization, panics over Black music has more largely echoed old taboos about interracial mixing and racial contamination: "The vast repetition of references to Black music as a fever, drug, disease, and intoxicant indicate that the threat of Black music related above all to fears of miscegenation, through which hot rhythm becomes the metonym of the Black male body, and specifically, Negro semen or blood" (Radano 2000:474).

As articulated through dominant perceptions of Blackness, Black music's symbolic danger has not only been the source of negative fears but also of great attraction (Kelley 1997:3). Commonly described as a pure intuitive expression independent from rational constraints, as an immediate release stemming from a genius inner-sensibility, Black music has been a subject of intense fascination. As a romantic inversion positively valuing Black music – and by extension, Blackness – this fascination however, has reproduced the opposition white/Black, relationally defining the former as the norm and the latter as the other. A prime example of this fascination

has been white hipness and its constant search for proximity to Blackness (Monson 1995). As the epitome of transgression, Blackness has functioned as the liberating antidote for hip whites looking to break free from the chains of social norms. They've continuously performed their detachment from mainstream society through their association with Blackness and Black cultural practices incarnating it. In that way, Black music has been a choice medium to articulate one's desire of rebelliousness. However, just like the fears associated with Black music, the fascination for it has relied on the same othering logic, reducing Blackness to a racial essence, of which Black music would be a direct expression. The widespread popularity of Black music has made Blackness central to American popular culture at large. The ubiquity of Blackness in the mainstream however, has typically been understood through the lens of white supremacy rather than through the complexities of Black life (Verney 2003:7). In that sense, the deep investment of market forces in white racial fears and fantasies has organized the commodification of Black music through the reproduction of dominant constructions of Blackness.

Chapter 2

Rethinking the Moral Panics around Rap in the 1980s and 1990s

The first chapter has primarily focused on analyzing moral panics around rap as conservative reactions, whose grounds in ideological struggles reveal the racial dimension of power issues central in the debates surrounding Black American culture. If those critical perspectives are essential to understand rap, they nonetheless take part in erasing the complex and ambivalent dynamics at work in moral panics. The common conception of "moral panic" as a univocal societal reaction, developing in logically ordered stages (McRobbie & Thornton 1995:560), can reduce moral panics around rap to "an envoy for dominant ideology" (McRobbie & Thornton 1995:562). Indeed, the common conception of "moral panic" not only tends to minimize the plurality of reactions *against* rap, but also usually overlooks the supporting voices from counter-oppositions, and from hip-hop artists themselves. Relying on a distinct conception of "moral panic" as an arena of contested debates, this chapter re-examines the moral panics around rap in the 1980s and 1990s by taking into account the dynamic interaction between various parties with diverging opinions and interests. Through archival research, and in the interest of historical accuracy, the chapter thus intends to depart consensus (Deflem 2020:4). It does so by foregrounding the voices of hip-hop artists and confronting them with anti-rap perspectives. Considering the clashing opinions and interests of a range of moral entrepreneurs, artists, companies, politicians, journalists, scholars, and regulatory agencies, I complicate the analysis of moral panics around rap and acknowledge counter-discourses. By doing so, I contribute to analyses of

rap as a contested category embedded in complex and ambivalent dynamics rather than taking its meaning as inscribed within its form alone (Hall 2002:189).

However, while thinking through complexity, I maintain a critical ideological lens. In continuity with the previous chapter, I explore how the construction of Black inner city youth as a social problem (through what I have termed ghetto pathology discourses) plays into the criminalization of rap, and conversely, how the criminalization of rap participates in the criminalization of this very social group. In other words, this chapter studies how the ghetto pathology discourse has taken part in the criminalization of Black life and culture in America. In these terms, the chapter also reflects on the ideological grounds of the longstanding relationship between rap and the law, and thus helps contextualizing the historical roots of the enduring criminalization of contemporary rappers, such as Travis Scott, Young Thug, and Gunna. More generally, the chapter looks at how the moral panics around rap exemplify how the wider power asymmetries in the U.S. socioracial order are expressed through the cultural terrain.

The chapter is divided in three parts. The first part examines how moral entrepreneurs and their campaigning against rap were indeed grounded in the ghetto pathology discourse, and therefore implicitly racist, despite their proclaimed "social concerned" motives. The second part, by focusing on the wide array of interacting parties, opinions and interests, complicates the analysis of the moral panics around rap by revealing the ambivalent dynamics within which they were embedded. In the final section, I explore the concrete impacts of moral panics on rap, its commercial organization, and its cultural marginalization and criminalization.

Rap, moral panics and the ghetto pathology discourse

Based on alarming perceptions of rap, a variety of moral entrepreneurs in the 1980s and 1990s embarked on campaigns in order to regulate its content, its circulation, and its commercialization. Despite defending different opinions and interests, moral entrepreneurs' positions deeply reflected ghetto pathology discourses. While focusing on cultural issues, their campaigns implicitly identified Black inner city youth as a threat to social order. This first part investigates some of the major moral panics around rap and their grounding in ghetto pathology discourses, particularly prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s through the "underclass" debate and the War on Drugs panic (Kelley 1997).

Rap and the police

The belief that rap encouraged violence against law enforcement was central in the campaigns set against it. For this reason, N.W.A's song "Fuck the Police" became a key repository of anti-rap rhetorics. Published in the Christian right organization Focus on the Family magazine *Citizen*, a 1989 article titled "Rap Group N.W.A Says 'Kill Police'," exhorted readers to "alert local police to the dangers they may face in the wake of this record release" (Marsh and Pollack 1989). Among others, this article has often been said to motivate Police departments nationwide to fax each other N.W.A lyrics in order to stimulate pressures against the group. Directly related to those "fax campaigns" was the 1989 FBI letter written by Milt Ahlerich, the assistant director of the FBI's Office of Public Affairs, which he addressed to N.W.A distributor Priority Records. After stating that N.W.A's album *Straight Outta Compton* "encouraged violence against and

disrespect for the law enforcement officer," the three-paragraph letter presented police as the shield protecting society from rising crime:

> "Violent crime, a major problem in our country, reached an unprecedented high in 1988. [...] Law enforcement officers dedicate their lives to the protection of our citizens, and recordings such as the one from N.W.A are both discouraging and degrading to these brave, dedicated officers" (Marsh and Pollack *1989*).

Then, it seems clear that Ahlerich's interpretations took N.W.A lyrics out of context and understood them through the criminalizing lens of law and order rationales foregrounded in the War on Drugs (Murch 2015). Against these perspectives, N.W.A and rappers in general kept arguing that their songs reflected the reality of police brutality and the hyper-criminalization of Black youth in the inner city. In a 1989 N.W.A interview, Ice Cube said: "Five white guys walk in together as friends, five Black guys walk in together as a gang in the police's eyes. They have you like this, and head down, and you'd be on the concrete." (Ice Cube 1989).

In 1992, in the wake of the L.A. uprisings, a similar case took shape around Ice-T's Body Count band and their song "Cop Killer" released on Sire Records. Due to Ice-T's racial identification and hip-hop musical categorization, the song, despite being performed by a heavy metal band, was framed as rap and thus fed into the controversy over the genre. Again, police departments and associations across the country such as the Fraternal Order of Police or the Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas (CLEAT) joined forces with groups like the National Rifle Association (NRA) to call for the boycott and ban of the song (Charnas 2010:377). During a TV interview, Glenn White, the vice president of Dallas Police Association and main instigator of the boycott said: "As you go through those lyrics you can basically understand that he's planning the assassination of a police officer. It's a concern that should be shared by everyone"

(Hezakya Newz and Films 2018).[17] This time around, the song and artist weren't the only target. Indeed, Time Warner, the owner of Sire Records, received an incredible amount of pressure. Accusing the media conglomerate of doing anything for financial profits, campaigns against the company called for a boycott of its products, including music, magazines, and cinema, the 1992 *Batman Returns* movie in particular. Peter Kehoe, the executive director of the New York State Sheriff Association expressed his attacks against Time Warner on ABC: "It has nothing to do with freedom of expression. It has everything to do with incredible corporate greed, with incredible social irresponsibility" (Ralph Viera Videos 2018). The allied forces in the controversy used Time Warner's 1992 annual shareholders meeting as a strategic opportunity to tighten the pressure. While police advocates protested outside the Beverly Wilshire Hotel where the Time Warner meeting was held, inside, the CLEAT distributed documents to stockholders urging them to send the company a "message with stock divestitures and other tactics" (Morris 1992a:71).[18] In their attempt to convince shareholders to take side with them, the campaigners also resorted to emotional shock. Actor Charlton Heston – a close affiliate of the NRA – read some of Ice-T's lyrics in order to cause dismay among

[17] Glenn White was the editor of the Dallas Police Association's newsletter "The Shield." In the May issue appeared a piece titled "New Rap Song Encourages Killing Police Officers."

[18] Relying on similar "divestiture" strategies, police associations across the nation threatened to divest their pension funds from Time Warner's stocks. Leading the way was the New York Patrolmen's Benevolent Association said to possess about $100 millions worth of stock (Morris 1992a:71).

the audience. Widows of slain police officers were present, officers injured in duty shared their testimony. Bobby Smith, a former Louisiana police officer gave a speech that was broadcast by NBC: "My two-and-a-half-year-old son comes to me and asks me 'daddy read me the book,' and I can't, because someone hated police so bad, that they took away my sight" (Ralph Viera Videos 2018). In the midst of heightened attention to the endemic racism of the police and of demands for its institutional reform, reactionary campaigning against "Cop Killer" (and rap at large) re-articulated a pro-police rhetoric through the cultural terrain of rap (Chang 2005:397). This is something that Ice-T himself articulated about the panic around "Cop Killer" in a 1992 interview: "The cops used us to get a lot of publicity" (Ice-T 1992).

Obscenity, and moral decay

Other campaigns against rap centered on the idea that it spread obscenity and thus was involved in the moral decay of society. The rap group 2 Live Crew was particularly under fire for its explicit sexual lyrics. Perceiving rap music as a great social problem, Florida lawyer Jack Thompson left his job to go after the group and their leader Luther Campbell, also owner of Luke Skyywalker Records. In 1990, with the aim of getting the album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* banned, Thompson sent hundreds of letters to sheriffs' departments and politicians (Chang 2005:393). Thompson often compared himself to "Batman" and hailed Campbell as "The Joker." His self-identification to Batman went much further than a simple metaphor – he notoriously drank out of a Batman mug, wore a Batman watch, and placed photocopies of his driver's license with a Batman picture over his own when sending legal documents (Parker 1990). This fixation on Batman not only reflected his private investment in the law but his narrow

moral sense as well. As a self-confessed "radical conservative Republican" and "born again" Christian (Philips 1990a), Thompson wrote panic articles in *Billboard* like "Clean up Record Lyrics – or else" and "Morals are Slipping" in which he attacked Luke Campbell and the 2 Live Crew: "He's peddling obscenity to children and that is why I have to play Batman here – to assist, to cajole and to sometimes embarrass government into doing its job" (Philips 1990a). From this latter quote, we understand how Thompson normalized obscenity as if it was a concrete measurable thing and not something dependent on his own ideological positioning. Although acting independently, he expressed feelings of proximity towards the fundamentalist Christian right group the American Family Association and their approach on cultural matters. Responding to attacks on rap, and its supposed danger for children, Ice Cube critically posited that the young listeners knew how to make sense of the music, and that the problem really stemmed from parents' lack of knowledge and understanding. In a 1991 CNBC interview he declared:

> "Do kids take it for face value or do you take it for face value? The kids that I run across know who I am and know what I'm talking about, and are down with the struggle. The people who don't understand or don't take time to understand they just see it for face value" (Ice Cube 1991).

Sharing similar motives, the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) targeted rappers and rap songs' lyrics in a more all-encompassing way. Indeed, the PMRC wasn't only concerned with obscenity, but emphasized the need to protect children from the dangers of certain kinds of popular music. As they defined themselves, the PMRC strived to educate and inform parents about music that "advocate[s] aggressive and hostile rebellion, the abuse of drugs and alcohol, irresponsible sexuality, sexual perversions, [and] violence" (Friedlander 2006:301). Far from an independent

concerned parent group, the PMRC was founded and run by highly politically-affiliated women, most of whom were married to prominent government officials, which caused the group to be known as the "Washington Wives."[19] Based on their proclaimed purpose of informing parents, the PMRC launched a monthly newsletter and campaigned for the establishment of a music rating system to be applied on records deemed "explicit." Organizing a "media watch," the PMRC and supporters sent letters to radio and TV stations nationwide to pressure their broadcast programming as well as to record companies to pressure their musical production (Packer and Pennington 2014:349; Deflem 2020). If the PMRC boasted reputable supporters like the National Parent Teacher Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics, it also maintained close ties (despite denying them) with Christian right associations like Teen Vision, 700 Club, Focus on the Family, and the American Family Association (Marsh and Pollack 1989). The PMRC's campaigning led to a Senate Hearing in 1985. A few weeks after the hearing the Recording Association of America (RIAA) agreed to the introduction of a warning sticker (Deflem 2020).

The PMRC originally focused on pop music, rock'n'roll and heavy metal artists like Prince, Madonna, Frank Zappa, Twisted Sister or Black Sabbath. They only shifted their focus to rap in the late 1980s. If the lawyer Jack Thompson was after rappers, he

[19] Most notoriously part of the PMRC were Tipper Gore, married to Senator and future Vice President Al Gore; Susan Baker, married to Secretary of State James Baker; Pam Howar, married to vice president of D.C. Republican Committee Raymond Howar; Sally Nevius, married to former Chairman of D.C. Council John Nevius.

was also against video games, which he thought glorified violence, sex and corrupted American youth. It's then important to understand their actions in a broader context, as a more general concern with popular culture. Beyond rap, their actions reflected those of the American Family Association, which had led boycott campaigns against many companies, which for example led 7-Eleven to stop selling adult magazines in its stores, and Pepsi to drop a commercial featuring Madonna. That said, despite an overall concern about popular culture, we can't ignore the specificity of attacks on rap and their grounding in a racist ideology foregrounding ghetto pathology discourses. Addressing the hypocrisy of accusations, Queen Latifah expressed that instead of focusing on rappers, pundits should look at the deeper social issues: "You can't blame us for that, go into the real problem, don't just sit here and say 'musicians, musicians, rappers, rappers, rappers" (Hezakya Newz and Films 2018).

In the name of a supposed moral righteousness, Thompson and the PMRC's rhetoric advocated the policing of rap by relying on the so-called "American family values" and the "sake of children" (Chastagner 1999) supposedly highly vulnerable to what they perceived as "dangerous music." Following Sunaina Maira, as youth is often taken to be the bearer of society's future, their supposed corruption has generally been used to signify the corruption of America's future (Maira 2014:247). Seen as a perverting force, leading to crime, drugs, sex and other defiling-perceived activities, rap has been constructed as a threat to the social order. In this perspective, the notion of "nuclear family" has had a profound ideological grounding and has long served to justify conservative politics. In a 1992 interview, Ice-T accurately reframed the debate and identified that the real issue was the political educational power of rap and its effect on

white listeners. A process that he metaphorically termed "home invasion." Flipping the criminalizing discourse about Black youth as threats to society, Ice-T reversed it to identify conservatives' fear of social change through their fear of rap.

> "They're really afraid of Black rage, and Black rage being injected into white kids. It's the final chapter in preparation for the revolution. When the white kid walks home saying 'Fuck the police,' and says 'Yo mom we ain't built no pyramids, Elizabeth Taylor wasn't Cleopatra, [...], and why is this and why is that, I'm not with you and pops' bullshit. When that happens their homes have been invaded, and that's when they have to shut it down. They have to shut this information down" (Ice-T 1992).

Extending on this idea, Ice Cube said: "This is not a physical revolution it's a mind revolution" (Ice Cube 1991).

In the late 1980s especially, in the midst of the Reagan era, the concerns over the "family structure," among those over crime and drugs, were central in the "underclass" debate and the War on Drugs panic. Further, because they echoed ghetto pathology discourses, and as such, put forth a construction of Black inner city youth as a threat to society, the crusades against rap should be understood at the intersection of generation, gender, class, and race.

Black attacks on rap

Attacks on rap didn't only stem from white-led groups. A number of Black leaders heavily critiqued rap along similar lines. Reverend Calvin Butts of the Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem was one of the most vocal. In various media outlets, he frequently expressed his disdain for rap: "This poison kills, it kills young men and women, it kills old men and women, it promotes violence and sexism in our communities. It's dangerous to our police officers, it is just wrong" (Hezakya Newz and

Films 2018). Butts understood rap through the same ghetto pathology discourses that identified Black youth as the source of ills leading American society to its demise. In 1993, during the *Video Music Box Special:* "Censorship? Rap under Attack," Butts declared:

> "This is not only a condition in the community of people of African descent, this is a condition in the larger community, the white community. Therefore, we do not only need to worry about the moral erosion in our own community but the complete deterioration of the moral fabric in America" (Calvin Butts 1993).

Similar views were shared by former civil rights activist and founding member of the National Political Congress of Black Women, C. Delores Tucker, who received large media exposure for her positions. Like she declared on ABC News:

> "[Black youth] don't have the traditional family and home. [For] many of them the street has become their home, and the gang has become their family [...] They're in the street, their mothers are on crack, they can't parent them. We need a Girard college type institution because [...] it gives them moral and wholesome values [...] We have to provide these alternatives, home environments for them, if we don't we're going to see the worst epidemic of violence that we've never even dreamed of. It's a social time bomb" (Hezakya Newz and Films 2018).

In such remarks, rap clearly appears as the manifestation of Black youth's supposed entanglement in a pathological culture putting all of society at risk. Butts and Tucker both held rallies against rap and the companies involved in its production and distribution. Butts crushed rap records and tapes amidst a group of supporters screaming "Negative rap is not alright!," and then deposited the scraps at Sony headquarters (Levy 1993). Tucker picketed retail chains stores like Nobody Beats the Wiz and Sam Goody with supporters carrying signs such as "Ban gangsta rap" or "Gangsta rap is rape" (Gardner 1994).

Embedded in Black respectability politics (Vargas 2006), these anti-rap positions more largely reflected the polarities dividing Black Americans along lines of class,

generation, and faith (Murch 2015:170). The following remark about rap from Reverend Butts from the aforementioned *Video Music Box* episode illustrates this point: "We don't want to perpetuate negative imagery [...] we want to break free from that. I think that the challenge in our community is always to say let us raise the standards" (Calvin Butts 1993). Rappers were critical of these respectability politics and the lack of Black solidarity and unity they foregrounded. Tupac Shakur articulated these critiques at a 1992 Malcolm X Grassroots Movement event, where he reminded that "raising the standards" wasn't a matter of choice given the social conditions in the inner city, and that respectability politics just promoted division within that the Black community:

> "It's still on, just like it was on when you was young and we want to say "fuck that" just like you said "fuck that" back then. So how come now, I'm twenty years old, ready to start some shit, everybody's telling me to calm down, 'don't curse, go to school, go to college,' well fuck that. We've had colleges for a while now, and it's still Brendas [struggling young Black women] out there, and niggas is still trapped [...] It's not just the white man that's doing it to Brenda, and it's not just the white man that's keeping us trapped, it's Black. [...] What I want you to take seriously is what we have to do for the youth. Because we're coming up in a totally different world. This is not the same world that you had, this is not the 1960s. You grew up before crack, that should say it all. [...] It's not just about you taking care of your child, it's about you taking care of these children" (Tupac Shakur 1992).

And while advocating for solidarity across the Black community, he reminded that the struggle for racial justice has to be inclusive, and that some of the most celebrated Black leaders came from so-called "non-respectable" backgrounds themselves:

> "We gotta get our brothers from the streets like Harriet Tubman did, why can't we look at that and see exactly what she was doing. Like Malcolm did, the real Malcolm before the Nation of Islam. You gotta remember this was a pimp, a pusher and all that, we forgot about all of that. In our striving to be enlightened, we forgot about our brothers in the street, about all our dope dealers, our pushers, and our pimps" (Tupac Shakur 1992).

Further, such respectability politics often led to the exclusion of rap from the Black musical tradition and culture altogether. Butts again declared:

> "I'm concerned about the betrayal of a rich oral tradition, rapping comes from the griots, it comes from the preachers, from the poets like Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks. It's all part of a rich tradition that's being prostituted in the name of materialism" (Hezakya Newz and Films 2018).

However, rappers continuously claimed influences from Black poetic and Black musical traditions. In a 1989 *Yo! MTV Raps* episode, Ice Cube declared: "Our kind of influence, you know I listen to the Black poets of Watts, the Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron. Everything that gives us the flavor so we know what to talk about" (N.W.A 1989). Ice-T also said in a 1988 *Upfront* interview: "I always was into poetry, street type poetry […] I used to listen to Dolemite records, and Redd Foxx, and all that kind of stuff" (Ice-T 1988).

The backlash against Public Enemy's video *By the Time I Get to Arizona* (1991) reflected a similar rejection from a certain segment of the Black community. The video, which featured a reenactment of Martin Luther King's assassination and the murder of an Arizona governor, aimed at critiquing the state's cancellation of MLK Day. Rev. Warren Stewart who advocated non-violent action for the re-establishment of a King Holiday in Arizona, strongly condemned Public Enemy on CBS News: "It doesn't honor Dr. King. It's antithetical to everything he stood for and preached" (Hezakya Newz and Films 2018). Such positions also targeted the aesthetic value of rap, which, often reduced to "rhythmic talks over beats," was considered as lesser music, if music at all. Jazz and classical composer Wynton Marsalis condescendingly critiqued rap: "After all the history that we've been through, this is what we're at? […] When you get to rap

music, you can't reduce anymore. When you get past that, it's not music anymore" (Uncredited 1989:22).

The complex and ambivalent dynamics of moral panics

While it is important to situate attacks on rap as ideologically grounded in ghetto pathology discourses, it is equally important to acknowledge the ambivalence of these attacks as well as the counter-opposition that formed against them. Beyond the ambivalence of attacks on rap, by relying on the conception of "moral panic" as an arena of dissenting debates with diverging and clashing parties, opinions, and interests, it becomes necessary to not only acknowledge complexity but think through it in order to avoid reducing the moral panics around rap to "an envoy for dominant ideology" (McRobbie and Thornton 1995:562).

Varying opinions and positions

For example, despite its vicious critique of rap, the inflammatory *Newsweek* editorial published in 1990 features diverse and even opposing narratives. Throughout the endless list of accusations made, we can find ambivalence in remarks such as "The first important cultural development in America in 25 years that the baby-boom generation didn't pioneer" (Adler and Foote 1990:56); or "They fill major arenas" (Adler & Foote 1990:56); or "You know that American popular music is unimaginable without such Black contributions" (Gates 1990:60). These remarks can be interpreted as acknowledging the cultural significance of rap, its popularity, its commercial success, and the Black cultural contribution to American culture – which are not small things. Likewise, Reverend Calvin Butts, whose extreme positions regarding gangsta rap were

discussed above also said on ABC: “I must say that I’m not against rap music, I find it an important art form full of important social commentary. Positive rap music and even some that is really incisive and challenging is alright, I encourage it” (Hezakya Newz and Films 2018); which let us believe that he was aware of the diversity in rap and somehow acknowledged it as an art form. Of course, noting these remarks is comparable to looking for a needle in a haystack of accusations, but the fact that they exist lets us know that attacks on rap often contained “contradictory and ambiguous moments [...] which clearly open[ed] the text to alternative reading relations and a range of different political inflections” (Glynn 2000:39). Similarly, because they often included excerpts of interviews, these attacks displayed rappers’ viewpoints to the readers, thus providing them an entry to a potentially different interpretation.

The ambivalence of attacks on rap requires us to think through the variety of forces against rap and their equivocal positions. Indeed, it is clear that the large variety of reactions against rap prevents us from thinking the moral panics around it as rooted in an ideological consensus. A variety of reactions additionally taken in a large range of parties, opinions and interests, which make it difficult to define homogenous camps. Taking law enforcement as an example of this is illuminating. Indeed, if law enforcement has appeared as overwhelmingly against rap, their response to it can’t be *a priori* taken as univocal. During the polemic around “Cop Killer” the National Black Police Association stood against the boycott. The Association’s director Ronald E. Hampton took a public stance on the matter and declared that Ice-T’s song:

> “is not a call for murder. It is a form of protest. Ice-T is rapping about police misconduct, a problem that affects many Americans, primarily poor Black Americans and Latinos. A call for a massive boycott of Time-Warner Productions will not end the anger that is being expressed. The only way that can be reduced is

> through a more sensitive and humane approach to policing and protecting our communities" (Hampton 1992).

Further, even amongst the Police associations in favor of the boycott there were some disagreements. The president of CLEAT, Ron DeLord himself acknowledged the "separate agendas" motivating the diverse Police organizations involved in the boycott (Morris 1992b:10). Through the police organization Law Enforcement Alliance of America (LEAA), the NRA used the controversy to advocate their antigun control agenda, which came to compete with CLEAT's "pro-police lives" rhetoric (Charnas 2010:383). Stock divestitures were also an area of disagreement which divided police organizations (Morris 1992b:115). Besides, there were also personal discords between leaders of Police organizations. Initially, Glenn White of the Dallas Police Association ignored CLEAT's Ron DeLord's calls to join in (Charnas 2010:377).

A similar dissensus could be observed among Black leaders as well. If we've seen that people such as Calvin Butts or C. Delores Tucker echoed the polarities in the Black community, other Black leaders defended rappers, thus denoting Black solidarity. This was the case with people such as Reverends Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, leader of the Nation of Islam Louis Farrakhan, and U.S. Representative Maxine Waters. In a 1994 MTV News Special Report, the latter for example declared:

> "I don't think that rap music is the cause of violence. America is a violent place, and I think there's a lot of influences of violence in this country, and we have to look at some of the root causes of anger and despair" (Maxine Waters 1994).

Al Sharpton denounced the targeting of Black youth and their cultural activity as the source of America's social problems by pointing out the violence of all of American popular culture: "Most movies have a level of violence. Hard rockers say the same thing. Republicans like Bruce Willis and Arnold Schwarzenegger star in the most violent

movies around" (Braxton and Crowe 1995). Despite his ambiguous positioning on rap, Jesse Jackson resituated the attacks against it in a wider sociopolitical context by linking the social and cultural marginalization of Black youth: "There is no excuse for some of these lyrics. But there is also no excuse for our ghettos – where young men can't find jobs nor support families, where hope has gone" (Jackson 1995:39).

Varying interests

On top of the different parties' variety of positions, we need to consider the diverging interests often motivating such positions. Rap stirred up reactions from major political representatives with rather clear political interests. Then Vice President Dan Quayle denounced "Cop Killer" as "obscene" and while referring to family values decried the irresponsibility of Time Warner and the "Hollywood cultural elite" (Chang 2005:396). Such positions were publicly supported by President George Bush (Osgerby 2004:54). Bill Clinton also joined in on the debate around rap when he made comments on Sister Souljah at Jesse Jackson's 1992 Rainbow Coalition. Taking Souljah's remarks on the L.A. uprisings out of context, Clinton condemned her for inciting racial division and hatred. The national attention around the L.A. uprisings made the "underclass" debate central to the 1992 presidential election. In a 1992 interview on the *Arsenio Hall Show*, Ice-T critiqued the hypocrisy of accusations around "Cop Killer," and the political interests behind it:

> "If I wanted hype on this record I would have did it when the album came out in March. It's an election year, people are trying to find platforms to stand on, so 'let's go after this Black guy in the ghetto making this record, and let's go after Time Warner.' It has nothing to do with me, it has something to do with it being an election year" (Ice-T 1992).

In that sense, rap allowed politicians to play on the ideological field of ghetto pathology through the cultural terrain – an opportunity that few would miss. As Ice-T said in a 1992 *Rolling Stone* interview: "Politically, they know by saying the word 'rap' they can get a lot of people who think, 'Rap-black, rap-black-ghetto'" (Light 1992).

Positions on rap weren't only motivated by political interests. As attacks on rap often targeted the companies that associated with it, positioning against it was an opportunity for some to assert their brand reputation. This was the case of Walmart, which because they defined themselves as a "family-oriented" company, refused to carry records with advisory stickers (Strauss 1996). Walmart's position on music deemed "explicit" impacted rap more than any other genre. This stance played into their brand marketing interest as it allowed to assert their reputation as in line with so-called "American family values." In the "Cop Killer" controversy, many retailers stopped carrying the *Body Count* album. Mentioning bad press from the controversy, pressure from State attorneys general, and concerns of prosecution, Walter McNeer, the executive VP of the retail chain Hastings said: "We'd certainly like to have the title in our stores, but it's not in the best interest of the company or our associates right now" (Morris et al. 1992:74). The position adopted by Hastings and other retailers was more motivated by a need to protect their companies' interests than by an ideological positioning on the debates. Diverging interests divided allied actors supposedly working in the same camp. In the case of the 2 Live Crew for example, allies to Jack Thompson's cause did not share the same agenda. That is something that Thompson was well aware of. In a *New York Times* interview, he said he was skeptical about Broward County Sheriff's Nick Navarro's motives: "His agenda is not my agenda" (Rimer 1990). Navarro

who provided Thompson with law-enforcement support was known as a publicity freak, and for that was known locally as "Prime Time" (Rimer 1990). Governor of Florida Bob Martinez, another important ally to Thompson, also had his own agenda. Struggling with general unpopularity while in the middle of his 1990 re-election campaign, Martinez likely saw the debates around rap as an opportunity for his political interests (Philips 1990b). In the 1993 *Video Music Box* episode, Ice-T clearly articulated how attacks on rap were tied to implicit interests and desires for media exposure:

> "I think they attack rap because rap can get them on the front-page, it's the vehicle that takes you to the top of this media thing. If you attack the beer commercials you don't get as much news, so [they] attack somebody Black, attack kids from the streets" (Ice-T 1993).

Thompson, who thought of his position as purely morally-based, saw his allies' interests as driven by lower principles. However, because he needed political and law-enforcement support to fuel his crusade, he had to make concessions.

Acknowledging the dynamics associating and opposing a wide range of parties, positions and interests allows to complicate the ideological grounding of attacks on rap, which if they for the most part were mediated through ghetto pathology discourses were also marked by a wide ambivalence. Additionally, the conception of "moral panic" as an arena of contested debates requires us to not only pay attention to the ambivalence of attacks on rap, but also to the counter-discourses that were raised against them. Looking at rap's supporting voices – and their own ambivalent dynamics – reveals a fuller complexity of the moral panics around rap.

Counter-discourses and supporting voices

Rappers weren't the only ones caught up in the controversies. By association, the music industry was also an important target of attacks. As a multifaceted set of organizations and sectors the music industry's positioning towards the panics around rap was all but homogenous. The music industry's wide array of positions and interests involved is too large to sum up. However, in the perspective of analyzing the counter-discourses against the attacks on rap, it remains important to acknowledge certain of its positions. The main defense line was based on the First Amendment and its guarantee of freedom of speech. In the "Cop Killer" controversy, Ice-T had a lot of support from Time Warner's president and co-CEO Gerald Levin, who publicly expressed his position in a piece published in the *Wall Street Journal* titled "Why We Won't Withdraw 'Cop Killer':"

> "We stand for creative freedom. Whatever the medium – print, film, video, programming or music – we believe that the worth of what an artist or journalist has to say does not depend on pre-approval from a government official or a corporate censor or a cultural elite of the right or of the left" (Levin 1992).

In a 1992 interview, Ice-T echoed this statement, and replaced the pressure from censors within a larger political context:

> "These people are making these power moves, the conservatives are moving on this company [which] is down with free speech. From the beginning [Warner Brothers] got Madonna, they got Slayer, they got Pantera, they got Prince. They're using this company as a whipping post for being a platform for free speech" (Ice-T 1992).

Nonetheless, many executives at Time Warner didn't support Levin's stance. Based on the idea that the controversy would hurt the business and reputation of the company, they often exhorted him to give in to pressures (Charnas 2010:382). Eventually, it would be Ice-T's decision to remove "Cop Killer" from the *Body Count* album. Defending artists on the grounds of freedom of speech was a position shared by

other record companies. However, just like for Time Warner, many internal disagreements existed, which prevent us from generalizing this position.

Mirroring the freedom of speech defense was the accusation of censorship. Pointing at rap's opponents for attempting to censor artistic freedom and control popular culture was a pivotal counter-attack. By identifying the First Amendment as a fundamental American value, they reversed the rhetoric of rap opponents, who claimed to be in defense of "traditional American values." Anti-censorship work was led by about 100 different anti-censorship organizations, which fought against the PMRC and allies (Deflem 2020). Some of the most important included Music in Action, Parents for Rock and Rap, and Rock and Rap Confidential. Formed by music industry professionals, journalists and concerned citizens these national organized groups published monthly newsletters, launched petitions, sent out letters, and published articles in various news outlets. It's in the context of this anti-censorship work that the FBI letter sent to N.W.A's distributor was made public. Indeed, after they received the letter, Priority Records, while choosing to keep the matter private, shared it with Phyllis Pollack of the group Music in Action, who shared it with partner Dave Marsh (Hochman 1989). The letter was made public a few months later, as part of a co-authored piece for *The Village Voice* in which Pollack and Marsh investigated the pressures on rap, and the connections between censors and politics. The publication of the FBI letter was important in raising counter-discourses and unsettle attacks on rap. It even gained political support when U.S. Representative Don Edward, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on civil and constitutional rights declared: "The FBI should stay out of the business of censorship," and when mentioning investigation

on the matter: “We’re going to try to find out more about this letter” (Hochman 1989). The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) also participated in the anti-censorship debates. They notably weighed in the “Cop Killer” controversy, by sending a letter to record retailers, urging them not to “bow to the heavy-handed attempt . . . to dictate what music shall or shall not be sold in your stores” (Morris *et al.* 1992:74). Hip-hop artists also spoke on the censorship of their music. Rappers that weren’t directly concerned by censorship issues often stepped in the debate in solidarity with their peers. Queen Latifah declared on an episode of the *Queen Latifah Show* featuring Ice Cube: “N.W.A had some of the most controversial lyrics ever, and it was something that as a rapper I defended you guys many a day in an interview because I felt that if they censored you they could censor me, they could censor everybody else” (Queen Latifah 2000).

Besides the defense of freedom of speech/censorship, more counter-discourses emerged from the rap community and rap-focused media, which by explaining what rap was about from their own point of view critiqued and reframed the debate. Among different perspectives, two main – non-exclusive – ones existed. The first consisted in presenting rap as a reflection of the social reality of the ghetto, and as such could be considered as an expression of protest (Quinn 2005:19). The second consisted in understanding rap as a form of creative invention and character performance in the first person, in the same way as movies and novels (Quinn 2005:117). However, no homogenous camp could be defined on the “rap side” either, which was also characterized by internal conflicts. The variety of perspectives could even be an area of disagreement. In the “Cop Killer” controversy for example, Ice-T’s manager, Jorge

Hinojosa, expressed his doubts to Gerald Levin about the free-speech rhetoric, and instead was pushing for presenting the song as a fictional piece: "The song is *not* about killing cops" (Charnas 2010:380) – an interpretation that was relayed by Ice-T: "This particular guy in this character does, that's rapping in the first person, that's called a poetic license, and obviously these ignorant pigs don't know nothing about music" (Ralph Viera Videos 2018). Furthermore, Ice-T was heavily critiqued by the rap community for deciding to remove "Cop Killer" from the album. The leading rap magazine at the time, *The Source*, published several articles against his decision, holding him accountable for "allowing a devastating precedent to be set, opening the door for the widespread censorship of rap" (Ice-T 2011:149).

The excess of hostility of attacks on rap has often functioned as a resource for the development of defensive rhetorics (Glynn 2000:39). Going back to the aforementioned *Newsweek* articles, their publication was followed by a strong backlash. Critiques emerged from the specialized music press and the rap community, but also from mainstream news outlets like the *Washington Post* or the *L.A. Times* (Goldstein 1990). Among the plethora of critiques, *Newsweek* was particularly under fire for publishing a racist editorial demonizing rap, its artists and audience. In its January 1991 issue, *The Source* published an article critiquing the *Newsweek* editorial as "a vicious attack which ignored the positive value of rap and portrayed rappers and rap fans as threatening to mainstream culture" (Sanjek 1994:360). More generally, it's also important to note that rappers had direct access to the media. Debates and roundtables were organized on various TV programs like the March 1990 episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, which featured Ice-T, Nelson George and Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys on one side, and

on the other, Tipper Gore, journalist Juan Williams, and Rabbi Abraham Cooper. Similarly, the 1993 *Video Music Box Special*: "Censorship? Rap under Attack," which featured a range of positions and participants: Ice-T, Calvin Butts, journalist Cynthia Horner, and youth educator Coral Aubert.[20] These sorts of programs gave rappers the chance to respond directly to attacks and to foreground their own perspectives. Furthermore, TV or radio interviews were another format in which rappers replied to hosts and audiences' questions. *The Arsenio Hall Show* was a space where rappers could go in-depth into their perspectives. Ice-T, N.W.A, Public Enemy, Tupac, Snoop Dogg and many more were invited on the show. Hip-hop focused TV programs like *Yo! MTV Raps*, Fox's *Pump it Up!* and BET's *Rap City* didn't question rappers' perspectives and further, placed them in a wider hip-hop cultural context. Unedited live interviews on more mainstream TV programs, if they often featured more aggressive hosts and questions from the audience, still gave rappers the chance to deconstruct negative assumptions and to follow up by reframing the question. Particularly eloquent rappers like Ice-T, Ice Cube, Sista Souljah, and Tupac were masters of such live interviews, in which they could flip the script and show they weren't who they were assumed to be. In the 1991 CNBC interview, Ice Cube critically responded to attacks accusing him of having racist lyrics by contextualizing systemic racism:

> "I'm a young Black man with very strong views [...] about the system. I'm made in America. And what happens is, they like to call me racist, but in fact I'm the

[20] Also, the 1990 episode "Indecency & Obscenity" of *The Phil Donahue Show* featured: Luke Campbell, 2 Live Crew's lawyer Allen Jacobi, Jello Biafra, Wendy O. Williams of the Plasmatics, Mike Muir of Suicidal Tendencies opposed to Bob DeMoss of Focus on the Family and lawyer Jack Thompson.

> victim of racism, I'm just reacting to the system's racism. How could you justify it by calling me a racist when I'm just a victim?" (Ice Cube 1991).

The fact that the media was able to disseminate attacks on rap as well as its supporting voices makes us reconsider its position regarding the moral panics. Indeed, the media's position tends to be generalized as siding with moral entrepreneurs. However, it seems more interesting to understand it as a variety of outlets in which debates took place. In other words, the media "functioned not as a monolithic voice, but as an arena where the plural voices of the conflict could be articulated" (Deflem 2020:20).

Beyond the varying positions accessible through the media, it wouldn't be true to consider public protests against rap as consensually accepted. Across the street from the protest against "Cop Killer" advocating for police lives, there was a counter-protest with individuals advocating free-speech and Police institutional reforms with signs such as "Ban Killer Cops Not Cop Killer" and "No to Police State Censorship" (Morris 1992a). Additionally, if the protest organized by Calvin Butts included a crowd of supporters, it also had a significant number of opponents, who didn't miss to express their discontent. One person exclaimed: "You're steamrolling our dreams, you're steamrolling our aspirations, you're steamrolling who we are" (Levy 1993). As for C. Delores Tucker, she was arrested several times while picketing stores that sold gangsta rap (Barrientos and O'Reilly 1994). These examples let us know that the moral entrepreneurs looking to cancel rap had a strong and varied opposition which constantly contested their positions and offered responses which critically reframed the debate.

The consequences of the moral panics

Beyond acknowledging the wide range of dissensual dynamics constituting the moral panics, it is also key to consider the concrete consequences it had on rap, rappers and the social group associated to this music, namely, Black inner city youth. Indeed, despite divergent dynamics and counter-oppositions, the moral panics had impacts on rap, notably in terms of boycott, regulating legislation and creative control, but also way beyond it, especially in terms of policing and criminalization.

Impacts on the commercial side

Given the controversy around rap, the calls for its boycott motivated and/or pressured various sectors to fall in line with the moral entrepreneurs' expectations and plans for the commercial sabotage of rap. As we've mentioned above, in the midst of controversies, many retail chains – including some of the biggest like Musicland and Camelot Music – stopped carrying rap, causing thousands of stores nationwide to pull records (Charnas 2010:382). Additionally, in relation to the police-led boycotts, many rap tour dates and concerts were cancelled as police refused to provide security, a non-negotiable condition of insurance companies (Chang 2005:325). Like Jerry Heller, N.W.A's manager recounted in his memoir: "Insurance carriers required police security as a condition of issuing a policy. No police, no policy. No policy, no concert" (Heller 2006:155). A large number of radio stations – among which many Black radio stations – masked certain lyrics or even banned entire songs from their broadcast (Raspberry 1993). Local but also major radio stations such as KACE and KPWR in L.A., WBLS in New York, KKDA in Dallas, WLUM in Milwaukee, or WOWI in Norfolk (VA) (Meyer 1993). Even the youth media channel MTV which programmed the hip-hop focused

show *Yo! MTV Raps* banned N.W.A's "Straight Outta Compton" video from its network (Kennedy 2017:109). Motivated by a wide diversity of interests and positions, these various bans, as they impacted the concert economy, record distribution, and promotional exposure, significantly disturbed the commercial organization of rap.

Surprisingly, those consequences also seem to have had positive effects. Indeed, every rap artist or record that was directly caught in the eye of a panic storm saw their sales soar dramatically. In the case of "Cop Killer" for example, sales of the *Body Count* album were slowing down and records were being returned to Time Warner before the polemic started (Charnas 2010:376). The album, which had sold 200,000 units up to this point, sold 100,000 more in a month and was certified gold (500,000) by the end of the summer (Charnas 2010:383). The polemic around N.W.A and the 2 Live Crew had similar results on their record sales. But even beyond particular targeted artists, the general controversy around rap seemed to have a "rising sale" effect, notably for records carrying a warning sticker (Quinn 2005:5; Thornton 1995:209). Beyond just sales, as they made rap and rappers a hot topic debated in national and international media, moral panics guaranteed "free publicity" and mainstream exposure in ways that no PR company could even dream of providing. In an interview segment of the 1990 documentary *Luke featuring The 2 Live Crew: Banned in the U.S.A.*, reflecting on all the fuss around the group, Luther Campbell declared:

> "It is actually helping us, we're selling more records. We're on a totally different level now than we were last year. When you're in entertainment, the more you're in the spotlight [the more] it increases your value" (Spheeris 1990).

Based on the idea that controversial debates around certain cultural forms benefit them by bringing attention and appeal echoes the common phrase "there's no such thing

as bad publicity." Building on this, Sarah Thornton has argued that moral panics confer authenticity to popular music, and thus function as a priceless marketing tool. "What could be a better badge of rebellion? Mass media misunderstanding is often a goal, not just an effect, of youth's cultural pursuits. As a result, 'moral panic' has become a routine way of marketing popular music to youth" (Thornton 1995:186). This is true to a certain extent. Rappers have commonly staged and performed their own rebellion to brand themselves as authentically subversive. Self-proclaimed "the world most dangerous group," N.W.A used to broadcast a message before entering the stage at their concerts: "Put your hands together for Eazy-E and N.W.A. N.W.A *Straight Outta Compton* video banned off MTV. N.W.A's music banned from most Black radio stations. N.W.A is criticized and for what? For telling it like it is" (Gerard 1992). In this case, the band's bans were used as a symbol of their subversion, which played into their scandalous image, which in turn, played into their relevance and sales. If this is a key point to consider, it is important to understand that the "marketing" aspect of moral panics was less sought after than re-appropriated as a resource by the artists and their record companies. In this sense, if they were able to turn it to their advantage, they weren't necessarily actively in search of "moral panic."

Contemplating the pros and cons of moral panics over his career, Ice-T has acknowledged that although they do increase exposure and sales, they also translated to tremendous losses, with show cancelations and lawsuits. Beyond the material consequences, he also reflected on the personal pressure which led him to take off "Cop Killer" from the album: "That was some stressful, hectic shit. That was heat coming from the government of the United States. I was in quicksand for months. There was no safe

ground to stand on" (Ice-T 2011:149). Similarly, Brother Marquis from the 2 Live Crew expressed reservations about the so-called benefits coming from moral panics:

> "We got to put out another album. What's going to happen now? They say it's all good for business as far as we get publicity and make money off of it too, but then it gets dragged out. They start fucking with you personally, they start messing with you private" (Salini 1991).

Then, if Thornton's analysis reveals some important dynamics, it nonetheless tends to downplay the consequences of moral panics, which often came with more costs than benefits.

By association, the music industry was also directly impacted by the consequences of moral panics on rap. Therefore, in the wake of the "Cop Killer" controversy, many major record labels re-assessed the terms of their partnership with rap artists and independent rap labels (Chang 2005:398). In order to protect their interests, majors pressured certain artists to drop songs, and as distributors, they pressured certain rap labels to drop artists or albums when deemed "potentially controversial." In late 1992, the rapper Paris who was signed to Tommy Boy Records had turned in two songs for his forthcoming album, "Coffee Donuts and Death" and "Bush Killa," respectively about killing police officers and killing the President (Charnas 2010:394). Concerned about the controversy the songs could spark, Time Warner, the distributor of Tommy Boy, pressured the label to drop Paris. Tom Silverman of Tommy Boy attempted to find Paris a new home, with Chris Blackwell's Island Records first, and with Rick Rubin's Def American then (Charnas 2010:394). Both times unsuccessfully as Island was owned by Polygram, and Def American distributed by Time Warner, which led Paris to release his album on his own record label Scarface (Charnas 2010:395). Two years prior, Geffen Records, which distributed Def American, refused to take part in the

self-titled album of The Geto Boys. This was this conflict which had pushed Rubin to go with Time Warner for distribution (Pareles 1990). Numerous rap artists such as Kool G Rap and DJ Polo, Almighty RSO or Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E. experienced various forms of pressure due to similar concerns from their respective record labels (Chang 2005:398). Furthermore, as Tricia Rose has shown, due to controversies, the live music industry also significantly disinvested from rap. In the midst of panics around rappers but also around the supposed "violence" at rap concerts, many venues decided to stop booking rap acts, or made it extremely difficult by enforcing stringent conditions, especially in terms of security and insurance policies (Rose 1994:130). Similarly, insurance companies either categorically refused to provide coverage or did but at skyrocketing rates (Rose 1994:133). The moral panics' consequences disturbed the overall relationship of rap with the music industry, and thus impacted artists' creative freedom, the budget allocated to support releases, the ability of independent rap labels to release project with support from major distribution, and the live music industry. As seen with Paris and the Geto Boys, these pressures pushed rap artists to work with independent record labels. In a 1993 Dutch documentary, Ice-T talked about what led him to leave Time Warner:

> "You can't seriously ask me to change this and change that and expect for me to feel comfortable. I'm not going to jeopardize my integrity. Why don't you just let me go? I'll be alright, I'll do it myself. [...] In the end, it's a blessing in disguise because now I'm running my own business and I much prefer this than being signed" (Ice-T 1993).

Impacts on policing and criminalization

The "costs" of moral panics however weren't limited to the commercial sector but also included the institutional policing of rap, and further, its prosecution and

criminalization. The institutional policing of rap refers to actual regulation passed in order to control its activity. One example of this was the implementation of the warning sticker for records with explicit content, mostly due to the PMRC's campaigning and the congressional hearings of 1985 (Deflem 2020). Focusing on rap, the subsequent congressional hearings of 1994 "Music Lyric Regulation and Rap Music," sparked the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to require "clean" versions of songs (Keyes 2004:106). These regulations increased the creative and organizational labor invested in rap records, and impacted their production costs.[21] Furthermore, cementing the relationship of institutional policing with rap, such regulations quite literally "put a label" on it and thus contributed to its cultural marginalization. Additionally, as it involved the legal system and law enforcement, the institutional policing of rap not only supported its control but also justified its criminalization. More largely, justifying rap's policing was its dominant construction as a threat to society, which had everything to do with ghetto pathology discourses.

Several famous cases related to moral panics around rap epitomize its policing and criminalization. The height of the police fax campaign against N.W.A came during the group's first national tour in 1989. In order to maintain the tour amidst boycotts from police organizations, the group agreed not to perform the song "Fuck the Police" (Chang 2005:326). However, right before their final tour date in Detroit, the group got

[21] For example, inventing new "clean" lyrics, booking extra studio time to record "clean" versions, producing two versions of albums (explicit and clean) and distributing them accordingly, the cost of warning labels… All of which was extra labor and extra expenses.

into an argument with the concert's organizer who wanted them to go second – this was a show featuring LL Cool J, Big Daddy Kane, Slick Rick and De La Soul (Mills 1989). While not firmly deciding anything, N.W.A contemplated performing the "non-performable" song as a way to get back at the organizer. While performing other songs, cheering chants from the crowd "fuck the police!" just led them into it (Westhoff 2016:186). In reaction, the strong undercover police presence at the show stormed the stage in attempt to arrest N.W.A members, who fled to their hotel rooms. When they went to the hotel lobby later that night, they were stopped by police officers who detained them (Marsh & Pollack 1989). In a 1989 interview with David Mills, Ice Cube recounted the events: "So… they took us into this little room. All they did was talk to us. They told us they wanted to arrest us on stage to front us off in front of everybody to show that you can't say 'fuck the police' in Detroit" (Mills 1989). By showcasing the readiness of law enforcement to police a rap group, this event tells us about the latent criminalized status of rap and rap artists.

Another famous example illustrating the policing and criminalization of rap is the case around 2 Live Crew's album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* (1989). Jack Thompson's strategy was based on instrumentalizing the moral panic around the group in order to rally institutional and law enforcement support to his cause. Indeed, one of Thompson's main line of attack was to prompt State governments to enforce their obscenity laws against the group and their music. Following Thompson's campaigning, several official entities did rely on their States' obscenity laws to prohibit the sale of the album and order it off the shelves. The strongest opposition to the 2 Live Crew came from their Florida home state. In 1990, Florida's U.S. district court judge Jose Gonzalez ruled the

album obscene. This ruling was the most serious institutional blow targeting the 2 Live Crew.[22] As it supported the institutional policing and criminalization of the group and their music, this ruling facilitated actions undertaken against them. Three days after the ruling, two members of the group were arrested after doing a show at the 21 and older venue Club Futura in Hollywood, Florida. Undercover police were present at the club and recorded the performance, which featured songs from their ruled-obscene album. The group members were charged with first-degree misdemeanors and ordered to appear in court at a later date (Hochman 1990). After their trial, 2 Live Crew members were acquitted of the obscenity charges against them (Clary 199). In 1992, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit in Atlanta overturned Gonzalez's obscenity ruling on *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* (Philips 1992). Obscenity was the main legal realm in which the 2 Live Crew was prosecuted. Jack Thompson and Governor Martinez also pressured to have the group prosecuted for "organized crime" under Racketeering Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) charges for the commercialization of obscene materials (Harrington 1990a). Their attempts remained unsuccessful. In the same fashion, Thompson used the RICO argument to pressure Time Warner executives in the "Cop Killer" controversy (Morris 1992a).

[22] Following this ruling, several record stores owners were arrested and charged for selling the 2 Live Crew's album: Charles Freeman in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Dave Risher in San Antonio, Texas, and Tommy Hammond in Alexander City, Alabama among others (Fields 1990).

Rap's relationship with the law wasn't limited to rappers' prosecutions and altercations with law enforcement but also included surveillance. From the mid-1990s on, in the wake of the artists-focused moral panics we've seen throughout this chapter, the rap industry was steadily monitored by law enforcement agencies. As Erik Nielson has shown, more than just surveilling rappers and associates' activities, law enforcement constituted entire dossiers holding private information such as "photos, license plate numbers, and social security numbers – that they distributed to other police departments across the country" (Nielson 2010:1255). The longstanding gathering of intelligence on rap affiliates is not dissimilar to the surveillance practices COINTELPRO used on Black and Brown artists in the 1960s and 1970s (Nielson 2010:1255).

Often reduced to mere rhythmic talks and repetitive beats made from music technology uses and misuses, the artistic significance of rap was commonly minimized. But more than just minimized, the art form of rap itself was incriminated. The lawsuits against rappers for the unauthorized and uncompensated sampling of other artists' songs can be understood in this context. De La Soul's use of "You Showed Me" by The Turtles cost them a lawsuit in 1989 and a $1.7 million reported settlement (Cohen 2016). Another early mainstream case includes the 1991 lawsuit against Biz Markie for sampling Gilbert O'Sullivan's song "Alone Again (Naturally)," which resulted in a federal judge ordering Markie's *I Need a Haircut* album to be removed from stores (Keyes 2004:104). In order to avoid future lawsuits and financial losses, record labels "imposed stringent sampling clearance policies, involving compensations to the artists and publishers of sampled music" (Keyes 2004:104). Such measures deeply limited and

policed one of rap's most central creative practice, which conflicted with one of the music industry pivotal logic: copyright holding (Keyes 2004:175).

Rappers and the music industry weren't the only ones impacted. Indeed, because rap has been associated to Black inner city youth, the policing of the genre has gone hand in hand with the policing of this particular social group. It is thus important to understand the cultural politics around rap in the broader ideological context of ghetto pathology discourses and their relation with the criminalization of Black inner city youth. As Tricia Rose's pioneering work has shown, the opposition to rap concerts in large venues has to be thought in relation to the apprehension towards a strong Black presence in the public space (Rose 1994:124). The stringent conditions regarding insurance policies and security have everything to do with the supposed belief in the necessity to police the Black presence at rap concerts. The excessively aggressive security practices observable on the ground – weapon search, metal detectors, surveillance, harassment – demonstrate the spatial control and containment of Black people in the public space (Rose 1994:128). In a similar fashion, noise ordinances and loud music regulations have been a way to police the Black presence in the public space through the targeting of rap music. The applicability of such regulations remain unclear and largely depend on the interpretation of those in charge of enforcing them, namely, law enforcement. Because of its association with Black inner city youth, rap music and its playing in the public space has been prone to surveillance and policing. Therefore, any type of rap music playing in the public space has been targeted, including on the road (car stereos), public transportation or on the street (boomboxes) (Kelley 1994:206). Such regulations have specifically been used to target rap. In the wake of the

controversy around the 2 Live Crew, then Florida Governor Martinez signed a bill into law making playing loud music on a car stereo chargeable of a $32 fine (Harrington 1990b). This is all the more evident as car culture and car stereos have been important parts of hip-hop culture (Williams 2014).[23]

Beyond the policing of the Black presence in the public space, rap has also been used to directly criminalize individuals from this very social group. In their book *Rap on Trial*, Erik Nielson and Andrea L. Dennis have shown how rap lyrics have been employed as proof to establish guilt and ensure conviction (Dennis and Nielson 2019:58). Based on literal interpretations, rap lyrics have been used in court as reflecting the lifestyles of defendants and thus as a way to have access to their supposedly "real selves." "In so doing, the lyrics are treated like autobiographical confessions rather than art or entertainment" (Dunbar *et al.* 2016:281). Nielson and Dennis have found that such legal practices have been existing since at least the early 1990s. If they've identified at least 500 cases, they also confess that this number is likely

[23] Beyond just rap, other hip-hop practices such as graffiti and break-dancing had long been under heavy surveillance and criminalization. Erik Nielson and Andrea L. Dennis have written about how millions of dollars were invested into special law enforcement units to fight such hip-hop practices through the surveillance of hip-hop spaces and the implementation of barbed-wire fences to prevent access to certain areas (Dennis and Nielson 2019:32).

to downplay the extent of this phenomenon, as rap on trial has been a standard practice since the late 1990s (Dennis and Nielson 2019:67).

Conclusion

Through a revised conception of "moral panic" this chapter re-situates historically the complexity and ambivalent dynamics constituting moral panics around rap in the 1980s and 1990s. Further, by contextualizing them within the ideological framework of ghetto pathological discourses it shows how cultural issues have been entrenched in the power asymmetries of the American socioracial order. In that sense, the impacts of moral panics around rap go way beyond the specific artists they targeted. They had pervasive consequences on rap as a whole, and impacted its commercial organization, its cultural marginalization, its institutional policing and criminalization. As those moral panics were grounded in ghetto pathological discourses they can be understood in relation to the "underclass" debate and the War on Drugs panic, through which the criminalization of Black inner youth was justified. For that reason, it is necessary to think the criminalization of rap as going hand in hand with the criminalization of the social group associated to it. They are mutually constituted. In other words, we must think how the construction of Black inner city youth as a social problem plays into the criminalization of rap, and from there, how the criminalization of rap participates in the criminalization of this very social group.

Chapter 3

Hip-hop and Practitioners' Agencies

Further questioning the relationship between the "ghetto" and hip-hop, this chapter looks to explore other prevailing understandings of hip-hop as mediated through ghetto discourses – that is, particular class, gender and spatial constructions of Blackness. Widespread in Black studies, hip-hop studies, anthropology and social science in general, uncritically accepted ghetto discourses other than ghetto pathology, while cast in positive and politically progressive terms, have largely relied on limiting constructions of Black culture and Blackness. In this chapter I identify and critique one key assumption of such ghetto discourses: hip-hop as a mere cultural adaptation to particular ghetto social conditions and material constraints.

Although well-meaning, often formulated as a defense against conservative critiques (Lee 2016:4), this assumption nonetheless constructs hip-hop through an all-encompassing cultural generalization, as well as a decontextualized and deterministic interpretation, therefore failing to acknowledge hip-hop's full complexity. This assumption is not inherently false. In many cases, it deals with fundamental dimensions of hip-hop. However, there's been a large tendency to reduce hip-hop to it. I don't intend to reject it altogether, but to critically examine its place in ghetto discourses and in the construction of hip-hop. Furthermore, I intend to contextualize this assumption within larger constructions of Black life and culture. If it is indeed widespread in the construction of hip-hop, it is not specific to it. It has generally been applied to previous Black cultural practices, music especially. Thus central in the identification of a Black

musical tradition, this assumption has in many ways impeded the consideration of hip-hop's own specificity. In this sense, by critiquing it, I intend to make way for more subtle ways of understanding hip-hop.

This chapter focuses on the assumption taking hip-hop as a sole cultural adaptation to particular ghetto social conditions and material constraints. I first critically deconstruct this assumption, and situate it historically in the 1960s urban ethnography and ghetto anthropology literature to show how it provided deterministic and functionalizing constructions of hip-hop. Second, by focusing on hip-hop practitioners' perspectives I center their agencies as a way to counteract the assumption that hip-hop would merely be a creative response to socioeconomic conditions. In this way, while contextualizing poverty and material constraints, I consider hip-hop through its practitioners' expertise, creativity, dedication, pleasure, passion, and community.

Black Culture as creative responses to socioeconomic conditions

In the first chapter of his landmark 1997 book *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!*, Robin D.G. Kelley critically interrogates social scientists' continual reliance on ghetto discourses, always central in their studies of ghetto residents and their cultural practices. Setting out to examine the predicament of the ethnographic imagination, he specifically pays attention to more progressive researchers, whose 1960s studies on urban poverty attempted to counter the logic of ghetto pathology discourses and War on Poverty policies. Kelley shows that their works have largely contributed to construct Black ghetto culture as a simple adaptation, or functional response to poverty and racism (1997:9). If the ghetto pathology discourse constructs Black culture as the root of ghetto residents'

conditions, thus identifying a supposed innate deviancy as the reason for their plight, 1960s progressives flipped this "blaming the victim" rhetoric. Instead, relying on a vulgar Marxist interpretation, they took ghetto residents' social conditions and material constraints as the root of their culture. While they acknowledged the systemic dynamics of socioracial power, the asymmetries, domination and very living conditions it produces, they nonetheless provided deterministic and functionalizing ways of understanding Black ghetto culture. Despite noble intentions, led by political ideals genuinely concerned with social justice and institutional change, their simplifying interpretations didn't come without issues.

David Schulz for example, one of the 1960s progressive ghetto ethnographers, wrote in the conclusion of his book *Coming Up Black: Patterns of Ghetto Socialization*: "Do away with the economic injustice [...], and the odds are that a style of life more closely resembling that of the core culture will emerge because there is no longer any need to adapt to isolation and deprivation" (Schulz 1969:193). Such a conception not only considers Black ghetto culture as the "non-core" culture, thus applying an othering process, but also reduces it to a simple product of socioracial domination and its material effects (i.e. poverty). What Schulz seems to say is that if ghetto residents had a higher position on the socioracial hierarchy, they wouldn't be poor and would have the material means to *not* adapt culturally, and therefore, would be able to share the same culture and values as the dominant group. By exclusively defining Black ghetto culture in reference to the dominant culture, but negatively, in terms of deprivation, 1960s progressives only considered it as "a mechanical response to a system of constraints" (Grignon and Passeron 1989:182). Thus establishing a causal relation between

racism/poverty and Black ghetto culture, progressives came to construct it as a non-culture or as a failing culture. This appears clearly in Elliott Liebow's 1967 *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men*, when he explains the "behavior of streetcorner men" as: "a way of trying to achieve many of the goals and values of the larger society, of failing to do this" (Liebow 1967:143). This quote not only shows the propensity of "much of this literature [to] conflate behavior with culture" (Kelley 1997:17), but the very denial of Black ghetto culture it carries out.

Indeed, if it is important to contemplate Black ghetto culture in relation to American society's systemic organization of power and its cultural implications, we can't ignore that Black ghetto culture remains a culture, that is, a productive system of practices and meanings. In other words, as sociologists Claude Grignon and Jean-Claude Passeron have shown, we shouldn't neglect the capacity of "any social group to organize its experiences into a coherent universe, a tendency of symbolic ordering that no social condition, be it the most miserable or the most dependent, can completely prevent from taking place" (Grignon and Passeron 1989:22). Although well-meaning, applauding the resiliency of ghetto dwellers and offering a political justification for their "behaviors" in the face of ghetto pathology rationales, progressives' ghetto constructions still appear as deterministic and ultimately, as denying ghetto residents' cultural agency (Ortner 1995). In this framework, Black ghetto cultural practices are not expressions of pathology anymore, but "compensatory behavior, or creative 'coping mechanisms'" (Kelley 1997:17), stemming from survival modes of being, and helping to withstand terrible living conditions. As he examined some of the 1960s progressives' interpretations of ghetto cultural practices like the dozens (Schulz 1969; Abrahams

1970), language (Labov 1972), hair styling and general style through "soul" or "cool" (Hannerz 1969; Schulz 1969; Rainwater 1970), and their continuing permanence in recent and present times (Lane 1986; Nightingale 1993; Majors and Billson 1992), Kelley critiqued social scientists' adaptive/survivalist interpretations and their failure to "acknowledge that what might also be at stake [...] are aesthetics, style, and pleasure" (Kelley 1997:17). Beyond Black ghetto cultural practices, many Black musical practices and genres like work songs, blues, and jazz have recurrently been understood through an adaptive or coping framework (Burnim and Maultsby 2006).

Hip-hop as a creative response to socioeconomic conditions

Not surprisingly, a large part of hip-hop scholarship as well as popular media have foregrounded socioecononomic conditions and material constraints when discussing hip-hop. In this sense, the birth of hip-hop is usually located in the failure of the civil rights to create institutional change, and the disillusionment that followed from worsening living conditions and prospects. Arising in 1970s New York's South Bronx, hip-hop did emerge amidst deindustrialization, the rise of unemployment and poverty, the development of alternative and illicit economies and networks, the militarization of law enforcement, white flight, disinvestment, the dismantlement of social services, welfare and arts programs (Toop 1984; Rose 1994; Keyes 2004; Chang 2005). Most commonly associated with gangsta rap, the emergence of hip-hop in 1980s Los Angeles is also linked to similar social conditions in Black inner cities like South Central and Compton (Kelley 1994; Quinn 2004; Chang 2005; Johnson 2013). However, depending on who is doing the explaining, the emphasis on socioeconomic conditions can vary

from a necessary historical, sociological and ideological contextualization, to a totalizing explanation for the emergence of hip-hop culture.

In his book *Listen to This*, music critic Alex Ross writes that hip-hop "rose up from desperately impoverished high-rise ghettos, where families couldn't afford to buy instruments for their kids and even the most rudimentary music-making seemed out of reach. But music was made all the same: the phonograph itself became an instrument" (Ross 2010:60). Similarly, in her book *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, Cheryl Keyes clearly states: "rap music was a consequence of geopolitical factors idiosyncratic to New York" (Keyes 2004:44), and then continues:

> "In the face of decreased financial support for New York City's public school music programs, particularly the instrumental music curriculum, inner city youth reacted creatively by relying on their own voices, launching the resurgence of street-corner a cappella singing and popularizing the human beat box (vocal rhythmic simulation of a drum). They also became more interested in musical technology" (ibid.).

These two quotes acutely demonstrate how hip-hop culture often is constructed as a simple response to poverty and deprivation. By mentioning social conditions, they explain how some of hip-hop's key elements and practices were just attempts to cop with constraints. In this sense, the logic seems to be that because of the rise of poverty, music and art programs budget cuts, ghetto youth couldn't afford musical instruments and couldn't learn to play them. Therefore, they didn't have the choice but to use what they had or what was readily available. So they used their voices to rap and to beat box. They also used audio technology, by repurposing it, like turntables and records, and later on by using drum machines, sequencers, samplers and synthesizers. This logic relies on the idea that both voice and audio technology were readily accessible, affordable and easy to use creatively to counterbalance the lack of musical training. For

voice, most able-bodied people have a voice, and can use it freely. In this way, rapping is understood as a simple rhythmic chant, which wouldn't require much musical ability, as opposed to singing (Adams 2008). Similarly, beat boxing would have emerged because of a lack of access to drums, leading ghetto youth to create rhythms with their mouths. As for audio technology, it has long been associated with effortless music-making. From the player piano, the phonograph, radio, to drum machines, audio technology has continuously been thought to make music and music-making more accessible, contributing to a so-called "musical democracy" (Roell 1989). However, this rhetoric largely stems from the "easy-play" marketing campaigns of audio technology companies, advertising their products as not requiring musical skills, or any rigorous work. Like Paul Théberge has shown, this rhetoric, while highlighting "effortless recreation, leisure, and instant gratification" has come into opposition with nineteenth century values associating musical skill with labor, a "'producer ethic' – its notions of creativity and personal achievement" (Théberge 1997:251). Then, those who have considered audio technology to democratize music-making, have unknowingly bought into advertising tales from the marketplace, which well predated hip-hop. In this sense, the logic that technology was a perfectly suited response to ghetto youth's lack of access to traditional instruments and conventional music education is actually grounded in the uncritical acceptance of consumer advertising.

According to such thinking, whether it is for voice or audio technology, hip-hop would then be nothing more than a reaction to a lack of choices caused by poverty, a "by default" musical culture. As such, this assumption even serves to explain hip-hop's commonly identified musical characteristics, that is, an emphasis on rhythm and

repetition, the use of audio technology as instruments, a basis in orality and improvisation (freestyle), as stemming from a lack of musical training and technical skills (Barlett 1994; Adams 2008; Adams 2009). All characteristics defined in opposition to music theory and conventional music-making, which are on the contrary, generally described as valuing harmonic progressions, the use of traditional instruments, musical notation and rational construction, as based on strong musical training and instrumental technical skills. This set of oppositions constructs hip-hop in reference to music theory. Rather than defining hip-hop in reference to itself, it does so through its supposed deviation from the "musical norm." Beyond hip-hop, such processes of othering have been widespread in the construction of Black music, notably through an emphasis on rhythm (Tagg 1989; Agawu 1995). It's thus important to recognize the racial dimension of such constructions, and how they play into the construction of Blackness through music (Radano 2003).

Based on this assumption, scholars and journalists have explained hip-hop in positive and supportive terms, against the ghetto pathology interpretations. In this sense, their position has been to state that amidst chaos and deprivation, music still found a way to blossom, resulting in rawer, purer creative expression, free of the unnecessary and pompous sophistication of institutionalized forms of musicking. Hip-hop would have greater value specifically *because* it stems from restrictive conditions. However, the terms through which these writers praise hip-hop remain grounded in the opposition with a "musical norm." For example, the idea according to which hip-hop would be less about musical ability than immediate expressiveness is directly connected to this opposition. Furthermore, this idea isn't specific to hip-hop as it has more largely

participated in the construction of Black music, with tropes such as Black musicians "play[ing] from [their] soul rather than their intellect" (Kelley 1997:3).

Although a number of scholars and journalists relying on this assumption are sympathetic to hip-hop and attempt to champion its cultural significance, we can't be blind to the fact that conservative critics have used the very same assumption to depreciate it. Indeed, on the conservative side, this assumption has served to argue that poverty makes for poorer musical practices, which themselves make for poorer musical forms. In other words, due to restricted means, rapping, beat boxing, DJing, and producing would be lesser musical practices, making hip-hop a lesser music, if music at all. Two incendiary *Newsweek* articles from 1990 articulate this perfectly. They present rap as barely more than noise. The first one describes it as "chanting over gut-whomping drumbeats and those noises like somebody scratching a needle across a damn record" (Gates 1990:60), while the other declares:

> "[the] thumping, clattering, scratching assault of rap – music so postindustrial it's mostly not even played, but pieced together out of prerecorded sound bites [...] is a rhythmic chant, a rhyme set to a drum solo" (Adler and Foote 1990:56).

Besides the extreme reactionary language, the most striking thing about those comments is that they describe rap in the same terms as those who support it. They are grounded in the same opposition with a "musical norm." The main difference then is a negative appraisal rather than a positive one.

Although it reckons with the systemic dynamics at root cause of poverty, the assumption that hip-hop is a simple response to social conditions and material constraints is problematic. By only contemplating hip-hop in regard to deprivation, it constructs it in othering terms, as deviating from the norm. This shows how music plays

into racial constructions, and in this case, how this assumption about hip-hop contributes to the othering of Black ghetto residents as the "thing against which normality, whiteness, and functionality have been defined" (Kelley 1997:3). While positively valuing hip-hop, commentators resort to a rehabilitating inversion that still takes part in the othering of hip-hop and the social group associated to it. Adopting a celebratory stance then ultimately remains insufficient to disrupt cultural hierarchies and their root in systemic power asymmetries. This thus brings us back to cultural politics, and how the supposed cultural illegitimacy of a subaltern group is constructed in relation to the supposed cultural legitimacy of the dominant group, a relational dynamic asserting the socioracial order through the cultural terrain.

Centering practitioners' perspectives and agencies

Beyond the critical deconstruction of this assumption, perhaps, the first thing to highlight is its actual falsity. Indeed, if voice can be considered to be free to use, it isn't the case for audio technology. Although synthesizers and drum machines became more affordable in the early 1980s thanks to mass production, they nonetheless remained expensive (Théberge 1997:72). Then, it is difficult to accept the idea that ghetto youth had access to DJ systems, large collections of records, or audio production technology, but not to traditional instruments (Schloss 2004:28). As we'll see below, beyond the supposed affordability of voice and audio technology, the actual ways hip-hop practitioners used them as creative resources reveal complex skills and dedication, thus challenging their presumed inherent easy use. Debunking the very plausibility of the assumption lets us know that hip-hop culture is more than a simple response to deprivation and racism. Without neglecting the importance of socioeconomic

conditions, it opens the door to Black ghetto residents' complex engagements with hip-hop. It also makes way for the interpretations of practitioners, too often squeezed out by such totalizing explanations. The following quote from producer Prince Paul precisely troubles the totalizing dimension of the assumption:

> "[Hip-hop] was cool! It's like: *we liked the music*. Deejaying was cool… Yeah, there's some socioeconomical issues and everything else that goes on, but that wasn't everybody's, like, *blatant* reason for making the music. There's some other stuff that people don't talk about. Like showing off, you know what I'm saying? There's stuff like girls. Loving the music in general. It's just the feeling that you get when you deejay. Especially back in the days. You can't even describe the whole feeling of how it was, because everything was so new and so fresh… It was all about fun. And it was *a lot* of fun" (Schloss 2004:29).

Prince Paul not only directly critiques the assumption that hip-hop would be a simple response to socioeconomic conditions, but by foregrounding his own experience, also offers several alternatives. He identifies fun, pleasure, feeling good about oneself, and style as key elements. Then we have to acknowledge the agency of participants. Hip-hop is something they chose to engage in because it felt good, because it was creative, because it made them part of a community. Making space for agency allows to consider the possibility of hip-hop as bigger than poverty, emerging out of participants' conscious choice to invest themselves in this practice rather than solely resulting from a lack of options. Beyond what Prince Paul raises, there are many other elements that become tangible when paying attention to practitioners' perspectives, thus further troubling the assumption and revealing the complexity and diversity of hip-hop.

It doesn't take much searching to understand the use of voice and audio technology in hip-hop as more than resulting from poverty. Hip-hop practitioners had genuine interests in practices such as rapping, beat boxing, DJing, and producing. In that sense, they weren't resulting from a lack of access to formal musical training or

traditional instruments. Taking the case of West coast hip-hop pioneer Egyptian Lover helps understanding the complex engagements practitioners had with hip-hop. Influenced by the records he played in clubs and parties, he wanted to not only be a DJ but to make records himself:

> "I was talking to Afrika Islam, and he said he knew Afrikaa Bambaataa like 'that's my pops man!' I said 'well, how did he get that sound on "Planet Rock"?' Because I wanted to do that sound. 'He used a drum machine called the 808.' I'm like 'Damn a drum machine! What is that?' 'I'll show you they got them at the Guitar Center.' So we went over to the Guitar Center and I saw the 808, and the guy at the place showed me how to program a beat, so I programmed 'Planet Rock.' I heard it I was like 'Oh yeah this shit sounds nice'" (Egyptian Lover 2015).

Egyptian Lover didn't turn to the TR-808 out of necessity but because that's the sound he was interested in. Additionally, he didn't find out about it by chance, but through active researching and eventually, through the recommendation of a peer. Afrika Islam of the Zulu Nation told Egyptian Lover about the particular machine he was referring to. Egyptian Lover's choice was then possible because he received advice from a peer who had inside knowledge about "Planet Rock" (1982), and was willing to share it. It is important to emphasize the exchange of knowledge between peers, who shared tips and information about the music. Participants had to be part of peer circles to receive such knowledge, which enabled them to pursue their hip-hop practice. Based on Howard Becker's definition of artistic conventions, we can acknowledge the influences that led Egyptian Lover to make the music he wanted to make (Becker 1982:34). In other words, he didn't start from scratch but built on the knowledge and the works of fellow musicians to develop his own sound:

> "When I first heard Kraftwerk, and I first heard Prince, and I first heard 'Planet Rock,' I knew I had a passion for these beats that sound like 'Numbers,' like 'Planet Rock,' and the lyrics from Prince. When I found that I loved that at sixteen-seventeen years old, that became the Egyptian Lover sound" (Egyptian Lover 2014).

It's his passion for the music of these artists and the taste he developed for their sounds that led him to craft his own sound. Beyond Egyptian Lover, paying attention to one of his main influence, the song "Planet Rock," is particularly interesting. Afrika Bambaataa and Arthur Baker made it from reproducing parts of songs from the German band Kraftwerk among other things. In a 1998 interview Afrika Bambaataa said:

> "I always was into 'Trans Europe Express,' and after Kraftwerk put 'Numbers' out, I said, 'I wonder if I can combine them two to make something real funky with a hard bass and beat.' So we combined them. But I didn't want people to think it was just Kraftwerk, so we added a track called 'Super Sperm,' by Captain Sky. The breakdown as the synthesizers going up, that's the 'Super Sperm' beat. And then we added 'The Mexican' by Babe Ruth, another rock group, and we speeded it up" (Bambaataa 1998).

Mentioning the various artists that inspired him to create "Planet Rock," Bambaataa also said that he was trying to fuse different influences, notably from the Japanese band Yellow Magic Orchestra, and European artists like Kraftwerk, and Gary Numan, with funk-oriented sounds: "So I took what they were doing with the technopop sound and I added the funk of James [Brown], George [Clinton] and Sly [Stone]" (Bambaataa 2009). In a Red Bull Music Academy lecture Arthur Baker stated: "We decided we needed a drum machine [...] we were trying to get the sound that Kraftwerk, the electronic drum sound" (Baker 2007).

Bambaataa and Baker ended up using the TR-808 drum machine from the Japanese manufacturer Roland to reproduce sounds from Kraftwerk. Not surprisingly, the earliest uses of the TR-808 in music recordings were done by Yellow Magic Orchestra (Shamoon 2020). Then, Egyptian Lover and Afrika Bambaataa's uses of the TR-808 didn't come from a lack of options caused by poverty, but from their actual choice to use this machine in the attempt to achieve a particular sound aesthetic they

wanted to create, partly based on the music they loved (Kraftwerk among others). Besides, Black musicians didn't wait for hip-hop to experiment with electronic sounds and instruments. There's been a long use of audio technology in Black music, whether it is in disco, P-Funk, jazz-funk, reggae and dub music, and more largely, in Jamaican sound system culture (Brewster and Broughton 1999; Chang 2005). Prior to that even, the Hammond B3 electric organ has been key to Black church music since the 1940s (Crawley 2016) and to jazz since the 1950s (Marmande 2015), just like the Fender Rhodes and Wurlitzer electric pianos have been to soul, rock and jazz since the 1960s (Solis 2019). It is fair to say that Black musicians and Black communities across the diaspora have had interest in audio technology for quite some time. Hip-hop musicians' use of audio technology then has to be considered through their appeal for it and their developed taste for the sonic possibilities it offers, which can't be reduced to a consequence of poverty. Additionally, as seen with the central influence of Kraftwerk and Yellow Magic Orchestra, this taste for audio technology was in no way limited to its use by Black musicians.[24]

[24] Although the TR-808 has been understood as part of the DNA of hip-hop and electronic dance music, it was also used in mainstream music. Released in 1982, the same year as "Planet Rock," Marvin Gaye "Sexual Healing" made heavy use of the TR-808, so did Phil Collins "One More Night" (1985). Charanjit Singh, an Indian musician and Bollywood composer also used the machine on his 1982 album *Synthesizing: Ten Ragas to a Disco Beat*, on which he fused electronic disco music with Indian classical ragas. Beyond the TR-808, audio technology, whether in the form of synthesizers or drum machines, has been commonly used in mainstream popular music as well as in

Returning to Howard Becker's definition of artistic conventions, we can understand influences as functioning as implicit sets of rules giving artists direction, but loose enough so they still allow creativity and innovation to happen (Becker 1982:34). Hip-hop DJing for example evolved thanks to DJs learning DJing conventions but then breaking them by innovating. From disco DJs' beat-matching techniques allowing seamless transitions between songs, to Kool Herc's Merry-Go-Round technique allowing to switch from a break beat to another, to Grandmaster Flash's backspin technique allowing to continuously play the same break beat, to Grand Wizzard Theodore's invention of the scratching technique, to Egyptian Lover's ability to play records backwards, and so on and so on with turntabilism' subsequent innovations (Lawrence 2003; Katz 2012). This series of creative innovations weren't easy to come up with because they not only required inventing a new practice, but breaking with established conventions. In the first episode of the docuseries *Hip-Hop Evolution*, Grandmaster Flash explained this process:

> "Most DJs, they concentrated their efforts on the tone arm. It would be totally sloppy off beat [...] I knew there had to be a better way and after trying many different things, I placed my fingers on the vinyl. I let it go. Stop it. I let it go. Stop

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diverse genres. Drum machines like the Linn LM-1 and the Oberheim DMX, and synthesizers like the Prophet-5 and the Yamaha DX7 had often been used by various musicians prior to hip-hop artists. Artists like Prince, Herbie Hancock, The Police, The Cure, Michael Jackson, Human League, Abba, Phil Collins among many many others had them part of their sound palettes since the early/mid-1980s. Although the use of this audio technology was certainly more defining for hip-hop than any other genre, we have to be aware of its widespread use across music in general.

> it. I said to myself: 'I have absolute control of the record.' But the taboo thing was you're not supposed to touch the middle of the vinyl. DJs are going to hate you. I decided this was the only way to do this. And then what I did was so that I could find the break quicker, I took a crayon. And I would make a circular mark where the break lived. […] I figured out a way to do this with never touching the tone arm" (Flash 2016).

As Grandmaster Flash explains, the process of inventing the backspin technique wasn't easy at all. It required breaking with the conventional ways of manipulating records, developing new skills through research, and actually practicing to be able to master this new technique – eventually completely redefining the use and the meaning of the turntable. Similarly, the TR-808 Roland drum machine was originally designed as "a portable accompanist for practice situations, demo recordings, and solo performances" (Berk 2000:193). Although the TR-808 was meant to reproduce actual drum sounds like kicks, snares or cowbells, it did so in very unrealistic and hypersynthetic ways (Hamilton 2016). Initially perceived as a weakness, the sound gap with live drums became the TR-808's distinctive characteristic as musicians started using it as a production instrument. Explaining what drew him to the TR-808 Egyptian Lover said:

> "It sounded so toyish but so futuristic at the same time, the hi-hat sounds like nothing else that was out there at the time, the kick drum you could decay and make it longer, the snare is real toyish, had the cowbell that was kinda of funky, the rimshots, the toms, and the handclap with the built-in reverb on it, put it all together and making that beat, it sounded good to your ears" (Egyptian Lover 2020).

Once again, it is musicians' appropriation that made the TR-808 a musical instrument. They redefined its use and meaning through their own agencies (Lamontagne 2022:223). Beyond this, using the TR-808 wasn't instinctive but required patience and practice. Egyptian Lover, in the above quote, credits the Guitar Center salesman for teaching him how to program the drum machine, a far from simple

process. Rapper and producer DJ Quik expressed similar thoughts about the learning process to be able to use audio technology:

> "I was in the house learning how to work a four track; learning how to ping-pong; learning about equipment that muhfukahs wouldn't have the patience to pick up a manual to read about. I'm the type of person that when I buy a new piece of equipment, before I start messin' with it I'll read the whole manual and get to know the equipment before I even get it out of the box. That's the kind of person I am, real thorough" (Dennis 1991:48).

Then, despite the "easy-play" advertising tales commonly linked to audio technology, we must recognize the levels of research, practice, dexterity, dedication, talent, and innovation hip-hop practitioners committed to in order to match the intransigence of their aesthetic intents. This is perhaps the reason why countless hip-hop artists have often referred to hip-hop as a science or theory, emphasizing the expertise and intentionality behind their practice. Highlighting the musicians' agency allows to avoid the pitfall of technological determinism at work through these "easy-play" tales, "as though it were technology and not ourselves making and using various technologies in a complex series of interlocking webs" (Taylor 2001:26). More importantly, emphasizing musicians' agency allows considering hip-hop in reference to itself rather than in opposition to a "musical norm," or as a simple adaptation to poverty.

As a totalizing explanation, the assumption according to which hip-hop would only be an adaptive response to poverty and racism fails to recognize the intricacies upon which hip-hop culture and practice have relied on and emerged from. By centering agency, I've tried to show how expertise, talent, creativity, dedication, pleasure, community, style, passion, and support, continue "to exist, if not thrive, in a world marked by survival and struggle" (Kelley 1997:4). By deconstructing the assumption and

opening new perspectives, we can start reimagining hip-hop beyond totalizing stories, and beyond the erasures and exclusions they reproduce. Paying attention to practitioners' perspectives allows to make room for more complex understandings of hip-hop.

Chapter 4

Centering Hip-Hop Mothers

Beyond focusing on hip-hop practitioners' agencies, it is the very conditions making these agencies possible in the first place that need to be examined. Indeed, if practitioners' agencies have given birth to hip-hop culture, these agencies didn't happen in a vacuum. Then, who gave birth to hip-hop practitioners' agencies? Or at least, who is responsible for their development? Although there's not necessarily a unique answer to these questions, in this chapter I'll argue that mothers through their labor and practices, in the particular space of the home, played a major role in the development of hip-hop practitioners' agencies and their hip-hop practice. In order to be influenced by certain music recordings and to use certain audio technology, hip-hop practitioners first had to know about it and have access to it, and second, they had to learn how to engage with it. As I demonstrate in this chapter, hip-hop mothers had a lot to do with their children's conditions of access to music, and modes of engagement with it. Centering hip-hop mothers' labor, I explore the environment and conditions through which hip-hop practitioners learned about and developed knowledge about music which later allowed them to pursue their own practice. Because as Verna Griffin (Dr. Dre's mother) writes in the opening words of her memoir: "talent isn't born; it's created" (2008:1). In that

sense, how did mothers contribute to the musical talents of their children, and to the agencies that shaped their hip-hop practice?

Building on Black feminist thought and activism, I connect the centrality of mothers' labor in the emergence of hip-hop culture to the longstanding centrality of Black women's labor in the struggle for racial justice (Hunter 1997). Through a focus on hip-hop culture, I thus attempt to reveal the essential role of Black women as "architects of alternative futures [...] stand[ing] up and creat[ing] better lives, for themselves, their families, and the larger community" (Cumberbatch et al. 2016:1–3). In this way, I explore how, in the face of anti-Blackness, the worldmaking capacities of Black women's labor have allowed to make space for "the embrace of blackness" (Quashie 2022:5) through culture and activism. However, at the same time as they made their children's creative agencies possible, enabling them to develop their hip-hop practice, mothers' labor and practices reproduced their own marginalization within the framework of a classist, racist, and sexist society. Addressing this ambivalence, we always must simultaneously acknowledge how Black women's labor is central to Black cultural and political agency, as well as how it participates to their own exploitation and oppression. Emphasizing this ambivalence, Saidiya Hartman wrote: "It seems that [the Black mother's] role has been fixed and that her role is as a provider of care, which is the very mode of her exploitation [...] This care, which is coerced and freely given, is the black heart of our social poesis, of making and relation" (Hartman 2016:171). Following the work of Prudence Cumberbatch, Dayo F. Gore, and Sarah Haley, this chapter approaches Black women's labor as a "practice that produce[s] both pleasure and pain; [...] as a site of oppression and resistance; provid[ing] opportunities for joy and personal

expression, even as it also reinforce[s] limiting representations of black women" (Cumberbatch et al. 2016:2).

By centering hip-hop mothers, the chapter further reckon with the legacy of erasure of Black women's labor. In that sense, the chapter critically deals with dominant masculinist historical narratives silencing Black women's stories and contributions to hip-hop, and questions the institutionalization of Black women's erasure in the archival record. Studying archival production as a process, Ann Stoler has shown how the "archive" is embedded in asymmetric power dynamics (Stoler 2010). Reflecting on this process in the context of Black women's erasure, Premilla Nadasen examined how archival sources tended to reinforce Black women's dominant representations, while further suppressing their "agency and how they challenged, resisted, made sense of their labor, and developed alternative images of themselves and their work" (Nadasen 2016:155). While addressing the erasing dimension of the archive, we must also acknowledge Black women's agencies and the ways they chose to share and hide information about themselves and their lives while dealing with multiple systems of power. In other words, the archival record depends on what personal information Black women decided to make public (Schalk 2020). This is what Darlene Clark Hine has called the "culture of dissemblance," which she defined as a "cult of secrecy, […] to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives," which "enabled the creation of positive alternative images […] and facilitated Black women's mental and physical survival in a hostile world" (Hine 1989:915–920).

Given the erasing dimensions of the archive, how do we center Black women's perspectives, and in this chapter specifically, how can we center hip-hop mothers? As

Tera W. Hunter wrote: “Historians assumptions that there were ‘no sources’ to write about them lacked imagination” (Hunter 2016:151). Giving in to the archive’s asymmetric power dynamics, this lack of imagination risks leading to the further erasure of Black women’s perspectives and to the reproduction of dominant representations. To counter these erasing dynamics and center hip-hop mothers’ perspectives, I rely on the memoirs of Verna Griffin, Afeni Shakur, and Beverly Broadus Green, mothers to three of the most important West Coast hip-hop artists: Dr. Dre, Tupac Shakur, and Snoop Dogg. In these three memoirs – *Long Road Outta Compton: Dr. Dre’s Mom on Family, Fame, and Terrible Tragedy* (2008); *Evolution of a Revolutionary* (2004); and *Real Love II: The Story of an Extraordinary Woman* (2014) – Verna, Afeni, and Beverly speak in depth about their lives, experiences, struggles, and feelings. For that reason, these memoirs are not only key sources to center their voices, but also to resituate their labors and practices in the context of their children’s hip-hop practice, and beyond. This focus on hip-hop mothers is “not just a correction of the skewed archival record” (Nadasen 2016:157), it further allows rethinking hip-hop culture and history altogether, beyond uncritically accepted masculinist constructions. Rooted in what Lynnée Denise a.k.a. DJ Scholarship calls “erasure resistance,” the chapter is “inspired by the troubling fact that Black women and queer DJs are missing from hip-hop’s most popularized origin stories” (Denise 2019:64).

In the first section of the chapter I contextualize women’s domestic labor and the particular space of the home in feminist thought. Linking the home to the patriarchal order, I show how the domestic sphere has been one of the main site of women’s

exploitation and subordination. Further relying on Black feminism and centering the conditions of Black working-class women, I complicate the debate around women's oppression in relation to domestic labor by emphasizing what the Combahee River Collective called the "simultaneity of oppressions" (1986). Expanding on the ambivalence of domestic labor I then focus on women's home practices. In the second section of the chapter I center hip-hop mothers. In this way I show how the labor and practices of hip-hop mothers are what rendered everything possible for hip-hop practitioners. It is in the home through their mothers that they first learned about music, and had the chance to hold records, play them, listen to them, access a collection, listen to the radio. More than the home-based access to music, it is the listening, selecting, and collecting practices that mothers shared with their children that must be considered, and how these agentive practices, these arts of doing contributed to shape hip-hop culture (Stoever 2018:3). Beyond that, through mothers' labor the home was a space to practice, to have friends over, to keep their gear, and more largely, as a place of support and encouragement. Hip-hop mothers' labor and practices have been central to hip-hop in multiple ways, making their erasure all the more problematic and questionable. In the last section, while reiterating how centering hip-hop mothers' labor in the home enables decentering dominant masculinist constructions of hip-hop, I explore how this focus risks romanticizing motherhood and normalizing the sexist exclusion of women from dominant hip-hop spaces. From there, I conclude on the longstanding social and historiographical exclusion of women from hip-hop despite their day one involvement. Taking the case of Cindy Campbell as a telling example, I reflect on how women's contributions to hip-hop haven't been limited to center stage

roles such as the one of the performer but to a large array of positions, labors and practices, which made hip-hop spaces and culture possible in the first place.

The home in feminist and Black feminist thought

The necessary first step when speaking about the home is to remind that the gendering of space is fundamentally linked to the system of power of cisheteropatriarchy. In this sense, the gendered construction of the home as a "woman space" has been tied to the exploitation of women through domestic labor, and to their exclusion from a men-dominated world (Johnson 1990:20). For this reason, in feminist thought, the home has very much been identified as one of the main sites of women's subordination and oppression (Walby 1990:178). The feminist critique of the naturalization of the home as a "woman space" has therefore looked to deconstruct the gendered dimension of the opposition between the private and public spheres, which implicitly normalized the confinement of women in the home where they were assigned to serving and supporting men on one hand, and the spatial and social mobility of men working and socializing across all areas of society on the other (Pateman 1988; Squires 2003; Graeber 2011). Associated with the gendered division of labor, the gendering of space has thus had a major role in the reproduction of the patriarchal order, including in ideological terms, by devaluing and erasing women's labor and practices, and only regarding men's labor and practices as worthy (Wischermann 2004).

Critically addressing Marxist theory's exclusion of women in the analysis of capitalist production, materialist feminists have shown how the very emergence and possibility of capitalism has depended on women's exploitation (Gibson-Graham 1996).

By revealing the centrality of women's domestic labor, nurturing and social caring in the reproduction of capitalism, they have thought the oppression of women through connecting patriarchy and capitalism: "since in capitalism reproducing workers on a generational basis and regenerating daily their capacity to work has become 'women's labor'" (Federici 2004:18). Or as Sylvia Federici also put it more bluntly: "housework is already money for capital, [...] capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking" (Federici 1975:5).

Often equating the subordination of women with the domestic space, these critiques have however tended to take for granted the very opposition private/public they were looking to deconstruct (Squires 2003:140). Despite the gendered construction of those spheres in relation to the patriarchal order, women's lives and oppressions never empirically limited to the private sphere (Wischermann 2004:185). In this sense, the scope of patriarchal power extended beyond the sole private sphere, and took many forms depending on women's particular social groups. One of Black feminism's central critique has precisely been to reveal how mainstream feminist movements and theories have centered white middle-class women, and how women's subordinations have generally been understood through the experiences and conditions of this particular group, at the erasing expense of working-class racialized women of color (Davis 1981; Hull et al. 1982; Smith 1983). In the 1970s, to counteract the generalizing and marginalizing perspectives of dominant feminist movements, Black feminists from the Combahee River Collective and beyond have emphasized the simultaneity of oppressions, and how their experiences and conditions were grounded in interlocking systems of power involving gender, race, class and sexuality at the same time

(Combahee River Collective 1986; Crenshaw 1989; Brewer 1999).[25] These critical perspectives thus allowed to reveal the complexity and diversity of women's oppressions, never solely depending on the single category of gender, and certainly not reducible to the private sphere. In reality, very few women could afford to remain entirely in their homes (Squires 2003:138). Black women often had to work at exploitative rates in the homes of middle-class white women, while still having to perform this work for free in their own homes (Brewer 1999:43; Hunter 2016). In the 1970s, despite the social achievements resulting from the Women's Liberation Movement (Squires 2003:140), working-class racialized women still found themselves to be one of the most marginalized groups in American society. Despite the mainstream opening of the world of work to women and the redefinition of their relationship to the home (Walby 1990:21), poor Black women and women from the Global South – that is hip-hop mothers – have filled low-wage service sector jobs, most of which were public social reproductive work (kitchen and cafeteria workers, janitors, nurses' aides, childcare, care for the elderly), "which are extensions of the private household service role" (Brewer 1999:43). In the context of deindustrialization and the shift to a service economy, working poor racialized women constituted the exploited labor working the least desirable and rewarding jobs (Hine 1989; Kelley 1994; Browne and Misra 2003).

[25] The perspectives developed by Black feminists didn't only center their own experiences, but looked to construct a larger political solidarity with other minorities and their specific subaltern experiences.

Acknowledging the patriarchal dimension of domestic labor is the necessary first step. However, it's equally important to consider the home as a space for women's agencies, pleasures, creativity, community, resistance, care, and transmission. As we've already seen, the construction of the home as a "woman space" is strongly bounded to the mothering and domestic labor women are equated with, and is thus tied to their subordination and exploitation. Although the dominant construction of "women spaces" depends on the patriarchal order, they don't only exist within and for this system of power (Hartman 2016). By inhabiting these spaces, women appropriate them in ways that also are non-compliant with their dominant construction, continuously redefining them through their own practices. Marked by this ambivalence, domestic labor is thus simultaneously a practice of subordination and resistance, of exploitation and autonomy, of pleasure and pain, of violence and safety (Cumberbatch et al. 2016:2). Expanding on this, Louise Johnson wrote: "If the home is women's place, it is indeed one of the few spaces they have. Even though the design of houses reinforces the woman's role as a domestic worker and mother, it is still within the home and in associated communities that women can and do achieve pleasures which subvert their domestic confinement" (Johnson 1990:23).

In this perspective, alongside their domestic condition, women's relationships with music in the home must be considered through their practices and labor. In the context of hip-hop, how did Black and Brown women's labor and musical practices allowed their children to develop hip-hop culture? Indeed, paying attention to hip-hop mothers' musical practices, their listening, collecting, and selecting practices in the home reveal the influence they had on their children and on the emergence of hip-hop

(Stoever 2018:3). In other words, how were mothers' labor and practices central to the formation of hip-hop practitioners' creative agencies, and from there, to the very possibility of hip-hop culture? As Timothy D. Taylor has shown, home audio technology and hi-fi have historically been constructed in gendered terms, defining this technology and its associated uses with certain forms of "expert" masculinities (Taylor 2001:80). Focusing on hip-hop mothers fights back against the sexist erasure and trivialization of their home-based musical practices – practices only acknowledged and valued when associated with men. "Amplifying the record-collecting and listening practices of women of color unsettles the comfortably masculinist [...] images of the 'record collector' and 'crate digger' ghosting popular music and popular music studies since the days of the 78" (Stoever 2018:8). These reflections thus push us to grapple with the pervasiveness of misogyny in popular music studies, widely relegating women to trivializing roles and figures – the teenage girl, the mother, the groupie – through which they only appear as hysterical fans, passive dupe consumers, lacking musical taste and expertise, and whose interests in music aren't considered as "serious" (Davies 2001).

Centering hip-hop mothers: Verna Griffin, Beverly Broadus Green, and Afeni Shakur

Mothers had their own interests and talents. And more often than not, their interests had a direct influence on their children. Verna Griffin and Beverly Broadus Green's memoirs are very musical. Music is central to their stories, and therefore to their lives. Throughout her memoir, Beverly mentions her favorite soul bands, the parties that she would attend, and particularly emphasizes her involvement in church choirs:

> "Music has been a part of my life since I was five-years-old. First, I began singing in Mr. Vernon's choir until I was 12-years-old. We then moved to California, where we joined Golgotha Trinity Baptist Church, and I have been singing in that

> choir ever since. […] I had been the president of the choir for 20 years, choir director for 25 years […] and a choir member for 42 years" (Green 2014:120–146).

Verna Griffin references her love for music just as much. In her memoir, she reflects on her diverse involvements in music. Whether it be her early interest in family members' record collections, singing and writing songs in the neighborhood group called the Four Aces, going to record stores, building a large record collection for herself, going out and party, or organizing house parties, Verna has surrounded her life with music. Although music doesn't appear as much in Afeni Shakur's biography, other areas of interest seem to have influenced her son Tupac. As a former leading Black Panther, it is obvious that Afeni's political consciousness and critical knowledge of politics, culture and history had a deep impact on her son's outlook on the world, which he expressed in his music. She also talks about her love for Shakespeare, a writer that Tupac often referenced as a major influence. After learning about Afeni's liking for Shakespeare, biographer and family friend Jasmine Guy muses: "That's funny. Tupac loved Shakespeare, too. I thought he got that affinity from the Baltimore School of the Arts, but he got it from *you*" (Guy 2004:42).

Hip-hop mothers not only influenced their children through direct exposure to their interests. As their interests manifested as practices and labor, they provided particular ways for their children to learn about and engage with music. When speaking about their lives, hip-hop mothers often reflect on the musical environments and practices that they shared with their children. Then, it is no surprise that many hip-hop pioneers mention and credit their mothers for introducing them to music, notably through their record collections. Among many others, it is the case of Dr. Dre, Silky D

and General Jeff in Los Angeles. Verna Griffin for example, remembered in her memoir:

> "I had a phenomenal record collection. Music was always playing in the house. I cleaned house to music. I had my best thoughts while listening to music. And I lived by certain words from certain songs. When people dropped by, they sometimes thought that there was a party going on. But it was just the boys, my music, and me" (Griffin 2008:86).

While first acknowledging Verna's engagement with the marketplace, we must understand her musical consumption as practice. Michel de Certeau's notion of "arts of doing" refocuses on practitioners' actual uses, and helps redefining consumption from the negative standpoint of a passive and debasing condition to an active practice (Certeau 1980). Through her practices, Verna re-appropriated and reinvented musical recordings, transforming them according to her context, desires, needs, and intentions. In other words, Verna's musical consumption as a practice can be understood as a form of cultural production. In this way, she didn't simply expose Dr. Dre to her collection, she taught him about music through her collecting, listening, and selecting practices. She provided much more than a simple access to music, she socialized her son to music, through practices introducing specific modes of experience. Musical experience is not a passive receiving activity. Collecting, listening, and selecting practices are arts of doing, shaping the musical experience. Centering listeners' agencies, Ola Stockfelt wrote: "Identically-sounding musical works, listened through different modes of listening, may engender different kinds of music experiences" (Stockfelt 2004:378). In this sense, Dr. Dre's musical upbringing didn't happen in a vacuum but in the particular context of the home, where he learned from his mother Verna Griffin actively engaging with music in particular situations.

As emerging from their situated agencies, the musical arts of doing of Verna Griffin and other hip-hop mothers were meaning-producing practices "layering records with filiations, feelings, affects, and stories" (Stoever 2018:11). As Verna makes it clear, we have to take hip-hop mothers' musical practices seriously, and consider the significance of the specific situations in which they took place. For example, playing music in the background to set a specific mood in their home, to accompany a given emotional state, picking a particular track for their own or their loved ones' listening and dancing pleasures, to relax after an exhausting day, to take their minds off things, when doing domestic chores, or when organizing a get-together with friends, to mask noises from the neighbors, to contribute to their children's musical education… (Stoever 2018:3). A wide range of musical practices happening in situation and transforming the meaning and experience of the music, and participating to shape their children's relationship with music.

Once again, a way to make room for hip-hop mothers' practices is to pay attention to their perspectives, in dialogue with those of their children, who continuously reference their mothers and their influence on them and their hip-hop practice. Talking about her son's early experiences with records, Verna Griffin recounts how Dr. Dre first caught interest from her collection:

> "After Andre learned how to play the records, I would occasionally let him deejay for me and for our company. Even then, he was really good. Andre learned to recognize record labels even before he could read by looking at the color of the label or other distinguishing features" (Griffin 2008:86).

Further, she explains how he got his first experiences as a DJ by playing records at house parties she was organizing at her house:

> "It was not uncommon for friends and relatives to drop by anytime, unannounced. A few people people would come over, and before you knew it, we had a house full. [...] Andre would do what he enjoyed – which was spinning the records. Our friends would sometimes give him a dollar or two for his efforts" (Griffin 2008:111).

Hip-hop practitioners' narratives echo the perspectives shared by Verna Griffin, and how they first learned about music and DJing through their mothers' record collections and house parties. Pioneering L.A. hip-hop DJ Silky D from the crew Uncle Jamm's Army said: "I was always playing music for my mom and her friends, their little get-togethers, their parties, but never realizing that I was being a DJ then" (Personal interview with Silky D 2019). General Jeff, a pioneering L.A. hip-hop DJ also from Uncle Jamm's Army, expressed similar views:

> "I wouldn't call myself an official DJ but when I was eight or nine years old. My mom would always have house parties. She had 45 rpm records, and it would just be stacks and stacks and stacks of them. The guests would come over my mom's house party and they would have requests. One time they really wanted to hear this record, and I happened to know where the records were because I would just spend all day just reading, studying the labels, logos, everything about them. So they made a request, I said 'Oh I know where that record is.' My mom was like 'Oh no it's too many records, it would take forever.' I was like 'No I know where it is.' So they were like 'I'll give you a dollar if you can find this record right now.' I knew exactly where it was. It wasn't about the dollar, I was just excited to be involved in this adult function. So I went over there, found the record, put it on. My mom was amazed. Then people were like "Hey you find her record, find mine, I want to hear such and such.' So all of a sudden I became the DJ for the party because everybody was coming with requests. That was my first digging in the crates, before there was even such a thing. So you know that was fun, every time there was a house party, I was the DJ" (Personal interview with General Jeff 2019).

Through these stories, we see how Dr. Dre, Silky D, and General Jeff not only learned about music through browsing the record collection of their mothers, but how the house parties their mothers organized, allowed them to engage with music in a specific environment and in specific ways. As they reflect, Silky D and General Jeff identify their mothers' home-based musical practices as the early stages of their DJ

practice – before they even knew what DJing was. Conversely, Verna Griffin identifies her home-based musical practices as the foundation of her son Dr. Dre's DJing practice. Additionally, it is easy to draw a connection between mothers' collecting, selecting, and listening practices and central hip-hop practices such as DJing, sampling, and digging through the crates (Denise 2019:67).

However, mothers didn't solely participate in shaping the creative agencies and hip-hop practices of their children through their musical practices but also through the unsuspected labor and practices of their daily lives. In the following quote, Grand Master Flash describes how he invented the slipmat while looking for ways to better manipulate the records while DJing:

> "When I tried to put the record on it [the rubber platter], I got too much drag, too much friction. My mother was a seamstress so I knew polyester, silk, rayon… I knew all the materials because my mom made all our clothes. So I went to the material store, and I started feeling all these different materials. When I got to felt, I touched it, I put it on my fingertips. But the problem with felt was if you have a piece of it, it's very limp. So I ran home, got a copy of an album and I bought two pieces of the felt. When my mother wasn't looking I sprayed starch to felt until it became stiff. I called it a wafer […]. Then my mom used to bake cookies for us so there was that wax paper that she used to use, so I cut out two pieces of that and maybe 35 years later, they called it a slipmat" (Flash 2016).

The invention of the slipmat thus came from practices relating to the domestic labor of Mrs. Saddler, Grand Master Flash's mother. Labor practices he was able to appropriate to develop his creative pursuits.

Mothers' interests and practices didn't just rub off on their children. The influence they had on their children also stemmed from an intentional investment. As the primary caregivers, hip-hop mothers provided most of the labor in raising their children. Beyond material labor (cleaning, cooking, etc.) they also provided affective

labor, involving affects, care, relationships, and "forms of communication and cooperation among children, in the family, and in the community" (Oskala 2016:285). Hip-hop mothers' investment in their children's education represented both labor and intentional transmission. Mothers cultivated what their children seemed to enjoy, even before they were able to explicitly say it for themselves. As Afeni Shakur explained in her biography: "The key is, and this where we come in as parents, to guide the talent" (Shakur 2004:40). Mothers invested in their children, and encouraged them to pursue their interests, even when it represented a consequent effort. Whether it is in terms of time, money, energy and organization, the investments of mothers in their children's interests significantly relied on their own labor. In her memoir, Beverly Broadus Green speaks about her son Snoop Dogg's early interest in music. Through the choir of her Golgotha Trinity Baptist Church in Long Beach, she was able to cultivate Snoop's interest in music, and later get him piano lessons, despite having to drive from Long Beach to L.A every week, which was a major sacrifice.

> "Snoopy joined the choir. He showed a very big interest in playing the piano, and he tried to play it in church. The adult choir would be singing, and Snoopy would climb on the piano bench next to Danny Carr, the pianist, and imitate his movements. Danny didn't teach music but he knew of a person, Prince Eugene, who gave piano lessons. So every Saturday, for two hours, we would go to Los Angeles for him to take his lessons. It was quite a sacrifice for me since it was 50 miles from Long Beach to Los Angeles. […] Snoopy had to practice at home, but since we did not have a piano, the church allowed him to practice on theirs. When Prince Eugene had a raffle at his church, Snoopy performed his first recital and won second place, which was six months of free piano lessons" (Green 2014:68).

Verna Griffin, also speaks of Dr. Dre's early love for music:

> "Andre loved hearing music, even as an infant. It seems that he was born with a love for music. When I look back on his life, I think he began to develop this love when he was only a few months old. That was when I noticed the soothing effect that music had on him. When music was playing, he would lie content and look around as if he were searching for the direction from which the sound was coming. As long as he was full and dry, he would lie there listening to the music

until he fell asleep" (Griffin 2008:49).

This investment in their children's interests wasn't limited to music. As Verna expresses in her memoir, she cultivated her children's interests in a variety of areas: "Both boys had expressed some interest in karate, so I enrolled them in a martial arts school. I took them to classes when I got off work in the evenings" (ibid.:116).

Hip-hop mothers wholeheartedly invested in their children's upbringing, by transmitting what they thought was right according to their own values. They wanted their children to be wholesome individuals, and worked hard to prepare them for the realities outside the home. In that sense, hip-hop mothers had a big hand in shaping their children into the individuals they came to be. Beverly Broadus Green, Verna Griffin, and Afeni Shakur all articulate such intentions of transmission when discussing the education of their children. Beverly Broadus Green about raising her children:

> "I tried to raise Jerry and Snoopy, and later Bing, the way I was raised. I wanted them to go to church, treat everyone with respect and do their school work. I took Jerry and Snoop to church, and they would attend Bible class" (Green 2014:68).

Verna Griffin about her children:

> "During the time when I was raising Andre, I instilled in him, as well as in his sister and brother, the values of neatness, cleanliness, respect, and prosperity. [...] Sometimes I believe I pushed him beyond normal limits. Like my mother had with me, I didn't allow Andre to say 'I can't.' By the time he was ready for school, I had taught him so much. He knew the entire alphabet, how to count to one hundred, his address and telephone number, how to spell and write his own name" (Griffin 2008:75–126).

Afeni Shakur about Tupac in the upcoming docuseries *Dear Mama*:

> "It was my responsibility to teach Tupac how to survive his reality. So Tupac do something wrong, 'take your little sorry self in that corner, get the *New York Times*, and let's have a debate about it. Not a discussion, a debate. Let me hear what your idea is, stand up, defend it'" (Afeni Shakur 2022).

In a Q&A about her biography she continued:

> "I insisted in my house that you read, and you read everything, and you read critically and analytically, and that you read for the sake of reading, and that you learn for the sake of learning" (Afeni Shakur 2021).

Through their labor and practices, hip-hop mothers enabled their children to develop their hip-hop practice. Mothers' selflessly provided for their children, often at their own expense, while struggling with difficult conditions. As the literature on Black women's labor has shown, Black women couldn't afford to not work outside their home (hooks 1984; Cumberbatch et al. 2016). As single mothers and primary caregivers, hip-hop mothers were responsible for domestic labor as well as for wage work. Verna Griffin clearly expresses this: "Although I spent a lot of time working, I still found time for my household chores and my children" (Griffin 2008:116). Further, Black women's relationship to the home and wage work subjected them to exploitation in *and* outside the home, as well as to "forms of intimate violence" (Hartman 2016:170). All three of Verna, Beverly, and Afeni have experienced poverty and exploitation as low-wage workers; experiences they describe in their memoirs. Verna Griffin remembers dealing with poverty: "At times, we were so strapped for cash that I would search between the cushions and empty out my purses, searching for change to buy dinner" (Griffin 2008:97). She also remembers the exploitation she underwent, performing work that was repetitive and non-meaningful to her:

> "After two years at National Dollar, I was growing tired of working at what seemed to be a dead-end job. [...] After many disappointments, I finally got a job at K-Mart Department Store, on Western Ave and Imperial Highway. I found myself back in the same old rut, performing the same tasks that I had at National Dollar" (ibid.:103).

Abusive relationships and violence happening in the home is also something that all three of Verna, Beverly, and Afeni discuss at length in their memoirs. Beverly Green

for example recounts the abuse she was going through with the men in her life, and how she attempted to protect her children from it: “Even though I was a single parent and I had a lot of problems with men, I kept that life separate from life with my kids” (Green 2014:68). In a 2020 interview she continued: “Those husbands taught me how to fight, they taught me how to stand up and be a woman. ‘Stand up, you got these sons watching you. So you gotta defend yourself whatever it may cost,’ and that’s what I did” (Beverly Broadus Green 2020). Expanding on the adversities that she went through with men, poverty, and employment, Verna Griffin expresses the determination she had to do better for her children:

> “My sons meant everything to me; I was not going to reside in an atmosphere that was uncomfortable for them. I began considering the idea of moving and changing jobs once again. […] It was a challenging time, but as a young, struggling mother, I did what I had to do. I don’t think I ever thought it was tough at the time. I was determined to do well some day. Looking back, I wonder sometimes how I made it through the trying times” (Griffin 2008:90–107)

Hip-hop practitioners largely benefited from their mothers’ practices and labor. However, selflessly providing for their children participated in the reproduction of hip-hop mothers’ oppression. Discussing the simultaneous centrality and erasure of Black mothers’ labor, Saidiya Hartman wrote:

> “Those of us who have been ‘touched by the mother’ need acknowledge that her ability to provide care, food, and refuge often has placed her in great jeopardy and, above all, required to give with no expectation of reciprocity or return. […] She provides so much, yet rarely does she thrive. It seems that her role has been fixed and that her role is as a provider of care, which is the very mode of her exploitation and indifferent use by the world, a world blind to her gifts, her intellect, her talents” (Hartman 2016:171).

While still connected to racism and sexism, contrary to the work outside the home, the home-based labor has had a humanizing and affirming dimension for Black women, who, through this labor, have managed to make room for pleasure, for

community, for life… not only for themselves but for their children as well (hooks 1984). As we must acknowledge how this labor relates to systems of power, we also must recognize that these "forms of care, intimacy, and sustenance exploited by racial capitalism, most importantly, are not reducible to or exhausted by it" (Hartman 2016:171). In this context, bell hooks rethought the significance of the home for Black communities. By creating what she terms "homeplaces," Black women have continuously provided spaces for Black people to safely exist in, to rest, to have fun, to invent and express themselves outside the anti-Black gaze of the public world.

> "Since sexism delegates to females the task of creating and sustaining a home environment, it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination. […] Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world. This task of making homeplace was not simply a matter of black women providing service; it was about the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there in the inside, in that 'homeplace,' most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits" (hooks 1990:42).

Through the practices and labor of hip-hop mothers, the home was a place allowing hip-hop practitioners to pursue their creative pursuits. As such, the home functioned as a key space to practice, to have friends over, to keep their gear, and more largely, as a place where one could find support and encouragement. Verna Griffin recounts how her house became a place of practice and socializing for Dr. Dre and his friends. We also see how she protected her son's passion as a way to protect him from the potential troubles he could get into:

> "My house became party central. Just about every kid on the block would come by at some point during the day. […] At times, some neighbors would complain

> about the loud music. I would tell them that I was glad to hear the music because I always knew where my children were. I reminded them that they were not breaking into houses or disabling people by selling them drugs. My reasoning was, 'If you take my children's music away from them, what will they have to do?'" (Griffin 2008:131).

Hip-hop practitioners themselves acknowledge the importance of the home in the development of their practice. Snake Puppy of the L.A. Dream Team, a pioneering West Coast rap group, recounts how he became a better DJ by practicing at the home of his friend Egyptian Lover: "His momma [Mrs. Broussard] bought him turntables. Practice was at his house, we would go over there and practice, do our little thing at is house. I'd go over there and spend the night, we practiced so hard I had to spend the night" (Personal interview with Snake Puppy 2019). Similarly, Grand Master Flash tells the story of going to Gene Livinston's, his DJ partner, to practice: "He had the best mother in the whole entire world. Mama Livingston, she'd allow you to play music all time of the night, 'just don't play it too loud cause I have to get my sleep and go to work, lay down on the couch you ain't gotta go home'" (Flash 2016).

Through their domestic labor and practices, both material and affective, hip-hop mothers provided space for their children and their peers to delve into their passions. As the above quotes show, inside these homeplaces, hip-hop practitioners had personal space where they could "do their own thing" and develop their skills. Further, one way hip-hop practitioners could afford the expensive gear needed for their practice was through the material support from their mothers. In this next quote, Verna Griffin talks about buying Dr. Dre's his first mixer:

> "In 1984, Andre asked for a music mixer for Christmas. He wanted to attach it to his music system and two turntables [...]. [We] did all we could to make sure that we enjoyed a wonderful Christmas as a family. [...] Andre was so excited when he unwrapped his mixer. He immediately got dressed and went out to show some of

> his friends before setting it up. He remained in his room all day, practicing with his mixer. I had to beg him to take a break just to eat. That night after all of the guests had left and the other kids had all gone to sleep, I went into Andre's room to check on him. He was lying on his bed fast asleep, with his headset still on his head and the music blasting. I took the headset off, turned of the music, and threw a blanket over him, trying hard not to disturb his sleep. From that day forward, Andre took his place as the music person in our household" (Griffin 2008:131).

Egyptian Lover tells how he bought the TR-808, the Roland machine essential to his style and career thanks to the support of his mother: "This sounds like a record already I need to buy this. I had $400 and they wanted $800, so I went back home, I got $400 from my mother, came back, paid the $800, got the 808, filled it with beats" (Egyptian Lover 2020).

More than just providing space and financing their children's passions and callings, hip-hop mothers were supporting them in a variety of ways. Verna Griffin for example remembers driving Dr. Dre and his friends to gigs. She tells the story about bringing him to Eve After Dark, the Compton club where Dre would get his start as a DJ:

> "I would take Andre, Tyree, and their friends to a club called Eve After Dark, which was a teen club that allowed the kids to showcase their talents on weekends. I would pile as many kids as I could fit into my car and would drive them to the club at about nine o'clock. I would return home and set my alarm clock for one o'clock in the morning, when I would return to the club to pick them up" (ibid:132).

Hip-hop mothers have been fundamental to the emergence of hip-hop. Through their practices and labor, they've created spaces for their children's practices, actively participated in the constitution of their creative agencies, supported them in multiple ways, so that they could be able to create hip-hop. By contextualizing the lives of Verna Griffin, Beverly Broadus Green, and Afeni Shakur in the literature on Black women's labor, we see how hip-hop mothers' labor is "crucial, as often as it is unrewarded; it is

isolating and isolated at the same time as it is intergenerational; it is precarious (in terms of pay) at the same time as it is constant (in terms of time) (Gumbs 2016:138). As Alexis Pauline Gumbs notes, despite its centrality, this labor remains unrewarded and largely erased. Conscious of this erasure Verna Griffin didn't miss to articulate it: "Another problem I had was [...] being introduced as Dr. Dre's mom. It was like I no longer had a name" (Griffin 2008:179). Addressing this erasure, Beverly Green also explicitly countered it at times, claiming her influence. Bootsy Collins reminded how Beverly came up to him to let him know her role in Snoop's talent:

> "Night before last, Mother Snoop, she wanted to let me know hands on that it was because of her that Snoop was down with the funk, she looked me right in my face 'Now I want you to hear it Bootsy, you know how they are, I want you to know, it was me, that got my son into the funk'" (Bootsy Collins 2018)

Beyond mothers: Women in hip-hop

More than just acknowledging the significance of mothers' labor and practices for the emergence of hip-hop, the focus on mothers redefines hip-hop altogether. Indeed, recognizing the practices and labor of mothers in the home unsettles the dominant historiography of hip-hop, commonly centering the agencies of men in men-dominated spaces, like the street (public space), the stage, the record store, the club, or the studio. The practices taking place in these spaces – record digging/collecting, studio recording, technology uses, connoisseurship, hip-hop performance and production – have thus been cast in gendered terms, reducing hip-hop to a set of masculine practices (Rose 1994:57; Straw 1997). Centering the agencies of men at the expense of women's, the focus on men-dominated spaces has led to a construction of hip-hop that takes for granted women's exclusion and erasure (Lindsey 2015). Acknowledging the importance

of mothers' labor allows to redefine hip-hop outside of men-dominated spaces and narratives. Centering the home however doesn't come into opposition with the hip-hop practices taking place in public spaces; on the contrary, it comes into relation with them (Stoever 2018:5). Centering the home allows to position the agencies of women as pivotal in developing the creative agencies of hip-hop practitioners, and their expression in public spaces. Without homeplaces and mothers – whether their own or those of their peers – hip-hop practitioners wouldn't have been able to create and practice hip-hop in the spaces most frequently identified as hip-hop spaces.

Nonetheless, acknowledging the contribution of women through their domestic labor remains insufficient to fight against their sexist erasure in dominant hip-hop historiography. As bell hooks warned, by centering domestic labor, we run the risk of romanticizing motherhood and renormalizing sexist defined-roles (hooks 1984:135). Although it makes room for women's contribution to hip-hop, centering the home doesn't automatically challenge the status quo. Additionally, recognizing the home in hip-hop is not enough because it can implicitly normalize women's exclusion from dominant-defined hip-hop spaces – spaces which have been given greater value. That's why we always need to remind the connection between the gendering of space, the subordination of women, and patriarchy as a system of power. In that sense, the recognition of the home as an essential space for women's contribution to hip-hop must always be understood in relation to their sexist exclusion from the men-dominated spaces of hip-hop.

It's also important to add that as women have continuously been written out of hip-hop history, their exclusion has also been historiographical. A long history of

erasure has been at work, perpetually presenting women's participation in hip-hop as a novelty, even though they've been part of the culture from the jump (Djavadzadeh 2021). Indeed, women hip-hop practitioners always existed in men-dominated spaces. If "strong social sanctions against their participation limited female ranks" (Rose 1994:57), women practitioners always pushed back against their exclusion. Silky D for example, while mentioning her passion for DJing, recalls the exclusion she experienced from being a woman DJ: "I was in hiding; I wasn't on the forefront because I didn't see any female doing it. So I just thought it was a guy hobby, until one of my best friends told me 'you need to quit playing'" (Personal interview with Silky D 2019).

But conversely, we can't only consider women's place in men-dominated hip-hop spaces as taking center stage as artists or performers. Women's presence in those spaces also took other forms, which despite being marginalized, constituted essential roles in the organization of hip-hop spaces. If we must recognize women hip-hop artists, we must also recognize the women promoters, organizers, supporters, critiques, doing the subaltern labor that allowed hip-hop spaces to operate and exist in the first place (Stoever 2018:11). A striking example here is the origin story of hip-hop itself. In most historical accounts, the birth of the movement is usually traced back to the night of August 11th 1973, when DJ Kool Herc gave a party at 1520 Sedgwick Ave. The responsibility for this event is usually single-handedly granted to DJ Kool Herc. However, Cindy Campbell, his sister, was behind everything. In a 2010 interview with Davey D she said:

> "I wanted to get some back to school clothes [...] I saw a way to do it by having a party in the recreation room [...] I went down to ask about it, it was only $25 to rent the room. [...] And Herc had a sound system [...] So I'm thinking how can I cut my costs, because I have to have the music, that's the main thing when you

> have your party, you gotta have the music. I was cutting costs, the invitations were done on index cards that I got from school because I was in the student body, the beverages I bought wholesale" (Cindy Campbell 2010).

Not only did Cindy Campbell have the idea for the infamous "Back To School Jam," but she also rented the recreation room of their apartment building, she booked her brother as the DJ, she made the invitations cards, and she bought the beverages and food. Despite her labor being central to what we understand today as the first hip-hop party, Cindy Campbell's behind-the-scene role remains little acknowledged in hip-hop historiography. Her example is only the most blatant among the general erasure of women's labor in creating and sustaining hip-hop spaces. To fight against the sexist erasure and marginalization of the contribution of women to hip-hop, we must take into account the full diversity of their involvements in hip-hop, throughout the whole range of hip-hop spaces, whether they be gendered as feminine or masculine.

Chapter 5

Hiphopographic L.A. Explorations:

Practice, Community, Locality, and Industry

This chapter more directly focuses on perspectives from participants I've interviewed during my fieldwork. Connecting various participants' perspectives on L.A. hip-hop through selected quotes, the chapter attempts to think with participants, thus considered as cultural theorists. Taken as reflective of larger social, historical and political perspectives on hip-hop, the particular experiences of participants are considered as situated expertise. This chapter thus enters what I call robust hiphopography. In his groundbreaking 1991 piece "Grandmaster Caz and Hiphopography of the Bronx," James G. Spady introduced the radical approach of hiphopography, which was later described by H. Samy Alim, Samir Meghelli, and Spady as a critical methodology that "integrates the varied approaches of ethnography, biography, and social, cultural, and oral history" (Spady et al. 2006:28), requiring scholars to "engag[e] the community in its own terms, […] assum[ing] that the culture creators of Hip Hop are quite capable of telling their own story," and as such, taking "the values, aesthetics, thoughts, narratives, and interpretations of the culture creators [as] our starting point" (Alim 2006:969-970).

Placing the engagement with hip-hop participants at the heart of its methodology, hiphopography acknowledges and includes participants' agencies, reflexive capacities, and active theorizations on their own hip-hop practices and involvements in hip-hop cultural worlds as central to the production of knowledge on hip-hop. It simply ain't

happening without them. At its core, hiphopography decenters scientific authority and ideas of "objective knowledge," to make room for hip-hop participants' situated interpretations and theorizations. Set on an equal footing with participants', the scholar's analytical practice – at best – adds another layer of reflexivity to the already complex and multi-layered perspectives of participants. In his book *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!*, Robin D.G. Kelley critiqued the tendency of scholars to silence the voice of the culture's participants, and while reminding that "we need to begin where people are rather than where we'd like them to be" (Kelley 1997:172), emphasized the necessity to foreground their perspectives as based in experience and expertise. Hiphopography thus helps us grapple with difficult questions, here formulated by H. Samy Alim: "How have we as scholars reproduced the hierarchies that we are trying to dismantle? How has our methodology silenced and disempowered the very folks we claim to be giving voice to and empowering?" (Alim 2006:12).

Much more than a simple heuristic approach, hiphopography also offers ethical, and socially justice-oriented ways to engage in the knowledge and power relationship. In that sense, hiphopography stems from an effort to break away from the epistemic violence of social sciences (Spivak 1988), which, as an activity producing knowledge, has been deeply invested in the reproduction of structures of power (whether it be through race, gender, sexuality, ableism, or class). As a non-hierarchical, anticolonial, and inclusive methodology (Alim 2006:12), hiphopography allows to shift from an extractive conception of the world as a resource from which to take from, to a community of agentive and situated voices with whom to co-produce knowledge. Embedded in making hip-hop research accountable to hip-hop communities first, hiphopography's approach

thus tends to prioritize allegiance towards those communities rather than the institutional spaces of the academy. Building on Donna Haraway's discussion of situated knowledges, we can further understand hiphopography as being "about communities, not about isolated individuals," and whose goal is to provide fairer and more just "accounts of the world" by emphasizing "accountability and responsibility for translations and solidarities linking the cacophonous visions and visionary voices that characterize the knowledge of the subjugated" (Haraway 1988:590).

Through hiphopography, the interviews I have done during fieldwork work as moments of co-theorizing with participants of L.A. hip-hop. While relying on these interviews and the multiple layers of reflexivity and analysis they carry, the present chapter, by connecting these different interviews, attempts to offer a supplemental level of analysis. The chapter starts by investigating how hip-hop participants first encountered and engaged with hip-hop in Los Angeles, how their passion for it developed over time, and how they became hip-hop practitioners themselves. From their initial encounters through media like TV or the radio in the home, I focus on how their engagement with hip-hop then evolved from interactions with the media to various public spaces in the city where hip-hop was taking place. In that sense, I explore how the development of their hip-hop practice went hand in hand with community building. This discussion around hip-hop practice and community further evolves in dealing with what hip-hop meant to them, and how, as young racialized Angelenos, hip-hop was a cultural resource helping them create a new sense of consciousness in relation to the sociopolitical conditions of the 1980s. By centering the participants' voices, their hip-hop practices clearly appear as ways to refuse the ghetto pathology discourse that were

projected on them by dominant interpretations of hip-hop. From there, the chapter moves to a larger discussion of hip-hop as Black music. Through the participants' perspectives, the chapter discusses how hip-hop is Black music, and what this means in terms of who can part take in it, particularly through a focus on the politics of inclusion, and the potential of political solidarity through cross-racial cultural engagement. It notably discusses the continuations and origins of hip-hop in older forms of Black music, and more largely replaces these perspectives in the framework of Pan-African flows. The chapter then moves to examining how L.A. participants think about the local cultural roots of L.A. hip-hop. This discussion reimagines the history of L.A. hip-hop from a locally-centered point of view, and contributes to critically reframe New York-centered origin stories of hip-hop. Finally, the last part of the chapter explores gangsta rap as a moment of radical transformation for L.A. hip-hop. Based on participants' perspectives as well as gangsta rappers' own perspectives, I attempt to deal with the many complexities and ambiguities about gangsta rap, notably its ambivalent reliance on the vocabulary of the ghetto pathology panic.

Initial engagements

Just like the rest of the country and the world, hip-hop formally reached Los Angeles in the late 1970s and early 1980s, through its commercialization and its circulation via various media formats, be it radio, records, shows or movies. Through media circulation, hip-hop reached individuals in Los Angeles, whose interest in the art form quickly sparked them to invest themselves in it, look for more of it, find people with similar interests to build communities, and eventually become practitioners themselves. Paying attention to how L.A. participants talk about their first encounters with hip-hop

helps us understand the particular ways through which they engaged with it, and how their initial engagement pushed them to become practitioners. These personal narratives not only tell us about specific songs, artists and media, but more largely inform us about the specific and practical contexts of engagement with hip-hop, the intentionality through which these engagements happened, and what they meant for participants. As a high schooler in the early 1980s, hip-hop artist Medusa's first introduction to hip-hop was two-fold, as she distinguishes the dancing, and the rapping aspect:

> "That would be The Poppin' Dominoes and The Lockers on *Soul Train*. Because in hip-hop, that's what I started with. Then as far as rhyming 'Rappers Delight.' When 'Rappers Delight' came out, I mean it just kind of blew everybody to be honest, and it was getting regular radio play on the KACEs, the KJLHs, the KDAYs. So that would have to be the hottest one. You have to understand when I was in Pomona, we didn't get L.A. stations, so you were lucky if you could set up your antenna to pick up those radio stations. Other than that I was listening to my mom's record collection" (Personal interview with Medusa, 2019).

From this quote, we see how Medusa first found out and became interested in hip-hop through the media, notably in pop-locking through the popular TV-show *Soul Train*, and in rapping through the L.A. radio stations which catered to the Black community (DjeDje and Meadows 1998; Person-Lynn 1998). Finding out about hip-hop through the media was one thing, but it is important to emphasize the intentionality Medusa had in engaging with it, and in pursuing her interest. The fact that she had to fix the antenna a certain way in order to hear the specific hip-hop programming she wanted to hear shows her active engagement. This demonstrates radio listening as a practice rather than as passive reception.

Hip-hop producer, trumpetist, and long-term participant in L.A. hip-hop scenes Josef Leimberg who was in his early teens in the early 1980s expresses similar ideas regarding his first introduction to hip-hop:

> "I remember somebody coming up to me with a boombox, and that was a friend of mine that used to pop and he was playing Malcolm McLaren. I thought it was the hippest shit I'd ever seen. I was like 'What is that?' He was like 'AM Stereo KDAY 1580,' all the way on the end of the dial you had to be in the right room to get this station where I lived. I was obsessed with recording mixes on AM Stereo KDAY. […] [It] was like a religion. If you were into hip-hop or poppin' or breakin' or any type of hip-hop thing you'd listen to KJFJ and KDAY. And we always had KJAZZ 88.1 we still do. So when I'd get in the car with my mother she was always playing 88.1, so that's what I do when I drive around I listen to jazz radio. […] And also my parents took me to see the movie *Wild Style*, it was in theaters in 1983. So I got exposed to that, and especially when I saw the portion with Grand Master Flash going back and forth" (Personal interview with Josef Leimberg, 2019).

OG Chino, a former hip-hop record store owner (B-Boy Records) and music executive for Def American Records also remembered the early days of hip-hop in L.A.: "You're listening to KDAY, and they would tell you, 'There's a rap contest over here,' so we'd go" (Personal interview with OG Chino, 2019).

The L.A. radio stations playing rap music were key in exposing young Angelenos to hip-hop sounds. They sparked their interest in hip-hop and oftentimes initiated them to their hip-hop practice. They also functioned as a source of information through which listeners learned the names of artists, and could gain knowledge about those artists, their music, and where hip-hop activity was taking place in the city. Again, more than just passive listening, radio could be an introduction to a hip-hop practice. For example, the way Josef Leimberg was recording songs on the radio and making pause mixtapes. Early hip-hop movies similarly provided more insights in hip-hop culture, not only in terms of sounds and visuals, but also in terms of contexts, practices, and values.

L.A. artist Hymnal recounts his early encounters with hip-hop through his bi-coastal school mates, who were bringing back hip-hop media from New York. His story not only emphasizes the early influence of the New York hip-hop scene on the West Coast, but also the fact that engagement with hip-hop media wasn't just a passive encounter with industry forces but woven into interpersonal interactions. Whether it is for radio, magazines, or films, the engagement with hip-hop through media had something to do with community building.

> "There were a lot of kids at this school who were bi-coastal. They would go from the east coast back to the west coast and they would bring back *Spraycan Art*, films like *Style Wars*, and things like that. *Wild Style*, before they would show up on the West Coast" (LeBlanc 2018).

Developing their practice: from the media to the community

Already in high school, Medusa was able to go to hip-hop events around the city. In that sense, if she was introduced to hip-hop through the media, her practice quickly became part of collective interactions and gatherings across Los Angeles, where she was able to meet and bond with people with a similar passion for hip-hop culture and practice.

> "I would go to Radiotron [hip-hop workshop in McArthur Park], I ditched school the last two periods of my classes and went out to L.A. and hit Garfield High and battle whoever was up there. That's when I'd run up into people like Popin' Pete, Pop N Taco, Boogaloo Shrimp, people like that. When I went out to Dena and places like that. Then you had World on Wheels [skating rink in mid-city], Skateland [skating rink in Compton], all these skate depots that had a lot of popping competitions. So a lot of crews would show up to these different spots to get the trophies. The Sports Arena, when Uncle Jamm's Army [pioneering DJ collective and party organizer] threw something all the dancers came out" (Personal interview with Medusa 2019).

As she describes it, it is through such interactions that she became part of the Groove-Atrons dance crew: "They came to my school pop-locking, and I was probably

one of three people that knew how to pop at Ontario High. So I battled with these cats, and they were like 'Oh shit you can get down!' So they took me in their crew" (ibid.).

The rapper and manager Chace Infinite also remembers his engagement with hip-hop in the mid-1980s Los Angeles. His memory displays a Los Angeles where hip-hop already had been developed locally, and shows the ways a teenager could engage with it. He recounts buying clothes and a mixtape at the Slauson swap meet, and going to different hip-hop events around the city under the wing of his older brother. Older siblings, as well as friends, cousins, neighbors or school mates were often key in introducing individuals to hip-hop and hip-hop spaces around the city.

> "I remember buying a Troop jacket, some red Fila shoes with the blue and white stripe and a mixtape from the Slauson swap meet. It had like six songs on it, King Tee's 'Payback is a Mutha,' another one was 'Fat Girl' by N.W.A. This was early you know, early L.A. hip-hop shit. 'The Batterram' [by Toddy Tee] might have been on there. It was a mixtape with early groups. My brother and all of them went to parties a lot. So I had been to Radiotron, Skateland in Compton, Skateland in Northridge, shit like that" (Personal interview with Chace Infinite, 2019).

Whether it is through listening to the radio, watching TV, going to the movies, buying clothes or cassettes, hip-hop practices were embedded in consumption and engagements with the media industry. As argued in the previous chapter, consumption then must be considered as an agentive practice, and further as a form of production in its own right. In this way, following Robin D.G. Kelley, hip-hop culture "was as much a product of market forces and commercial appropriation of urban styles as experience and individual creativity. And very few black urban residents/consumers viewed their own participation in the marketplace as undermining their own authenticity as bearers of black culture" (Kelley 1997:26).

Another important area to look at is how hip-hop practitioners started their hip-hop practice, in relation to the media industry, but also in relation to a community of peers who shared similar interest in hip-hop, and with whom they were able to develop their practice. Medusa asserts the importance of the engagement with the media in providing the original forms from which to start practicing: "Self-taught, watching the Poppin' Dominoes and The Lockers [on *Soul Train*]. Yeah just mimicking moves" (Personal interview with Medusa, 2019). In the same way, DJ Chris "The Glove" Taylor, a pioneer of L.A. hip-hop found out he wanted to be a DJ by listening to a record by Grand Master Flash:

> "Grand Master Flash releases *The Adventures of Grand Master Flash on the Wheels of Steel* (1981), which is him basically cutting it like a mixtape, him basically cutting and scratching. I was like 'Wow that's what I want to do right there! What is that?'" (Personal interview with Chris "The Glove" Taylor, 2019).

Although he did research on his own to find out what equipment he needed to be able to DJ like Grand Master Flash, it's only when he met Tony Joseph, a DJ from New York, that Glove was able to know what equipment to use and how to use it. He emphasizes that a lot of knowledge on hip-hop was difficult to obtain. Despite the art form being accessible in the media and certain spaces, it was difficult to get more information to be able to become a practitioner:

> "Tony Joseph really taught me how to be a DJ, literally, like 'this is a turntable, this is a mixer, this is how you put them together.' He said he would teach me. He showed me. He made me a tape. I knew what I had to get. I got turntables. Then I was like 'Okay I got that all together, how do I make them do their thing woowoooowooo [mimicking sounds of scratching]. I found out about slip mats, that was a secret. That used to be an alchemical secret. Slip mats turn a regular person into a super hero. They didn't make slip mats so we had to cut felt in a circle and put it on the record. And I was like 'Oh they spin!'" (ibid.)

Then, although media were the basis of practitioners' encounter with hip-hop, the bonding with and support from a community of peers, and the guidance from mentors

were key in allowing them to develop their hip-hop practice. In other words, participants' hip-hop practices went hand in hand with the interpersonal relationships they developed. In that sense, their hip-hop practices more largely relied on the intimacy shared amongst tight communities of peers. Josef Leimberg emphasizes this idea when he speaks of the group of friends surrounding him who had a mutual passion in hip-hop, which facilitated and encouraged his own interest in it.

> "It kind of happened very naturally. Even the friends I had in the 1980s were either playing instruments or rapping or trying to make records so I think it was a very natural thing to move towards that direction" (Personal interview with Josef Leimberg, 2019).

Similarly, Chace Infinite talks about the mentorship he received from a friend, who helped him work on his skills and technique. Although he was already practicing writing rhymes, and was already good at it, exchanges with more experienced emcees led him to reach another level, and take the craft more seriously.

> "I saw people who were responsive to some of the shit I was saying. I have a real good friend from the group Funkytown Pros, a legendary group from out here. He was an early mentor of mine in terms of crafting rhymes. I was good with words but [he helped me] in terms of how to number your lines and come up with a 16 bar. He pushed me a lot, because he was a brilliant lyricist" (Personal interview with Chace Infinite, 2019).

Locality and participation diversity

As much as initial encounters with hip-hop were important, collective bonding and community support and competition were essential to develop personal dedication leading to a hip-hop practice. In addition to the collective dimension of their hip-hop practice, the variety of locations of hip-hop spaces across the city has to be stressed. Hip-hop was practiced and happened in a multiplicity of spaces in Los Angeles, from all

parts of South Central, to Korea-Town, Venice Beach, Santa Monica, Hollywood, Long Beach, Pomona, or the Valley. Medusa for example said:

> "Uncle Jamm's Army went everywhere, that's different from Eve After Dark (Compton) and all of those that were steady foundations that had their hood where they got down in, and sometimes those were hoods where you didn't feel safe in. Radiotron (Westlake) was so hip-hop that you always felt safe there. That's what it was about, it wasn't about your colors, it wasn't about talking out the side of your neck and banging. It was different branches of who we are as hip-hop. Because Pomona was totally different than Dena, Venice Beach pop lockers were totally different from Skateland (Compton) pop lockers. Everybody got their own flavor but when we came together we got to see that" (Personal interview with Medusa, 2019).

Perspectives stressed by Chace Infinite:

> "Everywhere. I mean, I did rap with or against motherfuckers in any part of the city, from Watts to Pomona to the edges of the 805, Simi Valley and all that shit. […] Los Angeles is 508 square miles, in order to be properly chronical about Los Angeles hip-hop, you have to do it by section" (Personal interview with Chace Infinite, 2019).

Geography was then an important aspect of the diversity of L.A. hip-hop. If there was specificity in each of the various areas, there was a lot of movement happening. In that sense, hip-hop practitioners weren't trapped in particular areas, they often circulated from one area to another to attend and participate in different hip-hop spaces across the city. This allows to revisit the often reductive conception of L.A. hip-hop as uniquely originating from South Central Los Angeles. This common reduction usually takes for granted hip-hop activity as limited to Black Los Angeles, and further, Black Los Angeles as limited to South Central (Hunt and Ramon 2010; Kun and Pulido 2013). Then, paying attention to L.A. hip-hop allows to refigure Black Los Angeles and the presence of Black communities across the city – not only in South Central but in other areas such as Venice Beach, the Valley, or the Inland Empire. Beyond a revised understanding of Black Los Angeles, the mapping of hip-hop in the city can't be limited

to Black communities as it happened all across the city, and involved people from all races.

While talking about Radiotron and other hip-hop spaces in Venice, Santa Monica, and Hollywood, Medusa emphasized the racial diversity of participants:

> "It was very mixed. Back then it was more Latin and Black, and then you had that special white boy that had a rhythm, and you were shocked that that dude could pop or hit that hard. You had your occasional Filipinos, Puerto Ricans, they came out here from New York" (Personal interview with Medusa, 2019).

This diversity however depended on the part of town and the particular hip-hop spaces. Chris "The Glove" Taylor while remembering various hip-hop spaces was clear in differentiating the crowds – notably Uncle Jamm's Army parties happening in South Central, and Club Radio (not to be confused with Radiotron) happening in Westlake (between Downtown and Koreatown):

> UJA: "Uncle Jamm's Army was young Black teens partying to the fastest music ever. Teenagers, all Black. It was my crowd. It was my neighborhood" (Personal interview with Chris "The Glove" Taylor, 2019).

> Radio: "It was mostly white people. The club was cool, it was an artsy white crowd, imagine New York going hip-hop clubs, you see all white people. You know it's more Europeanish because it was a nouveau thing. So the people who liked the new things would come. Like the painters, the motherfuckers that trendset, forward-thinkers" (ibid.).

In particular, the hip-hop participation of Latinx communities has to be thought at the intersection of cultural affinities and political solidarities (Johnson 2013). Put another way, how the participation of Latinx youth in hip-hop spoke of the similar social conditions Latinx and Black communities experienced in post-industrial Los Angeles (Loza 1993; Pancho 2012). And perhaps, especially in South Central where 1970s and 1980s Latinx immigration took place at the intersection of migrants' cultures and Black American culture (Kun 2004; Johnson 2013).

While recognizing this diversity of participation however, participants whether they were Black or not, acknowledged hip-hop as a Black art form connected to the marginalizing social conditions of the inner city. In that sense, hip-hop was understood as not only dependent on racial identification but on particular social conditions as well. Then, participation in hip-hop wasn't limited to Black people, but included communities experiencing similar racial and social conditions, and more largely, people willing to be in solidarity with social groups struggling with such conditions.

Pioneering L.A. DJ Silky D discussed hip-hop in relation to white supremacy and non-whiteness. By articulating various systems of power, whether it'd be white supremacy or class exploitation, she expresses why hip-hop, although a Black music, doesn't necessarily need to be closed off to non-Black people, as it can be a cultural medium to build solidarity and resistance against supremacy.

> "The thing is, we can't get caught up in labels. We have to understand how supremacy works, and who's running it all, and how it's governed. Because it comes in all colors. Hip-hop stands for everything" (Personal interview with Silky D, 2019).

While participation in hip-hop from non-Black people was accepted, the Black origins of the culture was always emphasized, so was the threat of cultural appropriation and exploitation:

> "The origins of hip-hop as an art does belong to indigenous disenfranchised communities in America, that's who made it. Who exploited and created venue for exploitation for it are not Black people that's been like that since the beginning. […] [The culture] has definitely been created and propelled by us [Black people], it's not even disputable" (Personal interview with Chace Infinite, 2019).

Referring to Black and Brown inner city communities as "indigenous," Chace Infinite addresses how hip-hop helped transform marginalized communities'

relationship to space. As a cultural practice, hip-hop helped them reinvent their neighborhoods from spaces of exclusion and control, to spaces of community, belonging, solidarity, and intimacy. This understanding of hip-hop resonates with what Gaye Theresa Johnson has termed "spatial entitlement," when "marginalized communities have created new collectivities based not just upon eviction and exclusion from physical places, but also on new and imaginative uses of technology, creativity, and spaces [...] creat[ing] new articulations, new sensibilities, and new visions about the place of Black, Brown, and working-class people" (Johnson 2013:x). Through their hip-hop practices, participants have reimagined their neighborhoods and their communities outside the pathologizing ghetto constructions of the dominant imagination.

The meaning of a hip-hop practice

Furthermore, many talked about the meaning hip-hop had for them, what drew them to it, and kept them involved in it. As we explore the personal meanings participants found in their hip-hop practice, we see how hip-hop was a cultural medium giving participants new ways to imagine themselves as young Black and Brown youth, and thus as a practice actively engaged in refusing the "pathologies" projected upon them in dominant ghetto discourses. As Chace Infinite puts it, some of the core reasons to invest himself in hip-hop was that it was a medium for self-expression, and at the same time, something cool to get involved in: "I got into hip-hop wanting to express myself and thinking that shit was cool" (Personal interview with Chace Infinite, 2019).

Elaborating on this quote, we can understand hip-hop as a practice which could make participants feel good about themselves, as well as validated socially, as their passion for hip-hop was shared amongst a community of peers through which

participants could recognize themselves and each other. In the following quote, Chace Infinite talks about the collective dimension of being a hip-hop practitioner as something bigger than oneself, and as something relating to being part of a community:

> "At first the fact that people were finding clever ways to say shit that I always wanted to say, but also rhyming and then the collective energy like collectivizing around hip-hop. […] So just the feeling of discovering shit, whether it be dance styles, wearing your pants a certain way, or new slang and hairstyles, and being a member of a community within a community, that was the best part for me. You could recognize [if] somebody in a party was into hip-hop by how they dressed, the body, how they talked" (Personal interview with Chace Infinite, 2019).

Expanding on the creative and cool aspect of practicing hip-hop, Medusa discusses how it provided an alternative to the various possibilities available to racialized teenagers in the 1980s. Especially emphasizing the dominant roles available to young women then, she talks about hip-hop as providing a distinct avenue, less shaped by the pressure of traditional social and gender roles. In this way hip-hop provided racialized youth with new ways to be themselves. More than just a cultural and artistic practice, hip-hop was embedded in a self-consciousness that allowed racialized teenagers to imagine themselves outside the dominant definitions society put on them through the ghetto pathology panic:

> "It was an option. A different option. Growing up, in high school girls are girls, you're either a tom boy, or a cheer leader, or you're kind of in your own world, or you're boy crazy and you want a boyfriend. And yeah I played some ball but what's the alternative, what's the exciting alternative. Pop-locking, hip-hop was it, it was an outlet that didn't have anything to do with all the other things. If you were unique and wanted to be different or already different, hip-hop was that place, that was that lane. You're either going to gang bang, boy crazy and get pregnant, marry this dude, pick a career and run with that, and the arts were kind of… So to be able to go somewhere and dance, rhyme, move your body, create new moves, create new ways of dressing, it was like all of those things without the bullshit in one" (Personal interview with Medusa, 2019).

Rapper Akil the MC from the group Jurassic 5 also expressed how hip-hop was a different option from the common possibilities available to young Black men in the 1980s:

> "It was everything, and it saved my life. He kept me from being involved in gangs. It kept me busy, gave me something to do, something to strive for. Cause if you ain't got nothing to do, then something will find you. So in L.A. like around 1984, this was the thing to do that occupied a lot of our minds because, we come from gangbanging infested neighborhoods. So it just took our minds off of that lifestyle, there were so many things you could do and stuff. You could either join the hood, or if you were a good sport star you were going to try to go to college, or you would go into the service, or you were going to try to get a good job. Other than that those were our only elements, but when hip-hop came there was four other elements so that occupied my time and my energy" (Personal interview with Akil the MC, 2019).

Situating cultural and artistic practice within the context of South Central's social conditions, singer and artist Jimetta Rose stressed the strength of hip-hop in producing this sense of collective self-consciousness. As such, she links hip-hop to the specific experience of the racially marginalized, in the Black inner city particularly. Her quote more largely brings back conversations about hip-hop at the intersections of Black culture, politics and aesthetics, in the broader context of the shift from the civil rights era, and what has often been called "post-soul" (Nelson 1992; Neal 2002).

> "Social conditions are still harsh around here with violence and addiction but it speaks of how much conviction you must have to continue to build culture that reflects not who they say we are but who we are from inside. That's what we do. It's about owning our stories. Telling stories that are not in books and making sure they're felt and remembered so we can find strings of ourselves. We find the threads; we keep knitting the fabric" (Personal interview with Jimetta Rose, 2019).

In the marginalizing socio-economic context of postindustrial Los Angeles inner cities, hip-hop, more than intimately connected to the self-consciousness and experiences of Black youth, offered them strategies to "avoid dead-end, low-wage labor while devoting their energies to creative and pleasurable pursuits" (Kelley 1997:45). By

putting their passions to work, through grassroots entrepreneurial investments in hip-hop culture, practitioners could escape (even if temporarily) the hard prospects of structural unemployment.

As expressed by General Jeff, an Uncle Jamm's Army DJ and West Coast hip-hop pioneer: "When it first came out I used to say 'hip-hop is God's greatest intervention,' because you look at all the jobs, all the success, everything society didn't create for us, we created hip-hop for ourselves" (Personal interview with General Jeff, 2019).

The "new" Black music: musical continuations and Pan-African flows

Josef Leimberg talks about how he connected with hip-hop culture, and how the various hip-hop practices spoke to him. He interprets this instinctive connection as a generational belonging. As a sense of generational belonging, hip-hop relied on teenagers' own investment in cultural forms they felt drawn to. As a rather "new" phenomenon at the time, hip-hop was appropriable by teenagers who could easily make it their own, as it wasn't associated to their parents, and previous generations. Furthermore, the understanding of hip-hop as particular to a generation brings it once again to the idea of a post-soul generation, and how hip-hop, in its forms and meanings, has to be situated in specific historical and socio-political contexts, distinct from former Black musical and cultural movements in the U.S.

> "I thought that was amazing, but just the whole culture of the rapping and the breakdancing and the graffiti that connected with me and beat-boxing. I used to beatbox when I was little so I connected with all the elements of hip-hop at a very young age. Just connected with it because I feel like it was part of my generation. And it was birthed while I was living, while I was growing and growing up. I remember when it was just funk and jazz and I remember when it became hip-hop. I do remember when it actually happened" (Personal interview with Josef Leimberg, 2019).

Although hip-hop is perceived as its own thing, it is not seen as separate from previous Black musical forms, but rather in continuation as Josef Leimberg says it in the last sentence of the previous quote. Expressing this very idea, Silky D located hip-hop in previous Black musical forms as well, before the word and concept of hip-hop were coined. As she puts it, it is when she became a teenager and was able to directly participate in the culture by herself that hip-hop came into play.

> "My first hip-hop memory is James Brown, also the Watts Prophets, and the Black Panthers. That is my memory of hip-hop during the 1960s, as long as I've been here in L.A. James Brown was more revolutionary, the hip-hop beat, the funk, the message he had put in the music. That's what got me inspired to do these type of things. Then when I got to be a teenager, and locking came into the play, *Soul Train*" (Personal interview with Silky D, 2019).

Besides a general outlook on Black music and its evolution, the fact that participants often mention their families, and musical experiences with their elders also draws this connection with previous Black musical forms from which hip-hop would emerge. For example, in an above quote, besides hip-hop, Medusa mentions listening to her mother's record collection, and Josef Leimberg mentions listening to jazz on the radio with his mother while driving. Specifically, hip-hop practices such as crate-digging, DJing, and sampling, have continuously weaved in the past with the present and futures of Black musical life (Neal 2010). Considering such hip-hop practices as archival practices and deep engagements with the past in non-linear temporalities, we can think of hip-hop practitioners as "reorganiz[ing] history and challeng[ing] conventional thinking about medium specificity by bringing sometimes-unattended sonic material to new surfaces" (Raengo 2020:139). In this context, while recognizing "sampling as a citational practice," Lynnée Denise considers hip-hop as "one of our institutions of memory" (Denise 2019:67).

In the 1989 N.W.A. interview on *Yo! MTV Raps*, DJ Yella talked about the process of getting into the music to find samples: "You gotta listen to some old records, some 1970s funk, you listen to it, find certain little beats, clean, part, take them, and put raps to them" (DJ Yella 1989). In the upcoming book *Freedom Moves*, edited H. Samy Alim, Jeff Chang, and Casey Wong, rapper Talib Kweli goes even further, locating the roots of hip-hop in Africa:

> "You're talking about something that goes back before us, before the Last Poets and Gil Scott Heron, before the Negro spirituals and gospel songs that slaves sang to get them through the day. You're talking about things that go way back before, all the way to the African griot tradition. Banging on a drum and telling our story" (Alim et al. 2023:3).

Participants then although they draw a distinction, don't necessarily separate hip-hop from funk, jazz, or reggae, and other Afro-diasporic musical forms, but rather see them as the evolution of the same thing. As Amiri Baraka put it himself when talking about Black music as the "changing same," as a creative and cultural expression relating to Black people's identification to their social conditions in America (Jones 1967; Jones 1999). Perhaps, one of the main distinctive characteristic of hip-hop was that it was not only rooted in African American musical traditions but in Afro-diasporic ones more largely, Afro-Caribbean in particular. As Black American music, hip-hop not only reflected the historical particularity of African Americans, but of Black people and Blackness in America. In that sense, the longstanding Caribbean cultural exchanges and migration on the East Coast made New York a hub for Caribbean cultures key in the emergence of hip-hop (Chang 2004; Kelley 2006). This forces us to think about hip-hop in connection with centuries-long Pan-African flows and their cultural and political impacts in the United States (Meehan 2009). Approaching hip-hop in such a Pan-

African framework allows to address Blackness in the United States beyond national borders and nationalist perspectives, and conceptualize U.S. Blackness in the broader and older intercultural exchanges and political solidarities across the diaspora. Following Shana L. Redmond's study of Black anthems in her book *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora*, we can begin to understand hip-hop as "the evidence of a cumulative project of identity formation and political agency mobilized through culture, which, when taken together, construct parallel movements of solidarity and influence" (Redmond 2014:15). From these foundational Pan-African dynamics, it is not surprising that hip-hop, through its global circulations, rapidly became a critical voice throughout the diaspora, from North America, South America, Europe, the Caribbean, and of course Africa, as demonstrated in James G. Spady, H. Samy Alim, and Samir Meghelli in their book *The Global Cipha* (2006).

Back in the context of Los Angeles, although the Black Angeleno population mainly originates from various waves of migration from the U.S. South and remains dominantly ethnically African American (Hunt and Ramon 2010), many Black Angelenos are and have been of various African-descent, reflecting later waves of migration from the diaspora to the U.S., and to Los Angeles in particular. Fleeing the political turmoil of their home countries, looking for better life prospects and opportunities in the U.S., various waves of Caribbean immigration from Belize and Trinidad, African immigration from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Nigeria, or Afro-Latinos from various countries in Central and South America have contributed to make Black Los Angeles ethnically more diverse since at least the 1960s (Boyer 1985; Moran 1989; Ho

1993; Straughan 2004; Kun and Pulido 2013; Oyebamiji and Adekoye 2019). For many Black immigrants, Black American culture, through its global commercialization and circulation had long been a medium of racial identification in their home country. Through culture, many Black immigrants already felt connected to African Americans and their particular socioracial experiences in the U.S. Los Angeles resident and Belizean immigrant who first moved to the U.S. in 1961, Roland Yorke recounts how Black American culture was central in figuring his own Blackness as a teenager in Belize. He notably recalls covering the walls of his room with pages from *Ebony* magazine: "You could look on the walls and see all these pictures. […] I was tremendously influenced by being able to identify with Black Americans. I wanted to leave home and make it into the real world" (Boyer 1985).

For the offspring of Black immigrants growing up in Los Angeles, it makes sense that hip-hop was the cultural medium through which they connected with their own Blackness in relation to their Americanness. Among countless others, we can for example mention that in Los Angeles, Josef Leimberg is of Afro-Caribbean descent, Silky D is of Afro-Mexican descent, while Tyler, the Creator is of Nigerian descent, Earl Sweatshirt is of South African descent, rapper Thurz of group U-N-I is of Belizean and Ivorian descent, and the late Nipsey Hussle was of Eritrean descent. At the same time, hip-hop was the cultural medium through which the diversity of Blackness in Los Angeles found a common ground, thus reminding us how culture can contribute to articulate Pan-African political alliances and solidarity on a local level. However, going back further in the history of Black music in Los Angeles, we can find traces of such Pan-African ties as expressed through culture in the jazz community and its relation to the

radical politics of the 1960s. In particular, the community-based jazz ensemble – the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra – created in 1961 by Horace Tapscott, Linda Hill and other local artists, articulated their art at the junction of local, national, and international Black politics (Isoardi 2006; Widener 2010). In his autobiography, discussing the meaning of the music in relation to the name of the ensemble Horace said: "'Pan Afrikan' because the music would be drawn from African peoples around the world" (Tapscott 2001:83), and "Africa had a big impact on us. I was aware of the anticolonial struggles going on and I wanted to know how come we never had any hook up to Africa" (ibid.:136). In that sense, just like free jazz more largely, the Arkestra "was connected to an identification with both the anticolonial struggles of the emerging non-Western nations (in Africa and Asia) and the cultural heritage of the African continent in particular" (Monson 2007:19). These Pan-African musical ties in Los Angeles through the Arkestra are all the more interesting as the ensemble was closely associated with the Black Arts Community rooted in Watts, which meant a close connection to the Watts Prophets, the group of musicians and poets generally identified as West Coast hip-hop pioneers through their 1971 album *Rappin' Black in a White World* (Cross 1993). Going even further, the current activity of the Arkestra, now counting many young players whose musical practice include both jazz and hip-hop in ways that mutually redefine both musical cultures in relation to each other, speaks of the multigenerational local commitment to Pan-African musical explorations.

Cultural localization of hip-hop to L.A.

As we've seen above, most L.A. hip-hop participants found out about hip-hop from New York artists, songs, and films. Their first engagement in hip-hop usually can always be

situated in connection to New York. Although they acknowledge this early connection to New York, L.A. hip-hop participants also understand hip-hop culture in a wider framework. In this sense, Silky D is careful to differentiate the word "hip-hop" from the cultural lineages it emerged from. She doesn't necessarily understand hip-hop as an entirely new cultural expression, but rather as a culture that has to be understood in the wider context of Black American history and culture:

> "[Hip-hop] is a culture, although New York branded the word hip-hop, it goes way before our time. You can put a name to something that already had existed, and for those generations that's what it's known as. When you really do your history, it goes all the way back to Africa" (Personal interview with Silky D, 2019).

Beyond this wider contextualization of hip-hop culture, L.A. hip-hop participants also situate hip-hop in the particular local history of Los Angeles. By discussing how hip-hop culture and its various expressions were connected to multiple existing cultural practices locally, they not only localize hip-hop culture in Los Angeles in relation to the local Black cultural history of the city, but show that the idea of New York as the birthplace of hip-hop was already relying on particular processes of cultural localization. Then, their reflections allow to more largely replace hip-hop in the localized global cultural dynamics and circulations from which it emerged historically (Kelley 2006; Alim 2008). In that aspect, their reflections not only allow to complicate the history of hip-hop in Los Angeles, but further challenge the New York-centered origin stories by critically reconsidering the most commonly accepted master narratives that frame our understandings of hip-hop culture. This is made clear in the following quotes from Akil the MC and General Jeff, and how participants identify the local roots of each element of hip-hop, whether it'd be MCing, DJing, dancing, and even graffiti:

> "I realized like 'Oh this is a culture, MC[ing], and DJ[ing] and graffiti, b-boying' […] Then I realized that these things had already existed amongst us. In L.A., a lot

> of times gangbangers had been using a spray paint for the longest, so we had been writing up on the walls, they're striking up our hood, you know what I'm saying? But still using graffiti. So when hip-hop came, people that were already connected to spray painting who were gang members or into that one group, those people identified with that aspect of hip-hop. Then the DJ culture in L.A. is bigger than the MC culture in L.A. It was there before. So people that were already DJing, they just connected with the whole DJ thing in hip-hop. Then those people that were dancing that were already pop-locking, those people connected with the b-boys and breakers. You know what I'm saying? So a lot of these things that already existed, we just didn't know that it was this thing called hip-hop as a culture, […] and we had already been doing a lot of these things already" (Personal interview with Akil the MC, 2019).

> "On the East Coast they attribute the birth of hip-hop to DJ Kool Herc in 1973, when he did his party in the Bronx. Going back to the five elements, you know I'm a street dancer, doing research, locking started in L.A. in 1971, Don Campbell 'Campbellock' started The Lockers with Shaba Doo and all those cats. Well that predates 1973, I really want to push the West Coast branch of hip-hop as pre-dating whatever they're talking about on the East Coast. Now if we're talking about the music, The Watts Prophets came out with this album titled *Rappin' Black in a White World* in 1971 which also predates Kool Herc. While that was a spoken word album, there is one particular song, when it starts with somebody that's not necessarily beat boxing, but they're humming a melody, and then somebody starts spitting on top of that rhythm, so technically that's hip-hop right there. So we have multiple instances where hip-hop started before 1973, and you know when Ice Cube said 'Hip-hop started in the West,' we can actually lay that tree. […] *Soul Train* was filmed out here so the street dancing, a lot of the different elements, it's a lot of contributions that West Coast hip-hop has made to hip-hop" (Personal interview with General Jeff, 2019).

In these quotes, we see how General Jeff, Akil the MC, and Silky D weave in local cultural expressions to specific hip-hop practices and elements. They connect gang tagging to graffiti, *Soul Train* and the 1970s street dancing scene around pop-locking to breakdancing (Danois 2013), The Watts Prophets' album to rapping. They also connect earlier forms of DJing, notably disco DJ crews in the 1970s and house parties more largely to hip-hop DJing. Beyond tracing hip-hop elements to similar local cultural practice, they identify other local cultural practices and other influences which although they weren't part of New York hip-hop, were integral to L.A. hip-hop. General Jeff and Silky D for example both stress the importance of funk for L.A. hip-hop (Brown 2010),

and other elements such as car culture, the weather, and urban architecture with the width of the streets as specific local influences to L.A. hip-hop. Once again connecting hip-hop to former Black musical forms, participants identified the importance of funk in hip-hop, specifically in distinguishing the West Coast from the East Coast.

> "In New York their hip-hop beats were James Brown based, on the West Coast ours were more Roger Troutman, and Zapp, and George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic. Our thing was more funk-based, they had it James Brown-based, even though James Brown is funk" (Personal interview with General Jeff, 2019).

> "West Coast hip-hop is labeled for the funk, we are more funkafied. We talk about the low-riders, you didn't see low-riders on the East, because in California we have the weather, they don't have the weather, and they don't have the streets" (Personal interview with Silky D, 2019).

Building on these local cultural particularities and distinctions, participants emphasize the specificity of L.A. hip-hop, while still recognizing the influence of New York. They also interpret the longstanding centrality of L.A. hip-hop nationally and internationally through these cultural particularities:

> "The records first came out of New York and we gravitated towards that but we implemented our own interpretation and ran with it [...] We were never trying to do hip-hop the way they were doing it; we were doing our own interpretation [...] That's why on the West Coast we've always had lasting acts, lasting music, lasting energy, because it was ours, it was our energy, our culture, our foundations" (Personal interview with General Jeff, 2019).

Besides situating the cultural particularities of L.A. hip-hop, and more largely localizing hip-hop in the local cultural history of the city, it's important to acknowledge that this topic often sparked heated conversations about New York's dominant place in hip-hop historiography, and the longstanding tensions between the West and the East (Quinn 2003).

> "A lot of the East Coast cats, of course they're on their own ego thing and claim ownership as if hip-hop was their thing. Our own thing, well we like what you're doing and we're going to do our thing but the East Coast looked down on us like we can't do hip-hop the way we do it. What they didn't understand is that we were

> never trying to do hip-hop the way they were doing it, we were doing our own interpretation" (Personal interview with General Jeff, 2019).

As Eithne Quinn has shown, constructed as the birthplace of hip-hop, New York had dominance over what was considered to be "real" hip-hop. The authenticity associated with New York had a negative impact on the early hip-hop scene in Los Angeles, which was often perceived as lacking credibility (Quinn 2005). These authenticity politics were reinforced by the hip-hop industry and media, largely located on the East Coast. "The hip-hop media – crucial to the process of distributing and defining subcultural knowledge – was East Coast-based" (Quinn 2005:68). All of which was emphasized by General Jeff:

> "There was this separation. But then you have *The Source* magazine, *The Billboard* magazine, all the awards, MTV, *Yo! MTV Raps*, BET in D.C., all that stuff is on the East Coast, so they're promoting them cats, they're getting all the airplay, we're not getting any recognition, so quite naturally there was this East Coast/West Coast beef" (Personal interview with General Jeff, 2019).

A big moment for L.A. hip-hop: gangsta rap

L.A. hip-hop then seemed to experience a breakthrough moment with the rise of gangsta rap in the late 1980s, with artists like Ice-T, N.W.A. and Eazy-E, who although were an integral part of early L.A. hip-hop oriented their music in a new direction. Gangsta rap was a moment of increasing national and international visibility for West Coast hip-hop. Through ghetto iconographic themes, gangsta rappers "elaborated highly appealing and marketable expressions of authentic place-bound identity; and, at the same time, intimated the wider context of insecurities about place and the displacing features of post-Fordist capitalism that precisely drove those expressions" (Quinn 2005:67). Gangsta rap both offered a critique of the structural dynamics responsible for the

socioracial marginalization of the inner city, and while exploiting the ghetto pathology panic also participated in reinforcing those stereotypes.

Medusa remembers the shift the rise of gangsta rap represented for L.A. hip-hop, and how despite allowing the city to gain wider recognition for its hip-hop, also reduced what it was perceived to be: "When hip-hop grew in another direction it was the gang banger N.W.A. movement. It opened the door on one hand for L.A. hip-hop, but then it stereotyped L.A. hip-hop" (Personal interview with Medusa, 2019). Discussing gangsta rap, Josef Leimberg expressed how the genre, despite violent and graphic lyrics and imagery offered critical perspectives on the social realities of Black L.A. inner cities: "Even if it's told in some type of negative light it's still bringing awareness to what's going on in communities" (Personal interview with Josef Leimberg, 2019). This perspective has been emphasized over and over by the artists of gangsta rap themselves. In 1989 for example, in an interview with Fab 5 Freddy on *Yo! MTV Raps*, member of N.W.A. MC Ren declared:

> "Our ideas that we deal on the records is what happens on the streets where we grew up at, stuff that we saw everyday when we were growing up and we just put it down in the wax to let everybody know out there across the United States what's going on out there in Compton, California" (MC Ren 1989).

Although she recognizes the importance of gangsta rap in terms of shedding light on particular realities of Black marginalized youth, Medusa also expresses the unbalance, and how the ghetto portrayals mediated through gangsta rap tended to overshadow the diversity of hip-hop expressions and realities in Black Los Angeles:

> "I knew those hoods too so I got it. When N.W.A. came out and it was gangbanging, it was the total representation of what West Coast hip-hop was, and it was so not that. These cats that are gangbanging grew up together. They went to the same school. There were little pods of hoods that were that but then there was the rest of L.A. hip-hop and underground hip-hop that just wasn't. Then

> you're just exposing the gangbanger moment. We're so much more than that. It was real in some areas" (Personal interview with Medusa, 2019).

OG Chino also shares his perspective on the rise of gangsta rap and how it changed L.A. hip-hop, by notably bringing street life and hip-hop culture closer together, when they used to be more distinct. While commenting on gangsta rap, he's in accordance with the above perspectives from Medusa and Akil the MC, who perceived hip-hop as offering a different option to inner city youth, in particular by steering them away from gang involvement:

> "When N.W.A. and all that shit came out we didn't like it because we knew it wasn't real. We knew N.W.A. was fake. I was like this Dre and them, what the hell they're talking about? Because I came from that [gang] culture, so I'm thankful for hip-hop to give me something else to do, and here come these fools claiming they're gangsters. N.W.A. changed the whole ambiance in L.A. where you might feel where you could rap and you could keep banging, before it was 'I'm going to start rapping so I'm going to quit gangbanging.' [...] N.W.A. changed everything, that was some good music though, musically it was dope, but it was a setback. It became so big that I think every rapper thought they had to be a gangster. [...] It's not reality, it's exaggerated, dramatized. They made gangbanging sound ignorant. Gangbanging in L.A. is a culture, a lifestyle, but they took advantage of it, they mixed it up with *Scarface*. There's some truth to what they were saying" (Personal interview with OG Chino, 2019).

OG Chino emphasizes the inherent ambivalence of gangsta rap, and how N.W.A. members, while for the most part removed from gang culture, relied on it to make and sell music. Although he recognizes that the ghetto portrayals expressed in gangsta rap are based in reality, he critiques the representation of gang culture in gangsta rap for reducing the complexity of the culture to most common stereotypes about gangs and the inner city. In this way, Chino points out how gangsta rap, while exploiting gang culture, and more largely stereotypical ghetto representations, thus reinforced the ghetto pathology panic that terrorized and at the same time fascinated the country.

Similar thoughts were shared by rapper and ghostwriter The D.O.C., who although originally from Dallas, had lived in Los Angeles since the early beginnings of gangsta rap, and contributed to write the lyrics to a large number of the most famous gangsta rap songs, from N.W.A., Eazy-E, and Dr. Dre. In a DJ Vlad interview, he reflected:

> "When I was coming up, the four corners were Peace, Unity and Having Fun, now we were moving into the era where it's all about money and the four corners were just Money Money Money Money. The drugs have entered into the neighborhoods, the kids are seeing the guys having money, so the glorification of that kind of thing was popular. It's just like *Goodfellas*" (The D.O.C. 2015).

Although he agrees with OG Chino and how hip-hop experienced a shift in the mid-1980s, D.O.C. contextualizes this transformation in both the hyper-criminalizing dynamics of the War on Drugs, and the corporate investment of the music industry in hip-hop culture. Further, as Chino mentioned *Scarface*, D.O.C. mentioned the influence of *Goodfellas*, which reveals the connection between gangsta rap and action and gangster movies, and more broadly the influence of entertainment on gangsta rap, which was also often claimed by members of N.W.A. themselves. The violence of gangsta rap then can't singularly be interpreted as a reflection of the realities of the Black inner city, but as a whole, has to be addressed within the national ubiquity of violence in the U.S. entertainment industry. Something that The D.O.C. himself emphasizes: "It's not a rap issue, it's an American issue. Sex sells, violence sells, it's everywhere, it's on TV, it's every movie, every James Bond movie, cartoon…" (D.O.C 2015).

Directly addressing critiques of exploitation and glamorization of ghetto stereotypes, N.W.A. members often reminded that as musicians, their musical activity

was also simply their bread and butter, and that it had to be understood as part of the music industry more widely as a business making and selling music:

> "They don't tell singers you profiting off of love, movie makers, when you make a movie like *Mississippi Burining* [they don't say] 'Oh you adding to the problem.' So how can they tell us just because we are making the records we are, we're trying to capitalize, it's a capitalist system" (Ice Cube 1989).

Understanding gangsta rap's violence solely as a reflection of the social realities of the ghetto is then insufficient for at least two reasons. On the one hand, it foregrounds the hyper-criminalizing interpretative framework of the War on Drugs about the Black marginalized neighborhoods onto Black culture, and on the other hand, it erases other important factors taking part in the violence of gangsta rap, such as inherent ties to entertainment, and the market, but also aesthetics.

Although we have to understand gangsta rap in relation to the socioracial conditions of the Black inner city, we also have to understand it through the agency of its cultural producers, their engagement with the market and mainstream popular culture, the pleasures they experienced from making music, and the aesthetic and stylistic intentions they put into their musical creations. Ignoring these aspects of gangsta rap further contributes to erase its connection to former Black oral and musical traditions, and their ground in dramatic, playful, irreverent, and complex first-person story-telling uses of language. As demonstrated by Robin D.G. Kelley and Eithne Quinn, these aesthetic aspects of gangsta rap could be found in much older Black cultural forms, whether it'd be in Blues, Jazz, toasts, street fiction literature, or pimp narratives (Kelley 1994; Quinn 2005). Before ever hearing 'Rappers Delight,' Ice-T mentioned the influence of street rhymes from gang culture and the major influence of Iceberg Slim's novels on his own style:

> "Niggas would come to school with them in their back pockets, and I would read them and think, 'Oh my God, it's the phattest shit in the world,' because it's exactly what hardcore rap is: it's the lingo, it's the life. So I started reading it, and I used to quote his words…" (Ice-T 1993:182).

In another interview:

> "I always was into poetry, you know street type poetry, I used to say it in school and get attention for it, but I never even knew what rapping was, as far as the rap business. Then I heard this record called "Rappers Delight" by Sugarhill, and due to the fact that I already knew how to say street rhymes, I had learned how to rap but I used to listen to like Dolomite records and Redd Foxx and all that kind of stuff" (Ice-T 1988).

All these perspectives were asserted by members of N.W.A., whether it is the connection to older Black cultural forms, the irreverence and desire to shock, the pleasure of making music, or the connection to entertainment. For cultural producers themselves gangsta rap didn't have a set and defined meaning, it was a deeply ambiguous cultural form. As *New York Times* writer Jon Pareles put it in 1990:

> "Like other African-American musical and literary forms, gangster rap almost always carries multiple meanings simultaneously; its writers mix storytelling, mock-documentaries, political lessons, irony and self-promotion in unpredictable proportions, often defying simple summaries" (Pareles 1990:29).

In separate conversations with Brian "B+" Cross, Dr. Dre, Ice Cube and Eazy-E expressed what N.W.A.'s music was about and what their intentions were:

> "I wanted to do some hardcore shit. People like listening to Richard Pryor and Dolemite, the hardcore shit. The stuff you couldn't hear on the radio at the time… I wanted to make people go: 'Oh shit, I can't believe he's saying that shit'" (Dr. Dre 1993:197).

> "We came up with a name to shock ya. […] We just wanted to do something new and different and talk about what we wanted to talk about, like dick sucking, we wanted to talk about that. We wanted to do some shit that would just shock everybody" (Eazy-E 1993:201).

> "Not all my things you can take to heart, some of my records are entertainment" (Ice Cube 1993:205).

Perspectives reinforced recently in a collective interview members of the group did with Kendrick Lamar for *Billboard* in 2015:

> "Cube: Eazy wanted it harder harder harder [...] We had our own style, we thought it was going to be ours [...] But we turned hip-hop on its ear a little bit, we changed the trajectory of hip-hop.
> MC Ren: We were like 'How many times can we say nigga? How many times we said it last time, we're going to say it more this time [laughs]'
> Dr. Dre: We need more 'fucks' on this record [laughs]" (N.W.A 2015).

> "Dr. Dre: The love that I have for the music, the passion that I have for this hip-hop thing, first of all, it's my first love, the music, and this thing that we do so I'm going to protect that, I'm going to protect how I'm able to keep creating" (ibid.).

Getting into the creative process of writing lyrics for gangsta rap songs, The D.O.C. explains that there were different intents behind the lyrics, if some lyrics were about what was going on in the neighborhood, his writing approach came from his "imagination:"

> "D.O.C.: I used to sit around and Eazy used to have to answer questions about the lyrics that I had written. He would answer it like 'You know this is what we do, we tell it like it is,' and I'd be sitting there thinking 'it ain't why I wrote that' [...] Ice Cube's lyrics were about the neighborhood, when I wrote it was my imagination because I didn't live in the neighborhood, my idea was to try to make Eazy as palatable on any given track [...] I tried to make his stuff funny and charming to people who were outside his neighborhood, the young white kids in the suburbs who were really digging that music, I was rapping to them.
> Vlad: I was one of those white kids in the suburbs, when I first heard Ice Cube you couldn't tell me he wasn't the biggest gangsta on the planet" (D.O.C. 2015).

With that, we need to acknowledge the creative and stylistic intents behind writing lyrics, and the talent and expertise it took for The D.O.C. and others to write lyrics for songs. Second, we need to acknowledge the collective aspect of producing gangsta rap – if Cube and D.O.C. were writing lyrics, Dre and Yella were responsible for making the beats, Dre was also engineering studio sessions, while Eazy would figure out funding to finance recording, distribution and other aspects of the business. It's important to recognize the production of gangsta rap as a collective effort (Becker 1982).

In this next quote from Dr. Dre about working in the studio we can clearly see how this collective work was simultaneously fun, and an activity from which they derived great pleasure:

> "Kendrick Lamar: What was the energy like in the studio?
> Dr. Dre: The energy was crazy, it was just about fun, just free, fun [...] Imagine it's just us in the studio, we're just sitting there creating. Me and Eazy used to bump heads creatively" (N.W.A 2015).

Again, as The D.O.C. makes it clear in the last quote, the violent lyrics of gangsta rap were known to be appealing to white middle-class teens. Then despite the ambivalence and complexity of gangsta rap, the genre was often consumed through the voyeuristic gaze of white audiences, whose exotic fascination for the ghetto world portrayed in gangsta rhymes and videos lacked critical distance from the ghetto stereotypes gangsta rappers mobilized in their music. These limited and fetishizing interpretations relied on what Stuart Hall has called "spsectacle of the 'other'" (Hall 1997).

As white suburbanites have been defined as the target audience for gangsta rap (De Genova 1995; Lee LaGrone 2000), the music industry structured the rap industry around the expectations of this particular social group (Negus 1997). Through such a targeting, the music industry pushed gangsta rap over other forms of rap. Chace Infinite, who used to work for Priority Records in the 1990s reflected on

> "how much major white corporations control Black narratives [...] When you sit in those boardrooms and those marketing meetings you see who's getting the dollars. [...] Even if you have a group that's seemingly conscious, you're not going to get the same marketing dollars because the five or six themes that are evident and popular in your music don't support the same narrative as gangsta rap shit" (Personal interview with Chace Infinite, 2019).

Similarly, Good Life Cafe and Project Blowed rapper Abstract Rude speaks on the obstacles he encountered for not making gangsta rap music and the impacts of this choice on his career, and further, the pressure from industry professionals to change his style:

> "In an industry trying to make everything hardcore and gangster we were proud to be alternative, alternative to whatever this machine is producing. When they tell you 'you should cut your dreads, and rock some khakis and rock some gangsta shit like the hood where you come from and make some real money,' that was said to us!" (Personal interview with Abstract Rude, 2019).

Despite the many critiques from hip-hop practitioners we've seen, many of them still recognized the musical originality of gangsta rap, and never excluded it from hip-hop. Interestingly, if OG Chino expressed his dislike for gangsta rap, he acknowledged that he loved the music itself (See above quote). Abstract Rude also said:

> "That's why we liked N.W.A., cause Dre made that shit for hip-hoppers. It's gangsta music but it's so creative and the beats are switching up so much. He was making it for the heads" (ibid.).

In this next quote, Abstract Rude reveal how important gangsta rap was for him growing up in South Central – it allowed him to gain awareness about his neighborhood without having to experience it first hand:

> "I still needed to hear that gangsta shit, 'Boyz-n-the Hood' and that because I wasn't doing it. I could hear the shots from my window, I could hear the helicopter, the ghetto bird, but these rappers can take you all the way there. This is why I needed to hear it because somebody represented that. I'm young, I needed to hear it to hear more of the particulars and exacts of shit, so when I was around it I could identify it, so I wouldn't be one of the squares that didn't know what was going on, to hear exactly what I don't want to get involved in" (ibid.).

In that sense, it seems like a lot of L.A. hip-hop participants' main issue with gangsta rap was its ambivalent exploitation of ghetto stereotypes in relation with the music industry for a predominantly white audience, rather than the music and the craft itself, which a lot of them not only enjoyed, but also related to. Therefore, it's important

to understand the ambivalent positions of early hip-hop practitioners towards gangsta rap through the ambivalence of gangsta rap itself. If many are critical of the genre, they all recognize its central importance in L.A. hip-hop history. Impossible to ignore, gangsta rap also motivated the positions and styles of L.A. hip-hop practitioners, who often took a stance through their very hip-hop practice – as expressed by Abstract Rude in the above quote who strived to make something different, something alternative. In that sense, gangsta rap, because of its dominance, was still part of L.A. practitioners' relationship to hip-hop.

During a recent conversation with Chuck D, Joan Morgan explained the violence the major investment of the music industry in hip-hop represented for early hip-hop practitioners. Not only did early hip-hop practitioners had to negotiate being excluded from a culture that they had created, but also had to deal with the exploitation of this culture which was so intimately connected to their identities and experiences as young Black and Brown people. Drawing on an analogy between gentrification and losing control over a culture hip-hop practitioners felt was theirs, Joan Morgan addresses how the commercial investment of the industry was a shifting moment in hip-hop history, particularly as a moment of capitalist capture:

> "Hip-hop had gone from being this small cultural intimate phenomenon where we all kind of knew each other to being a multi-billion-dollar corporation. I don't know how many of you are experiencing the violence of gentrification, imagine that kind of violence amplified into a culture that grew and shaped you. You knew something drastically hazardous was about to happen, but at the same time you were powerless to completely stop it, and you needed it for the music to become the dominant form that it did" (Joan Morgan 2022).

Although she deplores how the industry marketed hip-hop and the particular social realities it was connected to back to the people who created it, and beyond, to

groups who weren't connected to those experiences, she recognizes that this mainstream commercialization was also what allowed hip-hop to be such a powerful cultural movement, radically transforming America. This flip to the exploitative critiques of hip-hop have been expressed by rappers such as Ice Cube and 2Pac, who, well aware of the exploitative dynamics they were involved in, also were conscious of the influence they had on their white listeners, who through hip-hop culture were not only exposed to the social realities of Black neighborhoods but also learned about the political background at the root of these issues. In other words, gangsta rap certainly provided exploitable ghetto narratives, but because of its ambivalence also provided social commentary, humorous rhymes and funky beats. Beyond white listeners' voyeuristic engagement with gangsta rap, the ambivalence of the genre opened the door to more complex engagements with hip-hop culture at large, and thereby, introduced them to critical perspectives on race and class in the United States. In that sense, by continuously foregrounding racial politics on the national stage through culture, style, and entertainment, hip-hop, including gangsta rap, has played a major part in raising consciousness about racial oppression and social justice. In a never aired 1993 intervew for ABC Ice Cube said:

> "Some of the white kids are sick of their fathers telling them about the community […] They're starting to say 'look pops, all that stuff you were saying, put that aside.' We're becoming their heroes, and that's really why the media is in a frenzy. Because the white kids are taking the Bon Jovi and all these clowns off their wall, and putting up Ice Cube and Public Enemy, and they start listening to what we have to say, because it's not all on the gangsta tip, a lot of it is really political, and that's where the problem stems from" (Ice Cube 1993).

Tupac echoed similar perspectives in a 1994 interview with Ed Gordon for BET:

> "I'm getting pimped, that's true […] If you really look at the situation it is not I who's getting pimped. When you look at the white kids with Raiders hats on, it's the white folks getting pimped, because I'm making their future, I'm writing

down their curriculum. Right now what I write in my album today, when it comes out in two months, that's what white kids doing. So who's really getting pimped? What I'm writing in my raps is what these white kids is going to be saying to their mamas and daddies when they come home. Who's getting pimped?" (Tupac Shakur 1994).

Conclusion

As H. Samy Alim says, if hip-hop has been around for 50 years, hip-hop scholarship has been around for at least 30 years. In the past 5 to 10 years, hip-hop has gained more mainstream attention than ever, and has been a major influence in politics, economy, fashion, and culture, not only in the U.S., but across the world. As hip-hop culture is becoming celebrated on a mainstream level, but also institutionally, through large museum and university projects, this is a time of solidification for hip-hop knowledge and historiography, and thus for dominant understandings of hip-hop to be reproduced and perpetuated. Now is then a perfect time to critically interrogate our most deeply rooted and taken for granted understandings of hip-hop. The dissertation deconstructs dominant hip-hop discourses and offers new ways of understanding hip-hop by relying of hip-hop participants' perspectives themselves. As many hip-hop pioneers are still with us, it is necessary to work with them, and think with them to think hip-hop in ways that properly reflect what the culture is about, and what it means to participants. The first chapter does so through a historical and political contextualization, replacing hip-hop culture in the larger power dynamics of American society, and the involvement of cultural matters in the reproduction of the socioracial order. It does so through a particular focus on "ghetto pathology," and its centrality in the conservative interpretations of hip-hop. Following up on conservative interpretations of hip-hop and the moral panics that they sparked, the second chapter looks to complicate the understandings of moral panics around rap in the 1980s and 1990s. Through archival research, it looks to move away from a simplistic dual look at moral panics around rap, and resituates the ambivalences and contradictions of

complex dynamics. By critically examining the assumption that hip-hop is a simple cultural reaction to poverty and racism, chapter three critiques all-encompassing and generalizing understandings of hip-hop, to instead center the agencies of participants. The fourth chapter centers hip-hop mothers' voices in order to understand how their labor and practices were central to the development of their children hip-hop practices in the first place. Based in hiphopography, the final chapter co-theorizes participants' relationship with hip-hop in Los Angeles, and unveils how they developed their hip-hop practice in relation to community.

The dissertation thus opens the door to the deconstruction work we need to do in order to think hip-hop through more complex ways than the constructions we've inherited from decades of irresponsible news media and scholarship. More importantly than the attempt of complicating hip-hop understandings, the dissertation looks to outline a theoretical framework critically contextualizing cultural matters in the power dynamics of American society. In that sense, I've tried as much as possible to properly define the systems of power impacting Black life and Black cultural practices. Although I specifically focus on race, I always try to understand it in relation to other systems of power, such as class exploitation, and cisheteropatriarchy.

The deconstruction work I attempt to do in this dissertation, by challenging dominant understandings and constructions of hip-hop, stems from a place of love, and the need to produce hip-hop scholarship closer to the complexities of our social realities, and their relations to power dynamics. At the root of my project stands the will to make room for participants' perspectives, and for fairer understandings of hip-hop. As such, my hope is to have contributed to fairer and more just understandings of hip-hop, which

themselves would contribute to a fairer and more just imaginings of our worlds (Savage 2021). Admittedly, I'm afraid that the scope of the dissertation might be too ponderous. Despite the work carried out by this dissertation, there still remains much deconstruction work to do regarding hip-hop, and Black music in general – a deconstruction work that always needs to be coupled with the critique of legacies of oppression. In that sense, I'm also afraid to have left too much details and complexities out of my analyses, and for that reason do not assert to have deconstructed hip-hop, but contributed to it at best. I'm also aware that anything valuable in this dissertation relies on the work of hip-hop participants, scholars, community members, and activists who have been conducted the work for many years.

Finally, the deconstruction work pursued in this dissertation allows me to open the doors to reimagine Los Angeles hip-hop from the space of hip-hop communities. I believe I'm now better equipped to focus on my ethnographic work without the bias of dominant hip-hop constructions. This next step of my work will then take me to pay attention to the historiography of L.A. hip-hop, and how hip-hop communities engage with this historiography through their own practices.

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