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Sonic Lattices: Sampling as Historiography in Hip-Hop, 1973-1998

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Department of History
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Memphis, Tennessee

2026

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Bachelor of Arts degree with Honors in History

This Honors paper by Camille Lee Carleton has been read and approved for
Honors in History.

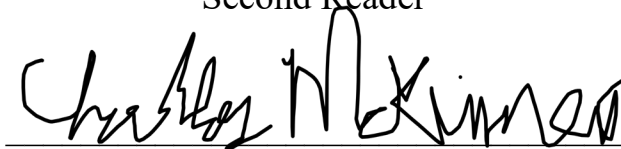
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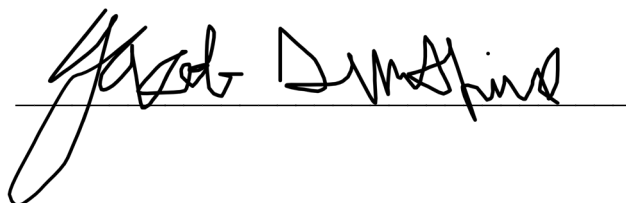
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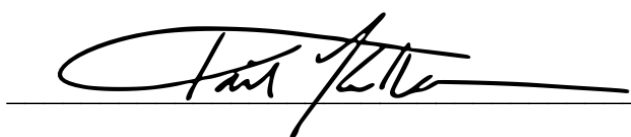
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CONTENTS

Permission Page	i
Title Page	ii
Signature Page	iii
Contents	iv
Abstract	v
Prelude	1
Track One: Sampling as Placemaking	15
Track Two: Sampling as Oral Archive	33
Track Three: Sampling as Lineage Building	51
Track Four: Sampling as a Narrative Space	73
Postlude	95
Bibliography	100

ABSTRACT

Sonic Lattices: Sampling as Historiography in Hip-Hop, 1973-1998

by

Camille Lee Carleton

My thesis project argues that sampling in hip-hop functions as a form of historiography: a sonic practice that preserves, reinterprets, and transmits Black historical experience. Emerging in the South Bronx in the 1970s amid urban disinvestment, racialized policing, and economic abandonment, hip-hop developed techniques that reworked fragments of earlier Black musical traditions—including blues, funk, soul, and jazz—into new compositions. Sampling therefore operates not only as a musical technology but also as a method of historical narration, linking past and present through the recombination of sound.

To analyze this process, the project employs the concept of rupture, drawn from the work of Tricia Rose and James Snead, to describe recurring breaks in Black social and political life produced by slavery's afterlives, segregation, state violence, and mass incarceration. I argue that sampling responds to these ruptures by transforming fragments of earlier recordings into new sonic narratives that document and reinterpret historical experience. This thesis demonstrates how sampling between the 1970s and 1990s became a practice through which marginalized voices reassemble cultural memory and assert historical agency. In doing so, sampling produces a layered musical archive in which sound operates as both historical record and mode of resistance.

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Prelude

“Harlem” or “A Dream Deferred”

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

- Langston Hughes (1951)¹

This famous poem’s final image—explosion—is the one Langston Hughes seems most interested in, and not by accident. Published in 1951, “Harlem” emerges from a shifting sociopolitical landscape in the city of its title during the late 1940s and early 1950s, and it registers that landscape not merely as subject matter but as sonic architecture. Hughes understood his poem this way, describing it as marked by “conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, and disc-tortions of the music of a community in

¹ Langston Hughes, “Harlem,” in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (New York: Henry Holt, 1951), 71.

transition.”² Each term Hughes names—nuance, interjection, riff, disc-tortion—is historiographical in their use. These are not merely descriptions of sound; they are descriptions of how a community in transition speaks back to its conditions. An “interjection” breaks into a dominant rhythm to assert presence. A “riff” repeats and reworks a fragment until it carries new meaning. A “disc-tortion”—Hughes’s strange, prescient coinage—imagines sound itself bent out of shape by the pressure of history. That Hughes anchors this truth in the language of music should not be lost on us: art that seeks to be relevant, lasting, and universal does not merely accompany historical conditions; it registers them, carrying dreams forward.

What Hughes named in 1951, hip-hop would formalize two decades later. The interjections, riffs, and disc-tortions he heard in the music of a community in transition became, in the South Bronx of the 1970s, the foundational logic of a new genre—a logic called sampling. Sampling, in its simplest, most precise terms, is the recontextualization of beats, melodies, or vocals from existing recordings to create a new song. Its role in hip-hop is to collapse time: it is an oral tradition made new, a lattice between past, present, and future that weaves storytelling, folklore, and poetry into a form of collective memory. Sampling is both a byproduct of and a contributor to culture, which continues to be created and re-created over time.³

If sampling is the engine of this collective memory, scholars have offered several frameworks for understanding how it works. For music scholar John Howland, sampling is the re-creation of culture in the sonic realm, a sort of “musical topic...meaning textures

² Scott Challener, “Langston Hughes: ‘Harlem,’” *Poetry Foundation*, January 21, 2026, [link](#).

³ Valerie Chepp, “Art as Public Knowledge and Everyday Politics: The Case of African American Spoken Word,” *Humanity & Society* 36, no. 3 (July 2012): 220, [link](#).

of music that trigger clear style and culture associations...[that] communicate through referential music topics and evocative textures and rhythms, among other stylistic markers, [and] that point towards *other* music.”⁴ These musical topics—of which sampling is a key one—allow artists to claim a lineage with the music that came before. Scholar Simon Reynolds names this same impulse from a different angle, describing sampling as a “recombinant approach to music-making that typically leads to a meticulously organized constellation of reference points and allusions, sonic lattices that span decades.”⁵ Read together, Howland and Reynolds suggest that sampling is not citation but conversation: a constant remediation of the past for the present moment.

Sampling first announces itself as a rupture within a previously established record. Musically, rupture refers to the sudden, intentional break, collapse, or interruption in an established rhythm, beat, or musical flow.⁶ While a breakbeat relies on a looped rhythm, the rupture is the sudden pause or suspension of that rhythmic fragment. However, rupture also refers to the significant breaks in social, political, and cultural life that disrupt existing power structures. Rupture marks moments where violence, dismemberment, displacement, or systemic oppression fractures communities and histories, leaving both physical and psychic scars. In the context of African American history, rupture appeared in the kidnapping of people from Africa, the crossing of the Middle Passage, the experience of slavery, the Post-Reconstructurist era marked by

⁴ John Howland, *Hearing Luxe Pop: Glorification, Glamour, and the Middlebrow in American Popular Music* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 12.

⁵ Simon Reynolds, quoted in Howland, *Hearing Luxe Pop*, 12.

⁶ “Recapping Week One: Flow, Layering and Rupture,” *Block Features* (blog), Colorado College, April 10, 2020, [link](#).

lynching and brutal sharecropping labor regimes, Jim Crow segregation, the War on Drugs, mass incarceration, and continued brutality and police violence. Rupture is not solely destructive; rupture creates the conditions for new forms of expression, memory, and resistance. Rupture is both the catalyst and the medium through which sampling performs its historiographical and reparative work.

Hughes' poem, read against the grain, also yields a powerful framework for thinking about historical rupture. What happens to a dream deferred? It explodes. The South Bronx of the 1970s was a borough in precisely this condition: its deferred promises of postwar prosperity were curdling into abandonment, disinvestment, and government-sanctioned destruction. Landlords, with the tacit approval of city officials, torched their own buildings for insurance payouts, leaving entire city blocks to rubble.⁷ The South Bronx did not merely decline; it exploded. And out of that explosion came something Hughes recognizes in his poem: a new music built from this rupture. Tricia Rose contends that sampling's ability to "create sustaining narratives, layer them, embellish them" ultimately changes moments of rupture into moments of transformation.⁸ Instead of being surprised by moments of rupture, Rose offers the following: "Be also prepared for rupture, find pleasure in it, *plan on* social rupture. When these ruptures occur, let us use them in creative ways that will prepare you for a future in which survival will demand a sudden shift in ground tactics."⁹ What Rose describes is the recontextualizing

⁷ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 15.

⁸ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 39.

⁹ Rose, *Black Noise*, 39.

of social rupture within the musical realm. Hip-hop has a tendency towards what the literary world calls intertextuality: the shaping of a text's meaning by another text.¹⁰ In the South Bronx of the 1970s, the recontextualization of social rupture happened on the dance floor.

In dancehalls both official and impromptu in the 1970s, music was played for one very important reason: dancing. Whether the crowd could groove to the beat determined how the night went for the two people orchestrating the room: the deejay (DJ) and the master of ceremonies (MC). The DJ—who spun records on the turntable—was in charge of the beat, or, more often, the overlapping and interlocking *beats* that drove the dancers. These beats were musical collages: brief, recorded segments of sound layered across two turntables, stitched together in real time.¹¹ While the DJ spun time across two live turntables to create the music, the MC animated the crowd; sometimes, he or she did this through rhythmic poetry, but more often by exhorting people to dance, broadcasting local news, and asserting his or her own skill through the microphone.¹² What happened in those dancehalls was an early form of sampling: the live extraction and recombination of recorded fragments into something new. The intertwined relationship between the DJ and the MC laid the groundwork for what became hip-hop, though the name came later than the practice itself, and the practice was far older than the 1970s.

¹⁰ “Intertextuality,” *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, accessed March 25, 2026, [link](#).

¹¹ Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 2.

¹² Schloss, *Making Beats*, 2.

Hip-hop is often dated to 1973. What the marker of 1973 doesn't tell us is that hip-hop had been in the making for centuries. To analyze sampling's role meaningfully in the 20th century, we must follow roots that stretch across the full sweep of the Black musical tradition: play songs dating to the 1600s, the folk spiritual emerging in the 1790s, syncopated dance music evolving across three centuries, and a long succession of genres—ragtime, doo-wop, urban blues, rhythm and blues, hard bop, soul jazz, and funk—each one absorbing and transforming what came before it.¹³ As 1980s-era hip-hop scholar David Toop writes, hip-hop's roots are “the deepest in all contemporary Afro-American music.”¹⁴ Hip-hop is unlike any musical form before it, and yet it holds tightly to the traditions that formed it. This is what hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose describes as a “complex fusion of orality and postmodern technology” that “blurs the distinction between literate and oral forms of communication”¹⁵ while sustaining the essential practices of African American folk orality. To understand sampling, then, we must reckon with two distinct but intertwined genealogies: one following the DJ and the sonic tradition of creative re-use, the other following the MC and the African oral tradition of verbal reconfiguration. Together, these genealogies reveal that sampling is the latest expression of a cultural logic stretching back centuries—a logic that arrived in the South Bronx not in a straight line, but by way of Kingston, Jamaica, and the West Indian diaspora that would reshape the neighborhood in the 1970s.

¹³ Portia K. Maulsby, “A Timeline of African American Music: 1600 – Present Day,” Carnegie Hall, 2025, accessed March 25, 2026, [link](#).

¹⁴ David Toop, *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 19.

¹⁵ Rose, *Black Noise*, 85.

In Jamaica, music already operated as a space for communal gathering and political expression through sound-system culture, where a mobile DJ setup allowed for songs, dancing, and deejaying to become tools for self-expression and identity-building.¹⁶ The sound-system culture in Jamaica is the most immediate precursor of hip-hop DJs in New York City.¹⁷ In a growing movement to gain independence, Jamaican artists responded to governmental policies through song, creating gathering spaces where collective memory could be made. Central to sound-system culture was a format called dub: the instrumental version of a record pressed onto its flip side, allowing for DJs to speak to the crowd without breaking the musical flow.¹⁸ Michael Veal, author of *Dub: Soundscape and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae*, argues that dub, placed into the context of Kingston, Jamaica in the 1970s, “symbolized the shattering of the *contemporary* peace, enabling an interpretation of dub as a language of musical ‘shock,’ bound closely with aesthetic values of dissonance, destruction, and decay.”¹⁹ Dub served as a form of countermemory in Jamaica, and this philosophy traveled with Jamaican immigrants directly into the South Bronx, carried most famously by Clive Campbell, better known as DJ Kool Herc.

Raised in Kingston, Jamaica and maturing in the South Bronx, Kool Herc is widely credited as hip-hop’s founder. Kool Herc spoke to Craig Werner about his

¹⁶ DiStasio, “A Soundscape Dissimulation.”

¹⁷ Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come*, 237.

¹⁸ Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come*, 237.

¹⁹ Michael E. Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 206.

foundational experience of becoming a DJ in the South Bronx, saying: “I did a lot of things from Jamaica, and I brought it here [to the South Bronx] and made it into my own little style.”²⁰ That little style would prove to be transformative. Veal offers that the central stylistic difference between Jamaican DJs and musicians like Kool Herc: “DJ Kool Herc... ‘toasted’ (rapped) over funk, soul, jazz, and rhythm-and-blues records instead of the reggae of [his] native country.”²¹ However, Veal still contends that “structurally and functionally speaking, the concept of the breakbeat in hip-hop closely parallels reggae’s concept of drum and bass.”²² Where Jamaican sound-system DJs played records in full, Herc isolated the *break*—the percussive, instrumental section of a track—and extended it by switching between two copies of the same record.²³ “In the Bronx,” Werner offers, “the most important part of the record was the break.”²⁴ This “break” is one of the sonic differences Veal identifies between dub and the early origins of hip-hop. From a sociopolitical context, hip-hop was “born of a period in which African American culture was gradually retreating in on itself under the weight of various socioeconomic pressures,” as compared to dub, a genre highlighted by “atmospheric soundscaping,” which contrasts that of hip-hop and in turn “reflects its own genesis in a period of expansive thinking, optimism, historical fantasy, and hopefulness.”²⁵ Dub’s

²⁰ Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come*, 237.

²¹ Veal, *Dub*, 247.

²² Veal, *Dub*, 247.

²³ Chang, *Can’t Stop*, 20.

²⁴ Craig Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come*, 237.

²⁵ Veal, *Dub*, 247.

“Black vision of the world” pulled sonic textures from a simultaneous “long-term historical embrace of ancestral African culture.”²⁶

Herc was raised on dub music and immersed in Jamaican sound-system culture. His musical and cultural choices reflected the dichotomy of reggae’s hopeful attitude and the harsh realities of life in the South Bronx. One cultural technique that Herc helped to modify for the South Bronx was that of the “sound-boy clash,” which hip-hop scholar Joan Morgan identifies as the Jamaican tradition of battling DJs, the direct antecedent of the deejay battle in hip-hop.²⁷ Competition, thus, traveled and evolved within the cultural incubator of the South Bronx: Toop notes that this competitive spirit “fostered an attitude of creating from limited materials.”²⁸ Sampling, in other words, was from its very beginning a practice of making something from the remainders of the rupture.

While the DJ genealogy runs through Jamaica, the MC’s genealogy runs deeper still. Rap is ingrained within a much longer lineage, invigorating forms such as disco, street funk, radio DJs, early rock ‘n’ roller Bo Diddley, the bebop singers, acapella and doo-wop groups, prison and army songs, signifying and the dozens, and institution of the griot from Mali, Senegal, and the Gambia.²⁹ The griot figure of the Mande people might serve as the most interesting historical comparison for the 1970s-era MC: Toop writes that in the savannah belt of West Africa, “the griot is a professional singer, in the past often associated with a village [...] who combines the functions of a living history book

²⁶ Veal, *Dub*, 247.

²⁷ Joan Morgan, *She Begat This: 20 Years of The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 8.

²⁸ Toop, *Rap Attack*, 20.

²⁹ Toop, *Rap Attack*, 19.

and newspaper with vocal and instrumental virtuosity.”³⁰ The griot’s role in his or her cultural setting was much like the role of MC: someone who provided knowledge of local and historical events through vocal virtuosity. Put simply, the role of the griot in his or her community was to collapse time; to, as Paul Winley writes in *Savannah Syncopators*, “know many traditional songs without error [...], extemporize on current events, chance incidents, and the passing scene.”³¹ This is, in essence, a description of the MC. Journalist Touré reinforces the continuity: hip-hop carries “a strong memoiristic impulse,” he writes, with MCs functioning simultaneously as autobiographer, reporter, and oral historian of their communities.³² The MC, like the griot, is a keeper of collective memory. Sampling is the tradition through which that memory is stored and transmitted.

Between the West African griot and the South Bronx MC lies a chain of verbal forms that transmitted this oral tradition across centuries. The toast, a long, rhymed narrative poem featuring boasting, vulgarity, and sharp wit, was recited in spaces of enforced idleness like street corners and prison cells, and is one such form.³³ The dozens, a semi-ritualized contest in which opponents trade insults until one concedes, is another.³⁴ Both encode the same values: verbal dexterity as social power, competition as community, and verbal wit as the primary weapon available. These values flow directly

³⁰ Toop, *Rap Attack*, 32.

³¹ Paul Winley, quoted in Toop, *Rap Attack*, 32

³² Touré, quoted in Toop, *Rap Attack*, 40.

³³ Toop, *Rap Attack*, 40.

³⁴ Toop, *Rap Attack*, 40.

into the MC battle tradition, and find their mythological embodiment in the figure of the Signifying Monkey.

The Signifying Monkey is crucial to understanding the formation of hip-hop for two reasons: the symbolism the story represents, and the verbal wit of the Monkey himself. Rooted in the mythology of the Yoruba people of West Africa, the Monkey is descended from the deity Esu-Elegbara and functions as a trickster figure who is cunning, elusive, and dangerous with language. As the story evolved and adapted within Black American culture, the Monkey came to represent the marginalized voice, while the Lion, who is physically dominant but intellectually outmatched, came to represent various forms of white authority. The Monkey never defeats the Lion through force. He defeats him through words. The verbal wit expressed by the Monkey is what Black studies scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls “signifyin’.” Gates coined this concept in 1988 in his work *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*.

“Signifyin’,” in simple terms, is vernacular trickery; Gates argues that the creativity and wit of the monkey’s speech emphasizes language *use* over language *meaning*.³⁵

“Signifyin’” is to say one thing and mean another: this highlights three core values in the Black cultural tradition: indeterminacy, wordplay, and most importantly to hip-hop: reconfiguration. Gates theorizes that signifyin’ relies on the following: “citing and re-writing well-known symbols, metaphors, or objects.”³⁶ We can draw two conclusions

³⁵ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

³⁶ Gates as quoted in Richard L. Schur, “Critical Race Theory, Signifyin’, and Cultural Ownership,” in *Parodies of Ownership: Hip-Hop Aesthetics and Intellectual Property Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 30.

from Gates' theory of "signifyin'" to help us better understand the theoretical influences on hip-hop culture. The first is that within forms of Black vernacular speech—like music—it often does not matter who the very first artist was to coin a certain idea, phrase, or *beat*. Instead, what matters more is how the art is used to convey a new meaning and make a new connection.³⁷ Black studies scholar Richard L. Schur asserts the following about the practice of signifyin': "Signifyin' functions like a trademark or copyright symbol. A successful instance of signifyin' constitutes an act of rhetorical ownership over an object, a text, or even an individual."³⁸ Signifyin', as identified by Gates and expanded by Schur, allows Black Americans an "alternative property-ownership system [...] which allows participants [...] to write over an unjust distribution of intellectual and cultural resources."³⁹

Sampling is signifyin' made sonic. It is the point at which both genealogies converge: the DJ's practice of isolating and recombining recorded sound, and the MC's tradition of verbal reconfiguration inherited from the griot, the toasts, the dozens, and the Signifying Monkey. To sample is to take a fragment of musical history and, through its displacement and reassembly, collapse time. As Toop offers: "...the endless high-speed collage of musical fragments leaves you breathless, searching for reference points. The beauty of dismembering hits lies in displacing familiarity."⁴⁰ This displacement and

³⁷ Schur, "Critical Race Theory," 30.

³⁸ Schur, "Critical Race Theory," 34.

³⁹ Schur, "Critical Race Theory," 34.

⁴⁰ Toop, *Rap Attack*, 18.

dismemberment of song reflects the social and cultural conditions of the South Bronx in the 1970s.

As a practice born from and shaped by successive ruptures in Black history, sampling functions simultaneously as a record of violence and an act of resistance, reassembling the dismembered cultural body and extending the oral tradition into a technological age. Langston Hughes heard it first. The interjections, the riffs, the distortions of a community in transition—he named them in 1951, before the technology existed to formalize them, and before the South Bronx had yet exploded into the rubble from which hip-hop would emerge. What follows in these five chapters is the story of what happened when that explosion became a method. DJ Kool Herc established sampling's foundational logic in the South Bronx parties of the mid-1970s, transforming the break into an instrument of communal memory. Public Enemy's dense sonic collages of the late 1980s turned sampling into explicit political commentary, assembling the sounds of Black America's past into urgent arguments about its present. N.W.A. used sampling to document the specific violence of life under aggressive policing in Los Angeles, creating a sonic archive of a community under siege. Dr. Dre's G-funk productions recontextualized the funk tradition to construct a new sonic identity for Black Los Angeles, demonstrating sampling's capacity for cultural reclamation. And Lauryn Hill's work on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* used sampling to recover and center the Black female voice within a genre that had frequently marginalized it, asking—through sound—whose history gets preserved and on whose terms. Together, their work answers the question Hughes posed half a century earlier. A dream deferred does explode. And sampling is the sound of that explosion gathered up, listened to, and replayed—one of the

most sophisticated historiographical practices of the twentieth century, rooted in the oldest of human traditions, and urgently alive in the present.

Track One: Sampling as Place-Making

The year was 1973. The South Bronx borough in New York City was undergoing extreme changes—politically, economically, and perhaps most consequently, musically. As Jamaican sound-system culture converged with Bronx house parties, a new musical tradition began to take shape. It was not yet named, but within a decade the tradition became hip-hop, and the deliberate rupture and reuse of sound on the turntable grew into sampling. The artists at the center of this emergence were young Black men, often from Afro-Caribbean backgrounds, arriving in the Bronx at a precise historical moment to pursue economic opportunity. The transformation of turntablism into hip-hop culture occurred neither all at once, nor did it emerge fully formed from a single house party. Rather, the act of sampling developed gradually and intentionally, built one break at a time by artists with distinct styles and messages. What united them was a shared refusal to remain silent in the face of enforced economic and political rupture. Through sampling, these artists responded to rupture by speaking into it, using sound as a historiographical tool. They recontextualized their present by trying on different musical textures of the past, rupturing them into fragments, and putting them back together into something new. This story often begins with DJ Kool Herc, whose looping of breakbeats extended the energy of the dancefloor and laid the groundwork for sampling as a practice of placemaking. Afrika Bambaataa expanded on this foundation, reimagining what place could mean for Bronx youth and mobilizing sampling to help give hip-hop its cultural form. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five further broadened this vision, bringing it into the commercial sphere with “The Message,” a record that broadcast what Herc and

Bambaataa had already made clear: the South Bronx would not stand aside but would answer rupture with creation. In the 1970s South Bronx, sampling emerged as a practice of placemaking through which Black artists transformed economic and social rupture into a generative force, using the fragmentation and recombination of sound to assert presence, produce meaning, and reframe their historical moment.

DJ Kool Herc sought to actively create place for both himself and his community by building cultural memory through sound. Author Barbara Ewell defines this concept as “placemaking.”⁴¹ She defines placemaking through the act of storytelling: “The stories we tell both ourselves and to one another do more than rewrite the past; [these stories] can create places.”⁴² Placemaking is not only about the physical environment, but about the stories communities tell to connect themselves to those environments. Writer Wanda Rushing argues that “place is also a site of imagination, constructed through symbolic work. Place exists in the mind as well as on the land.”⁴³ For Herc, placemaking occurred through the storytelling of his music. He was reclaiming place through sound, and in the process creating collective memory.

The first coverage of Herc’s sampling arrived via *Billboard* and *Amsterdam News* in the summer of 1978. *Billboard* writer Robert “Rocky” Ford Jr. published an article titled “B-Beats Bombarding Bronx: Mobile DJ Starts Something With Oldie R&B

⁴¹ Barbara C. Ewell, “Changing Places: Women, the Old South; or, What Happens When Local Color Becomes Regionalism,” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 42, no. 2 (1997): 161. [link](#)

⁴² Ewell, “Changing Places,” 161.

⁴³ Wallerstein, quoted in Wanda Rushing, *The Paradox of Place: Racial Politics and the Changing Meaning of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 20.

Disks.”⁴⁴ In “B-Beats,” Ford investigates why the disco retailer Downstairs Records in the South Bronx was suddenly getting calls for obscure “R&B cutouts.”⁴⁵ The majority of these calls were coming from young, Black disco DJs from the Bronx.⁴⁶ What Ford sought to find out was why these DJs were calling around for such obscure records. Upon speaking with Downstairs Record’s new-hire (to help with the uptick in calls), Elroy Meighan, Ford would get his answer from Kool Herc.

Herc, a Jamaican immigrant, had become somewhat of a phenomenon by the time he reached his twenties. Nelson George’s 1978 *Amsterdam News* article, “D.J. Herc and his ‘B-Beats’” describes him in this way: “He’s tall, 26, and quietly calm in a way that makes adolescent girls giggle...His reputation as a party master is unsurpassed in the South Bronx.”⁴⁷ This title of “party master” was perhaps anointed several years back, in 1973. Six years before the release of Ford’s article, Herc held a back-to-school fundraiser party for his little sister, Cindy, who needed money for school supplies.⁴⁸ Cindy knew her older brother was a talented DJ from his time growing up in Jamaica, immersed in the sound-system culture of Kingston, so she tasked him with DJing for the party, where she charged twenty-five cents for girls to attend, and fifty cents for boys.⁴⁹ Crucially, both

⁴⁴ Robert Ford Jr., “B-beats Bombarding Bronx: Mobile DJ Starts Something With Oldie R&B Disks,” *Billboard*, July 1, 1978, 65, [link](#).

⁴⁵ Ford, “B-beats Bombarding Bronx,” 61.

⁴⁶ Ford, “B-beats Bombarding Bronx,” 61.

⁴⁷ Nelson George, “D.J. Herc and His ‘B-Beats,’” *Amsterdam News*, July 1, 1978.

⁴⁸ Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 67.

⁴⁹ Chang, *Can’t Stop*, 67.

Cindy and Herc needed the party to go well. For Cindy, it was to raise enough money for her school supplies, and for Herc, it was to show off his new DJing technique—the Merry-Go-Round.

Herc’s Merry-Go-Round technique entailed a cultural fusion of his Jamaican background and years spent in the South Bronx. Veal illustrates Herc’s fusion as “transplanting the Jamaican sound system model to New York city,” citing that the roots of dub “remain discernable in hip-hop.”⁵⁰ George writes that one of the reasons for Herc’s success as a DJ was because he was also a different kind of rapper: “Herc [...] isn’t a rapid rapper who keeps your head spinning with patter. No, Herc is a musical innovator of the turntables.”⁵¹ The turntable was an essential part of creating beats in hip-hop. In the 1970s, it served as a vinyl-playing device that DJs, like Herc, used as a musical instrument, not just a record-player. Herc’s party-master status is because of how he utilized the turntable. His Merry-Go-Round technique, though officially named later, had one primary goal: prolonging the *break*. The “break” is the part of any song where the drums, bass, or instruments take over. In speaking with hip-hop scholar Jeff Chang, Herc identifies this moment as the most important part of a record: “The moment when the dancers would get really wild was in a song’s short instrumental break, when the band would drop out and the rhythm section would get elemental. Forget melody, chorus, songs—it was all about the groove, building it, keeping it going.”⁵² Herc needed the crowd to keep dancing. In order to do so, he used two copies of the same record, or

⁵⁰ Veal, *Dub*, 247.

⁵¹ George, “D.J. Herc.”

⁵² DJ Kool Herc, quoted in Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 79.

similar records with breaks, on two different turntables, and as the break ended on one record, he would immediately mix in the break from the other, allowing him to “loop” the records together.⁵³ Hence why he was calling in all those requests to Downstairs Records for such specific R&B tracks; he was crate-digging, looking for breaks similar enough to each other that could be looped infinitely, to keep the crowd dancing, and the party going.

Herc explained to Ford the labor behind finding so many b-beats to string together, saying, “On most records, people have to wait through a lot of strings and singing to get to the good part of the record...But I give it to them all up front.”⁵⁴ George further explains this phenomenon: “Herc’s DJ experience told him that the young dancers of the Bronx loved “breaks” in records; sections that deviate from the melody to showcase energetic Latin percussion work.”⁵⁵ Herc’s DJ innovation, as described by George and Ford, illustrates the earliest documented use of sampling. Though not called sampling just yet, what Herc was doing—isolating a break and pulling break-beats from other songs to create one continuous loop—is the first iteration of one of the foundational tools of hip-hop. Importantly, Herc’s motivation for his new musical phenomenon wasn’t to make it big in the industry—it was for his neighbors, and friends, and family to keep dancing. It was to raise money for his little sister’s school supplies, and to participate in the act of placemaking amidst enforced rupture from neighborhood ties.

⁵³ Rock Hall EDU, “Rock Hall EDU Presents DJ Kool Herc’s ‘Merry-Go-Round’ Technique,” YouTube video, 2024, [link](#).

⁵⁴ Ford, “B-beats Bombarding Bronx,” 61.

⁵⁵ George, “D.J. Herc.”

Herc's motivation to create place was in part due to the destruction of place identity in the South Bronx in the 1970s. Cultural geographer Timothy Creswell offers that "there are two basic requirements that precede our understanding of place identity; the *meaning* constructed by residents, media, politicians, and local culture and the *materiality* of the place, which arguably includes tangible cultural productions."⁵⁶ The narratives articulated about the South Bronx by the media and local politicians was that this blighted part of the borough was not worth saving. The meaning constructed by Herc and the community that he gathered at his parties was the exact opposite of this narrative. He crafted new narratives out of sound, and sampling was the mechanism through which that alternative meaning took material form.

If Herc created place through sampling, Afrika Bambaataa defined the new place of the South Bronx. Bambaataa, similar to Herc, liked a good party. Yet Bambaataa found himself involved with The Black Spades, a Black gang in the South Bronx whose influence peaked in 1973, right around the same time Herc was throwing that infamous house party for his sister, Cindy.⁵⁷ Gang life dominated the South Bronx of the 1970s, working as an apparatus to take back control from a place rupturing from within. Radically transformed in the postwar years, the neighborhood's makeup shifted from a primarily white, Irish, and Jewish middle-class enclave to one that absorbed nearly 100,000 Black Americans between 1940 and 1950.⁵⁸ Beginning in the 1960s, Jamaican

⁵⁶ Timothy Creswell, quoted in Rushing, *The Paradox of Place*, 17.

⁵⁷ Chang, *Can't Stop*, 67.

⁵⁸ Mark Naison, "The Multiracial Bronx: A Unique Cultural Incubator in Post War America," *Occasional Essays* 2 (January 28, 2019), [link](#).

immigrants followed, driven by political and economic instability at home and enabled by the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act.⁵⁹ By 1980, over 200,000 Jamaican immigrants had settled in America, more than half of them in New York City.⁶⁰

What both groups found in the South Bronx, however, was not relief but a different version of the hardship they had fled. The borough was subject to sweeping policies of “benign neglect,” a policy of non-interference enforced by President Richard Nixon. Jeff Chang quotes New York City’s Democratic senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who, when questioned about the ethics of displacing so many Black and brown folks in the South Bronx, stated: “The time may have come when the issue of race could benefit from a period of “benign neglect.””⁶¹ This policy of non-interference saw the South Bronx lose over 43,000 housing units and 600,000 manufacturing jobs within ten years, and the average income sat at roughly \$2,430, which was half of the New York City average and only 40% of the country’s national average.⁶² A neighborhood clinic director in the South Bronx put the conditions of the borough quite simply: “The South Bronx was nothing less than a Necropolis—a city of death.”⁶³

Within this city of death, DJs—placemakers—like Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa served as vital sources of community for the Black youth around them.

⁵⁹ Marco Di Stasio, “A Soundscape Dissimilation: The Emergence of Hip Hop in the 1970s Bronx and Its Jamaican Roots in Cultural Adaptation and Transformation,” *Mobility and Social Transformation*, University of Trento, 2024, ResearchGate, [link](#).

⁶⁰ Di Stasio, “A Soundscape Dissimilation.”

⁶¹ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, quoted in Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 14.

⁶² Chang, *Can’t Stop*, 14 & 16.

⁶³ Dr. Wise, quoted in Chang, *Can’t Stop*, 16.

Bambaataa's involvement with the Black Spades changed in the mid-1970s. Tired of the violence his position as a Black Spades warlord inflicted, Bambaataa shifted his status in the community into someone working to redefine the definition of place imposed by the local and federal government. Bambaataa founded Universal Zulu Nation, which Chang describes as being "the first hip-hop institution, an organization that tried to raise consciousness like it raised the roof."⁶⁴ This act of "raising consciousness" was Bambaataa's work within the community to change the South Bronx from being gang-centric to party-centric. The borough was a place under siege, but Bambaataa created and cemented hip-hop culture as the way out in the 1970s. Through djing, mcing, b-boying, and graffiti writing, Afrika Bambaataa was the missionary of early hip-hop, ready to take his message to all four corners of the globe.⁶⁵

The message endured repeated ruptures both within and outside of the music. Chang reminds us that in 1976, "The Transit Authority established a four-man Anti Graffiti Squad, which quickly issued a misleading "Profile of a Common Offender."⁶⁶ Graffiti was a core tenet of the message Bambaataa was working to spread. However, the Transit Authority was committed to cracking down on this seemingly-nefarious crime, with the profile reading: "*Sex* - Male. *Race* - Black, Puerto Rican, other. *Age* - Variable, predominantly 13 to 16 years. *Dress* - Carries package or paper bag, long coat in cold weather. *Occupation* - Student (lower socioeconomic background."⁶⁷ This "Profile of a

⁶⁴ Chang, *Can't Stop*, 90.

⁶⁵ Jeff Chang, "How Hip-Hop Got Its Name: The Origins of the Phrase Go Deeper than Sugarhill Gang," *Versions: A Series on Genre, Form, and Style*, Medium, October 10, 2014, [link](#).

⁶⁶ Chang, *Can't Stop*, 135.

⁶⁷ Chang, *Can't Stop*, 90.

Common Defender” targeted virtually all Black and brown teenagers in the South Bronx. Chang suggests that the police were thus able to make thousands of arrests, “stepping up the intelligence of people of color—monitoring their crews, confiscating black books, interrogating graffiti perps and raiding homes.”⁶⁸ Although the police were not directly enforcing legislation against the act of sampling, the people and the culture in which sampling existed were already being criminalized. Despite what Bambaataa was seeking to build, external ruptures continued. City forces seemed intent on the South Bronx dying.

Chang likens the South Bronx to the “unreconstructed South,” referencing the Reconstruction era in the southern United States in the 1800s. He describes the borough as a “spectacular set of ruins, a mythical wasteland, an infectious disease, and a condition of poverty and social collapse more than a geographical place.”⁶⁹ This was the deliberate abandonment of the neighborhood by the city and federal government. One of the factors contributing to the abandonment of the neighborhood was Robert Moses’ Cross Bronx Expressway. This six-lane highway stretches across the South Bronx, linking Manhattan and Queens.⁷⁰ However, in order to link these boroughs, the Expressway tore through residential communities in the Bronx, displacing thousands and accelerating the neighborhood’s physical and economic collapse. In addition to the Expressway, Chang reminds us that between 1973 and 1977, 30,000 fires were set in the South Bronx alone.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Chang, *Can’t Stop*, 135.

⁶⁹ Chang, *Can’t Stop*, 135.

⁷⁰ Ginia Bellafante, “Would the Cross Bronx Expressway Destroy the Neighborhood a Second Time?,” *New York Times*, August 22, 2025, [link](#).

⁷¹ Chang, *Can’t Stop*, 17.

These fires were a direct consequence of the larger urban abandonment that was symbolized and propelled by the Cross Bronx Expressway. The South Bronx was left to burn.

Author Jill Jonnes furthers this claim, describing the slum clearance program which added further displacement to the neighborhood. She writes: “You had public housing and highways...and then, on top of those, which were destabilizing enough, you added a deliberate program of slum clearance to displace the worst.”⁷² The straightforward definition of slum clearance defines it as an “urban renewal strategy involving the systematic demolition of substandard, overcrowded, or dilapidated housing, typically initiated by the government.”⁷³ However, slum clearance in the South Bronx—and across many other racially-mixed neighborhoods across the United States—held much deeper significance than just demolition. Alexander Van Hoffman, researcher of slums in post-war America, writes that “journalists of the day viewed postwar inner-city neighborhoods through the lens of the Progressive Era reformers,” and that these journalists were “prejudiced against the newcomers, whom they considered uneducated and uncivilized.”⁷⁴ Hoffman continues, offering that the official response to the “postwar slum was to destroy it and build something else—a physical cure for physical problems.”⁷⁵ Yet this demolition and urban renewal strategies instead targeted working-

⁷² Jill Jonnes, quoted in Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 13.

⁷³ Alexander von Hoffman, “The Enigma of the Slum in Postwar America,” *Housing Perspectives* (blog), Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies, November 21, 2024, [link](#).

⁷⁴ Hoffman, “The Enigma.”

⁷⁵ Hoffman, “The Enigma.”

class and low-income families, increasing “segregation of urban dwellers by race and class.”⁷⁶ However, Hoffman notes that even amidst slum clearance programs, residents in “postwar slum communities produced some of America’s most cherished popular music, including rhythm and blues, gospel, mambo, country, and *conjunto*.”⁷⁷ Between the 1940s-1980s, the South Bronx endured the worst of urban displacement at the hands of the city government. This urban displacement was indeed a moment of rupture, but one that South Bronx residents did not let go by without a musical innovation.

The South Bronx exited the ‘70s with foundational, yet scattered, journalism on this new phenomenon created by artists like Herc and Bambaataa. As the 1980s opened up, journalism began to pick up on the movement happening in the South Bronx, starting with *Village Voice* writer Steven Hager’s 1982 article, “Afrika Bambaataa’s Hip-Hop.”⁷⁸ Hager’s article brought forth the traditions and practices of Herc and Bambaataa—amongst many others—into the mainstream, shedding light on how the Black and brown youth of an abandoned necropolis had displaced gang violence through five essential practices, as named by Bambaataa: DJing, rapping, breaking, graffiti writing, and knowledge.⁷⁹ Bambaataa is credited with naming the subculture forming in New York City *hip-hop* itself as revealed by Hager’s investigative journalism. Bambaataa told him: “Well, I chose the name ‘hip-hop’ because of the clichés brothers was using in their rhymes [...] And I liked the sound of what they were saying. And when the media come

⁷⁶ Hoffman, “The Enigma.”

⁷⁷ Hoffman, “The Enigma.”

⁷⁸ Steven Hager, “Afrika Bambaataa’s Hip-Hop,” *Village Voice*, September 21, 1982, [link](#).

⁷⁹ Chang, “How Hip-Hop.”

to speak to me—cause we could have called it “the go-off,” “the boyoying,” “the scat rap,” and all that type—but I like that sound. I said, ‘This is hip-hop and when you feel that music you gotta hop to it, so that’s when we called it ‘hip-hop.’”⁸⁰ Bambaataa’s commentary here illustrates that the core of hip-hop culture is hip-hop music, created by the act of sampling.

Scholar Clarence Major connects Bambaataa’s term ‘hip-hop’ to the Wolof verb *hepi*, which means “to see.” The Wolof people are an ethnic group originating from the Senegambia region of West Africa, particularly known for their griot storytelling culture, with a diaspora in several other West African countries and throughout the United States. John Leland furthers Major’s claim, writing the following in *Hip: A History*: “Hip is a term of enlightenment, cultivated by slaves from the West African Nations of Senegal and Gambia.”⁸¹ Hip-hop, then, sees into the past in order to envision a better future. Grandmaster Flash took this better future into his own hands as the 1980s bore on.

Grandmaster Flash, born Joseph Saddler, moved from Barbados to the Bronx with his family as a child.⁸² He studied how local DJs on the scene—including Herc and Bambaataa—used turntable-based techniques to loop breaks together. In doing so, Flash built on Herc’s breakbeat technique and helped pioneer the use of the turntable as an instrument itself. Flash pioneered many of the techniques that would become mainstream turntable lingo like backspinning, scratching, and mixing—all tools he used to manipulate vinyl records in search of the perfect beat—into recognized parts of musical

⁸⁰ Steven Hager, “Afrika Bambaataa’s Hip-Hop.”

⁸¹ Chang, “How Hip-Hop.”

⁸² TeachRock, “Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five,” TeachRock, January 4, 2017, [link](#).

language.⁸³ He refined Herc's sampling technique, "backspinning and juggling the break between turntables in rapid fashion."⁸⁴ Additionally, Flash "built a cross-fader system so he could monitor the mix on headphones and switch channels quickly, essentially inventing the [modern] turntable setup."⁸⁵ Flash joined up with Keef Cowboy (Keith Wiggins), Melle Mel (Melvin Glover), and Mel's brother Kidd Creole (Nathaniel Glover Jr.), who called themselves "The Three MCs," before expanding in 1978 to add Scorpio (Eddie Morris) and Rahiem (Guy Williams), officially becoming Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five.⁸⁶

Grandmaster Flash and Melle Mel spoke with CBS News in a 1983 interview, exploring what the Furious Five aimed to do with their work. Grandmaster Flash described his primary role in the group: "My job is taking different parts of records and seggin'⁸⁷ them with other parts of records to make a completely new record."⁸⁸ What Grandmaster Flash illustrates here is early sampling being discussed on live TV. The reporter then asked Flash why he hadn't moved out of the Bronx following the success of his record. He said: "I love the Bronx. That's my environment; that's where I grew up. I would feel uncomfortable moving [...] See, in the ghetto, it's like I can relate to these

⁸³ TeachRock, "Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five."

⁸⁴ TeachRock, "Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five."

⁸⁵ TeachRock, "Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five."

⁸⁶ TeachRock, "Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five."

⁸⁷ Grandmaster Flash uses the term "seggin'" to illustrate how he connected different break-beats.

⁸⁸ CBS News, "From the Archives: Hip-Hop's Early Years with Grandmaster Flash, Queen Latifah, Ice-T and More," YouTube video, 1983, [link](#).

people better [...] It's where we get our material."⁸⁹ Ten years after the infamous Kool Herc party, Herc's sampling invention had taken root in the South Bronx. His placemaking method of constructing place through sound not only allowed for his new musical tradition to evolve into essential practices of hip-hop djing and production, but his work further allowed for Flash to build on it. What Flash's statement here illustrates to us is that place mattered to the South Bronx. Flash was just as intent on telling the world how tough life was in the Bronx, but he was determined as ever to stay. He goes on: "Like if we were to leave that [the Bronx], that's where our energy was created. And the thing with our energy is, you can't take that with you. If you leave our area, it's gone."⁹⁰ Flash directly connects place as the essence of his work. Place is where his energy, inspiration, and creativity flow from. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's 1983 release, "The Message," reflected on how the ruptured place of the South Bronx impacted the daily lives of the borough's residents.

"The Message" is a major departure from previous hip-hop records released throughout the 1970s. From a musical standpoint, "The Message" was unlike many of the earlier hip-hop recordings, as it was not built around an obvious sample of a previously-used breakbeat. Instead of encouraging its listeners to drop everything and dance, "The Message" reveals the grittiness of the urban ghetto in the early 1980s. The track depicts the life of a man living in the Bronx, with the chorus reading: "It's like a jungle sometimes/ It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under."⁹¹ By illustrating the

⁸⁹ CBS News, "From the Archives."

⁹⁰ CBS News, "From the Archives."

⁹¹ Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, "The Message," single (Sugarhill Records, 1983), [link](#).

Bronx as “the jungle,” Flash and the Furious Five invoke the rupture happening in their neighborhood, and question if their music is enough to keep them from “going under.” One of the group’s previous records, 1979’s “Superrappin,” introduces the group and their primary message: “We are the best as you can see/ So eliminate the possibility/ That to be an E-M-C-E-E/ Is not a threat to society.”⁹² With this lyric, Flash and the Furious Five speak directly to people like those of the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) who, through their crackdown on graffiti culture, criminalized the creativity of Black and brown people in the Bronx. Flash samples the entirety of the third verse of “Superrappin” on “The Message,” giving the listener a window through which to view the Bronx’s residents. Melle Mel raps: “A child is born with no state of mind/ Blind to the ways of mankind,” followed a few lyrics down with, “You’ll grow into the ghetto livin’ second-rate/And your eyes will sing a song called deep hate.”⁹³ By sampling this verse from “Superrappin,” Flash and the Furious Five connect the troubles of the 1970s into the ‘80s. The rupture has not dissipated, but neither have those with the power to speak against it. “The Message” provides a social commentary for its listeners, reminding them of the cruel fate that awaits many in the Bronx; by the end of the third verse, Melle Mel raps: “Bein’ used and abused to serve like hell/ ‘Til one day, you was found hung dead in the cell/ It was plain to see that your life was lost/ You was cold and your body swung back and forth/ But now your eyes sing the sad, sad song/ Of How you lived so fast and died so young.”⁹⁴ The man Melle Mel raps about could be any Black man—and that’s the

⁹² Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “Superappin’,” single (Enjoy Records, 1979), [link](#).

⁹³ Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “The Message.”

⁹⁴ Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “The Message.”

point. Even Melle Mel raps in the third-person, for the narrative voice of the song to commit suicide on the track itself is revolutionary for 1983. That's "The Message:" the rupture imposed on the South Bronx overdetermines an urban landscape of death and destruction.

Sociologist Loïc Wacquant offers us another lens through which to view "The Message" with his theory of the hyperghetto. For Wacquant, the hyperghetto is characteristically different from a traditional ghetto of the 1960s; while the ghetto typically had internal economic diversity, the hyperghetto primarily targeted impoverished Black folks.⁹⁵ He identifies the hyperghetto as a "city within a city," operating as a space of concentrated social abandonment, marked by high insecurity and urban desolation. This space has been economically abandoned, forced into extreme social isolation, and stripped of government support. Most importantly, Wacquant argues that the hyperghetto is poverty penalized: in such areas, the state acts through the police to enforce control, rather than relying on social welfare programs. For the people living in the hyperghetto, the *place* around them slowly corrodes their selfhood.

This corrosion is enforced by billboards such as the following, placed in one of Chicago's hyperghettos: "An ominous placard blaring "Addiction *is* Slavery" over a Black hand clutching drug pills."⁹⁶ This language not only links the rising addiction rates to enslavement, but further suggests that the people who suffer from addiction are to blame for their own predicament. Wacquant argues that "their bondage is portrayed as the

⁹⁵ Loïc Wacquant, "Urban Desolation and Symbolic Denigration in the Hyperghetto," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (September 2010): 215, [link](#).

⁹⁶ Wacquant, "Urban Desolation," 217.

product, not of subordination to a (white) master...but of a relation of self to self.”⁹⁷ This is the exact corrosion “The Message” fights against, telling the wider world about the policies put in place that specifically sabotaged majority Black and brown neighborhoods like the South Bronx, stripping them of their housing, of their jobs, and of their economic ability to move up the social ladder.

All of these artists—Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five—engage with sampling as a way to placemake amid rupture. One of the commonalities among these artists in their early sampling work is how repetition functions. Sociologist James A. Snead identifies repetition as a fundamental part of Black music. He argues that in Black culture, “repetition means that *the thing* circulates.”⁹⁸ “The thing” is a continuously circulating, rhythmic, or ritualistic element, like the beats used by the artists above. Further, “the thing” is never truly finished, allowing for it to be picked back up again.⁹⁹ Snead continues, asserting that if there is a goal in Black culture, “it is always deferred; it continually “cuts” back to the start, in the musical meaning of “cut” as an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break.”¹⁰⁰ This “cut” is what Black culture circulates around, as Snead suggests, “Black culture, in the “cut,” builds accidents into its *coverage*, almost as if to control their unpredictably...this magic

⁹⁷ Wacquant, “Urban Desolation,” 217.

⁹⁸ James A. Snead, “On Repetition in Black Culture,” *African American Review* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 648–656, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/687955>.

⁹⁹ Snead, “On Repetition,” 650.

¹⁰⁰ Snead, “On Repetition,” 651.

of the “cut” attempts to confront *rupture* not by covering [it] over, but by making room for [it] inside the system itself.”¹⁰¹

Where urban policy sought to erase Black continuity, Black cultural practice did not attempt to repair the break in linear or progressive terms. Instead, as Snead argues, hip-hop illustrates how Black culture circulates around this rupture, building it into the systemic logic of the music itself.¹⁰² The South Bronx did not produce hip-hop despite rupture—the artists of the borough instead learned a cultural logic equipped to grapple with it. Snead offers a critical light for viewing hip-hop in this way: “In Black culture, the thing (the ritual, the dance, the beat) is there for you to pick it up when you come back to get it.”¹⁰³ This “thing” is not preserved in an archive or protected by institutions—it exists and persists through circulation, memory, and reuse. The beat becomes grounding for the South Bronx; it becomes something to return to and create upon. Through the sampling sound work of DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, the South Bronx became a place of creation, setting the stage for the next generation of hip-hop artists in the 1980s.

¹⁰¹ Snead, “On Repetition,” 651.

¹⁰² Snead, “On Repetition,” 651.

¹⁰³ Snead, “On Repetition,” 651.

Track Two: Sampling as the Oral Archive

During the summer of 1987, Public Enemy took the stage alongside LL Cool J, Doug E. Fresh, Eric B. & Rakim, Stetsasonic, and Whodini on the Def Jam Tour—a \$15.50-a-ticket showcase of hip-hop’s next generation that stood worlds apart from the humble Bronx block parties where DJ Kool Herc had launched the art form just fourteen years earlier.¹⁰⁴ By then, hip-hop had already begun to evolve into a vehicle for social commentary; since Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message” in 1983, artists across New York—and increasingly on the West Coast—were channeling the tensions of urban life into transformational music. The tour itself was a product of Def Jam Recordings, the label founded in 1984 by NYU student Rick Rubin and Harlem club promoter Russell Simmons, who had already embedded themselves deep in the growing hip-hop culture.¹⁰⁵ In the mid-1980s, hip-hop was still fighting for legitimacy within the American public imagination, and Def Jam catapulted the genre into the mainstream. During the extensive rides on the tour bus, the artists drafted the blueprint for Public Enemy’s seismic album *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back* was drafted. By intentionally selecting samples from artists such as James Brown, Parliament, and Kool and the Gang, Public Enemy’s *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* draws from a vast body of communal Black knowledge, constructing a layered sonic wall that connected listeners to other epochs of Black history and redefined hip-hop in the 1980s.

¹⁰⁴ “The ’87 Def Jam Tour,” *Hartford Courant*, accessed via Newspapers.com, accessed April 1, 2026, [link](#).

¹⁰⁵ Universal Music Group, “Def Jam Recordings,” *Universal Music Group*, accessed February 9, 2025, [link](#).

Their record is a politically urgent act in a climate that demonized crime and concentrated poverty in majority-Black urban neighborhoods and served as an effort to carry the teachings of the 1960s forward to a new generation.

Public Enemy was formed by Chuck D (Carlton Ridenhour) in 1982 when he was a student at Long Island's Adelphi University studying graphic design.¹⁰⁶ It was at Adelphi that he met Hank Shocklee, who would later run Public Enemy's production team, The Bomb Squad. Recruited by Rubin after hearing him rap over a song called "Public Enemy Number One," Chuck D was tasked with putting together a crew.¹⁰⁷ He enlisted Shocklee as a producer, and then picked up DJ Terminator X (Norman Rogers), Minister of Information Professor Griff (Richard Griffin), and rapper Flavor Flav (William J. Drayton, Jr.)¹⁰⁸ The group's first album, *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*, was released on Def Jam in 1987, but received little critical acclaim. However, it was *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* that flung Public Enemy up high onto the Billboard Charts, signaling the public's growing acceptance of hip-hop as a mature art form. *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* takes what Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five did on "The Message" and articulates their unique approach to social commentary to the changing context of the late '80s.

In an interview with Shocklee, he described the collective authorship style of The Bomb Squad: "We were all in the studio working and performing various functions—

¹⁰⁶ "Public Enemy," *Long Island Music and Entertainment Hall of Fame*, accessed April 1, 2026, [link](#).

¹⁰⁷ "Public Enemy," *Long Island Music and Entertainment Hall of Fame*.

¹⁰⁸ "Public Enemy," *Long Island Music and Entertainment Hall of Fame*.

anything from finding samples to finding spoken word bits to finding intro parts, horn hits, guitar parts—everybody was doing everything.”¹⁰⁹ Shocklee goes on to say that each member of The Bomb Squad had a “love and feel for the music,” and no one member contributed more or less than another.¹¹⁰ Instead, each group member had a specific role and purpose: Chuck D., for example, “wrote the raps,” while Shocklee himself was a “song fanatic,” so he “looked for the songs, and edit[ed] the lyrics to make sure the arrangement [was] right.”¹¹¹ Eric “Vietnam” Sadler “played on a lot of the records, the beats—he was like a programmer or engineer.”¹¹² Public Enemy’s intentional division of labor in their process of production was also drawn out in their sampling style. Shocklee would pull from genre after genre of records, from Funkadelic to James Brown to David Bowie. These samples were crafted intentionally, layered within the album’s songs to create a constellation of Black history.

Sampling, for Shocklee and Chuck D., relies on the basis that rap music is not music.¹¹³ Instead, Chuck D. suggests, “It’s rap over music.”¹¹⁴ The statement reveals that hip-hop was still organized around the same division of labor that had defined it in the South Bronx—the music and the voice operating as separate but intertwined forces. The Bomb Squad’s work of rupturing and reassembling sounds was distinct from Chuck D.’s

¹⁰⁹ Philip Stevenson, “Hank Shocklee: Public Enemy Producer on Sonic Revolution,” *Tape Op*, 2005, [link](#).

¹¹⁰ Stevenson, “Hank Shocklee: Public Enemy Producer on Sonic Revolution.”

¹¹¹ Stevenson, “Hank Shocklee: Public Enemy Producer on Sonic Revolution.”

¹¹² Stevenson, “Hank Shocklee: Public Enemy Producer on Sonic Revolution.”

¹¹³ McLeod, “How Copyright Law Changed Hip Hop.”

¹¹⁴ McLeod, “How Copyright Law Changed Hip Hop.”

role as lyricist, even as the two were inseparable in practice. The DJ and MC roles that had been established were expanding, multiplied across more hands, but the structure held. In Public Enemy, Chuck D. was the MC, and the Bomb Squad was the DJ. This primary ethos guided The Bomb Squad in building P.E.'s distinctive sampling style. Shocklee would start with the beat, which he calls the "skeleton of the track"—a core of drums and bass that might already contain bits and pieces of samples in it—before layering dozens of other samples on top.¹¹⁵ This "skeleton track" refers to how Shocklee arranged the "noise" on P.E.'s tracks, and the result was something far removed from the smooth, expansive funk of late-'70s records like Parliament-Funkadelic's *Mothership Connection*. The music was dense and chaotic; the layered sounds carried their own message alongside Chuck D.'s lyricism rather than simply supporting it. This is precisely what Chuck D. means by "rap over music": the vocals and the music were two distinct but equally weighted arguments, and only together did they deliver the full picture.

Communication scholar Kembrew McLeod defines P.E.'s style as being a collage of sounds produced in order to create a "sonic wall."¹¹⁶ Sampling, for P.E., was "just another way of arranging sounds," Shocklee told McLeod. "Just like a musician would take sounds off of an instrument and arrange them in their own particular way. So we thought we was quite crafty with it."¹¹⁷ When P.E. wasn't creating their work on the fly, in front of an audience, the group collaborated in the studio together with new technology—the sampler. However, samplers and synthesizers were not nearly as

¹¹⁵ McLeod, "How Copyright Law Changed Hip Hop."

¹¹⁶ McLeod, "How Copyright Law Changed Hip Hop."

¹¹⁷ McLeod, "How Copyright Law Changed Hip Hop."

technologically developed as they are now. For The Bomb Squad, the sampler available was the Akai 2900, but the machine was incredibly limited in its usage, only able to sample two seconds at a time.¹¹⁸ Shocklee explains that “Don’t Believe the Hype,” featured on *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back*, “was basically played with the turntable and transformed and then sampled.”¹¹⁹ The turntable provided The Bomb Squad the ability to manipulate the work *live*, creating the dense, collaged sound P.E. is known for. Crucially, the availability of technology able to help producers sample other music reflects the growth of hip-hop within the music industry. Hip-hop thus evolved out of the traditions rooted in the South Bronx and was rewarded with broad cultural and commercial appeal.

What *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back* illustrates is that sampling in the 1980s was made possible by evolving technologies such as the sampler, and was simultaneously heightened by a sociopolitical context that called on producers to create politically (and sonically) layered songs that spoke to public concerns. Tricia Rose notes that “rap is a complex fusion of orality and postmodern technology. This mixture of orality and technology is essential to understanding the logic of rap music; a logic that, although not purely oral, maintains many characteristics of orally-based expression.”¹²⁰ Rose’s analysis highlights two key components of how hip-hop music was created in the 1980s: both through the use of technology, *and* traditional forms of Black orality. In Toni

¹¹⁸ McLeod, “How Copyright Law Changed Hip Hop.”

¹¹⁹ McLeod, “How Copyright Law Changed Hip Hop.”

¹²⁰ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 85.

Morrison's words, P.E.'s music contributes to the "Afrological aesthetic," a methodology of "recycling available media and re-contextualizing them into new forms."¹²¹ P.E. is not the first group of artists to recycle available media—in the beginning of hip-hop, we see Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash doing this in a different way.

Hank Shocklee was deliberate in how he constructed the sonic environment around Chuck D.'s lyricism. "Things were out of tune," he explained. "We deliberately made sure that certain things [were] out of time because we wanted to create a feeling. We could have easily put melodies, timing, all that stuff in sync."¹²² This is P.E.'s style; instead of creating something with melody, P.E. wanted the track to be a bed of noise. Scholar Niel Scobie theorizes that P.E.'s use of noise is more than "a subversion of established musical norms," and instead the "dissonant noise beds, with their screeching horns and busy drum fills [...] create a sense of urgency and aggression necessary to complement Chuck D's anti-establishment lyrics."¹²³ Scobie quotes Jacques Attali's work *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, where Attali states the foundational meaning of noise in society: "Noise is the term for a signal that interferes with the reception of a message by a receiver, even if the interfering signal itself has a meaning

¹²¹ Niel Scobie, "We Wanted Our Coffee Black": Public Enemy, Improvisation, and Noise, *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation* 10, no. 1 (2014), accessed February 4, 2026, <https://www.criticalimprov.com/index.php/csieci/article/view/3028>; the article quotes Toni Morrison on the essential qualities of Black art.

¹²² Scobie, "We Wanted Our Coffee Black," Scobie cites *The Hip-Hop Years*, a 1999 Channel 4 documentary by David Upshal featuring an interview with Hank Shocklee (originally on YouTube), where Shocklee discusses the Bomb Squad's production approach (cf. interview, YouTube, accessed Sept. 20, 2014, [link](#)).

¹²³ Scobie, "We Wanted Our Coffee Black."

for that receiver.”¹²⁴ This is precisely the register P.E. operates in throughout the album; by refusing melody as a foundation, their collage-like layering of noise intentionally disrupts the listener’s passive reception of the song, demanding their attention and engagement.

Shocklee found the raw material for this “organized noise” by going back through his favorite records. In an interview with *Tape Op*, Shocklee observes: “So we took the record we loved most...and we’ll find James Brown, Parliament, Ohio Players, Kool and the Gang—and we would sample their snares. And then we would go back to all our break records...and sample the kick and snare, and that sound in and of itself gave us an edge because our music sounded different.”¹²⁵ This fundamental difference *is* the noise, and the noise is thus made up of samples constellated across the history of Black music. Scobie offers that through their layered sonic wall of noise, “Public Enemy is openly referencing...generations of Black musicians and musical tradition.”¹²⁶ This sample-built sonic wall is embedded in each of their tracks on *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back*, first seen in track two, “Bring the Noise.”

“Bring the Noise” opens with a sample from Malcolm X’s “Message to the Grass Roots” speech from November 10th, 1963. Malcolm X states: “Too black. Too strong./Too black. Too strong.”¹²⁷ Malcolm X’s “Message to the Grass Roots” speech

¹²⁴ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

¹²⁵ Stevenson, “Hank Shocklee: Public Enemy Producer on Sonic Revolution.”

¹²⁶ Scobie, “We Wanted Our Coffee Black.”

¹²⁷ Public Enemy, “Bring the Noise,” track 1 on *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam Recordings, 1988), <https://open.spotify.com/track/5BiuxSuxOZ9CcQ6SqICsDv?si=9dcd6b4749604927>.

centers on the fight to integrate during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, where he argues: “[Integration] is just like when you’ve got some coffee that’s too black, which means it’s too strong.”¹²⁸ He goes on: “What do you do? You integrate it with cream. You make it weak.”¹²⁹ Malcolm X seeks to remind his audience that Black people must not be weakened by efforts to integrate in the 1960s. He argues that Black people cannot let whites weaken their sense of Black identity, and must continue fighting for their individual and communal strength within a country that continually seeks to cut them down. P.E. re-contextualizes Malcolm X’s speech from 1963 for the racialized political climate of the 1980s. In doing so, they frame *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back* as a political response to the continued displacement and violence against Black people in the United States, offering their album as a methodology, and a way of understanding the present through a historical lens. Invoking Malcolm X’s words reiterates the content of his speech—that Black people of the 1980s must not let anyone hold them back.

Chuck D. carries Malcolm X’s message to the first verse of the song, rapping: “They sayin’ we too Black, man.”¹³⁰ The background singers interject: “Bring the noise!”¹³¹ Chuck D. continues: “Yo, I don’t understand what they sayin’, but little do they know/They can get a smack for that, man.”¹³² Chuck D. references Eric B. &

¹²⁸ Malcolm X, “Message to the Grass Roots,” in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 10.

¹²⁹ Malcolm X, “Message to the Grass Roots,” in *Malcolm X Speaks*, 10.

¹³⁰ Public Enemy, “Bring the Noise.”

¹³¹ Public Enemy, “Bring the Noise.”

¹³² Public Enemy, “Bring the Noise.”

Rakim's "I Ain't No Joke" through this line, which reads: "You could get a smack for this/I ain't no joke."¹³³ Through this reference, P.E. offers that hip-hop is a collective, a community that extends beyond individual groups. Immediately after, James Brown's breakbeat from "Funky Drummer" enters, with Clyde Stubblefield's precise, tight groove dropping in like a floor beneath the track. P.E. uses this break not simply to layer the song sonically, but also to layer their political messaging with that of Brown's work in the 1960s. By sampling "Funky Drummer," P.E. implicitly samples Brown's entire legacy, including "Say It Loud: I'm Black and I'm Proud" (1968), released nearly twenty years before P.E. took the stage. The Black Power Movement of the 1960s is not background here; it is actively remediated, brought forward as a call to action for the 1980s.

Verse One of "Bring the Noise" makes the stakes explicit. Chuck D. opens: "Bass! How low can you go?/Death row? What a brother know!"¹³⁴ This is a direct allusion to the swelling population of Black men on death row and the machinery of mass incarceration bearing down on urban communities. In 1987, Black inmates made up 41.4% of the total 1,980 prisoners on death row.¹³⁵ In mentioning death row, P.E. openly criticizes the Reagan administration of the 1980s, where mass incarceration was initiated through the continuation of President Richard Nixon's "War on Drugs," driven by

¹³³ Eric B. & Rakim, "I Ain't No Joke," *Paid in Full*, 4th & Broadway/Island Records, 1987.

¹³⁴ Public Enemy, "Bring the Noise."

¹³⁵ U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Capital Punishment 1987* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, July 1988), PDF, [link](#).

specific “tough on crime” policies.¹³⁶ Flavor Flav finishes off Verse One with the lyric “Power, the people say/ Make a miracle, D, pump the lyrical!/ Black is back, all in, we’re gonna win.”¹³⁷ This lyric is a direct adaptation of the Black Panther Party’s “Power to the People,” reactivated here as a declaration of survival. The call-and-response between Chuck D. and Flavor Flav across the song enacts the very tradition they are drawing from: the communal back-and-forth of Black oral culture, now turned into an indictment of Reagan’s America.

In Verse Three, Chuck D. and Flavor Flav continue this messaging, referencing the sonic lattice of their record: “So what, the ride, the glide should be much safer than a suicide/Soul control, beat is the father of your rock’n’roll...”¹³⁸ The first line counsels strategy over recklessness—to move smart in the hostile environment Reagan created. The second line does double work. It calls first for spiritual grounding while also asserting that rock’n’roll, long coded as white cultural property, has its roots in Black music.¹³⁹ P.E.’s lyricism in “Bring the Noise” is not only historically referential but also self-referential: Chuck D. and Flavor Flav often rap about the very concept they are employing within the song. The Bomb Squad’s sonic constellation reinforces this across the track’s samples. Marva Whitney’s “It’s My Thing,” the hook from Funkadelic’s “Get Off Your Ass and Jam,” James Brown’s hook from “Give It Up Or Turnit a Loose,” (as

¹³⁶ Doug Rossinow, “*Reaganism and the Rise of the Carceral State*,” *OUPblog* (Oxford University Press), December 14, 2015, accessed February 8, [link](#).

¹³⁷ Public Enemy, “Bring the Noise.”

¹³⁸ Public Enemy, “Bring the Noise.”

¹³⁹ Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

well as “Funky Drummer” and “Get Up, Get Into It, Get Involved”) direct elements from The Commodores’ “The Assembly Line,” and lyrics from “I Don’t Know What This World Is Coming To” by The Soul Children featuring Jesse Jackson performed at Wattstax in 1972.¹⁴⁰ Shocklee’s samples—drum break, hook, or lyrics alike—work together to amplify P.E.’s messaging: bring the noise!

Traditionally, noise is thought of as being sonic impurity. The less of it, the better. P.E. completely reverses this narrative in “Bring the Noise,” doing what George Lewis describes as pure “rupturing.”¹⁴¹ This specific kind of rupture occurs *within* the song—The Bomb Squad works to polyphonically disrupt the production of their record, which historically has been interpreted by white critics and listeners as noise.¹⁴²

The 1980s offered its own set of challenges for the communities P.E. was speaking to. Craig Werner references Parliament-Funkadelic’s *Chocolate City* (1975) where P.Funk coined “chocolate cities” as the term for the increasingly Black urban landscape created by demographic shifts from the 1950s.¹⁴³ What had once been a celebratory term curdled as the decade wore on, Werner posits that as many members of the new Black middle class left their home neighborhoods, the “chocolate cities” they left

¹⁴⁰ WhoSampled, “Bring the Noise by Public Enemy – Samples, Covers and Remixes,” accessed February 2, 2026, [link](#).

¹⁴¹ Scobie, “We Wanted Our Coffee Black,” quoting George E. Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” *Black Music Research Journal* 22 (2002): 215–46.

¹⁴² George Lewis, quoted in Scobie, “We Wanted Our Coffee Black.”

¹⁴³ Craig Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 184.

behind became heavily concentrated in poverty.¹⁴⁴ Sociologist William Julius Wilson tracks this transformation through Chicago's seventy-seven neighborhoods, offering that from 1970-1980, the number of people living in poverty jumped to over 50%.¹⁴⁵ This pattern of poverty characterized the new social makeup of the 1980s. Wilson argues: "When the grudging enforcement of civil rights legislation opened new areas to the Black working class...the situation in the old neighborhoods changed drastically. Almost overnight, many poor Black children found themselves cut off from mentors who could teach them how to negotiate the...world without denying their Blackness."¹⁴⁶ P.E. speaks directly to these children within the rupture of Black community networks. The band members themselves are products of Black suburbia, with Chuck D. and Hank Shocklee meeting in college at Adelphi University. Under the Reagan administration, not only did harsh drug and crime enforcement sever the social fabric of Black neighborhoods, but Werner notes that "traditional support systems, such as youth clubs and neighborhood centers, collapsed under the impact of cuts to Social Services."¹⁴⁷ Werner describes Reagan's vision of America as seen through "rose-tinted bifocals."¹⁴⁸ *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back* is P.E.'s sustained effort to rip those bifocals off.

While the Reagan administration failed to address the real systemic problems of drug use in the urban hyperghetto, P.E.'s tracks did address these core societal ills. "Night

¹⁴⁴ William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹⁴⁵ Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

¹⁴⁶ Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

¹⁴⁷ Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come*, 256.

¹⁴⁸ Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come*, 258.

of the Living Baseheads” is perhaps the album’s most direct confrontation with the crack economy. The title of the track is a reference to the Geroge Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, which came out in 1968. P.E. replaces “living dead” with “baseheads,” a common term used to describe a habitual user of “freebase,” or crack cocaine.¹⁴⁹ Here, P.E. conceptually equates the zombies from Romero’s film to people addicted to crack cocaine. Barry Michael Cooper’s *Village Voice* article, “1980-1989: The Crack-Up,” explores how Reagan-era policies defined the era for Black communities in the urban ghetto. He writes: “While he napped, Reagan’s *No Doz* decade created the mutant inner-city environment known as New Jack City that ran 24-7, a *multropolis*—a cityscape with distinct characteristics that multiplies and spreads—created by the exorbitant profits from crack, and decaying moral nucleus.”¹⁵⁰ Cooper references First Lady, Nancy Reagan, and her campaign to “Just Say No” to drugs with his “*No Doz*” comment, a campaign that failed to address the inherent issues surrounding crack addiction and ignored the real systemic causes of drug use in lower-class areas where the issue was most prevalent.¹⁵¹

“Night of the Living Baseheads” opens not with Chuck D., but rather this sampled speech by Black Panther and Nation of Islam spokesman Khalid Muhammad: “Have you forgotten that once we were brought here, we were robbed of our name, robbed of our language? We lost our religion, our culture, our God... And many of us, by the way we

¹⁴⁹ “Freebase,” *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*, accessed April 1, 2026.

¹⁵⁰ Barry Michael Cooper, “1980–1989: The Crack-Up,” *Village Voice*, January 2, 1990, [link](#).

¹⁵¹ “Reagan’s National Drug Strategy,” *Crackdown: Policing Detroit through the War on Drugs, Crime, and Youth*, University of Michigan HistoryLab, accessed April 1, 2026, [link](#).

act, we even lost our minds.”¹⁵² By sampling Muhammad’s speech, P.E. situates the crack epidemic within a longer history of systematic rupture, framing addiction not as personal failure but as the compounded consequence of centuries of anti-Black governmental policy. Verse One then reframes the language of the crack epidemic itself. Chuck D. raps: “Here it is, bam/And you say, “Goddamn this is the dope jam,”/But let’s define the word dope/And you think it means funky now, no.”¹⁵³ Chuck D.’s redefinition of the word “dope” reminds his listeners that while pop culture had come to use it as slang for something exciting, the original meaning, narcotics, was hollowing out communities. His lyricism indicts not just the users but the system enabling it: “The problem is this, we gotta’ fix it/ Check out the justice, and how they run it.” The Bomb Squad underscores the urgency sonically, building the track from twenty samples—more than any other on the album—including James Brown’s “The Grunt” via the J.B.’s, Aretha Franklin’s “Rock Steady,” the Temptations’ “I Can’t Get Next to You,” and Dennis Coffey’s “Scorpio.” These were not random choices; they were the soundtrack of Black America in the decades before Reagan, reassembled now into something confrontational and *noisy*, a sonic mirror of what his policies had done to the communities that produced them.

One of the policies Reagan enacted was the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which granted law enforcement \$1.7 billion to establish mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses. This mandatory minimum disproportionately affected inner-city residents

¹⁵² Public Enemy, “Night of the Living Baseheads,” on *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, Def Jam Recordings, 1988, [link](#).

¹⁵³ Public Enemy, “Night of the Living Baseheads.”

because of the difference between crack cocaine and powdered cocaine. Writer and lawyer Deborah Vagins explains that while a gram of powder cocaine cost \$50 to \$100, a small vial of crack rocks cost only \$5 to \$20.¹⁵⁴ She argues that “the availability of small quantities of crack cocaine at an inexpensive price revolutionized inner-city drug markets.”¹⁵⁵ The 1986 bill passed had a 100:1 disparity between powder and crack cocaine. Vagins posits that the bill was backed up by “untrue claims that crack [was] more dangerous and addictive, while there is pharmacologically no difference in effects between the two forms.”¹⁵⁶ In effect, this meant that someone in “possession of 5 grams of crack (approximately 0.18 oz) would lead to a 5-year minimum sentence, and 50 grams (approximately 1.8 oz) would elicit a 10-year minimum sentence.”¹⁵⁷ As such, someone in possession of powdered cocaine “would have to have 100 times as much to trigger the same penalty.”¹⁵⁸ Given that powdered cocaine was so much more expensive, this bill led to a major racial and class imbalance where Black people faced exorbitantly harsher punishment for the use and sale of the virtually the same drug as their affluent, white counterparts.

Barry Cooper also criticizes the policies of neglect that stripped inner-cities of necessary programs, describing the *multropolis* as being a “floating city of the damned [...] built on neglect: it was the underclass’s reaction to the elimination of vital

¹⁵⁴ Deborah J. Vagins and Jesselyn McCurdy, *Cracks in the System: Twenty Years of the Unjust Federal Crack Cocaine Law* (Washington, DC: American Civil Liberties Union, 2006), [link](#).

¹⁵⁵ Vagins and McCurdy, *Cracks in the System*.

¹⁵⁶ Vagins and McCurdy, *Cracks in the System*.

¹⁵⁷ Vagins and McCurdy, *Cracks in the System*.

¹⁵⁸ Vagins and McCurdy, *Cracks in the System*.

community programs, afterschool recreation centers, neighborhood youth job core programs, [and] college scholarships based on need.”¹⁵⁹ He describes the incipient crack epidemic ravaging such cities with this image: “Rows of discolored newborns on respirators in city hospitals, crack, the end of a decade, the end of an age, the end of the world, crack.”¹⁶⁰ Crack undoubtedly characterized the Reagan years, but his economic policies also ravaged predominantly Black communities.

Reagan also bought into what his successor, George H. W. Bush, would later call “voodoo economics,” which describes the machinations of supply-side economic policies.¹⁶¹ Alternately called “trickle-down” economies, this theory argued that benefits given to the wealthy and corporations would *trickle down* to the rest of the people. Reagan fooled voters into believing that social programs like AFDC welfare, food stamps, and job training were making life too easy on inner-city families, and in his first nationally televised speech to the nation, declared: “In this crusade, let us not forget who we are. Drug abuse is a repudiation of everything America is. The destructiveness and human wreckage mock our heritage.”¹⁶² What he did not say was that his War on Drugs was, by design, a war on Black America itself.

The design is not incidental. In a 1995 interview, John Ehrlichman, Richard Nixon’s domestic policy advisor, admitted as much: “We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or blacks, but by getting the public to associate the

¹⁵⁹ Cooper, “1980–1989: The Crack-Up.”

¹⁶⁰ Cooper, “1980–1989: The Crack-Up.”

¹⁶¹ Robert B. Reich, “1980–1989: The Squandered Decade,” *Village Voice*, January 2, 1990, [link](#).

¹⁶² Gerald M. Boyd, “Reagan’s Advocate ‘Crusade’ on Drugs,” *The New York Times*, September 15, 1986, TimesMachine digital edition, accessed April 1, 2026, [link](#).

hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin and then criminalizing them both heavily, we could disrupt those communities.” He continued: “We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night in the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.”¹⁶³ Ehrlichman is not speaking in code; rather, he admits plainly that the goal was the criminalization of Blackness itself. When Reagan took office in 1980, the total prison population stood at 329,000. When he left eight years later, it had nearly doubled to 627,000. The creation of mandatory sentencing skyrocketed the rate of incarcerated Black men in the 1980s, increasing not only incarceration rates, but also the public fear of crime and urban disorder that Reagan used to justify further oppression.¹⁶⁴ Chuck D. knew the numbers. “Bring the Noise” and “Night of the Living Baseheads” are not just songs; they are calls to action.

Through these tracks, *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back* asks its listeners to do what Chuck D. commands at the top of “Bring the Noise”: turn it up. Craig Werner likens P.E.’s deployment of lyricism and sampling to a phrase from the Jamaican Rastas: “Word sound have power.”¹⁶⁵ The “word sound” of *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back* re-contextualizes the unity of the Black Power Movement for the separated and disparate state of Black communities all over America. On this record, the power of their words is directed squarely at the conditions Reagan built. In an interview

¹⁶³ Nkechi Taifa, “Race, Mass Incarceration, and the Disastrous War on Drugs,” *Brennan Center for Justice*, May 10, 2021, [link](#).

¹⁶⁴ Rossinow, *Reaganism and the Rise of the Carceral State*.

¹⁶⁵ Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come*, 261.

with *The Quietus* when asked whether he considers himself a nostalgic person, Chuck D. replied simply: “Yeah, I think so. It’s connecting with history.”¹⁶⁶ The ability of *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* to connect with history—with Black history—through its layered, sonic wall of samples is a major part of what redefines hip-hop in the 1980s. Chuck D. describes P.E.’s music as “filling the void” where education is lacking. He continues, stating that “To be able to dissect and understand what’s happening to them [Black youth] or what’s happening to us [the Black community], it takes years. It takes constant teaching.” For Chuck D., “Rap is a true reflection of the streets. It’s what R&B once was: the slang that you pick up on the streets, and then present through music.”¹⁶⁷

What began in Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s South Bronx—the breakbeats, the two turntables, and the crowd—had by 1988 become something capable of rendering legible the structural forces tearing those same communities apart. Through its sixteen tracks, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* offered Black youth a new kind of education: not the one Reagan defunded, but one built from the records their parents danced to, the speeches made by previous activists, and the noise of a generation that refused to go quietly. By invoking 1960s Black politicians, activists, and artists, P.E. remediates the history of the Black Power Movement for the Reagan era, asking their listeners to bring the noise: bring yourself, your Blackness, your identity, and, by all means, don’t be quiet about any of it.

¹⁶⁶ Ringo P. Stacey, “Public Enemy – Chuck D Interview,” *The Quietus*, May 20, 2008, accessed February 5, 2026, [link](#).

¹⁶⁷ Leland, *Public Enemy: Our 1988 Interview with Chuck D.*

Track Three: Sampling as Lineage Building

By the turn of the 1990s, hip-hop was poised to enter its next stage of evolution in the 1990s. The genre had spread across the country, moving from the East Coast to the West Coast, with its sound providing the backbone of a rapidly growing movement. Hip-hop was no longer just hip-hop. It was now absorbing a growing sub-genre called gangsta rap.¹⁶⁸ Gangsta's lyricism saturated the media outlets and gained federal attention for the supposed depictions of violence contained within the songs. On the 5th of December in 1993, *Dallas Morning News Editorial* asked the following questions: "Just how much does art imitate life? [...] These rappers are role models for millions of impressionable youths. Teenagers are already trying to emulate how the hip-hop artists dress and talk. Will they now act like their heroes?"¹⁶⁹ The *New York Times* called out the actions of such rappers like Tupac Shakur, Flavor Flav, and Snoop Dogg, who were all arrested in 1993 for separate criminal cases.¹⁷⁰ These arrests of such high-profile rappers set off an increased media frenzy surrounding the growing sub-genre. *Newsweek* declared rap "sociopathic entertainment" in November of 1993, while the *Orlando Sentinel* referred to rap group Geto Boy's album *We Can't Be Stopped* as containing "some horribly violent and misogynist imagery."¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ I've chosen to denote the word "gangster" here as "gangsta." Though the two are often used interchangeably, "gangsta" is an African American Vernacular English (AAVE) phonetic spelling of the same term.

¹⁶⁹ Kim Deterline, "Fear of a Rap Planet," *Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR)*, March 1, 1994, [link](#).

¹⁷⁰ Calvin Sims, "The Nation; Gangster Rappers: The Lives, The Lyrics," *New York Times*, November 28, 1993, sec. Week in Review. [link](#).

¹⁷¹ Deterline, "Fear of a Rap Planet."

What these reviews fail to mention is the comparable media to white artists such as Guns N' Roses, whose 1991 record *Use Your Illusion* received rave reviews despite the lyrical prevalence of insistent gun violence and violence against women. *Use Your Illusion* is called by the very same *Orlando Sentinel* article as being “merely obnoxious on songs like ‘Back off Bitch’ in which [lead singer] Axl Rose declares war on women.”¹⁷² Kim Deterline, author of the 1994 *Fair* article “Fear of a Rap Planet” (recalling back to Public Enemy’s 1990 studio album, *Fear of a Black Planet*) asks this formative question: “Why is a ‘bitch’ reference made by a Black ‘gangsta rapper’ considered [more] offensive than one made by a white ‘bad boy’ rocker?”¹⁷³ These media outlets refused to nuance their opinions of gangsta rap; instead, every Black rapper became a violent criminal, dead-set on upending the lives of white suburban children through their music. Writer Jay Marcus defended gangsta, arguing that while Elton John, Bruce Springsteen, and Guns N’ Roses’ songs “are sung either in first person, where the singer takes on the role of the killer, [has] tremendous empathy for the killer, and seeks to point out social problems that lead to the killer’s actions, only one [of these genres has...] incited any sort of public criticism or controversy.”¹⁷⁴ The *New York Times* offered a more nuanced take on the sub-genre, with Jon Pareles writing in 1990: “Gangsta rappers write rhymes about inner-city violence, sometimes as cautionary tales, sometimes as fantasies, and sometimes as chronicles without comment.” He continues, arguing that “the genre also calls for a detailed put-down [...] of anyone the rappers dislike...With its

¹⁷² Deterline, “Fear of a Rap Planet.”

¹⁷³ Deterline, “Fear of a Rap Planet.”

¹⁷⁴ Deterline, “Fear of a Rap Planet.”

jumble of brilliance and stupidity, of conscience and crassness, of vivid storytelling and unexamined conventions, gangsta rap is as profoundly mixed as any pulp genre in American culture.”¹⁷⁵ Pareles’ article suggests that good versus evil binaries flatten gangsta rap’s complexity and participate in a longer tradition of media discourse that pathologizes rap music.

Artists themselves recognized this framing early on. Andre Young—better known as Dr. Dre—emerged in the late 1980s as the primary producer for the Compton group N.W.A. In a 1993 interview with *Rolling Stone*’s Johnathan Gold, Dre pushed back against the media’s fixation on violence in his work: “If I’m promoting violence, they’re promoting it just as much as I am by focusing on it in the article. That really bugs me out—you know, if I weren’t going on, I couldn’t talk about it. And who came up with that term *gangsta rap* anyways?”¹⁷⁶ The phrase circulated through late-1980s journalism—from Gold’s coverage to Robert Hilburn’s reporting on both N.W.A. and rapper Ice-T—revealing that the category was less an organic musical label than a media construction imposed upon a rapidly evolving culture. From the start, hip-hop was narrated through a vocabulary that emphasized threat over context.

Black communities around America were divided over whether gangsta was furthering the political action set in place during the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement of the 1960s. Curtis R. Tucker Jr., a Black California Assemblyman, informed the *New York Times* of his take on the genre in 1993: “What started out as a

¹⁷⁵ Calvin Sims, “Gangster Rappers.”

¹⁷⁶ Jonathan Gold, “Day of the Dre,” *Rolling Stone*, September 30, 1993, [link](#).

means of informing the world about life in the inner city has now been prostituted by a new school of thought that it is all right to kill and rape and abuse drugs.”¹⁷⁷ The *New York Times* adds that Tucker was actively encouraging radio stations to boycott gangsta. Stanley Crouch, Black music critic and writer, gave the *Times* his adamant opposition to gangsta: “What is rebellious about a bunch of Negroes going around murdering people, raping people, and sitting around a table playing cards?” He continues, “They are not rebelling against anything. They are a bunch of opportunists who are appealing to an appetite that America has for vulgarity, violence, and anarchy inside Afro America.”¹⁷⁸

Undeniably these elements Crouch opposes—vulgarity, violence, and anarchy—exist within both the music and the personal lives of such artists. Yet rap—what Tricia Rose famously terms “Black noise” —demands more rigorous intellectual attention than such moral panic allows. Rose differentiates hip-hop as a broad cultural formation, and rap as its companion lyrical and musical component, both emerging out of the deindustrialization of the 1970s-era South Bronx. Within this context, rap “acts as a form of communication and a tool for social commentary.”¹⁷⁹ However, even Rose notes that the rise of commercialized gangsta rap significantly narrows the definition of hip-hop, inaccurately leading people to believe that hip-hop is culturally defined by images of violence, money, and drugs.¹⁸⁰ What, then, are we to make of the violent imagery present

¹⁷⁷ Calvin Sims, “Gangster Rappers.”

¹⁷⁸ Calvin Sims, “Gangster Rappers.”

¹⁷⁹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 20.

¹⁸⁰ Tricia Rose, “Tricia Rose on Becoming a Hip Hop Scholar,” YouTube video, [link](#).

in the work of artists such as N.W.A, Ice Cube, Ice-T, Dr. Dre? By analyzing these artists' sampling techniques, we can glean a much richer perspective of gangsta rap as a whole.

Gangsta rap interprets social and historical conditions through song, understanding these conditions and layering them with that of the past. To suggest that gangsta rap is the reason why America has the highest incarceration rates in the world points the blame at the creators and listeners of such music: young, Black males. And it pointedly diverges attention from what did produce the conditions of violence in the 1990s: “the throat-lock of disenfranchisement, endemic generational poverty, institutionalized racism, and a rotten-to-the-core system of policing and incarcerations.”¹⁸¹ Writers Sidney Madden and Rodney Carmichael’s *NPR* podcast *Louder Than a Riot* analyzes the power, protest, and paranoia at work in associating gangsta rap with increased incarceration in the 1980s and ‘90s. Madden and Carmichael’s podcast focuses on the alleged conspiracy theory that back in the 1990s, “the music industry and the prison industrial complex had colluded to market music that promot[ed] criminal behavior [...] to fill their prisons.”¹⁸² Through investigating this theory, Madden and Carmichael explore “the deeply entrenched racism that informs America’s justice system and how hip-hop, as an extension of Black America, would fall under that same shadow of perceived criminality.”¹⁸³ Ultimately, the podcast seeks to examine how hip-

¹⁸¹ Norm Schriever, “Don’t Believe the Hype; A Counterpoint to the ‘Secret Meeting That Changed Rap’ Story,” *Norm Schriever Blog*, March 30, 2013, [link](#).

¹⁸² Sidney Madden and Rodney Carmichael, “Power, Protest and Paranoia: How a Hip-Hop Conspiracy Theory Sheds Light on the Cracks in American Justice,” *NPR Music / NPR*, October 8, 2020, [link](#).

¹⁸³ Madden and Carmichael, “Power, Protest and Paranoia.”

hop, prison, and policing have stayed “chained together for more than four decades.”¹⁸⁴

Whether the theory is real or imagined doesn’t change the fact that perceptions of hip-hop and gangsta rap artists are almost always hand-in-hand with criminality and/or violent behavior.

This context of perception and stereotype set the stage for understanding how, in the late 1980s and 1990s, rappers used sampling as a deliberate tool. Under conditions of carcerality, deindustrialization, and spectacularized Black suffering, 1990s-era gangsta rap forged a genealogy of Black sound, using sampling as a means of lineage building and connecting their work to a collective memory from a time below—a time before. Artists such as N.W.A, Ice Cube, Ice-T, and Dr. Dre positioned gangsta rap within a broader Black performance tradition, asserting masculinity not only through lyrics but also sonically by reusing and reinterpreting Black musical memory.

The 1990s marked yet another moment of historical rupture, manifested in increasing police brutality and the formation of the carceral state. One of the most defining moments of the decade occurred on March 3rd, 1991, when Black motorist Rodney King was beaten by Los Angeles Police officers.¹⁸⁵ Members of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) struck King “over fifty times with nightsticks” after he initially resisted police orders.¹⁸⁶ The entire incident was caught on tape by onlooker George Holliday, who gave the footage to local station KTLA and commercial networks

¹⁸⁴ Madden and Carmichael, “Power, Protest and Paranoia.”

¹⁸⁵ UCLA Film & Television Archive, “Rodney King Case and the Los Angeles Uprising,” *UCLA Film & Television Archive*, accessed February 8, 2026, [link](#).

¹⁸⁶ UCLA Film & Television Archive, “Rodney King Case and the Los Angeles Uprising.”

nationwide.¹⁸⁷ Holliday's tape ensured that the beating of Rodney King would not go unnoticed, yet King was not the only person of color to suffer at the hands of the LAPD. Instead, Holliday's tape allowed the nation to see the pervasive violence people of color in Los Angeles were enduring in the 1990s at the hands of city and government officials.

Hip-hop artists already were in the practice of documenting police violence through sound, and so the King footage did not introduce a new reality for them; it simply confirmed one they had long been sonically archiving. *Los Angeles Times* writers Greg Braxton and Jim Newton offer that "Rodney King was not beaten because an officer or two had a bad day. He was a victim of deliberate use of force, directed by a veteran supervisor, observed by others and laughed about later. He was a victim of police misconduct, yes, but also of a debased and racist police culture."¹⁸⁸ This "debased and racist police culture" created the circumstances rap music responded to throughout the 1990s. Ramona Ripston, executive director of the Southern California chapter of the ACLU in 1992, shared this observation with reporters Hector Tobar and Leslie Berger: "This is not an isolated incident. The difference this time is that we have the proof...on tape."¹⁸⁹ This proof is further constituted by the LAPD's "Use of Force Policy" of 1992, the last line of which reads: "Officers are permitted to use whatever force that is reasonable and necessary to protect others or themselves from bodily harm."¹⁹⁰ The

¹⁸⁷ UCLA Film & Television Archive, "Rodney King Case and the Los Angeles Uprising."

¹⁸⁸ Greg Braxton and Jim Newton, "Looting and Fires Ravage L.A.: 25 Dead, 572 Injured; 1,000 Blazes Reported," *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1992, [link](#).

¹⁸⁹ Tobar, Hector, and Leslie Berger. "Tape of L.A. Police Beating Suspect Stirs Public Furor." *Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1991, [link](#).

¹⁹⁰ Tobar and Berger, "Tape of L.A. Police Beating Suspect Stirs Public Furor."

LAPD's use of excessive force on Rodney King's body exposes long-held beliefs about white power over the Black body.

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* provides a useful framework for understanding how power marks the body and for how the beating of Rodney King demonstrates that these dynamics operated within the peculiar framework of late twentieth century policing. Foucault writes: "The body of the condemned man is the place where the vengeance of the sovereign is applied, the anchoring point for a manifestation of power."¹⁹¹ In extrapolating Foucault's point, we can assign the "body" to that of the Black body, and the "sovereign" to that of white power, and/or the LAPD. Thus, Foucault's lines suggest: "The body of the Black man is the place where the vengeance of the white man is applied, the anchoring point for a manifestation of power." Furthermore, Foucault writes that "the body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold on it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs."¹⁹² This manifestation of power, documented extensively, was vividly enacted in the beating of Rodney King.

In this context, the body becomes the site where power is both decided and manifested. While Foucault talks about "the body" as a general site of subject formation, theorist Saidiya Hartman contends that the power dynamics produced during enslavement continue to influence and govern white power's view of the Black body in the modern

¹⁹¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 55.

¹⁹² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 26.

day. Hartman focuses on “scenes of subjection” in which white slaveholders exercise power over a Black slave: “The owner’s display of mastery was just as important as the legal title to slave property...Representing power was essential to reproducing domination.”¹⁹³ Hartman extends Foucault’s argument by situating his theory of power dynamics within the American system of slavery.

As a result, not only is the body a site where power is manifested, but it is also the site where domination is reproduced. During enslavement, the Black body became “the vehicle of the other’s power, pleasure, and profit.”¹⁹⁴ The Black body in this dynamic is a subjected body, and the body continues to be invested in, marked, trained, and tortured well after enslavement. Foucault writes about the conceptual scarring that torture leaves on the body, offering: “Torture...must mark the victim: it is intended, either by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim...torture does not reconcile; it traces around, or rather, on the very body of the condemned man...”¹⁹⁵ What Foucault and Hartman bring forth here is essential for a complete understanding of the power dynamics at play in the beating of Rodney King.

This is the very same power dynamic that gangsta artists were responding to through song. King’s beating is an example of spectacle by the state. In the years surrounding this incident, West Coast hip-hop had already begun creating a counter-memory to this society of violent spectacle, translating the lived experience of police violence into sound. While this chapter focuses on the 1990s, analyzing the sampling

¹⁹³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 29.

¹⁹⁴ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 35.

¹⁹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 34.

practices of late 1980s Los Angeles-based rap group called Nigg*z With Attitude (N.W.A), reveals how West Coast rap and the emergence of gangsta rap function as a form of insurgent Black historiography. N.W.A released their seminal album, *Straight Outta Compton*, on August 8th, 1988, launching West Coast rap far out of California and into the American public eye. At the time of its release, N.W.A was composed of Eazy-E (Eric Wright), Dr. Dre (Andre Young), Ice Cube (O’Shea Jackson), MC Ren (Lorenzo Patterson), and DJ Yella (Antoine Carraby). *Straight Outta Compton* illustrated the pervasive violence practiced against Black folks in the majority-black neighborhood of Compton, Los Angeles.

N.W.A’s breakthrough establishes the sonic and political conditions that made sampling an explicitly historiographical practice in the decade that followed. Though called gangstas, former N.W.A member Ice Cube has spoken about the reductiveness of the label, explaining, “A lot of people were giving us flak about the term ‘gangsta rap,’ which I hate. We never called our music that. It just got labelled as that.”¹⁹⁶ Ice Cube further argued that *Straight Outta Compton* was “reporting what was going on on the streets: the good, the bad, and the teachings of the elders. That’s basically what our thing was—that’s what we meant by ‘street knowledge.’”¹⁹⁷ Ice Cube’s definition of gangsta rap as “street knowledge” is borne out in the opening line of track one, “Straight Outta Compton,” where Dr. Dre states: “You are now about to witness the strength of street

¹⁹⁶ Steve Hochman, “Compton Rappers Versus the Letter of the Law: FBI Claims Song by N.W.A. Advocates Violence on Police,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1989, [link](#).

¹⁹⁷ Hochman, “*Compton Rappers Versus the Letter of the Law*.”

knowledge.”¹⁹⁸ N.W.A. did not merely transmit their “street knowledge” through lyrics alone; by the late 1980s, hip-hop production had already established sampling as a form of historical citation, layering fragments of earlier Black musical traditions into new sonic environments. On *Straight Outta Compton*, Dr. Dre’s production helps legitimize the group’s authority just as much as their lyrical content does. Drawing on stripped-down funk breakbeats and looped rhythmic fragments, Dre creates a soundscape that feels like a documentary in its stark realism. Gangsta rap’s claim to “street knowledge,” operates on two levels: the MC narrates contemporary urban life while the beat quietly embeds that narration within a longer genealogy of Black sound. By drawing from artists like Funkadelic, The Winstons, Wilson Pickett, Bob James, The Staple Singers, The Gap Band, and Ronnie Hudson & The Street People, N.W.A establishes rap music as a medium for understanding the present through lenses into the past.

Ice Cube opens up the record with “Straight Outta Compton,” rapping, “Straight outta Compton!/Crazy motherfucker named Ice Cube/From the gang called Nigg*z With Attitude!”¹⁹⁹ In just two bars, Ice Cube announces both the setting and the character that will be performing the rest of the record. He does so with a “visceral directness that would become a mark of gangsta rap...Since this time, every gangsta rap record is a variation on these two immortal themes: a violent setting and an unreliable, even psychotic, narrator.”²⁰⁰ It is crucial to understand exactly what Ice Cube is doing here. He

¹⁹⁸ N.W.A., “Fuck Tha Police,” track 6 on *Straight Outta Compton*, recorded 1988; released 1988 by Ruthless Records and Priority Records, CD/LP, [link](#).

¹⁹⁹ N.W.A., “Fuck Tha Police.”

²⁰⁰ Annette J. Saddik, “Rap’s Unruly Body: The Postmodern Performance of Black Male Identity on the American Stage,” *TDR* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 117, [link](#).

is telling the listener that on this record that he is not O’Shea Jackson: he’s Ice Cube, and he’s from Compton. Writer Annette Saddik identifies this trend of inventing theatrical names for the stage as existing in a much longer tradition of African American renaming.²⁰¹ Using Saddik’s theory, Ice Cube’s announcement of who he is performing is conscious: he is taking on a role. In doing so, Ice Cube is “simultaneously inhabiting [a] character.”²⁰² His “renaming, in the context of hip-hop, signifies both the inhabiting of a fictional character and, at the same time, an acknowledgment that, historically, even ‘real’ Black identity is a fiction. Rappers call for an appropriation of the self.”²⁰³ By taking on this persona, Ice Cube reappropriates who he is for the record and for the stage and engages with a long line of ancestors who renamed themselves, cognizant of the burden inherent with accepting a “slave name.”²⁰⁴ When N.W.A released *Straight Outta Compton*, the group did so each with their own performative identity on a record designed to engage the public about violence against Black people, especially Black men.

The violence on *Straight Outta Compton* seeks to illustrate the reality of living as a Black man in Compton, Los Angeles. Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, and Eazy E rap passionately over the record’s thirteen tracks, contributing to the conscious re-writing of the power structures at play in Los Angeles at the time. Most evident is the group’s commentary about police brutality, embodied best in Track 13, “Fuck Tha Police.”²⁰⁵ “Fuck Tha

²⁰¹ Saddik, “Rap’s Unruly Body,” 117.

²⁰² Saddik, “Rap’s Unruly Body,” 117.

²⁰³ Saddik, “Rap’s Unruly Body,” 117.

²⁰⁴ Saddik, “Rap’s Unruly Body,” 117.

²⁰⁵ N.W.A., “Fuck Tha Police.”

Police” opens as a theatrical trial in which N.W.A is putting the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) on trial. The track begins: “Right about now, N.W.A. court is in full effect/Judge Dre residing in the case of N.W.A v.s. the police department...”²⁰⁶ By metaphorically putting the LAPD on trial, N.W.A. is able to reverse the narrative. The same violence committed against members of the Black community is paid for in the fictional court staged on the record. The track continues, placing MC Ren, Ice Cube, and Eazy E as the prosecuting attorneys on the case.²⁰⁷ “Fuck Tha Police” is full of singeing one-liners, such as: “Fuck tha’ police comin’ straight from the underground,” followed by “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” and “Searchin’ my car, lookin’ for the product/Thinkin’ every n*gga is sellin’ narcotics...”²⁰⁸ “Fuck Tha Police” wields anger and violence as deliberate tools, demonstrating how repeated assaults on Black communities have compounded over time. Though “The Message” preceded it by six years, the systemic violence it depicts persists. N.W.A.’s records are designed to disrupt social norms, confronting a society that has normalized violence against Black bodies. Tracks like “Fuck Tha Police” make clear why this violence must not continue. Crucially, *Straight Outta Compton* precedes the beating of Rodney King, yet the song reads in retrospect as anticipatory rather than merely reactive. The record sonically documents a societal pressure valve already rising to the point of rupture.

²⁰⁶ N.W.A., “Fuck Tha Police.”

²⁰⁷ N.W.A., “Fuck Tha Police.”

²⁰⁸ N.W.A., “Fuck Tha Police.”

Tensions between Black communities and the LAPD had been escalating in Los Angeles for years. In 1987, the department launched “Operation Hammer,” a sweeping anti-gang initiative that resulted in tens of thousands of stops and arrests, disproportionately targeting young Black and brown men.²⁰⁹ Eight days before the release of *Straight Outta Compton*, the infamous 39th and Dalton raid occurred. In an article entitled “The Raid that Still Haunts L.A.” from 2001, LA Times writer John L. Mitchell writes that “scores of LAPD officers descended onto two apartment buildings on the corner of 39th and Dalton Avenue...it was an all-out search for drugs and a massive show of force.”²¹⁰ The LAPD put on a performance of their own. This raid was not simply to confiscate drugs; the officers left graffiti on the walls of the tenant’s homes and did so much damage that the Red Cross had to offer their aid and assistance to over ten homeowners.²¹¹ Mitchell later quotes NYU law professor Jerome Skolnick, who investigates police use of excessive force, and claimed that “Dalton was a precursor.”²¹² What Skolnick means is that the LAPD would continue to use “excessive force” against majority Black and brown communities well into the 1990s—all actions that were justified and enabled by the numerous and oppressive anti-gang laws passed in the late ‘80s. Compton’s anti-gang laws meant that any group of three or more people with a common identity could be classified as a gang. In reality, this policy allowed the LAPD to treat Black and brown children hanging out in groups after dark as criminal organizations. The

²⁰⁹ John L. Mitchell, “The Raid That Still Haunts L.A.,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 2001, [link](#).

²¹⁰ Mitchell, “The Raid That Still Haunts L.A.”

²¹¹ Mitchell, “The Raid That Still Haunts L.A.”

²¹² Mitchell, “The Raid That Still Haunts L.A.”

police undertook gang sweeps, building the anti-police animosity that birthed *Straight Outta Compton*. Sampling, then, emerges as a form of counter-memory against these moments of rupture.

Dr. Dre's use of sampling represents a new generation. Unlike the '80s-era artists before him who re-remembered Civil Rights Triumphs, artists of the 1990s inherited the fragmentation of their communities to the War on Drugs, the evacuation of the Black middle class, and the loss of federal funding for public services. Dre uses funk samples as a bridge across this generational loss, and a way to perform reparative work. Dre's first solo record, *The Chronic*, was self-produced and released in 1992. In his 1993 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Dre explained its necessity: "I needed the record to come out. I was broke. I didn't receive one fuckin' quarter in the year of '92, because Ruthless spent the year trying to figure out ways not to pay me so I'd come back on my hands and knees."²¹³ Dre refers to Ruthless Records, the label that he'd produced seven platinum records for between 1983 and 1991.²¹⁴ He desperately wanted out of Ruthless; he felt his payouts were too low, and that manager Jerry Heller was taking advantage of him.²¹⁵ Dre went on to found his own record label, Death Row Records, and soon produced *The Chronic*. *Rolling Stone* hip-hop writer Rashad Grove describes the album as creating a "seismic shift in the hip hop landscape," offering that "The star of *The Chronic* is Dre's masterful production. Using the timeless grooves of Parliament Funkadelic as his North

²¹³ Justin Sayles, "The Complicated Truths of Dr. Dre's 'The Chronic'," *The Ringer*, April 20, 2020, [link](#).

²¹⁴ Sayles, "The Complicated Truths of Dr. Dre's 'The Chronic'."

²¹⁵ Sayles, "The Complicated Truths of Dr. Dre's 'The Chronic'."

Star, Dre seamlessly wielded samples with live instrumentation that created a unique sound.”²¹⁶ Parliament-Funkadelic (P.Funk) emerged in the 1970s as a funkalicious, circus-like group led by George Clinton. Their tandem albums, *Mothership Connection* and *Chocolate City*, released in 1975, amplified one central claim: how to be Black in a post-Civil Rights Movement America. P.Funk crafts a collective Black mythology stretching across their 20 studio albums, and one that Dre heavily invokes in *The Chronic*.

Across his tracks “The Chronic (Intro),” “Let Me Ride,” “Fuck Wit Dre Day (And Everybody’s Celebratin’),” “Bitches Ain’t Shit,” “(Not Just) Knee Deep,” and “The Roach (The Chronic Outro),” Dre samples P.Funk’s music and mythology. The sample’s slow, descending vocal line and elastic bass groove create a sonic atmosphere centered on melody, allowing Dre’s Compton narrative to ride atop an inherited Black cosmology. Of the sixteen total songs on the album, Dre samples P.Funk in five of them, opening and closing the album. Dre interpolates P.Funk’s “Mothership Connection (Star Child)” in “Let Me Ride,” using the refrain of P.Funk’s track as the backbone of his own track about street life in Compton. The refrain reads: “Swing down, sweet chariot/ Stop, and let...me....ride!”²¹⁷ George Clinton himself samples the refrain from the same Black spiritual, turning this traditional song of oppression into a song of freedom. Dre builds this refrain into his cyclical chorus, remediating on the allusion of the “chariot”

²¹⁶ Rashad Grove, “*The Chronic*” — *Dr. Dre (1992)*, National Recording Preservation Board, Library of Congress, PDF (2019), [link](#); *The Chronic* was added to the Library of Congress’s National Recording Registry in 2019.

²¹⁷ Parliament-Funkadelic, “Starchild,” track 5 on *Mothership Connection*, recorded 1975; released 1975 by Casablanca Records, LP/CD, [link](#).

throughout the song. During enslavement, this spiritual was sung as a form of escapist hope; the “chariot” will come and rescue the enslaved African-Americans and “take them home” to a better place. In sampling P.Funk’s interpretation of the spiritual, Dre also indirectly samples the spiritual itself. Through sampling P.Funk’s work, Dre engages in what Craig Werner defines as the intertwining of music and history: “Structurally, music mirrors the complications of history. Moving forward in time, music immerses us in a narrative flow, gives us a sense of how what happened yesterday shapes what’s happening now.”²¹⁸ The complications facing Black people in the 1960s continue to reverberate into the 1990s. Where George Clinton and P.Funk “mirrored” the complicated history of Black people in America during the last fifteen years of the Civil Rights movement, they also envision a created universe that is a *better place* for Black people. This “better” place is one that is unified and free.²¹⁹

Michael Veal connects P.Funk’s created mythology to the reverb and delay techniques used in dub, terms that are commonly subsumed by the word *echo*.²²⁰ He argues that dub, like funk music, utilizes sonic space in order to connect with the listener’s cognition. In this way, the echo in dub serves as a “function of memory and the evocation of the chronological past.”²²¹ But an echo can also “at the same time evoke the vastness of outer space and hence (by association), the chronological future.”²²²

²¹⁸ Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come*, 227.

²¹⁹ Camille Carleton, “All Aboard the Mothership: George Clinton’s Vision of Freedom and Black Power in Outer Space,” *Rhodes Historical Review*, vol. 26 (Spring 2024), in *2024 Rhodes Historical Review*, [link](#). I examine similar themes in this article.

²²⁰ Michael E. Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 198.

²²¹ Veal, *Dub*, 198.

²²² Veal, *Dub*, 198.

Sampling falls under this umbrella of the echo; it, too, holds the cognitive function of memory and evokes both the chronological past and future. Dre interacts with Veal's definition of the echo across *The Chronic*, utilizing *Mothership Connection* as a way to re-contextualize the past for the future, saying: the better place is still to come.

By sampling 1970s-era funk, Dre inserts the image of gangsta masculinity into a longer Black performance tradition. Here, masculinity is not only lyrically asserted but sonically authenticated through the reuse of Black musical memory. Saddik identifies the violence produced in gangsta rap as representative, connecting Black masculinity to the American value system, which places value on a machismo identity. This machismo identity is one that is expected and exalted in American culture. Author bell hooks furthers this claim: "Gangsta rap does not appear in a culture vacuum but, rather, is expressive of the cultural crossing, mixing, and engagement of Black youth with the values, attitudes, and concerns of the white majority."²²³ hooks argues that "the sexist, misogynist, and patriarchal ways of thinking and believing that are glorified in gangsta rap are rather created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy."²²⁴ hooks contends that gangsta rap is not the prerequisite for the violence that saturates our society, but is instead a by-product of the violence that was already there.

The sort of hyper-masculinity Dre invokes is built on what Cornel West explains is "young Black male style."²²⁵ In *The Chronic*, these identities are engineered through

²²³ Bakari Kitwana as quoted in Annette Saddik, "Rap's Unruly Body," 113.

²²⁴ bell hooks as quoted in Annette Saddik, "Rap's Unruly Body," 115.

²²⁵ Saddik, "Rap's Unruly Body," 128.

sound instead of relying on narration alone. West identifies this style as “a form of self-identification and resistance in a hostile culture.”²²⁶ This hostile culture has been created by the power dynamics produced in slavery and perpetuated into the 20th century.

Hostility is still directed at the Black body, and the masculinity Dre raps about is a direct by-product of this violence directed towards him. Saddik reads Dre’s display of Black masculinity as a performance that can be “read as both a window into the ‘reality’ of the pressures of economically disenfranchised urban Black Americans.”²²⁷ This window is opened by Dre in *The Chronic*, in which he uses P.Funk’s samples in order to place his performance of masculinity in the deep tradition of Black folklore.

As discussed in the Prelude, the Black folkloric tradition of the “Signifying Monkey” plays a unique role in hip-hop culture. The story of the “Signifying Monkey” centers on the Monkey, who is a “trickster figure” and uses cunning wit and verbal wordplay to outsmart the white-coded authority figure of the Lion. However, Dre invokes the use of both the trickster figure and another folkloric character—the badman. Both are considered folk heroes, but while the trickster uses guile to maintain power, the badman uses direct confrontation.²²⁸ Instead of using only word-sound as power, the badman archetype embodies an outlaw-like figure who defies white authority and societal norms through sheer force and audacity.²²⁹

²²⁶ Saddik, “Rap’s Unruly Body,” 128.

²²⁷ Saddik, “Rap’s Unruly Body,” 114.

²²⁸ Trudier Harris, “The Trickster in African American Literature,” *Freedom’s Story*, TeacherServe®, National Humanities Center, accessed April 1, 2026, [link](#).

²²⁹ Crystal Belle, “From Jay-Z to Dead Prez: Examining Representations of Black Masculinity in Mainstream Versus Underground Hip-Hop Music,” *Journal of Black Studies* 45, no. 4 (May 2014): 287–300, [link](#).

The evolution of hip-hop aligns with the tactics used by both the trickster and the badman. Where 1970s-era hip-hop artists took a less authoritative stance, Dre and other gangsta-rap artists choose to embody the badman's archetype instead. Dre's illustration of violence across his album is a direct confrontation to the white authority—the LAPD, for example—that continually rupture both individual lives and communities. Dre utilizes strength (embodied by the badman) and guile (embodied by the trickster) as identity formation across *Straight Outta Compton*. Rap historian Eithne Quinn explains that the trickster archetype is undoubtedly connected to the pimp figure; she adds that “above all, [it is] the persuasive power, verbal skill, and emphasis on simulation that link the two.”²³⁰ These traits are deeply emblematic of the Black vernacular practice of “the dozens,” illustrated by verbal dueling, braggadocio, and stylized insults, as discussed in the Prelude.²³¹ Dre's gangsta rap embodies the same traits as the dozens, and is indeed built on the same vernacular traditions of this African American practice. Quinn also places Dre's gangsta rap and performance of masculinity directly within the tradition of the “Signifying Monkey.” She argues that the folklore of the Signifying Monkey offers an “expressive parable for the power differentials of Black America's rich supply of creative resources (represented by the Monkey's style and fast-paced improvisational language) in contrast to white America's stultifying economic and political clout (signaled by the white-coded lion's lack of wit but greater might as ‘king of the jungle’).”²³²

²³⁰ Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a “G” Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 133, [link](#).

²³¹ Quinn, *Nuthin' but a “G” Thang*, 134.

²³² Quinn, *Nuthin' but a “G” Thang*, 134.

Quinn's argument reveals exactly what Dre is doing by sampling from the sonic texts of the 1970s. He is re-building a genealogy for both himself and his community in the rupture of 1990s-era Compton. In order to establish this genealogy, he connects his listeners to P.Funk, who created a dialogue for Black children in the fragmented Black community after the Civil Rights Movement. Further, his remediation of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" indicates his linking of 1990s-era rupture to that of enslavement. By rapping in the vernacular practice of the dozens, Dre invokes the folkloric "Signifying Monkey," effectively narrating himself and his community as the Monkey, who must use fast-paced, improvisational language in order to try and defeat the Lion, the white-coded America, who has greater might.²³³ Dre's ghettocentric identity intertwined with the folkloric "Signifying Monkey" is another example of how rap music holds both cultural memory and tradition in the same breath. Dre circulates not only the samples of P.Funk, but the vernacular traditions that built gangsta rap.

The emergence of gangsta rap in the late 1980s and early 1990s interpreted the ruptures occurring in the form of increasing police brutality and continual disenfranchisement against Black folks through the practice of sampling. Built largely on the sonic and performative traditions rooted in funk, N.W.A and Dr. Dre articulated a distinctly racialized and gendered identity in gangsta rap. Their work demonstrated gangsta rap's assertiveness through its confrontational posture and unflinching narration of urban Black life on the West Coast. Their depiction of Black masculinity acts as a sonic construction, built through a reimagination of Black musical heritage. By analyzing N.W.A. and Dr. Dre's work, sampling in the late 1980s and early 1990s functions as a

²³³ Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 134.

sonic archive, preserving and recontextualizing both Black historical and musical traditions through sound.

Track Four: Sampling as a Narrative Space

On October 10, 1999, *The New York Times* featured a letter in their “To The Editor” column written by a reader named Willette L. Barnett from New Haven, Connecticut. Barnett was concerned about the morality of a certain rising star in the hip-hop realm: a woman named Lauryn Hill, whose album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, had been released just over a year prior on August 25, 1998. Barnett wrote: “If Ms. Hill were truly concerned about the troubling paths many young women find themselves on (as in her song “Lost Ones”), should she not consider the message she’s sending to these same young women by having children out of wedlock by her boyfriend? Surely she must be aware of the mixed-messages she’s sending?”²³⁴

Lauryn Hill was aware of the message she was sending but did not necessarily consider that message to be mixed. Despite Barnett’s concern, Hill had spoken at a recently-televised awards speech about her path in life: “I’m a Christian, I believe in the Bible and its teachings, I’m trying to pass this knowledge down on to my own and the next generation, but I’m also going to do my own thing.”²³⁵ Barnett actually cites this quote from Hill in her letter, clearly dissatisfied with the image of a woman heralding herself as a well-to-do Christian with a baby out of wedlock.

Barnett’s letter—and the fact that *The New York Times* deemed it newspaper-worthy—illustrates the complex social and cultural expectations set on Black women in the 1990s. When Hill released her debut solo album, she was twenty-three years old—a

²³⁴ Willette Barnett, “L. Soul Queens; A Poor Example,” *New York Times*, October 10, 1999, Letters section, [link](#).

²³⁵ Barnett, “Soul Queens; A Poor Example,” *New York Times*.

young Black woman on the cusp of full artistic maturity, nurturing her infant son Zion, and in the midst of exiting the Fugees, the hip-hop group in which she had emerged. Her album was an overnight success, ushering her into the same company as artists like Public Enemy, N.W.A., and Dr. Dre. *Miseducation*'s greatest strength lies in Hill's ability to weave together a vast range of diasporic traditions. Her pan-African artistic perspective grounds the album in her individual experience growing up as a Black woman in South Orange, New Jersey, while simultaneously drawing from Afro-diasporic musical forms to expand the record's thematic concerns of love, womanhood, and identity in the late 1990s. Through samples rooted in soul, gospel, blues, and jazz, Hill constructs a tapestry of sound that travels seamlessly across both geography and time: from Ethiopia to Newark, Brooklyn to Brixton, Kingston to the American South, and across the Black musical traditions of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s.²³⁶ Hip-hop scholar Joan Morgan captures this scope precisely, arguing Hill "deliberately wrote herself into the discourse of diaspora, drew on the global nature of Black music, and fashioned herself into a citizen of the world."²³⁷

Hill's intervention was rooted in a unique geographic sound. Morgan cites Hill's work as being geographically unique due to the diasporic elements at work within the tracks. The 1990s was the era of the "gangsta bitch," and Black identity politics remained heavily invested in respectability, frequently finding itself in tension with hip-hop's valorization of hood life and hyper-sexuality.²³⁸ The "gangsta bitch" image that

²³⁶ Joan Morgan, *She Begat This: 20 Years of The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (New York: Atria Books, 2018), 14.

²³⁷ Morgan, *She Begat This*, 14.

²³⁸ Morgan, *She Begat This*, 17.

proliferated '90s-era media depicts a stereotype of a woman who is aggressive, loyal, and over-sexualized.²³⁹ Researchers Dionne Stephens and Layli Phillips discuss the development of African-American women's "sexual scripts" in their 2003 study, "Freaks, Gold Diggers, Divas, and Dykes."²⁴⁰ The "gangsta bitch" stereotype is one of these sexual scripts, and Stephens and Phillips identify that the "gangsta bitch" often comes from a poverty-stricken, urban environment, but that this stereotype should rather be viewed as a "facade used by these girls to deal with the harsh realities of their lives and their poor economic conditions."²⁴¹ Additionally, 1990s rappers such as Notorious B.I.G. and Apache both released songs deifying the "gangsta bitch"— "Me and My Bitch" (1994) and "Gangsta Bitch" (1993), respectively.

Hill occupied a conspicuously different position. She took leave from Columbia University to pursue music professionally and grew up the child of middle-class parents in suburban New Jersey. Music journalists of the '90s eagerly exploited that difference, framing Hill in opposition to her musical contemporaries, such as Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, and Salt-N-Pepa, as though Black womanhood could only be understood through competition and contrast. *Los Angeles Times* writer Cheo Hodari Coker described Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown in his 1997 article: "At their best, New York's Foxy Brown and

²³⁹ M. V. Georges, *Shady Beats: Unveiling Colourism in Hip-Hop and Rap Music* (University of Manitoba, 2024), 25, [link](#).

²⁴⁰ Angelica Moss, "Anti-Video Girl: Empowering Parents and Adolescent Females to Defy the Misogynistic Images of African American Women in Hip-Hop" (Kennesaw State University, 2010), [link](#).

²⁴¹ Dionne P. Stephens and Layli Phillips, "Freaks, Gold Diggers, Divas, and Dykes: The Socio-Historical Development of Adolescent African American Women's Sexual Scripts," *Sexuality & Culture* 7, no. 1 (2003): 3–49.

Lil' Kim prove that female emcees can bring the noise with the same ferocious fury as any man. At their worst, they show that women can be as clichéd as their brothers, indulging in the sex and violence imagery that has drastically lowered hip-hop's collective IQ."²⁴² Coker goes on to depict Foxy Brown as "occasionally display[ing] dazzling skills. Unfortunately, many of her freestyles seem identical: repetitive, sound-alike rhymes about her doe eyes, homicidal tendencies, and burning thighs."²⁴³ Similarly, his description of Lil' Kim is that she is "overtly sexual and defiant."²⁴⁴ *The New York Times*' Lynette Holloway called Lil' Kim's "new image" in 2003 as being "sexually explicit" and "now more of a gangsta temptress."²⁴⁵ Holloway then writes: "Her handlers believe her new persona will evoke memories of Biggie Smalls and enable her to expand her audience."²⁴⁶ What Coker and Holloway's article suggest is that on both the East and West Coast, from men and women, female hip-hop artists were being depicted as "gangsta bitches." Neither of these articles talks about Lil' Kim or Foxy Brown's hard work to access the same podium the same writers so graciously deify Lauryn Hill on, nor do they give nuance to her artistic process, evinced in the deeply problematic statements of calling Lil' Kim's producers her "handlers." Instead, journalists of the 1990s—and into the early 2000s—chose to focus on the artists' embrace of their sexuality, clothing worn at awards shows, and feuds between the women.

²⁴² Cheo Hodari Coker, "Rhymin' L.A.," *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1997, [link](#).

²⁴³ Lynette Holloway, "Lil' Kim Surprises Critics as CD Catches On," *New York Times*, March 17, 2003, [link](#).

²⁴⁴ Holloway, "Lil' Kim Surprises Critics."

²⁴⁵ Holloway, "Lil' Kim Surprises Critics."

²⁴⁶ Holloway, "Lil' Kim Surprises Critics."

Lauryn Hill received ostensibly different treatment from the media. Instead of being a “gangsta bitch,” the narrative emerged that Hill was a respectable young woman that white and Black thinkers alike could get behind. What Barnett’s letter reveals to us is the deep entrenchment of racism present in coverage of female hip-hop artists in the 1990s. Perhaps her status of “respectability” was because her album invokes Christianity, or that she encouraged women (and men!) to reject “that thing” (a.k.a *sex*) in her album’s top-single, “Doo Wop (That Thing).” Either way, this chapter refuses to condemn the actions of Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, or Lauryn Hill. Instead, as critic Danielle Jackson writes in *The Paris Review*, the truth about Black female identity “can’t be found in the voice of any one rapper, but in the juxtaposition of many,” and lies at “the magical intersection where contrary voices meet.”²⁴⁷ *Miseducation* is exactly that magical intersection—a canonical intervention into the male-dominated space of hip-hop, and an invitation to encounter Black womanhood in its full relational, interior complexity. Through her pan-African sampling on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Hill enacts a Black feminist historiography that collapses musical time, building a narrative space in order to claim the interior lives of Black women as worthy of the same cultural weight as the tradition she invokes.

The media’s insistence on defining Black womanhood through a binary of respectability or deviance did not emerge in a vacuum. It was instead the cultural expression of political policies reshaping American life in the 1990s: the same hierarchies that welfare reform legislation codified onto the bodies and lives of Black women.

²⁴⁷ Danielle A. Jackson, “Joan Morgan, Hip-Hop Feminism, and the Twenty-Year Legacy of *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*,” *The Paris Review* (blog), August 8, 2018, [link](#).

Another stereotype that was pressed onto Black women in both the 1980s and '90s was that of the “welfare queen.” Popularized by Reagan during his 1976 presidential campaign, the “welfare queen” stereotype portrayed a woman, often Black, who exploited welfare programs to fund a supposedly lavish lifestyle.²⁴⁸ In response to this, and a wider belief that people of color were misusing welfare, President Bill Clinton signed the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act* (PRWORA) in 1996, seeking to “change welfare as we know it.”²⁴⁹ However, as Barbara Ehrenreich’s 2002 article in *The Progressive* suggests, “The stereotype of the welfare recipient—lazy, overweight, and endlessly fecund—has become a coded way of talking about African Americans.”²⁵⁰ PRWORA not only stigmatized single-mother households, but “advanced the long-held negative stereotypes about Black women’s sexuality.”²⁵¹

Barbara Gault and Annisah Um’rani conducted research through the Poverty and Race Research Action Council in 2000 examining “The Outcomes of Welfare Reform for Women.”²⁵² Gault and Um’rani found that while “90% of welfare recipient household heads are women, [...] few policymakers recognize that discussions of welfare reform are by nature discussions of women’s issues.”²⁵³ The outcome of the welfare reform in the

²⁴⁸ “The True Story Behind the ‘Welfare Queen’ Stereotype,” *PBS NewsHour*, June 1, 2019, video, 9:24, [link](#).

²⁴⁹ Bill Clinton as quoted in Zenitha Prince, “Welfare Reform Garnered for Black Women a Hard Time and a Bad Name,” *AFRO American Newspapers*, August 28, 2016, [link](#).

²⁵⁰ Prince, “Welfare Reform.”

²⁵¹ Prince, “Welfare Reform.”

²⁵² Barbara Gault and Annisah Um’rani, “The Outcomes of Welfare Reform for Women,” *Poverty & Race* 9, no. 4 (July/August 2000):1, [link](#).

²⁵³ Gault and Um’rani, “Outcomes of Welfare Reform,” 1.

1990s is put quite simply by *Village Voice* writer Jarrett Murphy in 2005: “It seems like welfare reform has done no better than welfare at curing the underlying problem, which, once upon a time, was called “poverty.”²⁵⁴ Ultimately, Clinton’s welfare reform demonized the individual instead of addressing systemic issues which entrenched Black Americans in cycles of generational poverty.

Black women suffered the most from these policies. PROWRA is another profound rupture in the lives of Black women and men in the 1990s. Lauryn Hill’s *Miseducation* comes two years after PRWORA was signed into law and presents a far different image than that of the undeserving single Black mother on welfare that Clinton popularized throughout his presidency. By challenging this notion as powerfully as that of the reductive “gangsta bitch,” *Miseducation* even more deeply illustrates the beauty and complexity of generations of Black motherhood, culminating in Hill’s own experience in the late ‘90s.

Miseducation’s fifteen tracks construct a language of syncretism, blending diasporic samples to adapt the hip-hop belief system to Hill’s own circumstances as a young Black woman in the 1990s. In her 1998 coverage of Hill’s debut album, *New York Times* writer Ann Powers describes *Miseducation* as “crossing back over from profane to sacred.” From the title of the record itself, Hill seeks to sanctify hip-hop with soul. Powers suggests that the saga that is *Miseducation* “even surpass[es] the details of Black American life that fill her work, right down to the album’s title, which echoes ‘The Miseducation of the Negro.’”²⁵⁵ By invoking Carter G. Woodson’s foundational work

²⁵⁴ Jarrett Murphy, “Where All The Welfare Queens Went,” *Village Voice*, April 25, 2005, [link](#).

²⁵⁵ Ann Powers, “Pop/Jazz; Crossing Back Over From Profane to Sacred,” *New York Times*, August 23, 1998, Section 2, 28, [link](#).

published in 1993, Hill evokes Woodson’s message that Black people in the 1930s were being culturally indoctrinated, rather than taught, in American schools. This cultural conditioning, Woodson argues, led Black people to seek out inferior places within the American social strata. Hill seeks to identify Woodson’s argument with the politics of Black identity in the 1990s, suggesting that she is rejecting the cultural conditioning enforced on in the hip-hop world, and re-educating herself through the record.

The first sound you hear on the album is a school bell, evoking the sonic world of the public education settings in which Hill would have been exposed to the forms of indoctrination that Woodson revealed decades prior. Conversations appear in interludes across the album led by educator Ras Baraka and a class of neighborhood children discussing the nature and power of love. In “Intro,” children Tamika Marshall, Taryn Lucas, Deshawn Marshall, Shaquan Suttons, and Aleesia Simmons answer various questions from Baraka about love in all its many forms.²⁵⁶ *Atlas Obscura* writer Paula Mejia suggests that to listeners, the “improvised discussion [on *Miseducation*] becomes an auditory study in the language of love, which asks us to consider tough questions: What *do* we talk when we talk about love?”²⁵⁷ When Baraka, playing teacher, calls Hill’s name, she is nowhere to be found. Her answer to Mejia’s question is the album itself. Track two of *Miseducation* is “Lost Ones,” where Hill samples Sister Nancy’s “Bam Bam” and Boogie Down Productions “Super Hoe.” Ophlin Russell, better known as Sister Nancy, is a Jamaican dancehall DJ and singer. Primarily working in reggae and

²⁵⁶ Paul Mejia, “*The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998),” Library of Congress National Recording Registry, 2018, [link](#).

²⁵⁷ Paul Mejia, “*The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998).”

blues, Sister Nancy's 1982 album *One Two* features distinctive Jamaican elements of rolling vocal patterns, sing jay style, and culturally conscious lyricism. On "Bam Bam," Sister Nancy opens Verse One with the following lyrics: "A me seh one ting Nancy cyaan understan/ One ting Nancy cyaan understan." Sister Nancy uses this line to assert her presence in the male-dominated reggae scene. Her repetition "reinforces the idea that she is addressing a persistent misunderstanding...to gender, respect, or cultural recognition."²⁵⁸ Further, by using her name in the third person, Sister Nancy "enhances the performative and declarative style of traditional dancehall toasting, where self-reference is common to assert presence and dominance."²⁵⁹

By sampling the vocals of "Bam Bam," Hill seeks to layer Sister Nancy's ideas within her own; Hill, too, is entering a male-dominated space and seeks to reinforce the persistent issue of her gender. Hill, too, asserts her presence and dominance in the first vocal track of *Miseducation*, and references herself in the third person in Verse One: "Some wan' play young Lauryn like she dumb/But remember not a game under the sun/Everything you did has already been done/I know all the tricks from Bricks to Kingston."²⁶⁰ Here, Hill also plays with another common aspect of Jamaican toasting, where deejays will use humor to insult rival artists. The target of her diss is former bandmate Wyclef Jean of the Fugees. She references both Bricks (colloquial nickname of "Brick City," a nickname of Newark, New Jersey) and Kingston, the capital city of

²⁵⁸ Sister Nancy, "Bam Bam."

²⁵⁹ Sister Nancy, "Bam Bam."

²⁶⁰ Lauryn Hill, "Lost Ones," track 2 on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Ruffhouse/Columbia, 1998, compact disc, [link](#).

Jamaica, illustrating the pan-Africanism of her work. Though not officially cited, another line in Verse One, “L been this way since creation,”²⁶¹ references Sister Nancy’s lyric in “Bam Bam,” reading, “A true dem nuh know it’s fram creation.”²⁶² Hill not only interacts with these specific Jamaican elements, but she also weaves Biblical allusions throughout *Miseducation*. Through direct scriptural language and gospel and soul sounds, Hill grounds the album in a deeply spiritual tradition.

Through scriptural language and the sonic textures of gospel, soul, and reggae, Hill further draws on syncretic Black Christianity as a foundational site of pan-African cultural identity. In an article titled “(ft. Jesus): How Lauryn Hill and Sampling Shapes Christianity in Mainstream Rap,” author Glenn Rogers argues that Hill’s melodies “signify rap’s shift towards the sound of popular music, but they also remind listeners of the sounds of a Sunday gospel.”²⁶³ What Rogers describes is the public identifying syncretic elements throughout *Miseducation*. Not only does Hill move hip-hop ever-closer to pop music, but she does also so by anointing the album with soul. Scholar Sophia Gilmour, writing in her theological analysis of *Miseducation*, argues that Hill’s music functions as “public theology,” a form of musical lamentation that “refuses to deny the pain caused by the hand of racist injustices [ruptures]” and thus becomes an act of liberatory truth-telling.²⁶⁴ For Powers, Hill’s “public theology” reaches farther, “to what

²⁶¹ Hill, “Lost Ones.”

²⁶² Sister Nancy, “Bam Bam.”

²⁶³ Glenn Rodgers, “(ft. Jesus): How Lauryn Hill and Sampling Shaped Christianity in Mainstream Rap,” *Afterglow*, October 30, 2019, [link](#).

²⁶⁴ Sophia Gilmour, “Lamentations for Liberation: A Theological Analysis of the *Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*” (Loyola Marymount University, 2022), [link](#).

she [Hill] considers *The Greatest Story Ever Told*: that of a Black spiritual legacy grounded in Christianity but constantly adapting to the world outside the church, the buried timeline of the African diaspora's social movements and its arts."²⁶⁵

In order to re-tell this story for her listeners, Hill reaches back to Rastafarian reggae. On "Lost Ones," Hill sings, "You can't hold God's people back that long."²⁶⁶ Michael Veal identifies that song lyrics in Jamaican popular music—one form of reggae— "tended towards themes of social and political justice filtered through the religious vision of Rastafari."²⁶⁷ This is the reggae Hill interacts with and samples throughout *Miseducation*, a form brought to the international stage by Jamaican-born musician Bob Marley, whose style of reggae became "stylistically [...] distinct from the local dancehall culture."²⁶⁸ Jamaican vocalist and producer Michael Campbell offers that Marley's music "was, like, timeless...you don't follow the trend or the fad which is going on now. You don't make music for now, you make music for all time."²⁶⁹ Instead of being influenced by the local trends of Jamaican music, Marley's distinct style of reggae endured into Lauryn Hill's gaze. While Hill infuses *Miseducation* with elements of reggae, she is also personally connected to Bob Marley, one of the leading pioneers of reggae music. Her partner and father of her son, Rohan Marley, is Marley's third son.

²⁶⁵ Powers, "Pop/Jazz; Crossing Back Over From Profane to Sacred."

²⁶⁶ Hill, "Lost Ones."

²⁶⁷ Michael E. Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 4.

²⁶⁸ Veal, *Dub*, 4.

²⁶⁹ Michael Campbell as quoted in Veal, *Dub*, 5.

Hip-hop's lineage grows out of these very same elements that mixed together in the cultural incubator that was the South Bronx in the 1970s, and by including them on *Miseducation*, Hill ties her work to one of the fundamental influences of early hip-hop culture. Hill also continues the trope of using samples from the soul era of the 1970s, likening her work to that of Kool Herc—both artists seek to redefine the ruptures around them through music. Additionally, Hill's sample from "Super Hoe" was produced by Lawrence Parker, better known as KRS-One—a pioneer rapper who included elements of Rastafarianism in his own work. While *Miseducation* is not a reggae album, Hill uses reggae and Jamaican dancehall elements in order to root her album as crucially hip-hop, and crucially pan-African.

Hill's gospel influences also root *Miseducation* in the tradition of 1960s female soul singers, connecting her work to a longer history of Black women's struggle and expression. Powers articulates how soul music connects religion to everyday life, writing, "Soul music showed how language, and the music that expressed it, could elevate people's understanding of carnal pleasures, personal relationships, and social concerns."²⁷⁰ Christopher John's *Time* article "The Soul Musician Aretha Franklin," published in 1998, describes The Queen of Soul as having that "glorious mezzo-soprano, gospel growls, throaty howls, girlish vocal tickles, swoops, dives, blue-sky high notes, and blue-sea low notes."²⁷¹ He calls Hill's contemporaries—Mariah Carey and Mary J. Blige— "musically speaking, Sunday-school students of Aretha's."²⁷² Hill, too, invokes

²⁷⁰ Powers, "Pop/Jazz; Crossing Back Over From Profane to Sacred."

²⁷¹ Christopher John, "The Soul Musician: Aretha Franklin," *TIME*, June 7, 1998, [link](#).

²⁷² John, "The Soul Musician: Aretha Franklin."

soul across *Miseducation* in order to sanctify hip-hop. In doing so, Hill takes on the same voice that made Aretha Franklin such a powerful force; for writer Thulani Davis, Franklin “is the voice that made all the unsaid sayable, powerful and lyrical [...] Aretha let her raggedy edges show, which meant she could be trusted with ours.”²⁷³

Mary J. Blige, one of Hill’s fellow contemporaries and another artist who blends hip-hop with soul, sings a duet with Hill on *Miseducation* titled “I Used to Love Him.” Powers compares this duet to that of Aretha Franklin’s work in the 1960s, paralleling how Hill also “uses spiritual rhetoric to create a highly introspective and ethical view of romance.”²⁷⁴ The spiritual rhetoric Powers refers to occurs across several tracks on *Miseducation*; “Lost Ones,” “To Zion,” “I Used to Love Him,” and “Forgive Them Father” feature gospel singers and traditional gospel styling. In “Lost Ones,” Hill sings, “[You] gained the whole world for the price of your soul,” which directly references Matthew 6:26: “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?” There are many more Biblical elements in “Lost Ones,” but where we really see Hill blending reggae, Rastafarianism, and gospel in one song is that of “To Zion,” track four of her album, which is dedicated to her son, who shares the title’s name.

Powers reminds us that by naming her son “after the homeland longed for by the Bible’s chosen people,” Hill invokes this Biblical narrative while also connecting “To Zion” to the Rastafarians, “who re-envisioned [the homeland of Zion] as Africa.”²⁷⁵ The

²⁷³ John, “The Soul Musician: Aretha Franklin.”

²⁷⁴ Powers, “Pop/Jazz; Crossing Back Over From Profane to Sacred.”

²⁷⁵ Powers, “Pop/Jazz; Crossing Back Over From Profane to Sacred.”

use of “Zion” and the exodus extends to many African American political movements as well. Hill doesn’t stop there—she sings in Zion that “Unto me a man-child would be born,” imagining herself in the place of the Virgin Mary. A gospel choir sings her out, echoing “Beautiful, beautiful Zion,” as Hill screams “Zion” in the background. Powers thinks “To Zion” “is the high point of a miraculous album, a hymn to all the holiness the mortal heart can generate.”²⁷⁶ Hill’s mortality is reflected in her own life; she had a child out of wedlock with Rohan Marley, who she would later split from. Her decision to root *Miseducation* in different religious traditions is part of what stirred up condemnation from the public, like Barnett’s letter to the *New York Times* in 1998.

What *New York Times* letter writer Barnett fed into is the very discourse pitting Hill against her “gangsta bitch” contemporaries, a topic writer Sia Michel discusses in her 1998 *Village Voice* article “Dream-girl Disenfranchised.” Michel describes the media landscape, depicting women in hip-hop dialogue as being “stalled in the “Foxy & Kim: Post-Feminist Geniuses or Stank Hos?” debate.”²⁷⁷ She continues, illustrating Hill “as an anomaly—the elegantly beautiful, musically gifted class brain, the stern voice over your shoulder telling you to put those booty shorts and Bee Gee samples down, you low-expectations-having-muthafucka.”²⁷⁸ Michel calls *Miseducation* the “coming-of-age of a golden girl who’s always outshone everyone else...who’s had her own seat at the hip-hop boy’s club...only to find out the same old gender traps still apply.”²⁷⁹ And while Michel

²⁷⁶ Powers, “Pop/Jazz; Crossing Back Over From Profane to Sacred.”

²⁷⁷ Sia Michel, “Dream-girl Disenfranchised,” *The Village Voice*, September 1, 1998, [link](#).

²⁷⁸ Michel, “Dream-girl Disenfranchised.”

²⁷⁹ Michel, “Dream-girl Disenfranchised.”

criticizes Hill for lyrics such as “showing off they ass ‘cause they thinking its the trend” in “Doo Wop,” her final line highlights what she truly thinks of Hill’s gender-expectations-defying album: “When was the last time a catchy pop song broke down twenty years of fucked-up gender politics, and cared enough to wonder, “How you gon’ win when you ain’t right within?”²⁸⁰ It’s lyrics like these—appearing on “Doo Wop (That Thing)” —that underscore her pull to situate *Miseducation* within gospel. As Powers so neatly states, gospel is the place where “music is the message, the purest expression of the spiritual self. Ms. Hill honors this fundamental [text] by challenging herself and her listeners, crossing musical borders in pursuit of gospel’s wandering lineage.”²⁸¹ *Miseducation* is a product of this wandering lineage, tracing gospel’s path through soul, blues, funk, and hip-hop. Hill’s sampling ties her work to this legacy while claiming her own place within the old story.

Hill’s sampling does more than reconstruct a musical lineage—her samples build a narrative space, claiming the interior lives of Black women as worthy of the same cultural weight as the tradition she invokes. This narrative space is created through Hill’s samples. Hip-hop scholar Treva B. Lindsey offers that hip-hop soul women of the 1990s were intentional in “carving out an African-American, woman-authored, and women-centered narrative space,” in which their voices could “challenge the invisibility of multidimensional African American womanhood within popular culture.”²⁸² Lindsey

²⁸⁰ Michel, “Dream-girl Disenfranchised.”

²⁸¹ Powers, “Pop/Jazz; Crossing Back Over From Profane to Sacred.”

²⁸² Treva B. Lindsey as quoted in Joan Morgan, *She Begat This: 20 Years of The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (New York: Atria Books, 2018), 87.

continues, arguing that the hip-hop soul music produced by such artists acted as “conduits...through which Black women of the hip-hop generation [could] express personal aspirations, intimacy, and love.”²⁸³ *Miseducation* is an example of such a conduit. By naming Track 5 “Doo Wop (That Thing),” Hill references the doo-wop genre of Rhythm & Blues music that originated in Black communities across America during the 1940s. Martin Gottlieb’s 1993 *New York Times* piece describes Doo-wop as possessing an “unaffected beauty with the simplest ingredients,” noting a “straightforward chord structure, a strong lead singer, and baroque background [...] silky, ethereal harmonies.”²⁸⁴ Hill samples these “silky, ethereal harmonies” in the second opening line and throughout Track 5.

Additionally, Hill weaves R&B throughout “Doo Wop,” invoking a genre whose simplicity, as Gottlieb observed in his 1993 article, was simultaneously “its strength and its undoing.”²⁸⁵ Where artists like Boyz II Men had mined doo-wop for nostalgia alone, Hill holds its elements out for the listener to recognize while folding them into something harder, using the genre’s warmth as a foundation for, rather than a retreat from, her hip-hop record.

Later on in the song, Hill’s bridge, “Watch out, watch out (*Bom, bom, bom*)/Look out, look out (*Bom, bom*)” samples a doo-wop record. Production assistant Rasheem “Kilo” Pugh explained the sonic breakdown of the bridge to *XXL*: “We actually got [the

²⁸³ Treva B. Lindsey as quoted in Joan Morgan, *She Begat This*.

²⁸⁴ Martin Gottlieb, “Pop Music; The Durability of Doo-Wop,” *New York Times*, January 17, 1993, [link](#).

²⁸⁵ Gottlieb, “Pop Music; The Durability of Doo-Wop.”

bridge] from a doo wop record. There was one song where the piano was really similar...and in Jamaica, they had the live horns put on it.”²⁸⁶ By using doo-wop and doo-wop samples throughout Track 5, Hill ties her music to a longer lineage of Black artistry and sonic work. In doing so, she illustrates Black female interiority in a space dominated by male artists.

Hill constructs this narrative space by sampling traditional Black genres of music, allowing her to bring the relational world of Black women to the forefront of the hip-hop scene in the ‘90s. “Doo Wop (That Thing)” exemplifies this dynamic—in it, Hill both captures the communal language through which Black women warn one another about men, and creates a surrogate space for those women who may lack such a community entirely. Specifically, Hill warns such women about “That Thing:” i.e., sex. Her song is a warning, calling out to her “bredrin” and “sistren,” Jamaican patois slang terms for groups of male and female friends. Danielle Jackson suggests that many of the hip-hop songs women loved and listened to in the 1990s “smeared and disparaged women and performed an unfeeling and harsh masculinity, one the men and boys in our lives sometimes mirrored.”²⁸⁷ Hill responds to such songs and cultural opinions of Black women at large throughout *Miseducation*, performing what Treva Lindsey describes as “Black feminist surrogation.”²⁸⁸ Lindsey also asserts that hip-hop soul women engaged with similar themes in music that blueswomen like “Ma” Rainey, Ida Cox, and Bessie

²⁸⁶ XXL Staff, “Lauryn Hill’s *Miseducation* Collaborators Remember the Album 15 Years Later,” *XXL Magazine*, August 25, 2013, [link](#).

²⁸⁷ Jackson, “Joan Morgan, Hip-Hop Feminism, and the Twenty-Year Legacy of *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*.”

²⁸⁸ Lindsey as quoted in Morgan, *She Begat This: 20 Years of The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*.

Smith dealt with in their own work.²⁸⁹ Hill builds on the traditions of these blueswomen by speaking directly to her audience, asking: “The pretty face men claiming that did a bid men/Need to take care of they three or four kids/And they face a court case when the child support late/Money taking and heart breaking, now you wonder why women hate men?”²⁹⁰ Hill criticizes men for “acting like boys,” and in a later lyric calls them “domestic violence men.” These lyrics echo the themes of songs like Ida Cox’s 1924-release “Wild Women Don’t Have The Blues,” where she opens the song with these lyrics: “I hear these women ravin’ ‘bout their monkey men/About their trifling husbands and their no-good friends...” Cox then turns her attention to the women of these men, who she describes as being “poor women [who] sit around all day and moan/ Wandering why their wandering papas don’t come home...” Cox’s refrain is the same as the name of the song: “But wild women don’t worry; wild women don’t have no blues.” Hill updates Cox’s thematic material for the 1990s landscape. While she is certainly not the first artist to do so, Hill’s technique of layering *Miseducation* with elements of soul, gospel, and blues allows for the record to act as a narrative space. Through sampling, Hill is citing not only recent messaging in the 1980s, but even recalling the struggles Black women faced in the 1920s. Her messaging, decidedly hip-hop in its form, incorporates these blueswoman elements in order for her message to be as widely received as possible.

While Hill calls out women for giving in to “that thing,” she speaks out of wisdom instead of judgment. When she sings lyrics like “Now, Lauryn is only human

²⁸⁹ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

²⁹⁰ Lauryn Hill, “Doo Wop (That Thing),” track 5 on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Ruffhouse/Columbia, 1998, compact disc, [link](#).

(Human)/ Don't think I haven't been through the same predicament (I been there),”²⁹¹ she places herself as a woman who previously “sold her soul because it's in.”²⁹² In her own words, Hill elaborates on this messaging in a 1998 interview with *Details* magazine: “I'm not dissing them [the women], I'm dissing their mindset. My music talks about a certain way of thinking...I knew girls like Kim growing up—I might have even been one at a certain age—and there's a huge lack of self esteem behind that thinking.”²⁹³ Here, Hill references fellow artist Lil' Kim, who, as discussed previously, was often portrayed as Hill's opposite as a “gangsta bitch.” Hill openly puts herself in the same position as Lil' Kim, saying, “When I was fourteen, I thought if a guy didn't whistle at me, that meant I wasn't pretty. But either you mature past that or you get caught in the concept of, ‘Oh, I have to show some ass, ‘cause that's the only way I can feel beautiful.’”²⁹⁴ Hill's opinion is her own—she is speaking from her own experience, and from what has helped her get to the place where she was writing *Miseducation*. Though her commentary about “showing some ass” may not speak to every Black girl in the '90s, Hill exists in a culture where respectability politics still governed how Black women viewed themselves.

Hill is one interpreter of '90s-era womanhood, centering her narrative as one solution to the male-dominated space of hip-hop. As Joan Morgan writes, Hill's narrative of herself allowed for a multitude of Black girls across the nation to see themselves in her

²⁹¹ Hill also uses the third-person here, like her third-person usage in “Lost Ones,” invoking Sister Nancy's “Bam-Bam.”

²⁹² Hill, “Doo Wop (That Thing).”

²⁹³ Brantley Bardin, “Sugar Hill,” *Details*, November 1998, 150.

²⁹⁴ Bardin, “Sugar Hill.”

shoes: “If you were a Black girl of the dark chocolate/dreadlocked/afroed/Caesar-cut/hip-hop gen/afro-bohemian/ nose-ringed/ghetto-born/Ivy League-schooled/Gucci-and-Timberland loving variety, you already knew better than to try to find yourself in *Essence*, let alone *Elle*.”²⁹⁵ When Hill graced the cover of *Elle*—and the cover of the *Times*—she was indeed what Morgan calls a “Black magic woman.”²⁹⁶ Her presence, illustrated across *Miseducation* and on the covers of such popular magazines, showed Black girls across the nation that they, too, could be the sort of woman she was. Morgan offers that *Miseducation* created a “uniquely relatable way that allowed Black women to stitch themselves into her narrative and rewrite their own.”²⁹⁷

In *She Begat This: Twenty Years of the Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Morgan expands on her view about what position Hill occupied in popular culture. She quotes author Aikba Soloman, who offers that the 1990s “was the era of the gangsta bitch, and a lot of girls in hip-hop identified with this hypermasculine idea of “soldiering.”²⁹⁸ Solomon's identification of “soldiering” in hip-hop refers to the glorification of a “thug life” persona, illustrated by the genre of gangsta rap. Author Eithne Quinn connects “soldiering” to that of the badman persona, writing that “gangsta rap realized the same protest against white supremacy as that of the badman, but did so with an even more nihilistic zeal that laughed in the face of danger.”²⁹⁹ Artists such as Lil' Kim and Foxy

²⁹⁵ Morgan, *She Begat This: 20 Years of The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, 2.

²⁹⁶ Morgan, *She Begat This: 20 Years of The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, 3.

²⁹⁷ Morgan, *She Begat This: 20 Years of The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, 3.

²⁹⁸ Morgan, *She Begat This: 20 Years of The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, 20.

²⁹⁹ Quinn, *Nuthin' but a “G” Thang*, 104.

Brown fit their work into this aesthetic. Morgan argues that “Kim and Foxy were the hot female rappers and they were rhyming about carrying drugs in your cooch on a Greyhound.”³⁰⁰ While this is interesting imagery, Morgan writes, it was not an experience she was able to identify with. This is why Hill’s *Miseducation* spoke so clearly to her: “For somebody like [Hill] to talk about the fullness of Black experience was important and brave at the time, because there was a whole swath of people in hip hop pretending that they weren’t middle class.”³⁰¹

However, Morgan also identifies a key problem within this debate: just like Danielle Jackson illustrated how the “magical intersection” occurs when we refuse to compare different representations of womanhood, Morgan points out that the 1990s was rife with these comparisons. She writes: “Everything seemed to be evaluated by markers back then: East Coast versus West cost... hoes versus queens. Even the Fugee’s success was partially due to the ways they were positioned as the positive alternative to the violence that claimed Biggie and Pac’s lives.”³⁰² These markers helped position Hill as part of the growing movement of “socially-conscious” rap, which denigrated the work of rappers like Biggie and Tupac. Morgan states that Hill’s “pedestal was partially built on a distinct fear and loathing for Kim and Foxy’s hypersexuality.”³⁰³ The media’s portrayal of Hill as the distinct opposite of her musical contemporaries is more reflective of the culture in which Hill came up than reflective of *Miseducation* itself. The narrative Hill

³⁰⁰ Morgan, *She Begat This: 20 Years of The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, 20.

³⁰¹ Morgan, *She Begat This: 20 Years of The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, 20.

³⁰² Morgan, *She Begat This: 20 Years of The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, 21.

³⁰³ Morgan, *She Begat This: 20 Years of The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, 21.

authors is not one for a singular type of Black woman; her work is for all Black women. Ultimately, Hill's sampling and interpolations of traditional Black music forms across *Miseducation* illustrate how hip-hop shifts from being a male-dominated space into one where women can author their own narratives. Hill makes visible the relational world of Black women, rendering the issues that impact her own life just as historically and culturally important as those raised by artists like Public Enemy, N.W.A, and Dr. Dre before her.

The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill is, at its core, an act of remembering. Through her pan-African sampling, Hill does not simply make music but calls upon history by stitching together dispersed threads of a diasporic tradition into something urgently present. From Sister Nancy's dancehall declarations to Ida Cox's blueswoman wisdom, from Bob Marley's Rastafarian spirituality to Aretha Franklin's gospel authority, Hill draws on the full inheritance of Black musical life and places it in the service of a singular argument: that the interior world of Black womanhood is not peripheral to history, but central to it. What makes *Miseducation* enduring is not only what Hill samples, but what she builds within those samples. She constructs a narrative space in which Black women could recognize themselves, counsel one another, grieve openly, love without apology, and claim their own complexity. In doing so, Hill performs what Treva Lindsey calls Black feminist surrogation. She is standing in for a tradition of Black women artists who had always insisted their stories mattered and ensuring that tradition would survive into the next generation.

Postlude

“Black Art”

We want a black poem. And a Black World. Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem Silently or LOUD

- Amiri Baraka, (1966)³⁰⁴

Fifteen years after Langston Hughes asked what happens to a dream deferred, Amiri Baraka answered him in the imperative voice. *Let the world be a Black Poem*. Where Hughes ended in a question, Baraka ended in a command—and between the two poems lies the full arc of what this thesis has tried to trace. Hughes heard the explosion coming. Baraka demanded that the explosion be authored. And in the South Bronx of 1973, a generation of young Black and Afro-Caribbean artists picked up two turntables and began to do exactly that. Sampling is the practice through which Baraka’s command became method. It is the world made into a Black poem, spoken sometimes silently—in the buried sample, the half-second loop, the ancestor’s voice folded into a beat—and sometimes LOUD, in the dense walls of noise, the courtroom of “Fuck Tha Police,” the gospel choir crying *beautiful Zion* behind Lauryn Hill.

If power shapes the production of history, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, then sampling represents a counter-archival practice. In the face of ruptures from the 1970s to the 1990s, sampling allows for Black communities to inscribe their histories directly onto the record. Instead of allowing those in power to dictate the boundaries of what stories get told, sampling acts as a “recovery and recirculation of an African American past from

³⁰⁴ Amiri Baraka, “Black Art,” *The Liberator* 6, no. 1 (January 1966).

below.”³⁰⁵ Sampling offers a way for Black artists to hold cultural memory and tradition in productive tension, re-enacting the struggles previous generations faced as a means of confronting their own present crises.

Writer Tom Perchard offers that sampling evolved from the 1970s into the 1990s to operate simultaneously as cultural memory and tradition.³⁰⁶ Perchard writes that “these two fingers...are difficult to separate from each other, and...are intertwined with every aspect of the debate on sampling’s historicity.”³⁰⁷ By identifying sampling’s “historicity” in this way, Perchard argues that the act of sampling is not only active in reviving and remediating the past for the present but also functions analogously to earlier Black musical forms that have long carried historical memory. Perchard later writes that “Black musical practice [is] a ‘site’ of cultural memory and memorial.”³⁰⁸ He borrows generously from Pierre Nora’s 1989 article “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de mémoire,” where Nora distinguishes history as clinging to events that plot its trajectory into the present, with memory “attaching itself to sites, places, and practices.”³⁰⁹ In other words, sampling operates as an active form of placemaking.

Just as DJ Kool Herc’s placemaking practices in the 1970s’ South Bronx helped spatialize Black cultural memory, and Public Enemy and others expanded possibilities in the 1980s, hip-hop artists in the 1990s from Dr. Dre to Lauryn Hill and beyond extended

³⁰⁵ Tom Perchard, “Hip-Hop Samples Jazz: Dynamics of Cultural Memory and Musical Tradition in the African American 1990s,” *American Music* 29, no. 3 (2011): 277–307. [link](#).

³⁰⁶ Perchard, “Hip-Hop Samples Jazz,” 279.

³⁰⁷ Perchard, “Hip-Hop Samples Jazz,” 279.

³⁰⁸ Perchard, “Hip-Hop Samples Jazz,” 281.

³⁰⁹ Perchard, “Hip-Hop Samples Jazz,” 280.

and intensified this practice by using sampling as a form of cultural memory. For Nora, this act is one of reflection “for those concerned rememberers who make a most deliberate stand against cultural forgetting.”³¹⁰ Within this circulation, reproduction is also at work—the reproduction of past moments of rupture in order to understand the current moment of rupture. This is the artist’s goal in sampling: to lift a beat, a lyric, a riff from a moment not our own and re-construct its meaning for the present. This reconstruction is, for Perchard, “often performative, [and] constricts oppositional historical narratives at the same time as it defines a contemporary ‘us’ and ‘them.’”³¹¹ Thus, the performance of rap music becomes an active re-construction of the historical narratives set forth by the government over time. This performance is vital to the archiving of Black history through sound, to the continual remaking of the past in the present tense. Archivist and historian Arthur A. Schomburg wrote in 1925 that “the American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future...History must restore what slavery took away.”³¹² Schomburg’s formulation continues to reverberate across late-twentieth century Black musical practice.

The legacy of slavery is still breathing in every corner of the country. The legacy of slavery—rupture—reappears in the cascading ruptures that follow it: lynchings, increased police brutality, anti-Black legislation, and the building of the carceral state. Slavery structured the economic policies of this country, and its legacy continues to disenfranchise Black citizens today. For Tsenay Serequeberhan, cultivating an encounter

³¹⁰ Perchard, “Hip-Hop Samples Jazz,” 280.

³¹¹ Perchard, “Hip-Hop Samples Jazz,” 279.

³¹² Perchard, “Hip-Hop Samples Jazz,” 271-72.

with the past is essential for imagining viable futures. At once, he offers, “African Americans cultivate the heritage of the struggle and enact that struggle’s continuation.”³¹³ This is an act of cultivation; sampling is the fertile soil that lays the groundwork for rappers to explore their own individual struggle in the face of generations of collective struggle before them. Sampling allows for these artists to remediate the past generation’s hardship in order to understand their own—an active form of placemaking, of circulation, and conscious continuity. Perchard argues that in contrast to the “conception of tradition that represents...an often-unconscious continuity, [sampling] is the purposeful bridging of discontinuity, a rupture in time, historical knowledge, and method.”³¹⁴ Sampling repairs the discontinuity between past and present; it refuses to forget the horrors that have been endured, and instead mobilizes them, circulates them, in order to imagine a different future. Sampling is a tool of historical method, enabling artists to invoke oral traditions of their ancestors while leveraging modern technology to speak into the past and, in doing so, articulate more expansive futures.

Baraka’s command and Hughes’s question meet here, in the practice this thesis has tried to render visible. What happens to a dream deferred?³¹⁵ It explodes—and in exploding, it scatters into fragments that can be gathered, looped, and replayed. Let the world be a Black Poem.³¹⁶ Kool Herc let it. Public Enemy let it, loud. N.W.A let it, in the language of the courtroom and the streetcorner. Dr. Dre let it, riding atop the Mothership.

³¹³ Perchard, “Hip-Hop Samples Jazz,” 281.

³¹⁴ Perchard, “Hip-Hop Samples Jazz,” 286.

³¹⁵ Langston Hughes, “Harlem,” in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (New York: Henry Holt, 1951), 71.

³¹⁶ Baraka, “Black Art.”

Lauryn Hill let it, in a voice that crossed from Newark to Kingston to Zion and back. Each of them, in their own register—silently or LOUD—answered Baraka’s imperative by turning the rupture into a method, and the method into an archive. Sampling is the sound of that archive in motion: the practice of a community that, told its dream had been deferred, picked up the fragments and made the world speak.

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