The South Central Soundscape: Understanding the Sounds of the Streets as Social Commentary in Postindustrial Los Angeles

Kevin Prescott Morris

Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/thesis

Part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation

https://surface.syr.edu/thesis/218

This is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses - ALL by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.
Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze how Black popular music sonically represents urban, ghetto landscapes through lyrics, timbres, tones, tempos, and samples as forms of social commentary and signifiers of an authentic Black experience. This project adopts the concept of the soundscape in order to tease out the ways music artists and producers sonically recreate their social environments, specifically understood as “the streets,” in order to provide nuanced social critiques about the social forces that dictate daily life. The project is situated in the South Central section of Los Angeles, California and follows a sonic chronology that traces the social commentary in the music from Los Angeles based artists between 1969 through 1992. Taking the streets as a spatial imaginary in Black popular culture, specifically in Black popular music, this thesis demonstrates how Los Angeles based artists deliberately employed sound to represent how locals responded to the way demographic shifts, economic stratification, the illicit drug economy, and militarized policing practices helped transform South Central Los Angeles’s social and political landscape.
The South Central Soundscape: Understanding the Sounds of the Streets as Social Commentary in Postindustrial Los Angeles

by

Kevin Prescott Morris II

B.A., University of Arkansas, 2014

Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Pan African Studies.

Syracuse University
May 2018
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank the following people who have supported my journey toward the completion of my thesis and Master’s degree.

First I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Herbert G. Ruffin II who has been supportive throughout the time it took to complete this project. It was under his recommendation that I direct my studies toward my hometown of Los Angeles and through this process I have learned so much about the city that shaped me. Working with Dr. Ruffin has made me a much more thorough scholar and I feel prepared to tackle my doctoral studies after being his student.

I send the utmost gratitude to the Department of African American Studies for their nurturing environment. Everyone in Sims 200 looked out in one way or another during this journey despite it taking much longer than expected.

To my committee, Drs. Pough, Fagan, and Wadley, I thank you all for coming through in the clutch and agreeing to serve on my committee on such short notice. I seriously can’t thank you all enough.

I have to thank my close family and friends, especially my mother Eunita, and my partner Devorah. Both of whom listened to me for hours at a time work through the moments of frustration and those nights where I questioned whether or not to finish. If not for their words and gestures of encouragement I would not be writing these acknowledgements now. I also have to shout out my best friend Bronny, my Golden Chow-Chow whose companionship and fun-loving energy undoubtedly got me through the dog days of this journey, (no pun intended).

Last, but definitely not least, I have to thank South Central Los Angeles for molding me into the person I am today. “Hardly home but always reppin’.”
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ...........................................................................................................................................................................i

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.............................................................................................................................................................iv

INTRODUCTION...........................................................................................................................................................................1

1. CHAPTER 1: PROPHETS OF RAGE ...............................................................................................................................26

2.CHAPTER 2: ESCAPING THE STREETS: ONE WAY OR ANOTHER ..................................................................................54

3. CHAPTER 3: REPORTIN’ LIVE FROM THE STREETS .................................................................................................74

4. EPILOGUE .............................................................................................................................................................................110

REFERENCES ...........................................................................................................................................................................117

VITA .....................................................................................................................................................................................125
Introduction

Before I could discover, before I could escape, I had to survive, and this could only mean a clash with the streets, by which I mean not just physical blocks, nor simply the people packed into them, but the array of lethal puzzles and strange perils that seem to rise up from the asphalt itself. The streets transform every ordinary day into a series of trick questions, and every incorrect answer risks a beat down, a shooting, or a pregnancy. No one survives unscathed. And yet the heat that sings from the constant danger, from a lifestyle of near death experience, is thrilling.

Ta-Nehisi Coates Between the World and Me

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze how Black popular music sonically represents urban, ghetto landscapes through lyrics, timbres, tones, tempos, and samples as forms of social commentary and signifiers of an authentic Black experience. As Coates astutely stated, the streets are more than just the physical blocks and the overcrowding of people packed into the urban ghetto. The streets constitute a complex web of obstacles that require a specific knowledge base to navigate such unforgiving terrain—hence the phrase “street smarts.” The sights, smells, and sounds of urban avenues and boulevards are articulated through music whereby artists from different regions recreate distinct soundscapes. Generally defined, a soundscape is an environment created by or with sound. Seen through Black cultural logic the soundscape is the articulation of a social environment via sound. I adopt this concept in order to analyze how Los Angeles
based poets and rappers soundscape “the streets” within their music as a signifier of an authentic representation of Black L.A.¹

Los Angeles has historically been considered a paradise in the American imaginary. The glitz and glamour of Hollywood, perfect weather, and sandy beaches lining the Pacific Coast Highway cloud the reality of the poor urban experience just Southwest of Los Angeles. South Central Los Angeles became a concentrated space of working class families of color after the 1960s. Before the spike in population, Los Angeles experienced a period of racial tolerance due in large part to the small Black populations prior to World War II. Prior to this time Blacks were not the primary victims of lynchings and race riots led by White Angelenos. But the racial hierarchy began to shift when Los Angeles saw an influx of Black Southern migrants, the majority of which hailed from states such as Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas. The migrants came to Los Angeles to find work in West Coast shipping yards and factories. Los Angeles had a Black population of 15,579 in 1920 and the city saw that number rise to 170,880 by 1950.²

Many of these new Angelenos moved to the South Central section. An area of Los Angeles that spans approximately 51 square miles and is made up of 25 neighborhoods was transformed as more migrants moved to Los Angeles well into the 1970s.


The Second Great Migration spanning from 1940 to 1970, reshaped Los Angeles’s urban landscape along racial and economic lines reminiscent of urban cities in the North. However it was Los Angeles’s sprawling landscape that geographically and socially distinguished it from other notable urban areas like Chicago, New York City, Newark, and Philadelphia. These mainly North and Northeast urban areas, with the exception of Chicago, carry a distinct feature within their urban landscape: they build up. Buildings are erected to accommodate for the lack of space, while Los Angeles is spread out. During the Second Great Migration, South Central Los Angeles became a highly concentrated population of working class Black families. Moving West promised financial and social mobility for Black families. The prospects of employment in the war industry, as well as other industries that established West Coast sites of operation, was very alluring to Black families looking to escape the systemic constraints of the Jim Crow South and the already overcrowded urban Northeast.

The story of South Central is complicated in terms of its historical formation along racial and class demarcations. Consequently, South Central has become a popular representation of Black America over the years. Staging two of the United States’ most infamous uprisings, the 1965 Watts Rebellion and the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising (or Rodney King Rebellion), South Central is a crucial site of the postindustrial Black experience as both a representation of a larger

---

crisis in the urban United States and someplace with particular qualities and social forces uniquely its own.\textsuperscript{4}

Blacks Los Angeles faced the effects of economic restructuring by the 1960s, when most of the city’s centrally located industry closed down and relocated to newly developed suburban enclaves. Along with the relocation of industry came a huge demographic shift with White Angelinos moving to the newly constructed suburbs. This White flight abandoned the growing Black and Brown populations in the inner city. The next few decades saw the deterioration of the economic base leave South Central with no jobs, overcrowded housing, drug addiction, and a heightened police presence.

Considering the laundry list of negative social factors that plagued South Central in particular and urban America at large, Black urbanites have developed a complex, love-hate relationship with their place of residence. As early as the Harlem Renaissance there have been depictions of the urban landscape as both nurturing and unforgiving. Authors like Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, and James Weldon Johnson have been credited with their detailed descriptions of the Harlem cultural and philosophical landscape. Beginning in the 1940s with the publishing of Richard Wright’s \textit{Native Son} and Ann Petry’s \textit{The Street}, Black literature gave voice to the plight of urban America, while finding pride in surviving such circumstances. Authors such as Robert “Iceberg Slim” Beck, Donald Goines, and Chester Himes would take a similar literary approach to depicting urban life. The literary shift in the 1960s, followed a string of urban uprisings, that would see urban America become synonymous with “Black America.”\textsuperscript{5}

Black popular culture, and politics, transitioned from the Jim Crow south to the urban North, and West, centering the urban experience in the struggle for racial justice. Music, literature, art, and fashion were created with urban politics and aesthetics in mind. This burgeoning political orientation left behind the respectability politics of the South and took on a much more radical character that spoke to the urban experience.

Black popular culture has always served as a platform to voice radical political positions but the medium of music, and sound in general, carry particular sociopolitical and sociocultural value throughout the African Diaspora. Music has the ability to merge elements of multiple artistic mediums into one package in order to bring a track to life. The music that was analyzed for this thesis fused a combination of lyrical forms, unconventional instrumentation and samples that crossed genres with the intentions of representing and reimagining urban life. Groups such as the Last Poets in New York City captured the Harlem soundscape of the late 1960s with loud percussion mimicking the noise of the New York City streets. By the late 1980s when hip-hop became the voice of the streets artists were experimenting with samples that corresponded to their hometowns.

For this project, I analyze how artists utilize the soundscape via close lyrical and sonic analysis, highlighting the way artists responded to the social and political landscape while manipulating sound. Emphasis was placed on musical and verbal tone, music samples, samples of nonmusical sounds heard in the streets such as sirens, car horns, loud voices, helicopters, gun-shots, etc—to authenticate the merit of their street tales. Lyrics and instrumentation carried the

---


thoughts, anxieties, and experiences of the Black working-poor while the accompaniment of the sounds of daily life helped produce cinematic-like narratives that placed listeners right in the heart of the streets. After listening to the Watts Prophets “Dem Niggers Ain’t Playin,” Ice Cube’s “Black Korea,” or Dr. Dre’s “The Day the Niggaz Took Over,” it is apparent that by capturing the soundscape of the streets, artists could sonically transmit the realities of South Central in subtle and compelling ways.

Attention will be devoted to “the streets,” which I use as an interchangeable term with ‘the hood’ and ‘the ghetto’ within the Black vernacular tradition. The streets constitute a critical social space in the Black spatial imaginary. A spatial imaginary is defined as “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings.” For Black urbanites, the streets make up the physical urban landscape that bare the results of failed economic and public policy. As a space of social marginalization, the streets provided a “vehicle to extract Black labor while keeping Black bodies at a safe distance, to the material and symbolic benefit of white society.” The streets constitute a space where ideas of inner city immobility are appropriated into local contexts to challenge urban identities and conditions.

I seek to understand how the social and political transformations occurring in Black Los Angeles were found were reported on from the streets via the soundscape. In other words, taking the streets as a spatial imaginary in Black popular culture, specifically in Black popular music,
calls for an analysis of how artists deliberately employed sound to represent the lived experience in South Central’s social and political landscape.

To accomplish this, I analyzed the music of spoken word artists such as The Watts Prophets, funk groups like War, electro hop collectives such as Uncle Jamm’s Army, and rappers such as Ice Cube and Ice T all of whom correspond to distinct moments in the social politics of Black Los Angeles and the nation at large. This project presents a critical sociopolitical historiography of the South Central streets through a sonic analysis of the music produced between 1969 and 1992. Needless to say, the majority of the music that I analyze for this project is written and told from a male, often hypermasculine perspective. However, the male-centeredness of these street narratives, and more specifically the choice of sounds utilized that help constitute the streets as a masculine space, evoke questions surrounding the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

The way the streets are represented as a masculine space is something I wrestle with throughout the project. During the Black Power era, the streets reflected a male gendered identity geared toward a reclamation of a lost masculinity due to systemic racism, economic disenfranchisement, and evolving forms of state-sanctioned violence. However, by the gangsta/reality rap era beginning in the mid-1980s in Los Angeles, representations of masculinity retained many of the elements left over from the Black Power era’s framing of gender but did not carry the same political objectives of the preceding generation. The streets were not just a space that excluded women in an effort to reclaim a Black nation through masculine ascendance, but they came to represent a space of gender and non-heteronormative sexual hostility. In order to track the historical devolution of the streets into a more hostile masculine space toward women I rely on previ-
ous scholarship regarding space, particularly the public/private divide within the Black Feminist tradition. Scholars such as Gwendolyn Pough have grappled with the public/private divide in Black (political) representation, and specifically tracing the public/private split within a hip-hop context. Pough posits that Black representation in the public domain tends to lean toward spectacle and this is integral to understanding the representation of “the streets” through a sonic lens.¹¹ Artists attempted to use spectacle, though at times problematic, as a political criticism against mainstream perceptions of Black urbanity in Los Angeles and urban America at large.¹²

There has been a breadth of scholarship that deals with Black popular culture’s affinity towards the ghetto.¹³ This thesis draws from the work that has preceded it with special attention paid to the way the streets (“the ghetto”; “the hood”) have been theorized in Black popular culture. Most of the attention “the streets” have received in the academy, however, has left the sonic element out of theorization.


¹² At times the criticism was poignant, and at others, terribly problematic. The sonic choices that artists made to vividly represent the streets, coupled with the commercialization of gangsta rap, see Quinn, E., 1971, & ebrary, I. (2005). Nuthin’ but a “G” thang: The culture and commerce of gangsta rap. New York: Columbia University Press; Ogbar, J. O. G. (2007). Hip-hop revolution: The culture and politics of rap. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas., would eventually reinforce many of the pathologies levied upon Black males in South Central Los Angeles that rappers from the area were attempting to give agency to. However, the opposite occurred. By 1993, gangsta rap had been co-opted to represent the most egregious elements of the streets while the War on Drugs continued to move forward under the Clinton administration culminating with the passage of the regressive 1994 crime bill, see Ransby, B. (1996). US: The black poor and the politics of expendability. Race & Class, 38(2), 6-11. 10. The urban experience that gangsta rap reported on was now perverted into hyperviolent, hypermasculine, war stories that sold millions of records while also justifying the profits that sprang from the expansion of the carceral state, see Herivel, T., & Wright, P., 1965. (2007). Prison profiteers: Who makes money from mass incarceration. New York: New Press.; Alexander, M. (2012). The new jим crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness. New York. The New Press.

Recently, more scholars have attempted to understand how sound and space are negotiated within Black popular music, examining how artists weave together musical and nonmusical sounds to construct compelling characters and narratives. Scholar Regina N. Bradley, whose concept of the “Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose,” (HHSCP) “posits a sonically manifested space to interpret and explore aspects of [B]lack identity unavailable in other mediums. Framing [B]lack men’s narratives through a combination of instrumentals, vocals, and other relevant sounds like grunts, laughter, and wails—HHSCP negotiates signifiers of [B]lack male life through a sonic framework.”¹⁴ In similar fashion, I consider how artists create the soundscape of South Central to comment on the social, political, and economic idiosyncrasies that constitute everyday life in the streets.

Gaye Theresa Johnson offered a critical historiography of Black-Brown relations in Los Angeles through a sonic framework in her text, Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles.¹⁵ Johnson’s text lends much to this project in its application of a sonic lens to the critical retelling of interracial relations and spatial politics in Black (and Brown) Los Angeles. I take up Johnson’s approach in my analysis of the different sonic “street” commentaries produced between 1969 and 1992 on police repression, intra/inter-class hostilities, interracial relations, economic disenfranchisement, and expressions of masculinity in postindustrial Black Los Angeles.

**The Soundscape of the Streets**


The soundscape is a sound inclusive environment that includes natural and man-made sounds which we use to negotiate the world around us. In his seminal text *The Tuning of the World: Toward a Theory of Soundscape Design* (1980), R. Murray Schafer states that music “forms the best permanent record of past sounds.” Music has an interesting function in that it can be representative of an environment or, in other words, music recreates a given soundscape through its use of sound. According to Schafer, music falls into two categories: absolute and programmatic. For the sake of this discussion we will only look at programmatic music which Schafer characterizes as “imitative of the environment.”

The sampling of musical and nonmusical sounds from the past and present recreate the soundscape to represent a particular social and political epoch. Therefore we could infer that studying music through the soundscape offers much insight to particular experiences and environments. By merging musical and nonmusical sounds together artists and groups such as War, Uncle Jamm’s Army, and Dr. Dre evoke experiences and sensations of a particular distinct sociopolitical and cultural eras. Artists and producers are able to recreate these soundscapes through a variety of ways, however, I will focus primarily on the sounds most associated with Black urban spaces and the music produced to reflect those experiences. The sounds of Black urbanity serve an integral function in the soundscape of the streets and consequently ideas of authentic Blackness.

The soundscape of the streets argues that the choice, placement, and blending of sounds — conceived as both musical and nonmusical — function as a signifier of an authentic Black experience. Employing the soundscape lens on Black popular music can provide a tool to unpack

---

the social and political nuances of entire productions rather than relying solely on lyrical and/or textual analysis. Furthermore, this project complicates the rigid notions of political and social awareness as it pertains Black popular music. That is to say, this study is not concerned with the overt political intent as much as with the political undertones found within the soundscape. By taking this approach I believe that the voices and experiences of the urban masses are better communicated versus the more direct attempts at creating radical or revolutionary cultural products.

The physical streets are formed at the crux of housing discrimination, deindustrialization, unemployment, capital flight, community redlining, and police repression. Moreover the material conditions of the streets lend to stereotypical representations that characterize urban poverty as something pathological within the Black urban experience rather than a byproduct of socioeconomic exclusion. But the streets became a symbol of Blackness in the postindustrial, post Civil-Rights era. The streets denote a sense of Black authenticity found at the core of Black urbanity and music oftentimes becomes the vehicle through which this concept of authenticity is articulated.

Furthermore, my framing of the streets through the soundscape offers the opportunity to unpack the gendered subtext found embedded in the sounds used by these L.A. artists. The hypermasculine orientation that has characterized the Black Power movement well into the hip-hop generation has no doubt been reinforced through cultural production and pay special attention to the way gender politics and relations were incorporated into the soundscape of the streets.

Methodological Approach
The approach taken to soundscape the streets is transdisciplinary. It involves lyrical and sonic analysis, critical human geography, as well as, social and urban history. This project will intersect New Western history, community studies, critical race studies, sonic studies, and hip-hop studies.

Through lyrical and sonic analysis, I examine the elements of a given track that speak directly to the experience in Black Los Angeles. Artists producing music within the project’s chronology touch on a number of themes that are closely associated with Black urbanity. For example, the Watts Prophets track “Pimping, Leaning, and Feaning” or Ice Cube’s “Steady Mobbin” both highlight the stereotypical trappings of urban America in the late 1960s and early 1990s respectively, in South Central. The lyrical delivery and sounds that are employed to recreate the soundscape in these two tracks represent their respective epochs and constitute a perceived Black authenticity. By highlighting the lyrics, themes, and sounds within the music allows for more in depth analysis of urban historicity and how residents related to the physical landscape. Merging social and urban history with critical human geography offers context to South Central as a space and the social conditions that created it.

A transdisciplinary approach to this project grounds the soundscape in the material conditions of South Central by historically charting the variant manifestations of political participation, social mobility, and racial identity. The soundscape of the streets tracks South Central through the Black Power era, major uprisings, the failures of the civil rights movement and both governmental wars on poverty and drugs from the urban working-poor perspective. Musical artists embraced the streets as a way to sonically invert the political, economic, and social cir-
cumstances of their social environments into forms of social commentary and narratives of empowerment.

**Contextual Background**

Beginning in the 1940s and 1950s there was a major spike in Black migrants flocking to California for wartime industry jobs. For instance, from 1942 to 1945, an estimated 338,000 Black people migrated to the state of California with over 200,000 settling in Los Angeles. According to census data, by 1960 Los Angeles County had a total Black population of 461,546 and by 1990, more than 250,000 Black people called South Central Los Angeles their home. But the Black Los Angeles experience was weighed heavily against the other races occupying the city. Mexican and Asian Americans had a complex relationship with the Black population in Los Angeles and their positions in the racial hierarchy had direct effects on Black Los Angeles.\(^\text{17}\)

There are some important factors to consider in the case of Black Los Angeles. The deindustrialization of Central Los Angeles marked the deterioration of South Central. The inaccessibility of jobs for unskilled labor coupled with discriminatory hiring practices created a contentious relationship between Black people and the formal economy. The jobs that brought families to Los Angeles during the war years were now being relocated to L.A.’s expanding suburbs. Suburbs and exurbs like Costa Mesa, Santa Ana, and Anaheim to the south and Ventura, Canoga Park, Woodland Hills, and Simi Valley to the north were witnessing a boom in consumer entertainment and aerospace industries respectively. The development of suburban cities like those

mentioned were byproducts of postwar middle class prosperity, a lifestyle not reserved for those in South Central.

In conjunction with suburban expansion came the rapid development of Los Angeles’s infamous freeway system. L.A. has been burdened with a poor public transportation system since the 1920s, when automobiles became the preferred choice of transportation. It was the construction of the freeway system in the 1950s and 1960s that had crippling effects on life in the central city. The completion of the freeway system in the 1960s and 1970s marked the flight of White Angelenos along with capital from the central city to the suburbs. For those reliant upon public transportation in South Central were not accommodated by efficient travel options to get to and from work. The public transit system did not feature routes that made Black Angelenos living between Central Avenue and Slauson Avenue to get to Woodland Hills. This virtually excluded many of South Central’s residents from Los Angeles County’s overall financial expansion.

Moreover, between 1940 and 1960, the number of cities incorporated into the metropolitan area reached sixty. As Laura Pulido explains, “Such a move not only had profound implications for the city of Los Angeles in terms of its tax base and community well-being but also established a geographic basis for unequal opportunity as incorporated cities were able to exert far more control over who lived, entered, and shopped in their communities.” Despite a boasting a diverse population, Los Angeles was spatially inequitable and reinforced White privilege through its geography.

To further ensure that these newly developed suburbs remained segregated, real estate covenants and redlining were implemented. In 1948, the Shelley v. Kraemer case determined that

---

the United States Supreme Court could not enforce racial covenants on real estate but this left a number of loopholes to be further exploited in years to come. This landmark case involved a Black family — the Shelleys — looking to buy a home that had a restrictive covenant attached to it. According to this covenant the house was to be unoccupied by anyone of “Negro” or “Mongolian” descent, respectively. The ruling did not deter the enforcement of restrictive covenants. It only ensured that the court would not have a hand in enforcing such contracts. This provided property owners and real estate associations with enough leeway to continue their discriminatory housing practices throughout the postwar era. These covenants helped create a system of de facto segregation throughout Los Angeles County that confined many Black and Brown families to specific areas.¹⁹

However, there were instances of legislative pushback against these racial covenants. What became known as the Unruh Civil Rights Act (1959), stated “all persons within the jurisdiction of the state are free and equal, and entitled to the full and equal accommodation, advantages, facilities and privileges or services in all business establishments of any kind whatsoever.”²⁰ This piece of policy laid the foundation for future legislation in California, particularly as it pertained to housing discrimination.

To compound these issues, class divisions within the Black Los Angeles deepened the social and political plight of those living in South Central. With many affluent Black families barred from the mostly White middle-class suburbs, the middle and upper-class Black families began moving farther west on the margins of South Central by the late 1960s in an effort to es-


cape the hood. By 1970, areas such as West Adams, Baldwin Hills, and Ladera Heights had become predominantly affluent Black enclaves. Despite the close proximity these neighborhoods had to South Central, they were socially and politically detached from their working-class neighbors. Many of the civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, the Los Angeles Urban League, along with many churches and fraternal organizations catered to a Black middle class demographic. Similar to the way substandard public transportation in Central Los Angeles excluded the Black working class of South Central from the labor pool, the class strata within Black Los Angeles excluded many working-class residents from formal political participation as well.21

The youth were probably hit the hardest from the economic transformation in Los Angeles due to the lack of options for political participation in South Central. Gangs sprang out in response to the lack of access to traditional social and political organizations, namely, The Boy Scouts of America, and Jack & Jill. But they also served as forms of community protection in the early 1950s with sets like the Slausons, the Avenues, and the Businessmen.22 These gangs protected their respective neighborhoods from attacks brought on by White gangs like the Spookhunters.

Tensions were also high between Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and Black Angelinos, completely boiling over in August of 1965. Sparked by a traffic stop and unlawful ha-

rassment of a Black motorist in the Watts section of Los Angeles, Black youth in particular took to the streets in order to channel their longstanding frustration with the police. But it was more nuanced than that. As jobs disappeared from Central Los Angeles and exclusionary practices in social and political organizations disenfranchised the Black youth of Los Angeles, the Watts Uprising was an outward expression against systemic oppression. Although the optics of the rebellion looked like random looting and vandalism, participants in the uprising had clear directives as to engaging with police and which stores to target that had a history of mistreatment towards Black Angelenos. Watts 1965 marked the shift from the Southern focused Civil Rights Movement, led by groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and ushered in an urban centered Black liberation movement in the United States.

The national break that the Black urban generation made from the Civil Rights movement saw the emergence of radical empowerment political organizations that took a “bottom-up” approach to racial, economic, and social justice. Two of the most prominent organizations in Los Angeles at the time were the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the US Organization (which refers to Black people as “us” as opposed to “them,” the oppressor), both of whom emphasized the dignity and self-determination of the people living in the hood.

The Black Panther Party, founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966 in Oakland, CA was oriented around a revolutionary vanguardism that established programs around economic independence and self-defense to meet the most basic needs of the people. The BPP

---


established a Los Angeles chapter in November of 1967 and gained hundreds of recruits in 1968. The Panthers launched a number of community based programs, namely the free breakfast and medical clinic that served the South Central Los Angeles community.

Ron Karenga, founder of the US Organization sought to create an organization centered on a cultural nationalist ideology seeking to empower Black South Central residents through the establishment of an Afrocentric identity. Karenga used the Negritude philosophy as a foundational ideological tradition that understood African culture to be communal in nature. The US Organization, like the BPP, launched a number of programs, however, these were normally culturally and artistically oriented.

Both organizations targeted the Black working class — or in the case of South Central — the permanently unemployed class as members. US and the BPP were also culprits of perpetuating problematic gender relations within their respective organizations despite women having such a prominent role in the success of both groups. The years following the Watts Uprising saw the Black Power Movement set the stage for the development of a political identity that was rooted in the urban experience. Although differing in political ideology, the BPP and US Organization filled the hole in South Central’s political representation.

The Black Panther Party and US Organization actively recruited many of the gang members of the 1950s to join their ranks in revolutionary political and cultural activism. By 1968, the early street gangs in South Central were absorbed into the political activism of the day and con-

---


solidated the Black gang members under one of the two major political organizations in Los Angeles.  

Considering the political and cultural flowering that occurred as a result of the Black Power Movement in Los Angeles, in retrospect, that era in the city’s history was very short lived. By 1970 both the BPP and the US Organization had effectively been dismantled through the orchestration of governmental programs such as COINTELPRO. The covert counter-intelligence program developed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) sought to undermine and neutralize domestic political organizations and figures. COINTELPRO obliterated major political organizations like the BPP that provided space and ideas of self-affirmation and empowerment, leaving Black youth in Los Angeles politically baseless and leaderless. Just like in the 1950s and early 1960s, gangs filled the void for the disenfranchised demographic and became a basis for identity in the post-Black Power landscape.

In late 1969, Raymond Washington started a new gang for Black teens that would mimic the recently dismantled Black Panther Party. Washington’s admiration for slain political leader and former Slausons's gang member Bunchy Carter, who was murdered at UCLA during an altercation with members of the US Organization, was apparent in the way fashioned his gang in the image of the Panthers, adopting both style and organization. However, it was Washington’s close connection with the Avenues of the 1950s that was most reflected in his gang’s identity.

Going by “Baby Avenues” or “Avenue Cribs,” symbolizing the next generation of bangers, they followed their predecessors’ principal tenant of community policing.\textsuperscript{29}

As time passed, the attitudes towards the tenants of community protection and Black Power disappeared. And just as Los Angeles County was expanding annually, the “Crips” (what they later became known as due to a mispronunciation of Cribs) were multiplying at a similar rate. As the Crips grew in numbers, so too did their influence. Yet their presence was met with resistance as other Black youth were being taken advantage of by the Crips.

Ironically enough this led to the formation of gangs in an effort to protect themselves from the Crips. These newly formed gangs went by the Brims, Black P. Stones, and the Piru Street Boys. This collective built an anti-Crip coalition under the banner of the “Bloods.” By the mid-1970s, the revolutionary rhetoric of the Black Power Movement had fallen on deaf ears. The ideologies of change and uplift were replaced with a street ethos that only placed value on gang life. According to Mike Davis in his text \textit{City of Quartz} (1990), Crips and Bloods were “a hybrid of teen cult and proto-Mafia. At a time when economic opportunity was drawing away from South Central Los Angeles, the Crips were becoming the power resource of last resort for thousands of abandoned youth.”\textsuperscript{30} The gang lifestyle was the new resource of power and identity similar to what the Black Power Movement provided for the previous generation. This turn in Black L.A.’s history was symptomatic of decades of social, economic, and political exclusion.


In 1978 the total active gangs in Los Angeles was forty-five according to the Los Angeles County Probation Department statistics, but this number ballooned to 151 by 1982.\textsuperscript{31} The proliferation of gangs in the 1980s can be attributed to the sudden arrival of crack cocaine on the streets of South Central.\textsuperscript{32} This smokable form of powdered cocaine gave users a more intense, but short lived high causing users to rush back in order chase that euphoric feeling. Crack, whose name is attributed to the \textit{crackling} noise the rock makes when smoked, became the most viable means of earning a living. Sellers exploited the shorter high crack gave addicts using the process of “cutting” or adding mixing agents to stretch the sellers’ product that would allow them to sell at a cheaper price. If the 1970s politically debased South Central’s youth, the 1980s “crack era" exacerbated the preexisting social conditions by creating intra-racial warfare over territory and money.

The War on Drugs officially launched in 1982 and only intensified throughout the remainder of the decade. As a result, the relationship between the Los Angeles Police Department and South Central residents became irrevocably impaired. Under police chief Daryl Gates the LAPD’s reputation was further sullied as the department’s record of physical brutality and harassment, racial profiling, and evidence planting became more pronounced.

The War on Drugs incentivized the draconian approach to policing that the Los Angeles Police Department became known for. With Gates at the helm and the federal government’s overspending on a flawed drug war, witnessed the LAPD militarize its police force with the implementation of SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) teams that were frequently seen ransack-

ing someone’s crib in the hood. Gates also created a special task force designed specifically for gang intelligence and elimination called CRASH (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums). The CRASH task force implemented weekly sweeps in an effort to get gang members off the streets and into the department’s gang database, known in the streets as “gang file.”

As the War on Drugs escalated with the added incentives that accompanied higher arrests rates, especially for drug related offenses, the Los Angeles Police Department set out to round up as many Black and Brown bodies as possible in 1988 with the approval of “Operation Hammer.” This 2.5 million dollar anti-gang suppression program was created to question suspected gang members and carry out weekly gang sweeps. By March 3, 1991 when the grainy footage of motorist Rodney King being beaten by LAPD officers aired on K-CAL 9 News, the tensions similar to those felt during the Watts Rebellion some twenty years earlier were again percolating in South Central. After the death of high school student Latasha Harlins at the hands of Korean shopkeeper Soon Ja Du and light sentence she received thereafter, the social fabric holding together such a racially contentious city as Los Angeles was hanging on by a thread.

On April 29, 1992 LAPD officers Stacey Koon, Timothy Wind, and Theodore Briseno were ac-

---

quitted of all charges by a predominantly White jury in the suburb of Simi Valley forty minutes outside Los Angeles (the jury could not agree on one of the charges for Laurence Powell). As news of the verdict settled in, South Central Los Angeles was on fire again.

**Layout**

The opening chapter examines the soundscape of the streets in the late 1960s through a close analysis of spoken word group Watts Prophets and their debut album entitled *The Black Voices: On the Streets in Watts*. The attention the Prophets paid to the streets is at the core of this chapter. The objective is to pull out the larger implications of the streets of South Central and how the soundscape represented the Black Power epoch in Black Los Angeles. Moreover, the Prophets represented the politicization of South Central’s lumpenproletariat made up of excluded Black workers and gang affiliated youth. The Prophets followed up their debut with the 1971 re-release of *Rappin’ Black in a White World* which continued to represent the South Central soundscape through a Black Power/Afrocentric lens. There are some problematic elements in the Prophets’ music, namely, the heteropatriarchal orientation found in both albums. This masculine complex from the Black Power era becomes central to the soundscape and its articulation of masculinity through the hip-hop era. Nevertheless, this group began a tradition of street oriented expression that captured the energy of the newly politicized Black youth of South Central Los Angeles.

Chapter two takes an interesting look at the crippling urban conditions of the 1970s and early 1980s juxtaposed with the increase of Black middle-class Angelenos and their flight from
South Central Los Angeles. I use this chapter to argue that the soundscape of the streets during this time reflected the real and imagined intraracial escapism occurring in South Central. Los Angeles was a party city in the 1970s and 1980s with discos, skating rinks, and house parties serving an integral part of social life. The music and overall party scene in Los Angeles offered Black Angelenos in South Central an opportunity to symbolically escape from the reality of worsening social conditions. Although the music at the time did not overtly deal with politics like that of the Watts Prophets, it did create unique ways of providing social commentary. On the other hand, South Central’s middle-class counterparts would physically escape the grip of the streets while also symbolically escaping the streets through their gaining access to more racially diverse, yet economically homogenous party spaces.

The third, and final chapter takes a look at the soundscape of South Central through reality/gangsta rap spanning from 1985 to 1992. During this time “reality rap,” or in popular discourse, gangsta rap, became a platform for urban reportage. The term “Black CNN”, coined by legendary MC Chuck D of the group Public Enemy, is a helpful way to frame reality/gangsta rap. According to Chuck D, rap music was “our invisible TV network. It is the CNN Black people never had.” If rap music was a nightly report from the streets, gangsta rappers were South Central’s investigative reporters. Rappers in LA were expressing the realities of the War on Drugs and “gang banging,” (actively representing a particular set or neighborhood and particip-

ing in gang-related activities), to a larger audience across the United States. Daniel Widener asserts, “gangsta rap carries an identifiable class politics, a profound urban critique, and most important, the sonic possibility of a more profound intervention into material and social relations.” By using the music as a reporting platform, rappers and producers constructed the soundscape as a way to give insight to the material and social relations in South Central pointing out interracial hostilities, police antagonism, gender battles, sexual anxieties, and (intra)class conflicts.

Throughout each chapter of the project, the sonic representation of the streets that are highlighted make for an interesting scope through which to chart the social, political, and economic transformations that shaped South Central Los Angeles and made it an integral space for understanding Black urbanity within the postindustrial American imaginary.

---

Prophets of the Streets

The Lumpen has no choice but to manifest its rebellion in the University of the Streets. It’s important to recognize that the streets belong to the Lumpen, and that it is the streets that the Lumpen will make their rebellion.

Eldridge Cleaver

I’m an educated man, with a doctor’s degree, from SWU — Sidewalk University!

Amde Hamilton, The Watts Prophets

Spoken word poetry came to prominence during the era of Black political and cultural radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s. This art form fused the traditional styles of poetry with the musicality of jazz and often featured the political orientation of the Black Power movement. Although its origins can be traced as far back to the performance of West African griots well into the Harlem Renaissance, the 1960s saw spoken word become the mouthpiece of the Black liberation struggle. Spoken word is also considered to be hip-hop’s predecessor. Spoken word artists “rap” which is generally defined as a style and tone of storytelling over percussion based music. It can be said that spoken word poets were “rapping” in the loose sense of the word, before hip-hop hit the Los Angeles scene in the mid 1980s. Poets like Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones), Stanley Crouch, and Nikki Giovanni helped set the tone for this form of Black ex-

---


pression. In many instances these works reflected a direct alignment with the Black liberation politics that swept through urban America.42

The politics of Black empowerment and liberation that captivated the urban centers across the United States had a specific allure for working-poor Blacks urbanites. In particular, the Black liberation politics of the late 1960s embraced those left out of the traditional economy and sought to uplift those in the streets.

“The streets” as a concept is used to understand the process of identity construction, political awareness, and authenticity in South Central Los Angeles. How the streets are imagined varies at different points in the narrative, however, what remains constant about the streets is its reflection of the prevailing social conditions. The spatial politics of the streets also speak to larger intersectional issues. The streets are usually articulated as a masculine space within Black expressive culture, particularly starting with the Black Power era. The absence of female voices reflected how men imagined political participation. Moreover, the male-centeredness of the movement privileged masculinity as the cornerstone of nation building. In turn, the streets represented the space where much of the nation-building would occur in South Central Los Angeles and beyond.

For this chapter, the streets reflect a complex blend of political participation, social transformation, and a space that welcomes illicit economic activity. The political orientation that became known as Black Power represented a response to the failings of the Civil Rights movement and the War on Poverty. The era of Black Power reclaimed Blackness through embracing the ur-

ban experience with the streets serving a crucial purpose to understanding this experience through racial, political, economic, and gendered terms. Therefore, when combining the soundscape and the streets we get a sonic representation of the social realities that dominate a given space. For the remainder of this chapter, I look to delve deeper into the soundscape of the streets during the Black Power era in Los Angeles.

**Speaking Truth**

Despite its historical legacy, the genre of spoken word has been popularly studied through the work of the Last Poets and Gil Scot Heron. The Poets and Heron refined the spoken word form of their predecessors while maintaining the Black Power orientation that manifested in the work of Baraka, Giovanni, and Crouch. The Last Poets and Gil Scot Heron ushered in a very street oriented style of language that spoke directly to the Black masses.43

The choice of sound (both musical and nonmusical) often coincided with the space artists were representing. For the spoken word artists like Gil Scot Heron and the Last Poets, the soundscape of the urban northeastern United States embodied the newfound race consciousness that was at the center of the Black Power movement. The soundscape that Heron and the Poets portrayed could be characterized by the amalgam of percussion sounds that reimagined the traditional African drums and effectively connected their music to the diaspora. The embrace of Afrocentricity that swept the Northern United States during the late 1960s was expressed through their poetic productions. In California, and specifically South Central Los Angeles, the sound-

---

scape as represented by spoken word artists sounded different denoting an urban experience distinct from that of New York, Newark, Philadelphia in the east and Chicago in the midwest.

**This is the West.**

The Watts section of Los Angeles has its own tradition of Black cultural expression dating back to the early 1930s. But the cultural radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s has been popularly historicized as a northeast and midwest United States phenomenon. Despite the fact that the Black Panther Party and other Black radical organizations such as the US Organization began on the West Coast, their artistic contributions to the Black Arts Movement have largely been left out of many retellings of this cultural and political epoch. This can be attributed to the mainstream image of urban America being New York City, Philadelphia, and Chicago following the initial wave of the Great Migration. As Blackness became closely associated with the urban experience, those cities that welcomed Black migrants from the South during the Great Migration became the spaces through which the urban experience was understood. As Blacks from Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, Georgia, and Tennessee moved west during the Second Great Migration beginning in the 1940s and lasting through the 1970s, the mainstream understanding of the urban experience necessarily had to change to accommodate the new spatial politics of the urban west.

In Los Angeles, the sprawling nature of the landscape contrasts that of eastern and midwestern urban cities that built up due to a lack of space. However, many of the same systemic

---

constraints found throughout the urban northeast such as redlining, housing discrimination, police repression, and interracial conflict were just as prevalent in Los Angeles.

But it wasn’t until August 1965 that Black Los Angeles moved into mainstream consciousness with the Watts Uprising. The term “uprising” is defined as an act of resistance or rebellion; a revolt. Counter this with “riot” which is defined as a violent disturbance of the peace by a crowd. The Watts Uprising is often mischaracterized as a riot in an attempt to discredit the social and political factors that led to the event. Describing this, and many urban revolts as riots look at the event in a vacuum without understanding the sociopolitical context through which the revolt occurred.

Although the uprising was initiated by a “routine” traffic stop, where the routine was harassment and abuse, the core of this rebellion was the intersectional oppression that dictated the lives of Black Angelenos. As a result of the uprising Los Angeles became a symbol of Black urban discontent.

Beginning in the 1940s with the initial influx of Black migrants from the South in order to fill the wartime manufacturing sector, Black Los Angeles was marginalized through racialized housing covenants, discriminatory employment practices, and unlawful police abuse. With racial covenants dictating geographical boundaries by which Blacks could secure decent housing, Black Angelenos found themselves bound to an expanding ghetto by the 1960s. City sections/neighborhoods like Watts became the prime locale of accommodation for WWII and postwar Black migrants. Naturally the inflow of Black migrants raised issues concerning anti-Black discrimination in Los Angeles. However, Los Angeles was undergoing a demographic shift in general during this time as the Asian and Mexican populations began to balloon during the 30-year
migration to the west. According to Laura Pulido in her text *Black, Brown Yellow, and Left Activism in Los Angeles*, the spike in the Black population after 1950 changed the racial hierarchy in Los Angeles. Prior to 1950, there were larger non-white groups in Los Angeles that were the targets of racial discrimination, namely the American Indian population that was subjected to lynchings, Japanese Americans who were terrorized and rounded up into internment camps, and police repression of Mexican communities.\(^{45}\) Black Angelenos benefitted from their small population and, in turn, not considered to pose a threat to the White order of Los Angeles. This resulted in less discrimination and physical harassment than other ethnic groups in Los Angeles.

Following World War II, Japanese Americans were re-acclimated to American society after spending time in internment camps and emerged as the “model minority”\(^{46}\) of Los Angeles. East Los Angeles was becoming an expanded Mexican barrio and a more organized labor force that benefitted from close proximity to Central Los Angeles’s manufacturing sector unlike the Blacks housed in Watts, and other parts of South Central.\(^{47}\)

By the time Black soldiers returned home from the second World War, they were met with staggering unemployment as the economy began shifting away from wartime manufacturing. The structural implications of unemployment saw Blacks excluded from the formal manufacturing sector just as soon as they began to gain access to the job market. The lack of viable jobs that brought many Blacks to Los Angeles a decade prior were gone but that didn’t hinder the number of Black families deciding to move west to escape the Jim Crow south. As the number of


Black Angelenos began to grow, they were virtually warehoused in the Watts section of Los Angeles.

The worsening economic and housing conditions for Black Angelenos provided a stark contrast from the perceived victories of the Civil Rights Movement marked by the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Ironically enough, these two seminal pieces of legislation came just days before the Watts Uprising.

The five day rebellion undermined the idea of racial progress. Watts put the American public on notice that the Black freedom struggle that began in the south was now shifting the political attention north of the Mason-Dixon line. This despite the fact that many cities in the urban West were technically below the proverbial North-South line of demarcation.48

The youth that participated in the five day uprising represented this paradigmatic shift, not only in political protest but overall political consciousness. As Laura Pulido puts it, “Watts marked a turning point in Black/white relations: Blacks were tired of waiting for white justice, and young people, in particular, were ready to take matters into their own hands.”49

Cultural Awakening: Artistic Resistance in Watts

48 Interestingly enough, Los Angeles is technically below the Mason-Dixon line which became a popular way of demarcating the border between the North and South. For the purposes of this discussion, the Mason-Dixon line symbolized the divide between the Jim Crow South and the urban North. The West was unchartered territory for many black migrants escaping Jim Crow but it served as an alternative to the North and Midwest. The “black westerner” added another layer to the black American experience through an amalgamation of rural southern and urban elements. Los Angeles was, in many ways, simultaneously southern/rural and urban. In relation to the uprising that placed Los Angeles in the mainstream consciousness, it can be said that the identity and experience of this locale was something that connected the rural South and the urban North and Midwest in ways that weren’t seen anywhere else.

The aftermath of the Watts Rebellion saw a number of attempts to quell the fervor of the South Central youth. Cultural expression became a vehicle through which the youth could channel that energy in constructive and reflective ways. The Watts community of Los Angeles soon became a cultural and political hub for Black youth. However the shift in orientation towards political radicalism was not quite the agenda for all.

The Watts Writer’s Workshop was created by Hollywood screenwriter Budd Schulberg who approached the creation of the workshop through a cultural liberalism framework. In the words of Daniel Widener, proponents of cultural liberalism like Schulberg “held to a distinctive ideological viewpoint that conceived of expressive culture as providing what were variously described as ‘nonviolent,’ ‘communicative,’ and ‘hopeful’ alternatives for frustrated urban youth otherwise susceptible to militant appeals.”

Detractors of the Watts Writers Workshop challenged the group on the efficacy of a White person instructing Black youth on expressing themselves. Furthermore, the cultural flowering that occurred in Black Los Angeles at the time created alternatives to Schulberg’s Workshop, as these cultural projects were more sympathetic to Black nationalist politics. Musicians and poets such as Jayne Cortez, Elaine Brown, Horace Tapscott, and Stanley Crouch created cultural projects and artistic collectives that sprang out of the ashes of the rebellion in an effort to redefine Blackness in Los Angeles.

Schulberg and the Watts Writers Workshop did not have a monopoly on the cultural movement that was occurring in Los Angeles at the time. Jayne Cortez cofounded Studio Watts while also directing the avant-garde theater company Watts Repertory Theater. Elaine Brown, a...

---

high profile member of the Black Panther Party collaborated with pianist Horace Tapscott to record two albums. Tapscott ran his own community based orchestra, the Pan-Afrikan Peoples Arkestra, while Stanley Crouch, the person responsible for introducing Brown and Tapscott, recorded his own spoken word album while also publishing a book of poetry.51

Due to a number of factors ranging from internal schisms, competition from other cultural collectives that embraced more radical political views, and the limited scope of cultural liberalism for the plight of Black urbanites, the Watts Writers Workshop soon began to unravel. Despite Schulberg’s ideological underpinnings, his workshop was unable to quell the militant consciousness that was flowing within his own organization.52

The Watts Writers Workshop gave birth to a proto-rap spoken word group, the Watts Prophets. The group was founded by Amde Hamilton, Richard Anthony Dedeaux, and Otis O’-Solomon who defied the ideology of the Workshop with their aggressive, street polemical style that would act as a predecessor for the reality rap generation of the late 1980s and early 1990s in South Central Los Angeles. Through their music, the Prophets put Black sonic forces on full display when describing life in the streets of South Central.53 The Prophets’ two key releases, *Black Voices: On the Streets in Watts* (1969) and *Rappin’ Black in a White World* (1971) marked the ascendance of a “West-Coast” response to New York City’s Last Poets. As Kermit Campbell asserts, they created a sound all their own “tending perhaps more toward the dramatic than the mu-

tical.” The dramatic nature of the Prophets’ work cannot be understated. Their output tended to capture the harsh realities of Black urbanity and created the soundscape to sonically reflect those deep-seated anxieties and rage. The percussion, wailing horns, and voice manipulation emotionally appealed to the streets of Watts. Anxiety and empowerment were entangled through the Prophets’ spoken word tracks. Musically, and structurally the Prophets found a unique sound to represent the urban experience of Black Los Angeles. It is important to note, that the experience the Prophets are appealing to is a youth phenomenon. For those that migrated from the Jim Crow South, Los Angeles was a social upgrade. Many of the Black migrants that traveled to Los Angeles fled the Jim Crow South in search of opportunity within the wartime economy. The conditions in Los Angeles seemed better than those in the south, but for the youth who were now first-generation Angelenos saw the social inequities in ways their parents either could not or did not see. The urban plight was the only experience they understood rather than the lesser of two evils philosophy their parents brought West with them.

Watts Up!?

The Watts Prophets created a sound that captured the vibe of the South Central streets and produced a soundtrack for Los Angeles’s Black Power era. The music created its own sonic envi-

---

54 See Campbell, K. E. (2005). Gettin’our groove on: Rhetoric, language, and literacy for the hip hop generation. 47. Wayne State University Press. It is important to note here that Campbell’s assessment of the Watts Prophets’ use of instrumentation is mostly accurate although his analysis of their work relied heavily upon the group’s second release Rappin’ Black (1971) whereas the group’s debut release Black Voices (1969) utilizes more of the traditional percussion sounds than the latter release.


ronment and served as confirmation of the political shift that had occurred in Los Angeles as a result of the Watts Uprising. As Michael Hanson notes,

In light of the historical character of black structural dispossession and racialised marginality, black music has also functioned as a primary site of negotiation and articulation over the form and appearance of black liberation struggles. In this way, black music, as a privileged, while not indexical, mode of black vernacular expression can be read as a meta-narrative of the shifting terrain of political self-consciousness and resistance over time.

The Watts Prophets embodied the Black Power politics of the time and served as that cultural connector between the streets and the political consciousness of the movement. The Prophets used a form of street speech that signified notions of authentic Blackness by appealing to class, masculinity, and Black nationalist politics. These elements intersected within their music in liberating and constraining ways. What the Prophets did was capture the soundscape the streets of Watts in their raw, unapologetic, militant, and oftentimes hypermasculine form.

**Black Voices**

The Watts Prophet’s 1969 release *The Black Voices: On the Streets in Watts* served as a sonic ode to the streets representing the complex politics of identity and Black authenticity in the era of Black Power. Sonically speaking, the Prophets reproduced Black Los Angeles’s anger, anxieties, pride, and bravado. The soundscape of South Central Los Angeles in the Prophet’s de-

---

57 The political climate in Los Angeles was not simply relegated to the Black community following the Watts Uprising. In many ways, the uprising ushered in political awakening of sorts across Los Angeles in the Chicano community with activist groups like the Brown Berets forming soon after the arrival of the Black Panther Party. The labor movement picked up steam during this time as well. However, the labor unions rarely had Black representation and therefore remained a mainly Mexican (Chicano/a) and white phenomenon as those groups dominated the demographics of the manufacturing sector in the 1960s. For more see: Pulido, L. (2006). Black, brown, yellow, and left: Radical activism in Los Angeles (Vol. 19). 70. Univ of California Press., Kaplan, M. (1962). Discrimination in California Housing: The Need for Additional Legislation. California Law Review, 635-649.

but release is represented through cultural signifiers, such as instrumentation and language. The ways in which tone was manipulated and voices were layered throughout their poems placed listeners right in the heart of the South Central, and Watts in particular. Unlike the South Central soundscape during the hip-hop generation, the technological limits of music production in the late 1960s and early 1970s, specifically the ability to incorporate samples of nonmusical sound-bites forced listeners to delve deeper into the instrumentation and lyrics to get a sense of what the streets were saying at the time. Despite these limitations, the Prophets constructed a sound that incorporated the full scope of the post-Watts Rebellion experience in Black Los Angeles.

“Pimpin’, Leanin’, and Feanin’” is a sonic narrative that captures the reality of life in the streets performed by Amde Hamilton. The track opens with a subtle conga drum signifying the rediscovered Black aesthetic of the time as many Black artists and musicians sought to incorporate traditional West African instruments within their music. The sound of the conga drum is juxtaposed with the wailing of a trumpet which becomes the predominant sound almost negating the percussion sound. This could be interpreted as a direct response to what the conga drum symbolized at this time, mainly as the sonic preference of authentic Blackness. However, the Watts Prophets complicated this notion with the wailing horn. The wailing interrupts the conga and problematized its symbolism within the Black aesthetic. The Watts Prophets are setting the


stage for a shift in discourse on Black urbanity in terms of what the masses were feeling and what they saw. Hamilton opens up,

“Pimpin’ leanin’ and feanin’, some say I’m dreamin’ but I know I’m schemin’, scufflin’ and hustlin’ slippin’ and slidin’ always hidin’ heats around underground hangin’ Black folks in courts hustlas tryna stay off them white folks jail reports!”

This speaks to the reality of the streets in Watts. Despite the politicization of many Black folks in the aftermath of the Watts Rebellion, the fact remained that the streets were controlled by the ills of prostitution, drug abuse, and hustling as a result of permanent unemployment. As Hamilton’s tone becomes stronger, he embodies the figure of the Black preacher who slowly increases the tone and passion in their voice during a sermon. In this track, Hamilton essentially provides a street sermon, preaching to his congregation on the corner.

The change in Hamilton’s tone is complemented by the wail of the horn, adding to the drama and urgency of his message to his congregation. He reiterates, “Pimpin’, leanin’, and feanin’, Shit! I ain’t dreamin’” as to say that the reality of the streets cannot be thought of as abstract. As he gets deeper into the reality of the streets, the conga drum becomes louder, denoting the reimagination of the Black aesthetic. In other words, Hamilton seems to suggest that the Black arts should not be concerned with redefining identity through abstract rediscovery but that identity should be rooted in the experiences of the masses. In this sense there is a clear connection between the Prophets, artists of “Soul” generation such as Bobby Womack and Curtis Mayfield and hip-hop artists such as Ice Cube, that spoke truth to power by representing the urban landscape in its most raw form, and drawing identity from those lived experiences.

---

In 1969, the year the Prophets released *Black Voices*, Los Angeles’s Black radical organizations and artistic collectives were beginning to be dismantled. Similar to most radical organizations around the country, the Black community based organizations in Black Los Angeles were being destroyed by the COINTELPRO program launched by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The counter intelligence program set up by the FBI and J. Edgar Hoover was designed to stifle domestic dissent by gathering information through extensive and intrusive wiretapping. In addition, those caught under the scope of COINTELPRO also endured threats on their lives, while the bureau infiltrated a number of Black political organizations in an effort to dismantle the Black liberation movement from within.

The Watts Prophets witnessed the infiltration first-hand as the United States intelligence community planted FBI informant Dathard Perry (under the name Ed Riggs) in the Watts Writers Workshop. Perry’s objectives involved sabotaging programs and eventually burn down the building as a way to quell the movement-building that was taking place at the Workshop. Richard Dedeaux of the Watts Prophets recalled the memory of the Workshop being destroyed:

We were always a compassionate group at the Watts Writers Workshop. One day this bum [Perry, aka Riggs] came to the Workshop, all nasty and smelly, said he was hungry and shit. So we took up a collection and got him something to eat. He told us how he was down on his luck a little bit and asked us if he could stay at the Workshop a while. So we let him stay on the couch there. After a while, he became kind of like the keeper of the Workshop. But what it was, he was sent there by the FBI, part of the COINTELPRO thing. And so things started really happening, like all of a sudden one day a bunch of seats would get cut up in the Workshop. When we got ready to film things, the camera equipment worked, but things would break and we’d lose that. Sometimes when mailing out flyers for our events, we’d find them in sewers, in the drains. So all kind of things, and we never once had any suspicion, until this guy got on Pacifica Radio and confessed.63

As these Black organizations lost their social, economic (although limited), and political clout, Hamilton represented that voice on the streets that called into question the viability of Black nationalist politics, in addition to cultural nationalism, in the face of poverty and government sanctioned persecution. He says “survival is my game, shootin’ dice for my life” which speaks to the fact that during this time Black folks in South Central felt dissuaded from political participation. The fate members faced from organizations like the Black Panther Party was seen as a risk far outweighing its reward.

Hamilton transmits the feeling of standing on the street corner listening to his impassioned speech. He ends the poem by proclaiming that he in fact is a thinker, a street philosopher of sorts “I’m an educated man, with a doctor’s degree, from SWU — Sidewalk University! Pimpin’, leanin’, and feanin, SHIT! I ain’t dreamin’…” The closing of the poem is accompanied by a cacophony of wailing horns and banging congas, interpreted as a rallying cry through the marginalization of Black urbanity. Despite the melancholic tone of the wailing horn the optimism that the conga represents during this time still remains. In this track Hamilton captures the soundscape of the streets by lyrically representing the harsh realism Watts residents saw the world through, yet positioning the historical significance of the conga drum as a signifier of their underlying optimism during a period of social, political, and economic uncertainty.

---

64 With regard to black nationalistic politics, the Watts Prophets challenged the political ideologies that were prevalent in Los Angeles at the time. Mainly the black nationalism of the Black Panther Party, and the cultural nationalism of the US Organization. Both organizations had a tight grip on the black youth of Los Angeles, however the FBI sanctioned dismantling of these community organizations led to a depoliticization of black Los Angeles. The realities of unemployment, and increasing levels of poverty proved too much for the black Angelenos.


The Watts Prophets furthered their critique of Black radical organizations in the track entitled “Clowns All Around.” Again performed by Amde Hamilton, the track represents a direct challenge to Afrocentricity. This track can be considered an extension of the critique in “Pimpin’, Leanin’, and Feanin’” in both musicality and poetic delivery. Hamilton maintains his position as the street preacher in this track and exhibits the skepticism some Black Angelenos had for certain organizations and their respective philosophies. The track opens with a tambourine sound, reminiscent of the Black church and reinforcing Hamilton’s street preacher status. Sonically, the tambourine recreates the streets into a church and complements the his sermon-like polemic. Hamilton says to his congregation,

Look around, it’s clowns everywhere negroes are turnin’ Black materially, natural hair-dos, no shoes, dashikis, combs in they head… these niggas oughta be dead if they think that’s BLACK!”

Hamilton’s critique of the trendiness associated with Afrocentricity can be ascribed to the Los Angeles based US Organization. The US Organization (where us referred to Blacks as opposed to them, or the White power-structure) was prominent during the Black Power era as an alternative to the Black Panther Party in Los Angeles. Founded by a collective including Maulana Karenga, Hakim Jamal, Tommy Jacquette-Mfikir, Karl Key-Hekima, Ken Seaton-Msemaji, Samuel Carr-Damu, Sanamu Nyeusi, and Brenda Haiba Karenga, the US Organization was based on the precepts of cultural nationalism with the objective of establishing a new Black cultural identity that incorporated African traditions with the purpose of spawning a Black revolution.

---

One troubling element of this track, however, is the hypermasculine position that Hamilton takes in describing his definition of Blackness. “Black is a masculine way of thinkin’, a moral way of livin.’” His suggestion that Blackness serves as a masculine way of thinking reinforces the patriarchal orientation of the Black Power era. The lasting criticism of the Black Power era has been its championing of patriarchy as the natural order of gender relations. The patriarchal foundation was seen as integral to the nation building process that many Black Power oriented groups adhered to. As a result, women within the movement were often marginalized or placed in subservient roles despite the fact that women served vital roles in the overall Black liberation struggle. Considering the patriarchal, heteronormative nature of American society at large, the redemption of the Black male was at the core of the Black liberation struggle. Many of the major figures that arose during this period was a result of this emphasis on male leadership.

The public/private divide played a major role in how the Black Power era sought to establish traditional gender roles. For the Prophets, the streets served as that public (male) space where the female presence was marginalized in order to amplify the Black male as a sign of resistance toward mainstream American social repression.

Hamilton describes the hypermasculine complex that was exhibited throughout the Black Power era with the line, “Black is strong and vicious!” Here, the Prophets can be seen appropriating the stereotype of the Black male brute as a way to empower the Black man image through strength and brutality. Black men have historically been caricatured in ways that rein-

---

forces their subjugation, and one of the most popular caricatures is the brute. Irrational, physically imposing, and carrying an insatiable sexual appetite, particularly for White women, the Black brute justified the lynching of Black men who posed an existential threat to the White social order. The Prophets took the main characteristics of the Black brute and inverted them as a sign of empowerment.

The low wail of the trumpet throughout the track is occasionally interrupted by the voices of Hamilton’s all male congregation. The use of the background vocals, “Yeah!” and “Right on!” emphasized the fact that the streets are represented as a masculine space.72

From a cultural representation perspective, the decision for the Black liberation struggle to be centered on the reclamation of the Black man created a static representation of women. As the poem comes to a close, Hamilton in his street preacher oration calls on the many Black revolutionaries and visionaries including Malcolm X, Patrice Lumumba, and John Coltrane. Yet ends with the line “Black is Simone, a Queen!” which could be taken as a sign of respect and reverence however peering deeper it also follows the Afrocentric idea that Black women are queens, mothers of the earth, who need to be protected and safeguarded by a strong Black man.73 The suggestion reflects an appeal to patriarchy and that being the natural order of gender relations. As a result, even a figure as revered as Nina Simone, is relegated to a static image under the guise of Black empowerment through a social framework that was just as patriarchal as the American power structure.

73 See Michele Wallace. (1990). Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman (Vol. 26). Verso. The image of the strong black man was created as a way to redirect the black community and reestablish traditional gender roles. However the realities of incarceration, unemployment, and assassinations left the image of the black male in an extremely fragile during the post-Black Power era. It can be deduced that the reclamation of the black male would uplift the black community however the staunch patriarchy of the Black Power era made the path towards liberation problematic.
The poem situates the streets as the space where the nation building process begins. Hamilton takes the philosophical underpinnings of the Black Power era and disseminates the information to those in an earshot of his street sermon. The streets offer the spatial environment necessary to reimagine Black masculinity in the face of U.S. imperialism, both domestic and abroad.

Class Clash

The track that most effectively represents the post-Black Power South Central soundscape and the class tensions felt in the streets is entitled “Response to the Bourgeois Nigger” performed by Prophets collaborator Ed Bereal. This track speaks directly to the schism within Black Los Angeles between the working poor of South Central and the growing Black middle class. At a time of radical politics, Los Angeles’s Black middle class, through exclusive organizational participation and establishing neighborhoods of Black affluence such as Baldwin Hills and Ladera Heights, created their own communities separate from South Central. Bereal’s tone is very direct, somewhat conversational, and condescending toward the “bourgeois nigger.” The track layered multiple voices on top of one another as a way of representing the conflicting emotions of the perceived Black perpetrator.74

Bereal’s critique is aimed at refuting the idea that middle-class status does not whitewash one’s Blackness. He says, “Whatever your particular anesthetic is, that you hold onto so desperately, the thing I mean that makes you THINK you know who you are.”75 Bereal signifies this break between the identity of those on the streets and the Black middle class that does little to

---

associate with them. In mocking fashion, Bereal is heard reciting the pledge of allegiance in the background of his polemic to signify the contradiction between the life the Black middle-class assume they live and the realities of Blackness that they are seemingly disassociating with. Participation within national organizations such as the NAACP and Urban League that had chapters in Los Angeles at the time was a major outlet of asserting agency for the Black middle-class. All the while, South Central was feeling the harsh effects of post-Watts Rebellion underdevelopment.76

As Bereal tears into the “bourgeois nigger” during his five minute long diatribe, he questions the integrity of this exclusive Black middle class existence in the face of Black poverty literally around the corner. Geographically speaking, the affluent Black neighborhoods in Los Angeles were still technically inside South Central Los Angeles. Meaning that the Black middle class was closer to the Black working poor than they were to their White middle class counterparts in Brentwood, Pacific Palisade, and Santa Monica just West of Central Los Angeles. During the aftermath of the Watts Uprising there was a surge in the number of Black families that reached middle class status. This uptick in Black economic mobility was accompanied by the continued influx of Black migrants moving West during the second wave of the Great Migration. As South Central became more densely populated following 1965, Black middle class families moved further West to escape the expanding Black ghetto. But Black Los Angeles’s middle class were still faced with the reality of discriminatory housing practices since they could not integrate

---

the predominantly White neighborhoods that formed outside of the central city. This led to the
development of Black middle class enclaves such as Baldwin Hills and Ladera Heights.\textsuperscript{77}

The poem ends with the “bourgeois nigger” having an existential crisis as Bereal dismantles the fantasy of Black affluence in South Central. Bereal was attempting to raise consciousness through the harsh delivery. The voices in the background that represented the Black middle class cried and screeched as to acknowledge that their reality was in fact a facade. “Do you really think that you’ve freed yourself of America’s insidiousness? No brother America is a condition, its shit far as the eye can see and we’re in it, my only question is don’t you really smell anything?”\textsuperscript{78} To which point the bourgeois niggers answer with an emphatic yet deeply troubled “NO!” Representing the fact that despite the truth behind Bereal’s polemic, the Black middle-class had already bought into the facade.\textsuperscript{79} As the decades moved along the divide between Black Los Angeles’ working and its middle-classes became more apparent than it had ever been.

**Rappin’ Black in a White World**

The release of the Prophets’s second album *Rappin Black in a White World* (1971), problematized the soundscape of the streets as a strictly masculine space through the use of multiple voices to represent folks in/of the streets, including women. Take for instance the track entitled “Dem Niggers Ain’t Playin” which describes the scene of an urban uprising and includes a number of voices representing the folks in the streets. Unlike the male dominated monologues in *Black Voices*, “Dem Niggers Ain’t Playin” opens with Doris Diane “Dee-Dee” McNeil, a former


songwriter for Motown Records, with astonishment proclaiming “Look at them flames lightin’ up the sky, ain’t never flames flyin’ up so high!” The 1960s came to an end with 329 urban uprisings resulting in 300 deaths, 60,000 arrests, and hundreds of millions of dollars in property loss and damage. Eldridge Cleaver points out in his text “On the Ideology of The Black Panther Party” that:

“The students focus their rebellions on the campuses, and the working class focuses their rebellions on the factories and picket lines. But being unable to find a job and therefore is unable to attend the Universities. The Lumpen has no choice but to manifest its rebellion in the University of the Streets.”

The term “lumpen” is defined in Marxist terminology as “uninterested in revolutionary advancement” and describes an exclusion from the formal or mainstream economy. Both the BPP and US Organization took those considered lumpen and politicized them around the social conditions they were faced with. The urban unrest that engulfed the latter half of the 1960s is Cleaver’s description of the lumpen taking to the streets to manifest its rebellion. In this track, the Prophets take the BPP’s idea of lumpen revolutionary action and capture the soundscape of urban unrest in the streets. The Prophets established agency and gave rationale behind urban unrest in the streets.

---

rebellions within this track. As McNeil repeats the phrase, the multitude of voices begin to sound off giving the listener the feeling of baring witness to the unfolding of an urban revolt.85

Richard Dedeaux chimes in “Are you listenin’ people to what I’m sayin? Cuz it sho looks to me like, dem niggers ain’t playin” to which a number of voices including McNeil, Solomon, and Hamilton repeat “Dem niggers ain’t playin’!” This represents a collective consciousness about the uprising that the people are witnessing in the streets. Dedeaux continues, “Ever since they passed those civil rights, fires have been lighting up the night, and they say they ain’t gon stop till we all have equal rights.” The importance of this line for Los Angeles and urban America, in general, was that the passage of the Civil Rights bill and the Voting Rights Act of 1964 and 1965, respectively. These two pieces of legislation did little to change the realities of those living within urban areas. The Civil Rights bill and Voting Rights Act both sought to eliminate discrimination within American institutions and establishments. The Civil Rights Act bestowed power upon the federal government over the hiring, employee relations, and customer service practices U.S. businesses. The objective was to ensure that minorities had a fair shot at gainful employment, and customer service, among other things. The Voting Rights Act looked to tear down the barriers Blacks faced when attempting to exercise their right to vote. However, the discriminatory practices that both pieces of legislation set out to eradicate were already thoroughly entrenched in the way American society operated.

Black Los Angeles in particular witnessed a rapid drop in employment and a subsequent rise in poverty rates between the years of 1965 and 1970. Not so coincidently during this five

year period the American economy saw its first downturn since 1941.\textsuperscript{86} To further compound these economic issues the population density rose in the South Central Los Angeles area during this time of economic and demographic restructuring. For instance, in 1950 the population of Black Angelenos was at 170,880 or 4.1 percent and two decades later in 1970 the total number of Black Angelenos grew to 781,000.\textsuperscript{87} This was underscored by the dismal job prospects for Blacks that migrated to Los Angeles in the late 1960s and early 1970s with only 60,600 Blacks constituting for only 6.1 percent of Los Angeles’ manufacturing sector. These numbers depict the effective joblessness in Los Angeles’s manufacturing sector that Black Angelenos faced by 1970.\textsuperscript{88}

“Dem Niggers Ain’t Playin’” had no musical component to it, but the sounds of multiple voices did much to represent the sentiment of the streets in similar ways the Watts Prophets’s earlier musical choices did. Dedeaux closes out by proclaiming that: “This now Black generation is gonna be free, just try and stop em and fasho you’ll see what I’m sayin’ cuz it sho looks to me like… dem niggers ain’t playin’!”\textsuperscript{89} At which point the collection of voices scream out “AND WE AIN’T EITHER!”\textsuperscript{90} The folks in the streets weren’t privy to the same forms of political par-


\textsuperscript{89} Prophets, W. (1971). \textit{Rappin' Black in a White World}. FFRR.

\textsuperscript{90} Prophets, W. (1971). \textit{Rappin' Black in a White World}. FFRR.
ticipation that the Black middle class was advantaged to have. The streets represented the most marginalized and the uprisings were the quintessential form of voicing their disdain. The poem highlights the collective consciousness of the streets during urban rebellions with the closing line, particularly the choice of “we,” affirming the witnesses’ solidarity with those who have already taken to the streets.

Possibly the Watts Prophets most telling poetic track is entitled “A Pimp” which gives agency to one of the streets most revered figures. The pimp as a cultural figure in Black cultural production represented the streets’ response to economic exclusion and an image of Black masculinity that asserted agency, despite it being at the expense of Black and sometimes White women.

The soundscape in this track represents a pimp’s introspection about life, opportunity, race, and manhood. Again, the Prophets utilize various voices to embody the streets and their own reflection of the urban landscape. Performed by Otis O’Solomon, “A Pimp” delves deep into the psyche of this figure and the musical accompaniment to O’Solomon’s poem is a slow and melodic piano signifying a sobering, almost pensive mood. The reflection of the pimp and the rationale behind his actions coincide with the complete dismantling of political organizations and the deindustrialization of Central Los Angeles at the beginning of the 1970s. For a space ravaged by permanent unemployment, the streets provided the space for the informal economy to thrive where figures like the pimp had to hustle to make a living.91

91 Staiger, A. (2005). "hoes can be hoed out, players can be played out, but pimp is for life"--the pimp phenomenon as strategy of identity formation. Symbolic Interaction, 28(3), 407.
The track “A Pimp” also acts as a response to President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “Great Society” which was a set of programs designed to eliminate poverty and racial injustice. Johnson’s initiatives were geared toward solving the social crisis of civil unrest that popped up in several different urban areas, but the programs did very little in achieving its goals. The Great Society was completely overshadowed by military operations in Vietnam that sent thousands of Black men to war while failing to make systemic changes in order to achieve social equity.

O’Solomon opens up the poem, “I’m a Black man… a pimp, all the little hip brothas dig me, I’m their symbol, I’m real.” The last line, “I’m real” signifies that as a pimp he symbolizes the only real option for the young brothas. Exclusion from the formal economy creates a pathway to hustling on the streets. He says, “with me they can relate, see I came from those same shabby shacks” which further appeals to the experience of the young males in South Central. Black Los Angeles saw a spike in prostitution and drug abuse inside the 1970s, although not to the same degree South Central would witness a decade later. Similar to the track “Clowns All Around” the background voices of men in “A Pimp” confirm O’Solomon’s words and acknowledge his declaration. O’Solomon also maintains that patriarchal, hypermasculine orientation of the streets by stating, “I take ho money and feel no pain, just like the White Man does, cept he take it from niggers and lames.” This augments the idea that streets remain a masculine space where women remain voiceless and serve only as a means to an end. The pimp’s actions are considered counterproductive in this particular section because his lack of empathy towards women disallows him to uplift his community through his economic gain.

---

But the reflection becomes more socially aware as the poem continues. O’Solomon states, “But folks tell me if I’d apply my ability in another way, ain’t no tellin’ where I’d be today” is an acknowledgement of his talents being transferrable to other ventures but the lack of opportunity and the need to make ends meet forces him to pimp. This parallels the autobiography of Robert “Iceberg Slim” Beck whose descent in the streets of Chicago and Los Angeles spanning across the late 1930s well into the late 1970s, came as a result of formal economic exclusion. But like Iceberg Slim, O’Solomon is also aware that race remains the dictator of opportunity and that he knows that as truth. He says, “If I had a master’s I wouldn’t be a damn bit further” giving voice to the skepticism felt in the streets when it comes to upward mobility, particularly Black upward mobility in relation to mainstream paths towards success, i.e. higher education. As a result, O’Solomon understands the finitude of his hustle which is the reasoning behind his contemplative monologue. In this track the Watts Prophets were able to capture the rationale behind making a living in the informal economy while also giving agency to a figure often portrayed for their apathy by highlighting the anxiety and regret that comes from someone so entrenched in the streets.

**Things Gonna Get Greater Later?**

The Watts Prophets represented the soundscape of the streets in creative, raw, and impertinent ways. Both albums approached depicting the streets through sounds, language, and topics that were culturally relevant. As the Prophets put it themselves, “we were just calling what we

---


saw” and in doing so they offered a soundscape that reimagined from the Watts street corners and shed light on the realities of life in urban America from Black working-class and Black underworld perspectives.95

It is safe to say that the Prophets symbolize a paradigm shift in Black Los Angeles based cultural production, particularly those artist most concerned with depicting the lived experience of those in South Central. Listeners of the Watts Prophets are given a rare opportunity to hear what the 1960s sounded like in South Central Los Angeles. The Prophets gave the streets a platform from which their internal feelings and collective struggle could be heard no matter how profane and vitriolic the delivery might have been.

The soundscape that the Watts Prophets presented underwent drastic changes at the turn of the next decade. By the mid 1970s, much of the political vibrancy that characterized the Black Power era had eroded. What’s more, Black Angelenos witnessed the emergence of a burgeoning Black middle-class and subsequent Black flight during the same period. The escape of Black middle-class Angelenos to the fringes of South Central paralleled the soundscape of escapism found in the musical epoch beginning in 1975 and the ubiquity of disco until the end of the electro-hop era in Los Angeles around 1985.

Escaping the Streets… One Way or Another

I [also] love that robot voice and that electronic music—using real electronic sounds from spaceships from outer-space. To me, it was the best way to escape from where I grew up.

Egyptian Lover

As the Black Power era in the Los Angeles came to a close, so too did the radical political atmosphere in South Central, though not entirely. The stringent economic policies of the 1970s would begin crippling the South Central section of Los Angeles on the heels of White and capital flight following the Watts Rebellion of 1965. The White migration out of Central Los Angeles into suburban communities economically debased South Central and just a half decade later had its effects compounded by Black middle-class flight.96

With the rise of the Black middle-class taking shape in the 1970s in Los Angeles and nationwide, the soundscape of the urban United States began to shift as well. The 1970s are emblematic of the disco era with the appropriation of cultural markers (afros, bell-bottoms, etc) and the sonic appeal of heavy baselines driving this new mainstream genre. Disco, as well as funk, created a sonic escape through music that paralleled the actual flight of Black middle-class residents from South Central. The party vibe that emanated from disco or the intergalactic narratives that were found in funk became the perfect escape from the worsening realities for those stuck in

urban areas. This appeal toward partying and escaping the realities of the day continued into the electro-hop era beginning in the early 1980s and lost widespread popularity by 1986. For Black Angelenos, the soundscape of the 1970s well into the mid 1980s was driven by the party scene which granted partiers moments of temporary sonic escape.

In this chapter, I take a look at the soundscape of streets in the 1970s and 1980s which I argue constituted an era of escapism. While South Central found itself in a state of socioeconomic retrogression, the popular musical stylings of the day sonically masked much of the political, economic, and geographical shifts that would set the stage for the tumultuous 1980s. The sonic escapism that spanned across funk, and disco in the 1970s well into the electro-hop scene of Los Angeles in early to mid-1980s, reflected the nuanced, covert responses Black Angelenos had toward the shifts in the global economic market as well as the demographic changes that were taking shape in Los Angeles. During this period in music, the soundscape of the streets represented an abandonment of radical (street) politics that would not reemerge until Los Angeles’s gangsta/reality rap generation of the late-1980s.

Although not as explicit in nature as say hip-hop, funk and disco were very unique sonic representations of the streets of South Central Los Angeles. Both musical genres offered listeners a sonic escape but also represented two different socioeconomic positions. Despite the crossover quality both genres had within the Los Angeles party scene, funk was geared toward working-class Black listeners. For instance, groups such as Parliament Funkadelic created culturally uplifting intercosmic spaces through which poor urbanites could reimagine their ability to respond
to existential concerns associated with Black urbanity.\textsuperscript{97} Contrastingly, many Black middle-class Angelenos gravitated toward the chart-topping disco records that dominated the disco clubs they frequented which signified their assimilation into mainstream society. Disco’s appeal to apolitical cultural expression complemented Black middle-class flight from South Central to the affluent conclaves bordering the central city. Disco carried elements of funk, soul, and Rhythm & Blues but appropriated these musical genres without maintaining the racial and class politics inherent in their creation. Disco’s apolitical orientation was absorbed into the electro-hop scene of the early 1980s as it became a staple of South Central Los Angeles’s party scene and youth culture.

The electro-hop era, though short-lived, was Los Angeles’s last hurrah at maintaining the facade of the party scene. The soundscape of the streets under electro-hop were an amalgamation of sonic influences from the funk and disco era blended with new sonic elements from house music and hip-hop. The 1970s and 1980s also forced people to grapple with ideas around expressing sexuality, and particularly expressions of Black male sexuality in response to the sonic representations of Black femininity within the ever-changing urban landscape of Los Angeles.

For the duration of this chapter, I will trace the theme of escapism through the soundscape of the streets in juxtaposition with the social, political, and economic shifts that shaped South Central Los Angeles through the 1970s into the mid 1980s. Through a close examination

\textsuperscript{97} The cinematic genre of Blaxploitation that rose to prominence in the 1970s was also an important cultural product that appealed to the streets as a way of depicting authentic Black urbanity, although in different ways than funk music. However, Blaxploitation often utilized funk as well as soul music as markers of not only racial authenticity, but working-class solidarity. Blaxploitation was a major cultural product that shaped ideas around Blackness, the post-Black Power urban experience, in addition to questions surrounding gender and sexuality. Despite the connections between Blaxploitation and the soundscape of the streets, it is, however, beyond the scope of this project due to the artistic medium of film which requires more attention to the visual than this project can accommodate. See Sieving, C. (2011). Soul searching: Black-themed cinema from the March on Washington to the Rise of Blaxploitation. Wesleyan University Press.; Guerrero, E. (1946). The rise and fall of Blaxploitation. \textit{The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film.}; Stanfield, P. (2005). Walking the Streets: Black Gangsters and the “Abandoned City” in the 1970s Blaxploitation Cycle.
of the music produced, recorded, and/or played in Los Angeles, I demonstrate how the music of
the 1970s and 1980s “L.A. party scene” served as a sonic escape from the realities of life in
South Central for both middle-class and working-class Black Angelenos.

The Great Escape

The Watts Uprising of 1965 marked a political awakening for Black Angelenos in South
Central Los Angeles. Radical political organizations rose from the debris of the rebellion that
August, but the uprising also highlighted the intra-racial class divide within Black Los Angeles.
While a vast majority of South Central residents relied upon blue-collar jobs, some Black Ange-
lenos found well-paid white-collar jobs which allowed for economic mobility. The number of
Blacks holding white-collar jobs expanded by 12 percent for Black males and 33 percent for
Black females between 1950 and 1970 resulting in a vast number of affluent Black families leav-
ing South Central for middle-class enclaves during the same period.98

Residents in areas such as Baldwin Hills were overwhelmingly white collar workers as
71 percent of their residents worked in professional office settings. Many of these new Baldwin
Hills residents, according to the 1970 census, were still living in South Central in 1965. Resi-
dents in this affluent area also boasted a level of mobility that their South Central counterparts
did not. Baldwin Hills residents were 57 percent more likely to own one car while the working
class family in Watts was unlikely to have a car at the exact same rate. Thirty-seven percent of
Black families in Baldwin Hills had at least two cars.

---

As well employed Black Angelenos began to move further west outside of South Central, the reality of impoverishment became all the more real for those stuck in the central city. Suburban areas such as Compton, had been an area of refuge for middle-class White families and later middle-class Black families. By 1970, as the demographics shifted to a predominantly Black, working class population, Compton began to suffer and due to its close proximity to Watts made it a prime location for working class families that could afford single-family housing during a time when property value in Compton dropped.

However, for the vast majority of Black Angelenos living inside of South Central, employment prospects were highly unlikely, especially in the manufacturing sector. Statistics show that by 1970, the still thriving Los Angeles manufacturing sector employed only 60,600 Blacks or just 6.1 percent of the total jobs. Black women were far more likely to hold domestic jobs and less likely (26 percent) to gain employment as manufacturing operatives than their East Los Angeles Chicana/o population (40 percent). 99

As the Black residents of South Central underwent a massive employment shakeup in the 1960s which pushed South Central below the poverty at alarming rates. The lack of employment and consequently the exclusion from labor-based activism played a role in the uprising of 1965. The economic position that the Chicana/o population had in the manufacturing sector and their political foundation being union based, warded against the same eruption to their social strife. The economic position that blacks found themselves in by the mid-1960s created the vacuum for

a Black Panther Party for Self Defense to thrive in with its emphasis on self-defense from police abuse and survival programs for an increasingly impoverished population.

However, the vigor of the post-movement era carried over into the seventies. The empowerment mantras put for by James Brown, “Say it loud! I’m Black and I’m Proud!” still reverberated throughout the streets of South Central despite the grim realities that many working class and poor Black families faced. The 1970s ushered in an era of Black empowerment that would experiment with expressions of gender and sexuality and culturally mediated forms of protests that were overtly and covertly political. The streets of South Central would embrace the anti-war movement, but also wanted to party through the night and deal with real life in the morning.

_The World Is a Ghetto_

The streets remained engulfed by the empowerment politics of the late 1960s in Los Angeles. Music remained a viable representation of the streets in the early 1970s with Don Tracy on KGFJ 1230 AM which programmed for a primarily Black listenership. Los Angeles based bands such as War continued in the tradition of The Watts Prophets by voicing the concerns and anxieties of Los Angeles’s poor Black working class. In 1972, War released their hit record “The World Is a Ghetto” which served as an ode to the urban ghetto and called for the streets to look inward for empowerment.

War sonically represented the overall soundscape of Los Angeles, but their content spoke directly to South Central. The band fused funk, rock, Latin, jazz, R&B, and reggae in a way that touched the various demographics of Los Angeles’s central city. When War dropped “The World
Is a Ghetto” in 1972, the United States were fighting a war in Vietnam that many people protested against until the U.S. reduced its troops beginning in 1973. But while the country was concerned with the United States’ foreign war, Black urbanites were beginning to feel the effects of a domestic war waged against them. War’s “The World Is a Ghetto” was a timely response to the conditions sweeping across the urban United States and placed them in the global consciousness.

Don't you know that it's true
That for me and for you
The world is a ghetto

The hook is accompanied by a funky horn rift and contrasted by the slowed tempo of the lyrics and the somber vibe of the baseline. This track embodied the complex outlook on conditions of the urban U.S. and particularly Los Angeles. As War sang about the world being a ghetto, Los Angeles saw its ghetto expand further east to claim Compton and southwest toward Inglewood. Black Angelenos began seeing their world become an increasingly larger ghetto, War sought to transform that harsh reality into a declaration of empowerment.

Spatially, Los Angeles is far more spread out than its urban North counterparts such as Chicago and New York City. For Black Angelenos, the sheer size of South Central’s ghetto evokes a sense of entrapment that can be attributed to the vast urban landscape.

Furthermore, the song’s hook also taps into the global worldview of the Black freedom struggle and liberation politics at large. War sonically connected the realities of urban life in America, and Los Angeles in particular, to the global struggles occurring in parts of Asian and Latin America in the 1970s.100

---

Saxophonist Charles Miller has a solo three minutes into the track that evoke the anxieties of life in the ghetto complemented by the somber pitch of the baseline with a melancholic display. But Miller’s solo also follows the growing tension of ghetto life, transmuting the streets onto the track and tracing the narrative of angst, frustration, and despair into a triumphant rift. Miller’s sax begins to scream out as if chanting a mantra of empowerment reminiscent of Los Angeles’s Black Power era. Miller’s sax rifts were also sequenced and layered in a way that mimicked multiple voices as if the streets were chiming in, similar to the use of multiple voices in the Prophets’ work a few years prior.

There's no need to search anywhere
Happiness is here, have your share
If you know you're loved, be secure
Paradise is love to be sure

As Miller’s solo comes to a close the third verse confirms the sonic monologue put forth by the saxophonist, reassuring Black urbanites of the happiness and contentment they’re in search of isn’t beyond their ghetto neighborhoods. War presented a continuation of the Black Aesthetic that considered Black urbanity a source of empowerment. As the 1970s proceeded, “The World Is a Ghetto” represented an antithesis to the soundscape that would dominate South Central Los Angeles by the latter part of the decade. While Black middle-class families were leaving South Central at the time of the track’s release, War was fighting against escaping the ghetto. They urged South Central Angelenos to accept their environment, to look inward for contentment and happiness but not in a way that would undermine material progress. War was concerned with the mental stability of the ghetto and sought to reinforce a sense of self-worth that was being systematically dismantled. War’s message of self-love in the face of unemployment,
and the failed promises of government investment post Watts Rebellion 1965 was clear. Black Angelenos in South Central were now tasked with reaffirming their social consciousness and racial pride in the context of a post-Black Power Los Angeles that was increasingly indifferent toward the plight of its Black working-poor population.\textsuperscript{101}

War offered a response to the existential crisis felt in the streets of South Central Los Angeles at the time. Considering the lack of employment prospects and the subsequent rise in drug use, homelessness, and the reemergence of gangs, Black South Central Angelenos were effectively abandoned by industry and their industrious Black middle-class counterparts. Despite these realities, War sang about finding empowerment through the struggles.

War’s message in “The World Is a Ghetto” follows the tradition of the Watts Prophets and their appeal to the streets. War inverted the spatial stigma of the ghetto as somewhere destitute and whose sonic choices reflected their objective of Black urban uplift. The inversion of the ghetto as a marker of power also constitutes a link between War and later funk groups of the 1970s by reimagining ideas of Blackness, space, and mobility. However, it can be argued that disco and the accompanying party scene became a safe haven for America, in general, following the tumultuous 1960s. For Black Angelenos, the new soundscape brought forth opportunities to pivot away from the radical politics of the Black Power era.

\textit{The Sounds of Los Angeles}

The soundscape of Los Angeles became dominated by party-oriented music by the mid-1970s. As corporations began to monopolize the music industry, the disco phenomenon had

a tight grip on the overall soundscape of the time. Disco usually refers to heavy bass tracks of
sonic repetition with hi-hat and kick drums. According to Nelson George, disco was “music with
a metronomelike beat — perfect for folks with no sense of rhythm.” Adding, “metallic sexuality
that matched the high-tech, high-sex, and low passion atmosphere of the glamorous discos that
appeared in every American city.” KGFI 1230 AM which began programming toward Los
Angeles’s Black population around 1972, played a variety of Black musical stylings, but the dis-
co era (beginning c.1975) greatly influenced the nature of the overall soundscape. The streets
weren’t immune to the inflectionless music just as their Black middle-class counterparts, but
both demographics appropriated the genre and the accompanying party culture, however, for
very different reasons.

As soul and funk remained staples of Black sonic expression in the South and Midwest,
the overall disco scene paired perfectly with the club culture of Los Angeles. For many of the
Black middle-class Angelenos that had access to predominantly White party-spaces, found the
disco as a confirmation of their economic and educational crossover status. Accompanying their
improved socioeconomic status, Black Los Angeles’ middle-class saw their musical sensibilities
and tastes changed as well. The disco sound was popular among Black Angelenos in South
Central but unlike the mainstream acts that were rather ubiquitous on celestial radio, groups like
Shalamar, The Whispers, Lakeside, and others acts signed to SOLAR Records (originally Soul
Train Records) became sources of high-energy Black dance music.

---

103 This is not to suggest that the Black middle-class did not enjoy funk and other music genres more closely associat-
ed with working-class partying spaces. The crux of the matter is how Black Los Angeles’ middle-class had access to
spaces whose music illustrated a different socioeconomic experience.
Realities, 266.
Founded in 1975 as Soul Train Records, Dick Griffey and Don Cornelius started a label that catered to Black working-class urbanites. Griffey and Cornelius began working together after Cornelius moved to Los Angeles in 1971 and began producing his nationally syndicated Black music variety show, *Soul Train*, after launching the hit show in Chicago. Griffey became Cornelius’s talent coordinator before the two formed the record label in 1975. Soul Train provided a platform for local youth to showcase local trends in dance, and fashion, but as Scot Brown points out, Los Angeles’s position as America’s media and entertainment center complicates ideas of “local” and “national” when considering trends in Black (urban) youth culture.105 Like with hip-hop, the move westward of not only working-class migrants, but artists from other urban areas brought new elements that blended with the local culture while also connecting South Central to other urban centers such as Chicago and Dayton, Ohio.106

The dance music that SOLAR released began to dictate the soundscape of South Central Los Angeles. The party scene of the mid-1970s and well into the 1980s were dominated by SOLAR’s artists. Their music became the soundtrack for the disconnected youth of South Central during a time that middle-class Blacks followed their white economic counterparts out of the central city.107

---

106 One of SOLAR’s most successful groups was Lakeside. The nine-member band was originally from Dayton, OH which produced a plethora of talented musicians between the 1970s and early 1980s. Lakeside played an integral role in the soundscape of South Central and constituted an edgier funk-disco fusion that was embraced by many of Los Angeles’s gang affiliated youth. See Brown, S. (2010). The History of the Sounds of Los Angeles Records. *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*, 266.; Dogg S “GGN News Network - Ty Dolla Sign” (2016, February 23). Retrieved April 09, 2018, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiHd-byTVN4&t=467s.; Breakfast Club “Vince Staples Speaks On New Music, Respecting Bow Wow & Why Gangsta Lyrics Are Lame” (2017, June 28). Retrieved April 09, 2018, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ceouMKCuDE.
During the same period that SOLAR was created, South Central’s gang culture reemerged as a result of the fallout of the Black Power era. While the Panthers and US Organization left a power vacuum after being dismantled, gangs assumed the position as the main organizational outlets for Black youth in South Central. Unlike the gangsta/reality rap era that would dominate Los Angeles a decade later, SOLAR records began releasing music that catered to the streets by offering a point of escape. The party scene in Los Angeles, particularly in South Central, was indicative of the collective shift away from the radical politics of the 1960s. “By 1976, the year of the bicentennial, voices of dissent could barely be heard. ‘Black Is Beautiful’ was no longer a militant gesture; it was simply cool to be black. ‘Power to the people’ was the greeting in 1972. By 1976, it was ‘Have a nice day.’”  

One of the label’s most prominent groups, Lakeside, created what West Coast hip-hop legend Snoop Dogg dubs as “real gangsta music.” The group’s 1978 hit, “It’s All the Way Live” encapsulated the move away from overt protest discourse of the previous era but maintained many of the sonic elements found in soul, funk, and even disco. 

If you wanna party  
Come on and party hearty  
When the people get together  
They don’t care about the weather  
We're proud to say Welcome to the party (Yeah)  

While disco can be seen as representative of Black middle-class escapism, or mainstream assimilation, the fusion of soul, funk, and disco that SOLAR produced carried an identifiable political objective for South Central dwellers. Escaping the streets through partying was a deliber-

ate act of uplifting the youth by eliminating the realities of oppression from the music’s discourse. The soundscape of South Central as represented through the music of the 1970s was a far cry from being representative of the lived experience. Artists were experimenting with different sounds, subject matter, but all under the objective of livening up the party.

By the early 1980s, SOLAR rolled out a number of hit records that continued the party orientation of South Central’s soundscape, specifically Lakeside, who dropped a street anthem entitled “Raid” in 1982. Interesting enough, “Raid” was released roughly a year after the United States Congress passed the Military Cooperation with Law Enforcement Act which equipped local police departments with access to military intelligence and weaponry to fight the newly launched drug war. The presence of police raids were becoming a regular occurrence in South Central during the early ‘80s and would only intensify later in the decade. But Lakeside’s “Raid” was a call for listeners to raid the dance floor. Again, the party atmosphere of Los Angeles created an escape for its residents despite socioeconomic status. For working class Angelenos, the dance floor was one of the few places they could escape the possible police raids that were beginning to sweep across South Central.

This is a Raid, everybody Raid the dance floor,  
Raid, cause your here to turn the party out  
Raid, everybody Raid the dance floor,  
Raid, party people let me hear you Shout

Although categorized as funk, “Raid” could be understood as a precursor to a Los Angeles based musical genre referred to as electro-hop. This track featured a fusion of the electronic dance music popularized as a derivation of disco and the emerging genre of hip-hop. With this track, Lakeside also turned the term ‘raid’ on its head considering the realities of an ever-grow-
ing militarized police force in Los Angeles at the time. Rappers in the mid-1980s and early-1990s would seek to directly confront the police force through their music in order to bring the listener closer to the realities of the streets. But the choice to provide more covert forms of social critique was emblematic of the SOLAR sound and content. “The party” would remain at the core of SOLAR released music into the 1980s and help spawn the electro-hop genre that sonically extended the fusion of funk and disco into a hip-hop adjacent medium. Electro-hop in Los Angeles differed from the hip-hop scene on the East Coast in overall sonic choices which leaned more toward heavy baseline, accompanied by futuristic electronic sounds. Ice-T described the music as “aerobic” in nature, and featured simplified party-oriented lyrics to liven up the audience.110

**Man the freaks ain’t freaky**

By the mid 1980s, the soundscape of the streets in Black Los Angeles was taken over by the sonic stylings of a new, almost exclusively Los Angeles sound — electro-hop. Definitionally, electro hop is a fusion of sonic elements from disco, electronic dance music and hip-hop. For the generation coming of age in the early 1980s, electro-hop supplanted disco as the dominant sound while maintaining the overall zeitgeist of “the party” in Los Angeles at the time. Not only was the party scene an escape from social and economic changes occurring locally, nationally, and globally but the music (and overall scene) offered the opportunity to challenge conventional conceptions of Black masculinity and sexuality.

---

110 At the same time hip-hop in New York City took lyricism to the next in the way rappers were able to embody the urban environment through their bars as well as displaying the sheer artistry associated with rhyming, storytelling, and delivery. See Wheeler, D., McFadyen, S., & Dunn, S. Hip-Hop Evolution: “The Birth of Gangsta Rap.” (2016, December 02).
Taking cue from artists like Michael Jackson, Prince, and Morris Day, electro-hop artists would dress in very eccentric ways in order to push the boundaries of masculinity and heighten their sense of sexuality. The World Class Wreckin’ Cru embodied this hypersexuality, visually through their performances, and outfits, which complemented their overall sonic choices. According to World Class Wreckin’ Cru founder Alonzo Williams, “[t]he inspiration behind Wreckin’ Cru’s image and sound was pussy, straight out!” Made up Alonzo Williams, Cli-N-Tel, DJ Yella and Dr. Dre, the World Class Wreckin’ Cru’s released one of its most popular tracks in 1984, entitled “Surgery.” The track demonstrates the sex appeal that Alonzo Williams envisioned for the group, and found future hardcore artists like Dr. Dre and DJ Yella attempting to portray themselves as sex symbols rather than gangsters.

I’m Dr. Dre, gorgeous hunk of a man
Doing tricks on the mix like no others can
The nurses say I'm cute, they say I'm fine
But you betta beware 'cause' I'll blow your mind
I'll take you to my car I'll take you to my home
And up and down your body my finger will roam
The nurses say that I'm nasty they say that I'm mean
But when you come to my pad your guaranteed to scream
Ahahahaha!

Alonzo Williams noted that the World Class Wreckin’ Cru was a clear manifestation of the sonic and visual milieu of the early 1980s. Dr. Dre’s first foray on the microphone was very dissimilar from the lyrics he would deliver with N.W.A. years later, particularly those that articulated concepts of masculinity within the “gangsta” ethos. Rather, Dr. Dre used descriptive words that linked his masculinity to women and feminine beauty. By calling himself “gorgeous,” and

“cute,” Dre can be seen working through the framework that allowed an artist like Prince to blur the lines of masculinity, and specifically Black male sexuality. The World Class Wreckin’ Cru was able to perform different ideas of Black masculinity through fashion but the sensuality that they attempted to infuse in their music challenged conventional gender norms as well.

Electro hop was a sonic escape for the youth in the 1980s but many of them would have to come back to reality. By 1985, South Central had already been hit with the inflow of crack cocaine flooding the streets which provided gangs with money and territorial power. As the Bloods and Crips took primacy over the streets they brought a new perspective through which to provide social commentary on the conditions of Black Los Angeles.

**Pop Lockin’ and Gang Bangin’**

As party-oriented music maintained its popularity, it largely remained a form of escapism from the mounting social ills that began to plague South Central. The streets were becoming tougher and more unforgiving as the music offered youth the opportunity to express themselves beyond the realities of their surroundings. With the programmatic shift for celestial radio station KDAY 1580-AM, which by 1983 became the first all hip-hop radio station in Los Angeles, featured many of the local artists and DJs around the growing electro-hop scene. The station would continue to be a home for hip-hop throughout the decade and premiered records that got little to no radio spins elsewhere. As the streets turned their radios to KDAY, the music in rotation became the new soundtrack for electro hopping, poppers and lockers as well as the newest crop of Bloods and Crips, and most times these groups weren’t mutually exclusive.
KDAY kept electro hop hits in rotation beginning in 1984 with Uncle Jamm’s Army, a collective of mobile DJs, with their street smash “Dial-a-Freak.” Keeping with the genre’s sonic template, “Dial-a-Freak” demonstrates electro hop’s affinity toward electrophones and drum machines like the Roland TR-808, Linn LM-1, Akai MPC 60C, and the Oberheim DMX. These machines along with synthesizers offered music producers the ability to manipulate sound and create up-tempo beats designed for popping and locking.

In pyramids, on the Nile
I ride my camels through the sand with style
I got an 8 way phone to call my freaks
I kiss a hundred different chicks per week
My telephone never stops ringing
And in my shower, my freaks never stop singing
Some say I’m conceited, but I can't be beat
Gimme respect, though I really don't need it
Egyptian lover, yes, that's me
Baby I'm the king of ecstasy
I'm so sexy, I'm so unique
The Egyptian lover, you little freak
Can you hang? Can you deal?
The Egyptian lover loves for real
Step this way, into my heart
So I can rip your poor mind straight apart

The lyrics weren’t of much importance at the time as were the beats, in similar fashion to today’s “trap” subgenre of hip-hop. The purpose of the music was to imbue listeners with the same repetitiveness of disco while promoting the party atmosphere through sexualized lyrics that were detached from the social realities in South Central. According to Egyptian Lover, who rapped the above lyrics, stated “I also love that robot voice and that electronic music — using real electronic sounds from spaceships from outer-space. To me, it was the best way to escape from where I grew up.”
Unlike the hip-hop movement flowering in New York City at the time, electro hoppers styled themselves in ways that deflected from their association with the streets. During the early to mid 1980s, the Los Angeles Police Department began to develop special task forces to crack down on the upsurge in gang activity, setting the stage for the crack epidemic that would hit South Central by 1985. As Tricia Rose states, “Hip-Hop is [B]lack urban renewal. Electro hop’s starting players refrained from participating in destructive gang activity and instead dedicated their energies to music production, promotion, and performance.”

For the electro hoppers that weren’t active gang members, the new scene worked as a way to represent the streets in stark contrast to the criminal perception brought forth by law enforcement. Furthermore, electro-hop oftentimes disassociated with gang culture in order to problematize the way young Black men negotiated their surroundings and the larger social forces that impacted Black Los Angeles.

M.C. Frosty and Lovin’ C released a track in 1984 that is particularly important when unpacking the relationship between the electro-hop scene and South Central’s gang culture. “Radio Activity Rapp” is the sonic precursor to gangsta/reality rap coming just a year later with the release of “Batteram” by Los Angeles rapper Toddy Tee. M.C. Frosty and Lovin’ C maintained the simplified lyrical approach in order to privilege the heavy-synthesized break beat that was integral to the local dance phenomenon of pop-locking.

Blood, Cuz, gangbangers
And there's thugs and pimps and dope slingers
You got to have knowledge in this world
You might get your purse snatched before your eyes swirl

---


114 Meadows, B. (2014). We came 2 get down: A history of pop locking in los angeles
You're doin' your job every day
But then you work so hard till your hair turns gray

The track is one of the first open “shout-outs” to Los Angeles’ infamous Bloods and Crips on recorded music. Gang culture in South Central Los Angeles hadn’t sonically and visually branded the city until the late-1980s with the introduction of N.W.A. In a way, however, M.C. Frosty and Lovin’ C demonstrated how the streets adopted electronic dance music by lyrically acknowledging the Bloods and Crips. And unlike the music produced by other artists of this epoch, M.C. Frosty and Lovin’ C were making a distinct break from escapism and rooting the culture firmly in the realities of the streets.

**The Return**

The socioeconomic downturn for the working-class of Black Los Angeles beginning in the mid-1960s with deindustrialization, capital and White flight was only exacerbated by Black middle-class flight in the 1970s. While the escape route for those of economic privilege was to relocate out of South Central, those who remained in the central city had to find other ways to cope with their surroundings. The music of 1970s and early 1980s provided that escape and kept the streets somewhat apolitical, but by the mid-1980s, the landscape of South Central Los Angeles had changed dramatically. Hip-Hop on the East Coast had already made its transformation to a lyrical-centric art form that produced a number of party records but most often represented the nuances associated with northeastern urbanity, both sonically and visually. Tracks such as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message” and Schoolly D’s “PSK” served as templates for Los Angeles’s evolving hip-hop sound and narrative approach. Rappers would as-

---

sume the role of street reporters in order to offer authentic accounts of life in South Central Los Angeles during the crack epidemic.

The heavy roar of ambulances and the *whoop* of police sirens, the chopping blades of helicopters, and gun shots ringing from .22 caliber pistols to AK-47s consumed the streets. South Central’s party scene was overshadowed by the actual casualties piling up as the 1980s raged forward. Coupled with a national drug war and LAPD’s newly implemented gang-suppression task force geared toward the further criminalization of Black Angelenos and Black (male) youth in particular; the 1980s witnessed even harsher economic policies that would calcify the disenfranchisement of South Central’s residents. The time to escape was over. Music coming out of South Central Los Angeles by the mid-1980s, which would become known as gangsta/reality rap, shifted the soundscape in order to prioritize reporting on the realities of the streets rather than escaping from them.
Gangsta rap carries an identifiable class politics, a profound urban critique, and most important, the sonic possibility of a more profound intervention into material and social relations.

Daniel Widener - Black Arts West

Rap is our invisible TV network. It’s the CNN that black people never had.

Chuck D

Do I gotta sell me a whole lotta crack for decent shelter or clothes on my back?

Ice Cube - “Bird in the Hand”

Hip-Hop has played a significant role in understanding the Black experience across regions of the United States in the post-disco age. As an art form, hip-hop has served as the voice of America’s inner cities prompting legendary MC Chuck D of Public Enemy to characterize the genre as the “Black CNN.” Hip-Hop at its core provides a space to amplify the voices within urban centers that face unfavorable social conditions. Rappers are often portrayed as “reppin’” or representing their neighborhood, gang, city, and/or region. But the Black CNN concept offers a more critical approach to understanding the distinct sound choices artists make to illustrate their town. Instead of representing, rappers are reporting from their respective communities as a continuum of Black cultural expression that critiques social systems and attempts to imagine alternatives of empowerment and Blackness.

---

For this chapter I unpack how Los Angeles’ hip-hop sound was directly influenced by the social, political and cultural conditions that shaped the 1980s along with the technological shifts that occurred, effectively allowing artists to sonically broadcast the experiences of South Central Los Angeles in the most vivid of ways. This chapter examines how rappers in South Central Los Angeles acted as investigative journalists for the streets. Moreover, I look to unpack the ways gangsta rap challenged mainstream narratives of Black criminality that dominated news headlines during the War on Drugs. The objective is to demonstrate how the soundscape of the streets became a platform for “street journalism” used to counter mainstream notions of Black urbanity in Los Angeles.117

Hip-Hop artists such as Toddy Tee, Ice-T, N.W.A., Ice Cube, MC Eiht, and Kid Frost reported on the material conditions in South Central while attempting to construct an identity that could rationalize the reality many Black (and Chicano) Angelenos were forced to live. These sonic recreations of the streets would buttress gangsta rap’s appeal to authenticity as well as challenge the idea that gangsta rap held little sociopolitical value.

Gangsta rap would go on to transmit these street dispatches from Los Angeles across the country, and benefitted from the technological advancements in music production equipment which allowed artists and producers to incorporate more “nonmusical” sounds. The use of sounds such as sirens, gun shots, car engines, shattered glass, among others, allowed artists to portray their social environments by incorporating nonmusical sounds that authenticated their musical dispatches. The convergence of crippling social conditions of the 1980s provided on the one hand much inspiration for artists and producers. South Central was faced with the reality of

underfunded schools, housing shortages, the introduction of crack cocaine, heightened gang warfare, and a militarized LAPD which provided artists with their content. While on the other, production equipment enabled artists to report on the conditions they observed, considering they had access to the latest technology.

It is important to note, that this chapter chronicles the gangsta rap scene in Los Angeles from the mid 1980s to the early 1990s. The significance of this chronology has much to do with the reporting rappers did leading up to the Los Angeles Rebellion and Gang Truce of 1992 and the immediate aftermath. The civil unrest that Los Angeles witnessed catapulted the hip-hop scene and South Central as a whole into mainstream fascination, arguably becoming the face of urban America. The 1992 release of Dr. Dre’s debut album *The Chronic*, marked the apex of South Central’s soundscape in terms of urban reportage. The use of news soundbites, funk samples, and the accompanying lyrics offered a definitive soundtrack to South Central. Ironically enough, this album also ushered in the mass commercialization of the reality/gangsta rap genre which became a caricature rather than an authentic sonic representation of the streets. Therefore, understanding hip-hop’s take on the soundscape of the streets through the Black CNN is more suitable for this period of South Central’s history.

**The Sample**

The cohesiveness of this chapter would be lost if time were not spent fleshing out the significance of the sample. A major element of hip-hop across time has been the ability to sample music and other sonic elements in order to articulate new meanings. Sampling, generally defined as digitally taking a portion or “sample” of a song (or other audio file) to use as an instrument for
a new song or piece.\textsuperscript{118} The proliferation of sampling within hip-hop has raised many complex questions concerning ownership, copyright, and trademark laws.\textsuperscript{119} The access and ability of producers to digitally repurpose sound played a significant role in hip-hop’s status as the voice of the streets. Sampling can, for instance, involve looping, which is a repetitive section of sound material as well as manipulation of tone, and speed of the sample. Hip-Hop producers follow a tradition of Black sonic expression that reorganized sound in ways that challenge traditional Western musical logic.

The legendary group, Public Enemy (P.E), revolutionized the overall soundscape of hip-hop. Through sampling especially, P.E.’s production arm “The Bomb Squad” and in particular Hank Shocklee, created new ways to organize sound in order to articulate the rage that their music transmitted. In an interview with pop culture journalist Richard Buskin, Hank Shocklee stated, “I made sure there were no bass lines on any of the Public Enemy records — traditional R&B bass lines formulated with funk were a little too melodic, a little too groove-oriented. The sound needed for this group was something that suggested urgency.”\textsuperscript{120} He would go on to say that Chuck D’s voice was integral to the decision of eliminating the bass line from P.E.’s music. Shocklee believed that Chuck D’s baritone voice became the music and he just scored around him “so that the overall effect was of fire and brimstone, as if the world was coming to an end.”\textsuperscript{121}

Hank Shocklee and The Bomb Squad would take hip-hop production to another level based on the techniques utilized by Public Enemy. Shocklee would “cram” multiple samples on top of another in order to create a chaotic blend of sounds while choosing not to reverb or mix the vocals in favor of an edgier, more raw sound. These sonic choices would allow Public Enemy to create a soundscape that would embody the conscious movement in hip-hop in the late 1980s.122

Digital technology opened the door to new manifestations of Blackness at a volatile time in urban America. The use of police sirens, gun shots, background voices, bending words, not to mention the use of Soul samples created aural reports about life in the urban streets. According to Tricia Rose in her seminal text *Black Noise* (1994), “Rap producers’ strategic use of electronic reproduction technology equipment, particularly sampling equipment, affirms stylistic priorities in the organization and selection of sounds found in many Black diasporic musical expressions.”123 Technology gave hip-hop the ability to revise Black discourses on race, class, gender, and sexuality that were simultaneously urban American and diasporic. But where previous generations could only portray or interpret the streets, with digital technology hip-hop had the capacity to literally put the streets on record.

As hip-hop spread from New York City, who had a diverse hip-hop scene of it’s own across the five boroughs, including Long Island, found the sound becoming distinctively regional which offered the opportunity for rappers to articulate the soundscape of streets in any given locale. Although this thesis focuses on South Central Los Angeles, I would be remiss to not give

New York and Philadelphia a proper treatment on how they used technology to capture the soundscape of the streets and in turn, influencing West Coast artists to do the same.

**National Report: New York City to Philly**

The history of hip-hop has been well documented, from the genre’s inception in the Bronx, NY to its regional renditions. Hip-Hop encompasses the urban house party scene to the raw biographies of street life. My goal here is not to give an exhaustive history of hip-hop, but to point out a few of hip-hop’s classic street soundscapes. These examples I lay out directly influenced the development of Black Los Angeles based hip-hop and provided a basis from which artists would reproduce the soundscape of the South Central streets.

In 1982, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released the classic track “The Message.” This song encapsulated the realities of New York at the turn of the 1980s. Melle Mel sharply affirmed the reality of urban decay with the opening bars: “Broken glass, everywhere! People pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't care I can't take the smell, can't take the noise, Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice.”124 The song brought an immediacy of urban decay directly to the listener in wake of New York City’s bankruptcy in the late 1970s. Moreover, 1982 marked the year President Reagan waged the War on Drugs.125 According to Michelle Alexander, “practically overnight the budgets of federal law enforcement agencies soared. Between 1980 and 1984, FBI anti drug funding increased from $8 million to $95 million… DEA anti drug spending grew from $86 to $1,026 million, and FBI anti drug allocations

grew from $38 to $181 million.” Beginning in the late 1940s, deindustrialization swept across America’s urban cities only to be compounded by the drug war almost 40 years later. In turn, “The Message” became hip-hop’s most popular response to the prevailing conditions of the day.

One of the most important sonic elements of “The Message” came at the track’s onset. There is the sound of shattering glass that accompanied Mel’s opening line. The use of this sound/sample projected the soundscape of the Bronx during this period. The broken glass sound authenticated the conditions that Melle Mel spoke to throughout the rest of his verse. Shattering glass may seem innocuous in relation to the content that Melle Mel raps, but this key sonic choice showcased how hip-hop reports on its social environment through sound.

The broken glass depicts the manifestation of the “broken windows” theory that drove urban policy in areas, particularly throughout New York City’s predominantly Black communities. Proposed by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling in 1982, the broken windows theory posits that by monitoring small and minor crimes such as vandalism, public transit fare-skipping, and public drinking can create an urban environment of lawfulness and order. This would in turn prevent larger, more serious scale crimes from occurring. While hip-hop coming out of the Bronx was becoming more socially conscious the output from other urban areas began to shape in other ways.

If New York City is the birthplace of hip-hop, Philadelphia is arguably the birthplace of gangsta rap. In 1985 Schoolly D dropped the classic “PSK” (Park Side Killas), an ode to the Philly streets. Schoolly D gave an account of his adventures through Philadelphia’s streets which

included drinking, smoking, and having sex with a prostitute. The content of Schoolly D’s tale coupled with his nonchalant delivery gave the music added a layer of reality. The track follows the traditional hip-hop break beat with a heavy 808 that represents a disruption of sonic territory.\textsuperscript{128} I take cue from Tricia Rose in this aspect by claiming that hip-hop serves as a disruption of traditional Western musical logic but what’s more is “PSK,” like “The Message” broke away from hip-hop’s status as party music. These tracks introduced listeners to a raw version of urban reportage.

The aggressive and poignant social critique of Melle Mel leveled in “The Message” in conjunction with the laid back street narrative Schoolly D presented in “PSK” greatly influenced the hip-hop scene in Los Angeles. On the West Coast in the early 1980s, gangs were beginning to go to war with one another over drug territory. With homicides on the rise, the atmosphere in Black Los Angeles began to change, and as a result the soundscape began to shift away from the party scene. What these particular East Coast tracks did was provide the blueprint for Los Angeles hip-hoppers to depict the realities of life in South Central from the frontline. The Black CNN had a new station and one of its first dispatchers was Toddy Tee, alerting residents of the “Batteram.”\textsuperscript{129}

\textbf{L.A. It’s Comin’, No! It’s Here: The Crack Era in South Central}

The same year Schoolly D dropped “PSK” (1985), Los Angeles rappers also began to use the music for purposes other than the party. Toddy Tee released the track entitled “Batteram”

which follows some of the sonic cues of the electro-hop scene in Black Los Angeles, however, the content reflected South Central at the turn of the drug war rather than the party-centric escapism of electro-hop. “Batterram” also spoke to a particular phenomenon within the War on Drugs and the larger military-industrial complex that was specific to Black Los Angeles. The use of the battering ram (define more explicitly) was introduced by the LAPD during the drug war as a way of entering suspected drug houses. With the proliferation of dealers and “dope spots” in South Central, the battering ram became a frequent sight as Toddy Tee explains his first dispatch.

The track opens with a traditional hip-hop break beat accompanied by scratching as Toddy Tee calls out: “In New York (it’s comin’!), In Detroit (it’s comin’!), In L.A. (it’s comin’!) No! It’s here!” Immediately after Toddy Tee calls out to NYC and Detroit—which could be interpreted as connecting major urban centers to the experience he lays out—the beat flips into a more electronic sound reminiscent of the electro-hop sound. The choice to flip the beat into a more electro-hop sound signifies Toddy Tee’s appeal toward maintaining Black Los Angeles’ sonic identity to that point with the heavy electronic based music. This was the soundscape of South Central at the time and despite not being traditionally hip-hop, this was a track for the streets.

Throughout the four-verse track, Toddy Tee gives multiple perspectives on the drug war as it hit South Central. It was the first look at how the streets operated and even the how the innocent bystanders were subject to the scrutiny and harassment of the police department during the drug war. The first verse serves as a warning to potential drug dealers alerting them of the new tactics and equipment that the LAPD has at their disposal to deter crack from hitting the streets. Toddy Tee raps:

They say they’re sick and tired of snatchin’ down bars
Cause on the tow trucks it’s makin’ it hard
And by the time they get in-to your pad
You done flushed it down the toilet and now they’re mad
But you’re out the next minute cause you post bail
Then on the very next day you say, “What the heck?”
You get a letter in the mail and it’s a D.A. reject
And you’re jumpin’ up and down cause it ain’t no case
And to the police that is a waste.\(^{130}\)

The idea that drug task forces could enter suspected drug houses by ramming through the front door in theory saved the department time to apprehend the suspected drug peddlers. But on the flip side, the LAPD terrorized the South Central community with the use of the battering ram because it turned out that not every house that was rammed through was a dope spot. Toddy Tee breaks this down in the third verse where he describes a working class family with no ties to the drug game being thrown in the midst of the war.

My wife was gettin’ ready to leave the house
But as she opened the door she seen a flare
It was an undercover cop, he was standin’ there
So she hollered back to me, “Honey, come and see just who this strange man could be”
But when I went to the door I thought it was a dud
Cause he kept asking me to sell him drugs
I said, “Listen homeboy, what you talkin’ about? You’re mistakin’ my pad for a rock-house
Well, I know to you we all look the same
But I’m not the one slangin’ caine
I work 9 to 5 and ain’t a damn thing changed
And I don’t have time for the hustler’s game.”\(^{131}\)

Despite being a working-class citizen, the man as Toddy Tee describes is implicated in the government’s drug war simply on the basis of race, class, and geographical location. The streets impacted everyone in South Central even those not actively participating in the drug

economy. “Batterram” serves as a feature on the outbreak of the crack epidemic in South Central and equitably represented the perspectives of drug dealers, regular citizens, city officials and the police department alike.

As the track comes to a close, the introductory break beat and record scratching reappears indicating a reconnection to hip-hop’s traditional sonic cues and placing South Central’s soundscape in hip-hop’s sonic lexicon. Toddy Tee managed to infuse the electro-hop aesthetic with a street based narrative that captured the soundscape of South Central in ways that hadn’t been done since the Watts Prophets in the early 1970s. Although artists coming after Toddy Tee adopted sonic cues that represented the streets in more sinister ways which appealed to more dramatic representations of the streets, the realism of Toddy Tee’s narrative ironically marked the shift away from electro-hop representing the soundscape despite his use of the sound. The harsh conditions that rappers would begin to lay out on “wax” or on record, could not be effectively transmitted by following the electro-hop aesthetic. “Batterram” would go onto set the precedent of street reportage in South Central Los Angeles but the overall sonic choices of hip-hop coming out of Black Los Angeles had to catch up with the content rappers were now willing to record.

6 ’N The Mornin’: The War on Drugs Is at Yo Door!

South Central Los Angeles in the year 1987 was in the midst of the crack epidemic and the Reagan administration’s “War on Drugs.” If music is a reflection of reality, the music that Black Angelenos were accustomed to listening to in the 1970s and early 1980s fell under the funk, soul, disco, or techno categories. But as the ‘80s moved along the social environment of South Central began to worsen and the music that captured this shift also changed dramatically.
Rapper Ice-T, from the Crenshaw section of South Central would be the first to capture the soundscape of the streets as they became enveloped in gang warfare. Ice-T dropped what most consider to be Los Angeles’s first gangsta rap record in 1987 with “6 ‘N The Mornin.”¹³² For Ice-T, someone who actively participated in the illicit economy and associated with the Rollin 60 Crips, stated that his approach to music was to “document the game.”¹³³ His debut single blends the social commentary of Melle Mel, the smooth narrative of Schoolly D, and gives the alternate perspective of “Batterram.” This track became an anthem for gang-bangers and drug dealers alike who could relate to Ice-T’s dispatch:

6 in the morning, police at my door  
Fresh Adidas squeak across the bathroom floor  
Out my back window I make my escape  
Don't even get a chance to grab my old school tape  
Mad with no music, but happy cause free  
And the streets to a player is the place to be  
Got a knot in my pocket, weighing at least a grand  
Gold on my neck, my pistols close at hand  
I'm a self-made monster of the city streets  
Remotely controlled by hard hip-hop beats  
But just living in the city is a serious task  
Didn't know what the cops wanted, didn't have time to ask¹³⁴

The life in the South Central streets during the 1980s was a constant cat-and-mouse game between gang members and the Los Angeles Police Department. Ice-T sonically portrays this interaction within the opening verse. The break beat, coupled with Ice-T’s nonchalant tone evoke a sense of immediacy and direct contact with the rapper’s account. During the onset of the War

¹³² Although not an official recording, Ice-T has performed a freestyle of sorts in two separate interviews (Hip-Hop Evolution (2016) and Drink Champs Podcast (2017)) that he characterizes as a “crip rhyme.” His crip rhyme offers an overview of the banger mentality: “Rollin through the middle of the night with niggas on my left and niggas on my right yellin, Cuh-Cuh Crip Wheeler, D. (2016) “Hip-Hop Evolution”. Ep. 4
on Drugs, mainstream media did much to purport the image of Black youth as “super predators.” Whereas Ice-T, although problematic in some regards, gave agency to these youth. The streets, which encompassed physical and psychological markers, were paramount to the development of young Black (male) identity in South Central Los Angeles.

As telling as this opening verse is about the street ethos in South Central, sonically speaking the track retained the East Coast production influence. The soundscape as presented in “6 in the Mornin” becomes a loose variation of the sonic choices found in Schoolly D’s “PSK.” But at the time of “6 ‘N The Mornin”’s release Los Angeles had no true hip-hop related sound and relied heavily upon the music coming from the East Coast. In this sense, the synergy of the urban experience and the soundscape of the streets through hip-hop connected Los Angeles to its East Coast counterparts — something rap legend Ice Cube hones years later.135

However, the realities that Black Angelenos faced as a result of gang warfare, the drug economy, and the associated governmental policies were represented as a South Central phenomenon. Although Ice-T’s sonic cues were inspired by Schoolly D, his content and therefore the accompanying storyline of the soundscape reported on a different urban experience. But ultimately, Los Angeles would need to develop its own sound in order to fully represent the soundscape of South Central.

**Reporting from the Capital C.P.T.**

Thanks to rappers like Toddy Tee and Ice-T, the Los Angeles hip-hop paradigm shifted. As a result, artists began depicting reality and speaking out against the decaying social condi-

---

tions of the 1980s. N.W.A (Niggaz Wit Attitude), colloquially referred to as “America’s most dangerous group,” was comprised of Eazy E, MC Ren, Ice Cube, and carry-overs from Los Angeles’s techno scene, DJ Yella and Dr. Dre. The soundscape of South Central moved toward expressing the anxieties and pitfalls of the streets and would find its sonic identity through the introduction of N.W.A, and Ruthless Records.136

N.W.A. also presented the opportunity to delve deeper into the gender dynamics of the streets at the turn of the War on Drugs. The content released by N.W.A. and particularly Eazy E expressed the misogynistic anxieties that Black men in South Central had during the time. It also reinforced the notion that the streets constituted a masculine space in similar ways to the Watts Prophets, however the political objectives of nation-building that were at the heart of the 1960s Black Power era were virtually absent by the time N.W.A. burst on the scene. But the seemingly unadulterated misogyny that characterizes gangsta rap raises larger questions surrounding heteropatriarchy in the United States in general. As bell hooks explains, the “sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving that are glorified in gangsta rap are a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”137 A clear example of hooks’ assertion can be seen in the voicelessness of women in

---

136 Ruthless Records, in addition to a number of seminal releases in West Coast hip-hop from artists such as MC Hammer (Year), Too Short (Year) and Ice-T (Year), were pressed and distributed through the independent label, Macola Records. Founded by Don Macmillan in 1983, Macola served as a label and distributor for aspiring rappers in Los Angeles. Macola was a staple in the music scene in Los Angeles dating back to the elecetro-hop era that featured artists and groups such as the World Class Wreckin’ Cru, The Egyptian Lover, Arabian Prince, as well as rap acts outside of the gangsta/reality rap paradigm in the mid-1980s such as Bobby Jimmy and the Critters. As the music began more explicit, Macola decided not to censor their artists’ music which served an integral function in the overall appeal of gangsta rap. See Westhoff, B. (2017, October 27). Macola Records: An Oral History. Retrieved March 28, 2018, from http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2017/10/macola-records-oral-history; Jam, B. (2013, October 8). Hip-Hop History Tuesdays: Los Angeles Rap/Hip-Hop, The First Decade (Pt. I). Retrieved March 28, 2018, from https://www.amoeba.com/blog/2013/10/jamoeblog/hip-hop-history-tuesdays-los-angeles-rap-hip-hop-the-first-decade-ppti.html

many gangsta rap stories. As N.W.A. began to dominate the Los Angeles hip-hop soundscape, and hip-hop in general, women became agent-less objects across street narratives. The absence of nuanced female representation also spoke to how “the streets” would direct the way young Black men articulate masculinity.

In late 1986 Eric “Eazy-E” Wright founded Ruthless Records which housed acts like N.W.A, The D.O.C, Michel’e, JJ Fad, and eventually Bone-Thugs-n-Harmony. The label’s initial function was to serve as a platform to release music by Eazy-E and N.W.A. The significance of Ruthless Records cannot be overstated when discussing the South Central soundscape. Ruthless was able to produce a sound of Los Angeles that spoke directly to the atmosphere of the city. N.W.A sonically represented the streets of Black Los Angeles and in process helped change the landscape of hip-hop.

Cruisin' down the street in my six-fo'
Jockin' the bitches, slappin' the hoes
Went to the park to get the scoop
Knuckleheads out there, cold-shootin' some hoops
A car pulls up, who can it be?
A fresh El Camino rollin', Kilo G
He rolled down his window and he started to say
It's all about makin' that GTA

Ruthless Records’s first hit single came in 1987 with a release by Eazy-E. The track entitled “Boyz-n-the-Hood” embodied the culture of South Central. The track can be characterized as driving music and Eazy-E’s tone and delivery brings vivid clarity to life in the streets of South Central. (In this track Eazy-E isn’t simply reporting on life in South Central, he represents a caricature of an active participant in the streets and would make way for the much maligned “studio

---

gangsta” who rapped about the streets but had very little interaction with the streets.) The sonic choice that producer Dr. Dre made within this track also speaks to the realities of South Central. While on this sonic ride-along through the streets with Eazy, the listener gets a sense of voyeurism into daily life. The chaos that ensues is framed by Eazy’s tone and delivery to evoke a type of normalcy to what is going on around him.

But it was Eazy-E, along with N.W.A as a collective, that utilized multiple voices, skits, and samples to speak out about Black Los Angeles’s social conditions in creative and forceful ways. Reality rap, or gangsta rap as it became known as, sat at the intersection of reportage, urban criticism, and sonic technological advancements that allowed the music to reverberate throughout the nation.

**F*ck Tha Police!**

Black Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) have a long documented history that dates back to the 1940s and the Zoot Suit Riots. By the turn of the 1980s, the Los Angeles Police Department could be characterized as an occupying force in the South Central community. Ice-T and Toddy Tee both reported on the conditions of South Central at the beginning of the War on Drugs and spelled out the interaction between residents and police. However, neither fired off a direct critique of law enforcement up to that point. By 1989, when N.W.A released their smash single, “F*ck Tha Police,” Los Angeles had become a gang war

---

zone. But despite South Central being plagued by internecine gang conflict the common enemy of most Black Angelenos was the police and N.W.A. sonically captured that sentiment. If Ice-T’s “6 in the Mornin” was considered a gang-banger’s anthem then “F*ck Tha Police” became a rallying cry for the entirety of South Central. The Los Angeles Police Department saw Black youth as an indistinguishable, monolithic group. N.W.A.’s lyrics, tone, and delivery gave most young Black men in South Central the sense that their story was being broadcasted.

The track opens up with a fictional enactment of the LAPD standing trial in an N.W.A led court room. The role reversal in the intro speaks to the group creatively subverting the power dynamic between police and Black youth in South Central. N.W.A takes the feelings toward law enforcement that are felt in the streets and created a subaltern space of seeking justice and retribution on their terms through this song. Although this intro doesn’t reflect actual interactions with law enforcement, N.W.A found a way to sonically create a space of empowerment through real-life discontent.

F*ck the police! Comin' straight from the underground
A young nigga got it bad 'cause I'm brown
And not the other color, so police think
They have the authority to kill a minority
F*ck that shit, 'cause I ain't the one
For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun
To be beating on, and thrown in jail
We can go toe-to-toe in the middle of a cell
Fuckin' with me 'cause I'm a teenager
With a little bit of gold and a pager
Searchin' my car, lookin' for the product
Thinkin' every nigga is sellin' narcotics

---

N.W.A. took the experience of Black youth in Los Angeles and sonically transmitted that experience to the masses. This song served as the soundtrack for the streets by effectively voicing the disdain Black Los Angeles had for the Los Angeles Police Department.

**Exclusive: I Got Pulled Over**

N.W.A. had a track that spoke directly to how the streets perceived the police with their 1989 hit “F*ck tha Police.” The sentiment transmitted through that hard-hitting track would be validated after March 7, 1991. A home recording showed motorist Rodney King being excessively beaten by Los Angeles Police Department officers after a short high speed chase. But it wasn’t Rodney King leading police on a short chase, or his own checkered criminal past that would make headlines. The video footage of police officers using excessive force validated what black Angelenos had been stressing for decades. In many ways, the South Central community held King as a quasi-martyr, rejoicing not in King’s assault but that his assault was caught on tape. Black Los Angeles felt they had indisputable evidence to finally hold police accountable in court.\(^\text{141}\)

But the Rodney King beating didn’t just impact Black South Central Los Angeles. The rise in police repression had similar implications for the Chicano Angelenos in and around South Central. The Rodney King assault and eventual uprising that came a year later after officers were acquitted of any criminal wrongdoing, saw working-poor Black and Mexicans joining forces in

the uprising. This speaks to both communities finding solidarity behind negative experiences with the police and to a lesser extent, Korean merchants monopolizing various shops within their communities.

The tape also validated the use of force that is often characterized in hip-hop music. The depictions of police encounters were more than sonic recreations with the release of the Rodney King tape, they were finally rendered “real” to mainstream America. The dominant political discourse reverberating through the streets was that police represented the frontline of a larger system of control that sought to control Black and Chicano/a people in general, and Black men in particular.142

Rodney King’s assault highlighted the heightened militarization the Los Angeles Police Department underwent by the late 1980s. The proliferation of guns and ammunition flooded South Central simultaneously as the influx of drugs gave way to a new economy for Los Angeles’ street gangs. In April of 1988 the Los Angeles City Council approved 2.5 million dollars to assist the Los Angeles Police Department in implementing “Operation Hammer,” an anti-gang suppression program that instituted city-wide gang sweeps. Police Chief Daryl F. Gates and police officials designed the program to stop and question suspected gang-members caught loitering. The stories of police harassment and use of excessive force accompanied the police department’s new program making Rodney King’s assault emblematic of a larger operation to suppress Black and Chicano Angelenos.143

To drive home the connection between the Black and Chicano experience with police as well as maintaining the soundscape of the streets, I direct attention to the dispatch provided by Latino artist Kid Frost in his track “I Got Pulled Over” featuring MC Eiht and ALT.

Kid Frost’s track does much to represent the Chicano vibe that was as much a part of South Central as the Black cultural atmosphere. The track opens up with a police radio which sets the stage for the song. The use of audio from police radios or nightly news reports were important elements of capturing the soundscape of South Central. Artists in Los Angeles were sonically concerned with representing the streets as authentically as possible. A major tenet of hip-hop is originality, and artists in Los Angeles were attempting to distinguish themselves from other regions across the country with their street dispatches. Kid Frost sonically rendered the Chicano community’s experience parallel to Black Angelenos in South Central with the track “I Got Pulled Over.” The beat that features the menacing gangsta rap baseline synonymous with Los Angeles but its infusion of latin percussion spoke to a larger interracial connection embedded in this track.

In the opening verse, Kid Frost is detailing his encounter with the police which representing the racial and class profiling experienced by the Chicano/Mexican community:

They ask about my beeper, I'm not a dope dealer
This is the Cherokee 4 wheeler
If I was sellin drugs
To all of the street thugs
Yo, I don't mean to brag
But I'd be drivin in a Jag¹⁴⁴

---

Kid Frost is reporting on similar treatment that N.W.A. reported on in “F*ck tha Police.” The police represent a repressive force in the streets of Los Angeles and wielded an autonomy in the streets that allowed them to treat Black and Chicano Angelenos any way they saw fit. There was a certain apprehensiveness, if not fear, of the police in the streets of South Central, and Kid Frost captures this at the tail end of his verse when he states:

Yo, go ahead and write your ticket
But hey yo, Mr. Officer, you know where you can stick it
I say this to myself, I let him do his thing
Or he might beat me down just like he beat down Rodney King
I got pulled over145

The fear of ending up like Rodney King wasn’t an exclusively Black phenomenon in Los Angeles. Kid Frost clearly spoke to the Chicano side of the racial situation in the city at the time. Also, by featuring MC Eiht on the track sonically reclaimed the interracial coalition that was formed in the streets between Black and Mexican residents during the Zoot Suit Riots of Los Angeles.146

**Breaking News: Los Angeles Is on Fire!**

Los Angeles is a peculiar city and one that wasn’t immune from the effects of neoliberal economic restructuring occurring in the 1980s. Although the roots of “free markets” can be found in the postwar era 1940s.147 Neoliberalism is considered a revival or return to laissez-faire economic policies that situate overall nation-state growth to its economic performance in the

global market.\textsuperscript{148} While corporations benefitted from this restructuring, urban centers such as Los Angeles saw their blue-collar sector debased by the outsourcing of jobs to East Asian countries in order to exploit their cheap labor force. The low-paying factory jobs, predominantly located in the Garment District of Los Angeles, were also reserved for cheap immigrant labor in sweatshops.\textsuperscript{149} Moreover, the neoliberal policies pushed forward by the Reagan administration disempowered labor unions, the welfare state and other economic provisional powers that the government held.\textsuperscript{150} Black Angelenos were historically excluded from labor unions, but the slashing of government programs that many families relied upon locked them into poverty as America revamped the (global) economic system.

The racial breakdown of the city purports the idea of a multicultural melting pot with many ethnic communities represented throughout Los Angeles County. However, the hostile racial relations in Los Angeles reach beyond the binary of Black-White. For Black Angelenos, the issue stems from economic exclusion on behalf of the Korean merchants that set up shop in South Central, dominating the strip malls and swap meets while not offering Black residents the opportunity to work.

Racial hostility brewed in South Central as Black Angelenos who were economically and politically debased by the 1980s witnessed an influx of Korean merchants who were economically and...
Black South Central residents saw Korean merchants as an impediment on the development of the Black community. However, the hostility toward Korean merchants in South Central on behalf of the Black community was somewhat misplaced. The larger neoliberal economic structure that took shape in the 1980s promoted intraclass warfare. The financial institutions often discriminated against Korean immigrants who sought formal routes of securing capital to open small businesses. Moreover, banks traditionally denied loan applications for businesses looking to open in economically depressed areas. South Central’s underdevelopment was the result of structural policies that crippled the community over the course of decades. These issues manifested in the 1980s and became personified by Korean merchants who Black Angelenos saw as disabling the establishment of Black businesses within South Central.

The hostility toward Korean store ownership in South Central was also compounded by the residential politics of Los Angeles. Many of the store owners were “absentee merchants” which meant that they did not live in the community. Koreans occupied an area of Los Angeles just north of South Central making the relationship between merchants and their Black customers transactional, at best. While Black Angelenos maintained that Korean merchants were a major reason for their economic retardation, many of the Korean merchants (like other Asian ethnic groups) accepted the narrative of the “model minority.” The idea that Korean shopkeepers were actively realizing the American Dream since getting to the United States as immigrants rep-

---

resented a stark contrast with the perception of Black Angelenos in South Central as well as the Chicanos (Latinos) in the community.¹⁵⁴

The Black-Korean divide came to a head following the murder of a 15-year-old Black high school student named Latasha Harlins on March 16, 1991. Harlins was a patron at a local Korean owned convenient store when she was suspected of stealing a two dollar carton of juice. Harlins and the store owner, Soon Ja Du, got into a verbal altercation over the matter before Harlins placed the alleged stolen juice on the counter. At that instant, Soon Ja Du fatally shot Harlins at point blank range. The case made national news and eventually saw Soon Ja Du convicted, but only of voluntary manslaughter. Her sentence required 400 hours of community service, a 500 dollar fine, and five years of probation. Soon Ja Du served no prison time for her crime.

The tension in South Central began to boil over following Soon Ja Du’s light sentence. Later that year, Ice Cube dropped his second studio album, Death Certificate (1991), which served as a social polemic and sonic uprising. Cube channeled the Black rage of South Central that had been brewing since the Watts Uprising of 1965. The entire album takes the listener on a sonic trip through the streets of South Central and captured the pulse of streets during this tumultuous time. The album was broken into two parts: the “Death Side” and the “Life Side.” Death Certificate’s narrative structure took the listener through the elements of the streets, namely gang banging and selling drugs, that led to either social death i.e. prison, or physical death. Contrasting the “Death Side,” the “Life Side” acts as a rebirth of the gangsta in the first half into a politicized street figure that represented a heightened level of social consciousness.¹⁵⁵

But it’s one track in particular that represented the soundscape in prophetic ways. “Black Korea” starts with a simple, somewhat innocuous horn sample before jumping into the actual beat. The heavy baseline permeates the track in a very eerie and chaotic way which captures the bedlam of an uprising, similar to the Watts Prophets in their track “Dem Niggers Ain’t Playin.” Cube complements the baseline with a force in his voice that transmitted the rage felt toward the Korean community after Latasha Harlins’s murder.

Every time I wanna go get a fuckin' brew
I gotta go down to the store with the two
Oriental one penny countin' motherfuckers
That make a nigga mad enough to cause a little ruckus
Thinkin' every brother in the world's out to take
So they watch every damn move that I make
They hope I don't pull out a gat and try to rob
They funky little store, but, bitch, I got a job

"Look, you little Chinese motherfucker
I ain't tryin' to steal none of yo' shit, leave me alone!"
"Mother fuck you!"

Yo, yo, check it out
So don't follow me up and down your market
Or your little chop suey ass'll be a target
Of the nationwide boycott
Juice with the people, that's what the boy got
So pay respect to the black fist
Or we'll burn your store right down to a crisp
And then we'll see ya
Cause you can't turn the ghetto into black Korea

Although this track was released months before the uprising of 1992, it serves as a clear representation of the rationale behind Black South Central residents targeting Korean establish-

ments. Cube takes the listener into the liquor store with him in this track, effectively transmitting the experience of being Black in South Central Los Angeles in much more refined ways than even N.W.A. had in 1989 with “Fuck Tha Police.”

“Black Korea” demonstrated how tense the interaction between Blacks and Koreans was at the time. The almost comedic sounding horn sample represents the surface layer of the interaction; the racial slurs and profanity hurled at one another only masked the true disdain each community had for the other. The baseline underlies the track and represents what’s underneath the surface level tension. Cube captured how the Black community saw Korean immigrants as another enemy, just as they did the Los Angeles Police Department. If the police were occupying South Central in a carceral capacity, the Koreans constituted an economic occupying force. According to the logic and tradition of Black rage that uses urban uprisings as a political statement and not simply a destructive reaction can see how Cube’s threat “So pay respect to the Black fist or we’ll burn ya store right down to a crisp”, is based squarely on the economic relationship between African Americans and Korean Americans.

As social relations in Los Angeles began to unwind between 1991 and 1992, the rap game was also witnessing changes in sound and mainstream exposure, all of which came to a head in April of 1992. But it wasn’t until December of that year that the soundscape of the streets became most vivid than with Dr. Dre’s debut album, *The Chronic*. Ironically enough, *The Chronic* is the apex of gangsta rap serving as an urban news platform, but it was also the album that crossed over, effectively diluting the political potential of gangsta rap to follow. Nevertheless, the

---

Black CNN finds its most refined version of urban reportage in Dr. Dre’s sonic journey through the Los Angeles Rebellion of 1992.

**The Day the Niggaz Took Over**

The footage that captured motorist Rodney King being beaten by police placed Los Angeles at the center of the fight for justice against police brutality. Witnessing the assault in full was thought to be enough to bring the police officers on trial to justice. However, the prevailing notion of the United States judicial system that absolves police officers of any wrongdoing when interacting with Black citizens was reinforced with the verdict of “Not Guilty.” Officers Laurence Powell, Timothy Wind, Theodore Briseno, and Sgt. Stacey Koon were acquitted on the charge of assault while the jury deadlocked on Powell’s charge of excessive force. The verdict led to Los Angeles’s second urban rebellion and further elevated the status of Los Angeles based gangsta rap.

The hip-hop scene in Los Angeles became the new hotspot for stories about inner city life, while also becoming an industry powerhouse in terms of record sales, mostly attributed to ascendance of Death Row Records. Gangsta rap was becoming a mainstream phenomenon and a political lynchpin for Black respectability politics embodied by the elite of Black Los Angeles. Death Row Records was founded by Marion “Suge” Knight, SOLAR Records founder Dick Griffey, and Michael “Harry-O” Harris (who created Death Row’s parent company Godfather Entertainment alongside longtime attorney David Kenner) in 1991, and had a major role in shift-
ing the paradigm of hip-hop as a whole toward the streets. The label solidified gangsta rap as a prominent voice within hip-hop as they curated the soundtrack for the 1992 film *Deep Cover*. In the process, Dr. Dre positioned himself as a solo artist while introducing the world to Snoop Dogg on the hit title track single. The soundscape of the South Central streets was encapsulated by Death Row Records. They captured the unadulterated rage of the streets and gave listeners the opportunity to peer deeper into the social conditions that plagued South Central Los Angeles.

Although Death Row’s heyday spanned from 1992–1995, the label released an album that played a pivotal role in capturing Black Los Angeles’ soundscape of the streets. Dr. Dre’s debut release, *The Chronic*, sonically recreated Los Angeles’ second uprising and took listeners through the firebombed streets of South Central in a triumphant expression of agency. Looking through the lens of the Black CNN, *The Chronic* was the frontline report from the war zone. If there were no visuals of the Los Angeles Rebellion, *The Chronic* sonically paints the picture for its listeners. Dr. Dre may not have been as politically inclined at the time as say Ice Cube, but his ability to produce a soundtrack for the streets during such a tumultuous period in South Central highlights music’s ability to accurately reflect and respond to social conditions.

A clear example of how sonic choices can (re)create social environments is Dr. Dre’s “The Day the Niggaz Took Over” which captures the soundscape of the streets during the uprising. The track takes actual audio from people in the streets at the start of the rebellion and samples it as a way to complement the menacing beat. The use of sirens, voices, and other


159 Also see Cube, I. (1992). “We Had To Tear This Mothafucka Up.” *The Predator*. EMI Records.
sounds from the streets authenticate Dre’s street dispatch. This track employed the use of sampled audio from the day of the uprising as a retelling of the narrative. It allowed the streets to have their own version of what occurred.

I'mma say this and I'mma end mine
If you ain't down for the Africans here in the United States, period point-blank
If you ain't down for the ones that suffered in South Africa from apartheid and shit, dammit, you need to step your punk ass to the side and let us brothers, and us Africans, step in and start puttin some foot in that ass!160

Dr. Dre opened this track by using one of the most popular audio clips from the Rodney King Rebellion. The excerpt is from a Black man who rallied with the rest of the residents outside of a popular church in South Central. The church was attempting to quell the tension that was brewing just outside its walls, where speakers such as then mayor Tom Bradley urged against violence. Those gathered inside the First African Methodist Episcopal Church of Los Angeles represented a way of thinking that countered the sentiment coming from the streets. In an attempt to pacify a level of rage reminiscent of Watts roughly 27 years prior, Tom Bradley implored, ”We encourage you to express your outrage and your anger verbally, […] We don't want you to resort to violence. That would only destroy every positive thing that we have been doing.”161 But for those in the streets, violence and destruction was the only language that was understood following the “not guilty” verdict. Bradley’s presence and message highlighted a divide between the upwardly mobile African Americans of Los Angeles and the poor residents of South Central.

“The Day the Niggaz Took Over” is in many ways a culmination of The Watts Prophets “Dem Niggers Ain’t Playin’” and Ice Cube’s “Black Korea.” Although Dr. Dre famously rejected the politicization of gangsta rap in his hit single “Let Me Ride” off the same album, where he proclaimed,

No medallions, dreadlocks, or Black fists it's just
that gangster glare, with gangster raps
that gangster shit, that makes the gang of snaps,
word to the motherfucking streets

However, Dre’s decision to document the uprising in “The Day the Niggaz Took Over” was stamped as a political statement from the beginning.

The choice to use the audio clip to open the track not only spoke to the rage felt in the streets of South Central at the time but it also connected South Central to larger political struggles. The man in the streets linked the struggle of Black Angelenos to South African apartheid. South Africa officially abolished apartheid in 1991 but the struggle to overthrow the system of racialized, state-sanctioned repression served as a symbol of liberation. This soundbite represented a clear articulation of Pan Africanism which takes the suffering and subsequent liberation of Black people across the globe as interconnected.162

The production for “The Day the Niggaz Took Over” was extremely layered and sonically chaotic. Dr. Dre sonically created a cinematic treatment of the uprising as a way to transmit an alternate narrative of the rebellion. Dre’s sonic choices mirror those of Hank Shocklee in terms of remaking an environment through cramming multiple samples and soundbites into one track.

---

to reflect the moments during the revolt as authentically as possible.\textsuperscript{163} By looking at it through a
Black CNN frame, the soundscape as Dr. Dre captured it, represented the chaos of the uprising as
a liberating force. The drum pattern coupled with the synthesized sounds provided the track a
horror-film vibe and it can be argued that the idea of the “niggaz” taking over could be seen as
such. It is interesting though, how Dr. Dre’s rejection of politics and social consciousness
throughout \textit{The Chronic} contradict the function of the soundscape he presented. To put it another
way, “The Day The Niggaz Took Over” sonically reimagined the revolt as to claim agency
through the mayhem and establish, albeit indirectly, a political position for Black youth in Los
Angeles.

Dr. Dre’s voice is also an important sonic tool that makes this track so representative of
South Central during the uprising. Dre, Snoop, and Daz were able to capture the voice of the
streets in their tone and delivery, giving off the sense that they themselves were active partici-
pants in the uprising.

\begin{center}
Laugh now but cry much later
You see when niggas get together
They get mad cause they can't fade us
Like my niggas from South Central, Los Angeles
They found that they couldn't handle us
Bloods, Crips on the same squad
With the Ese's help and, nigga, it's time to rob and mob\textsuperscript{164}
\end{center}

Dre’s opening verse is an acclamation of sorts. Like the audio of the Black man in the
opening of the track, this wasn’t about sitting around being victimized by the LAPD. Dre called
upon gang unity and interracial solidarity take to the streets. This harkens back to the 1990 track

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
“We Are in the Same Gang” which featured a number of Los Angeles artists with ties to different neighborhoods and sets across the city, as well as acts from the Bay Area including MC Hammer and Shock G. This in addition to Kid Frost’s “I Got Pulled Over,” highlighted the solidarity that was on display during the uprising and was emblematic of the 1992 Watts truce that occurred following the rebellion. The track called for interracial solidarity with the “Eses” but the bridge alludes to the underlying interracial animus felt between Black Angelenos and Korean merchants:

How many niggas are ready to loot?
Yeah, so what you wanna do?
What you wanna do?
I said, how many niggas are ready to loot?

Looting on the surface was seen as a destructive act that was only damaging the very community Black people lived in. But Black Angelenos didn’t own much of the neighborhood where they resided. Black-Korean relations were already volatile following the Latasha Harlins case but the Rodney King uprising gave Black Angelenos the perfect opportunity to enact their form of street justice against who they perceived to be an economic adversary.

New Report: Nobody I Know Got Killed in South Central LA… Today Was A Good Day

The soundscape of the South Central streets was completely altered after the Los Angeles Rebellion of 1992. There was a somber tone to the music that was released after the uprising, re-


flecting the citywide tension that still remained. One track that sonically represented the tension and paranoia of the streets in the aftermath of the rebellion was Ice Cube’s “It Was A Good Day.” The track borrows from Eazy E’s “Boyz-n-the-Hood” in narrative structure but follows the post-N.W.A. gangsta rap aesthetic that sonically appealed to darker, melancholic beats to complement the street tales rappers narrated.

Moreover, “It Was A Good Day” represented a larger discussion regarding mental health issues among Blacks in South Central Los Angeles. Cube’s sonic narrative can be seen as a short break from the anxiety, and trauma that is oftentimes dismissed when discussing Black male experiences in urban environments. The streets treat vulnerability as a weakness but Ice Cube’s narrative in “It Was A Good Day” peeled back the layers of his street-oriented masculinity and let listeners in on the angst he and others like him feel within their social environment. In a way, “It Was A Good Day” constituted a four-minute sigh of relief. Throughout the track there are references to various perils awaiting Cube in the streets of South Central but as his story progresses, those anxieties fail to manifest into real, and present danger. At the end of every verse Cube ad-libs “Shit…”, representing the relief of avoiding potentially life-altering or life-ending situations.

Tommy Curry looks “Black male vulnerability” as foundational to understanding the Black male experience. Curry suggests the term captures the “disadvantages Black males endure compared with other groups; the erasure of Black males’ actual lived experience from theory; and the violence and death Black males suffer in society.”\textsuperscript{168} Black male vulnerability expresses the “sheer fungibility” of Black male existence where they are susceptible to being dehumanized, killed, or raped at any moment. Ice Cube illustrates Black male vulnerability throughout “It Was

A Good Day.” The subtext of the opening verse highlights the anxiety Cube is experiencing coupled with the somber chords of the Isley Brothers sample.

Just waking up in the morning gotta thank God
I don't know but today seems kinda odd
No barking from the dogs, no smog
And momma cooked a breakfast with no hog
I got my grub on, but didn't pig out
Finally got a call from a girl want to dig out
Hooked it up on later as I hit the do'
Thinking will i live another twenty fo'

When Cube wakes up in the morning, he says he feels odd considering the somewhat peaceful morning he’s awaken to. Despite there being a host of things going seemingly well, Cube’s tone suggest a hidden disbelief in this turn of fortune. However, his anxiety is explicitly acknowledged when he says “as I hit the do’ thinking will I live another twenty fo’.” The prospects of becoming a victim in one way or another dictated Black male mobility in South Central Los Angeles. Despite the gang truce being in effect, the truce largely involved gangs within the Watts section of Los Angeles. For other gangs spread across South Central, upholding the truce was all but circumstantial.

As the track progresses, Cube highlights more of the perils that plague South Central. His tone is much different at this point in the narrative though. Unlike the opening where he rapped in tone of disbelief at how well things are going, by the last verse of the song Cube has embraced the good fortune he’s come across.

I was glad everything had worked out
Dropped her ass off, then I chirped out
Today was like one of those fly dreams
Didn't even see a berry flashing those high beams

---

No helicopter looking for a murder
Two in the morning got the fat burger
Even saw the lights of the Goodyear Blimp
And it read Ice Cube's a pimp (yeah)
Drunk as hell but no throwing up
Half way home and my pager still blowing up
Today I didn't even have to use my A.K.
I got to say it was a good day

The story culminates with Cube avoiding any police encounters, murder, and he didn’t even have to use his AK-47 to protect himself from danger. The reality of Black (male) urbanity in South Central Los Angeles was one lived in constant fear. Tommy Curry states that Black males live in a “perpetual susceptibility to the will of others’ fears and anxieties on him and Cube’s lucky day involved navigating the streets of South Central and consequently, the will of others, without succumbing at the end.

**News Recap**

The soundscape of the streets of South Central as represented through gangsta rap provided the unfiltered truth of Black Los Angeles. Rappers and producers (re)created sonic treatments of their social landscape that acted as frontline dispatches. Gangsta rap in Los Angeles was the news channel that America could tune into as an alternative to mainstream narratives of criminality, poverty, and lawlessness. The common charge against gangsta rap is that it glorifies the social ills of post-Reagan urban America but since 1985 hip-hop in Los Angeles gave voice to the voiceless. However, as men predominated the music scene, their stories dictated the soundscape which oftentimes left women on the periphery. Despite how articulations and political ob-

---

jectives associated with South Central’s soundscape changed throughout the decades, women’s voices unfortunately became less and less audible.

As the social conditions continued to worsen throughout the 1970s and mid-1980s, hip-hop began to document the unraveling of Los Angeles’s social fabric. The sonic narratives that were released between 1985 and 1992 were a result of rappers having an outlet to broadcast their political criticism, formulate sociopolitical identities, as well as give insight into the mental instability that plagued young Black men navigating and negotiating with the streets of South Central.
What you know about the dope game? Was you born in the 80's? Did your mama smoke cocaine?

Nipsey Hussle - “Double Up”

Play your cards right or be scratching off them calendars

Jay Rock - “90059”

Los Angeles currently finds itself back at the forefront of hip-hop with the emergence of Kendrick Lamar as one of the culture’s most highly regarded MCs. But the city has had a renaissance of sorts when it comes to hip-hop with a number of artists coming out of South Central (and surrounding neighborhoods) that are imbuing the current soundscape with varying elements of self-awareness, social consciousness, and introspective bouts with post traumatic stress disorder. Artists like Jay Rock, and Nipsey Hussle paint vivid portraits of the streets and delve into the mental instability and existential anxiety that young Black men experience in the streets of South Central. Unlike the early stages of gangsta rap that sought to highlight Black male machismo in order to respond to the surrounding environment, rappers such as those mentioned above take listeners into the pitfalls of that mentality. Rather than glorify the gangsta ethos of the South Central streets, Nipsey, Jay Rock, and Kendrick offer the opportunity to see young Black men embrace their vulnerability as a means of navigating the unforgiving terrain of South Central Los Angeles.
Moreover, this newest generation of Los Angeles based rappers are the products of Reaganomics, the War on Drugs, and mass incarceration. Artists often retell personal narratives or those of loved ones, that have been absorbed into the criminal justice system or succumbed to streets. Coupled with the repressive policies of the Los Angeles Police Department, the Bill Clinton administration passed the 1994 crime bill that effectively codified the criminalization and subsequent warehousing of Black and Brown youth nationwide. Nipsey Hussle’s track “Double Up” off of his latest release, *Victory Lap* (2018) confronts the social circumstances that made South Central an urban ghetto. Nipsey’s verse signals a sense of introspection and contemplation. The lyrics are complemented by the melancholic instrumentation and chirping birds representing the juxtaposition between the idyllic Los Angeles climate and the heavy, dark traumatic thoughts Nipsey carries with him.

What you know about the dope game?
Was you born in the 80's? Did your mama smoke cocaine?
Have you ever seen a whole thang?
What you drove through to the streets cause you grew up on short change?
Fucked up when the dope age
It remind me when these rappers drop duds and they clothes change
Had the part with the low fade
I would stand in front of Nix wit my sack for the whole day
Drive-by's, that was road rage
Then we park and hop out, learn levels to this whole thang
Old school play the O'Jays
Tryna make a slow change, mama still slavin' for a low wage\(^\text{171}\)

The psychological strain that is associated with poverty is a driving force behind many of the sonic narratives presently coming out of Los Angeles. Nipsey Hussle is emblematic of this

appeal toward sonic narratives that provide personal insight rather than simply reporting on the issues in the streets.

The way current artists express the mental battles that arise as a result of the material conditions opens up the possibility of challenging concepts of masculinity, and how young Black men, in particular, relate to trauma. While rappers like Ice Cube, and Ice-T were reporting from the streets, rappers today are providing personal sonic diaries that assist listeners in understanding the source of trauma associated with Blackness in the age of mass incarceration and lets listeners peek behind the gangsta persona.

The overwhelming angst of growing up in a depoliticized, and disenfranchised environment is something Watts native Jay Rock of Top Dawg Entertainment captures unlike any other artist currently on the scene. On his last studio project, *90059* (2015), Jay Rock gives the listener a sonic snapshot of Watts in the era of mass incarceration on the title track “90059.” The Watts that Jay Rock describes is a far cry from the fervent, radical environment that spawned the Watts Prophets but similarities can be drawn along the lines of intensity, descriptiveness, and rage.

The stench from the smoker's smoke, so ferocious
Winos in the alley, nearly slumped over
Demons in they eyes, glassy, no Folgers
Wake up sober, kill you for a cold one
Snotty nosed rascals, big ratchet toters
Give it up slowly, click, clack, it's over
Something like Velcro, stay attached to corners
Hood rats plotting, riding for the blue cheese
All for the Gram, grams and a new weave
All they got is spandex pants, and some loose knees
Niggas taking chances, tip-toeing with two P's
No one's exempt, weak or strong they do bleed
Candle light vigils, closure if they do leave
Bullets have a name defined by different calibers
Concrete jungle, beware of different challengers
Gotta have the stomach for dookie bags and catheters
Play your cards right or be scratching off them calendars\footnote{172}

The last line of Jay Rock’s opening verse, “[p]lay your cards right or be scratching off them calendars,” speaks to the ever present reality of being absorbed into the carceral system. One’s inability to navigate the streets results in death, whether physical or social, and Jay Rock pulls out the underlying nihilism that many Black Angelenos of the post-Rodney King Rebellion generation grapple with.

What’s more, the recent advancements in technology have allowed for twenty-four hour access to information and content. The proliferation of videos showing unarmed Black people (men, women, children, LGBTQ) being harassed, abused, and oftentimes murdered has reinforced the anxiety associated with fragility of the Black body. Surveillance technology has also enhanced providing law enforcement agencies the ability to watch targeted communities at all times of the day. We find ourselves in a moment where the gaze upon the Black body has been magnified through social media and surveillance technologies which in turn has amplified the psychological strife that Blacks experience throughout the country.

There is a level of trauma associated with watching Black bodies handled and disposed of on a continuous loop, and also realizing that you are being surveilled. However, Kendrick Lamar’s Grammy award winning album, To Pimp A Butterfly (TPAB) (2015) featured the track “Alright” which became the theme music for the #BLACKLIVESMATTER movement. Kendrick’s track follows the tradition of resiliency and pride that is indicative of Black expres-

sive culture as a whole, but infused elements of funk and electro-hop throughout the track to sit-
uate it within a continuum of music speaking out from the streets of South Central Los Angeles.

When you know, we been hurt, been down before, nigga
When our pride was low, lookin' at the world like, "where do we go, nigga?"
And we hate Popo, wanna kill us dead in the street for sure, nigga
I'm at the preacher's door
My knees gettin' weak and my gun might blow but we gon' be alright

Kendrick’s track encapsulates the inherent optimism associated with the struggle for a
more equitable society. “Alright” confronts the reality of Black bodies being killed in the streets
through state sanctioned violence with a hopefulness reminiscent of “We Shall Overcome.”
Whether through introspection and interrogation, contemplating nihilism, or remaining faithful in
better days to come, rappers of the current South Central soundscape are coping with the ravages
of the War on Drugs, mass incarceration and heightened police surveillance.

The era of mass incarceration has opened up a number of scholarly possibilities that in-
corporate interdisciplinary approaches to analyzing and understanding the phenomenon. This
project has led me on a sonic journey back to the present moment where it is not enough to call
out the social conditions. The music today must continue to confront the psychological ramifica-
tions of the prison-industrial complex while also addressing the alarming rate of drug use among
youth. The narrative about prescription drug abuse has become one of mental health as the epi-

demic reached rural and suburban White America, but young Black and Brown kids are also becoming increasingly addicted to prescription drugs at an alarming rate.\textsuperscript{174}

Schoolboy Q, for instance, has rapped openly about abusing and selling prescription drugs throughout his career. But the underlying narrative to his music reveals someone whose decisions were often based in escaping whether it be from the law, the streets, or fame. The escapism harkens back to Los Angeles during the disco/funk era when funky, intergalactic baselines and horns forced Black Angelenos to the dance floor. The heavy sedative prescription pills and codeine cough syrup that Black youth abuse in low-income urban and suburban communities today is reflected in the current soundscape that privileges more laid back, contemplative, and melancholic sounds.

Dr. Tommy Curry of Texas A&M has an essential text entitled \textit{The Man Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood} (2017) that tackles many of the issues associated with Black manhood, and particularly Black male trauma.\textsuperscript{175} As Curry notes, there is glaring hole for more scholarship that grapples with the dilemma of Black manhood in the United States and the subordination of the Black male body under White heteropatriarchy. His text calls for a deeper interrogation of what Black manhood means in the era of mass incarceration and how scholarship on Black males has been led by more caricatures of Black manhood rather than nuanced analysis. In answering Dr. Curry’s call, I see the introspective nature in many of today’s hip-hop

\textsuperscript{174} The low-income urban and suburban phenomenon occurring in Los Angeles is a result of the gentrification happening in the central city. As the geography of Los Angeles shifts to accommodate wealthier residents, those on the lower tier of the socioeconomic ladder are being relocated to the soon-to-be desolate suburbs north of Los Angeles in Sylmar, San Fernando, Newhall, and Antelope Valley or displaced entirely. Although the changes have been rapidly occurring within the last decade, the gentrification process has been underway in Los Angeles since the mid-1990s. See: Sims, J. R. (2016). More than gentrification: Geographies of capitalist displacement in Los Angeles 1994-1999. \textit{Urban Geography}, 37(1), 26-56

artists but specifically those from Los Angeles as providing cultural products through which to analyze how the youth address Blackness, mental health, trauma, and identity in a rapidly changing socioeconomic and political climate.
Bibliography


Meadows, B. (2014). We came 2 get down: A history of pop locking in los angeles


Staiger, A. (2005). "hoes can be hoed out, players can be played out, but pimp is for life"--the pimp phenomenon as strategy of identity formation. *Symbolic Interaction*, 28(3), 407.


EDUCATION

MA Pan African Studies Anticipated Completion, Spring 2018
The South Central Soundscape: Understanding the Sounds of the Streets as Social Commentary in Postindustrial Los Angeles.
Syracuse University, Department of African American Studies

BA Philosophy and African American Studies 2014
University of Arkansas, Department of Philosophy; Department of African & African American Studies

WORK EXPERIENCE

Copyeditor — Hot in Here, Inc. Present
New York, NY

PR and Marketing Intern — J10 Music LLC 2017
New York, NY

Instructor — TRIO Upward Bound 2016
Nevada State College, Henderson, NV

Teaching Assistant — Introduction to African American Studies 2015 - 2016
Department of African American Studies, Syracuse University

GRANTS AND FELLOWSHIPS (HONORS AND AWARDS)

African American Studies Fellowship 2014-15
Syracuse University

Student Undergraduate Research Fellowship 2014
Arkansas Department of Higher Education

African American Literature and Culture Institute Summer Fellowship 2013
University of Texas, San Antonio

UNIVERSITY SERVICE/INVOLVEMENT

Department of African American Studies, Syracuse University 2015
Professor of Literature search committee

Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences, University of Arkansas 2014
Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences search committee

National Pan-Hellenic Council, University of Arkansas 2013-2014
Scholarship Chairperson

Kappa Upsilon Chapter, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., University of Arkansas 2013-2014
Recruitment/Intake Coordinator