

Re-Taking it to the Streets: Investigating Hip-Hop's Emergence in the
Spaces of Late Capitalism

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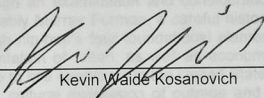
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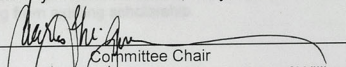
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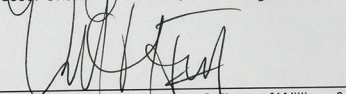
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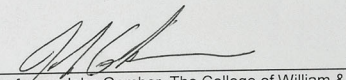


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ABSTRACT PAGE

Much of the scholarship focusing on rap and hip-hop argues that these cultural forms represent instances of African American cultural resistance. Although rap and hip-hop affords marginalized voices the opportunity to speak out and be heard, rap and hip-hop's critical position is too often critically neglected. Examining the historical, cultural, scholarly, and commodity modalities of rap and hip-hop through careful attention to its spatiality provides a new critical understanding of not only rap and hip-hop, but also late twentieth century America. Through an examination and consideration of scholarship devoted to space and rap, most notably Murray Forman, a careful historical examination of hip-hop's urban emergence through hip-hop's four foundational elements, and an inspection of the rap album as a representation of urban, as well as economic, space, rap and hip-hop's socio-cultural relationship to late capitalism in the United States is completely reinterpreted. Instead of being a pure, cultural expression of outrage and dissent subsequently sullied and neutered by the marketplace, rap and hip-hop is inextricable from the spaces of late capitalism. Importantly, this new understanding of rap and hip-hop presents broader implications for rap and hip-hop studies. Understanding rap and hip-hop's central relationship to late capitalism provides an opportunity to conceive a political economy of rap that has been missing from existing scholarship.

Introduction	11
Chapter 1: The Spatiality of Rap and Hip-Hop	22
Chapter 2: The Spatiality of Rap and Hip-Hop	27
Chapter 3: The Spatiality of Rap and Hip-Hop: The Space of the DJ and MC	37
Chapter 4: The Spatiality of Rap and Hip-Hop	38
Chapter 5: The Spatiality of Rap and Hip-Hop	51
Chapter 6: The Spatiality of Rap and Hip-Hop	63
Chapter 7: The Spatiality of Rap and Hip-Hop	83
Chapter 8: The Spatiality of Rap and Hip-Hop	85
Chapter 9: The Spatiality of Rap and Hip-Hop	94

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Dedication	v
Acknowledgements	vi
Introduction. Rap and the Spaces of Late Capitalism	2
Chapter I. Rap and Space	6
Chapter II. "We Form Like Voltron": B-Boys and Graffiti Artists	18
Breakdancing	22
Graffiti	27
Chapter III. Agency and the Marketplace: The Space of the DJ and MC	37
The DJ	38
The MC	51
Chapter IV. The Rap Album	63
Coda	83
Bibliography	86
Vita	94

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To my mother and father, thank you.

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Re-Taking It To The Streets: Investigating Hip-Hop's Emergence in the Spaces of Late Capitalism

INTRODUCION

Rap and the Spaces of Late Capitalism

Rap music and the scholarship it has created inexorably documents and fixates on ideas of space.¹ Inherent in rap and hip-hop is meaning made from the places and spaces elaborated in the music and the sites of its production. However, unlike past works of rap scholarship, this essay's investigation of rap's spatial production refuses the overdetermined utopian and revolutionary promises so often identified in hip-hop by scholars. Instead I argue that a spatial analysis of rap and hip-hop illuminates the confluence of race, culture, history, and economics of late twentieth century America. This in turn resists a dystopian/utopian binary inflection so often applied to hip-hop. A direct analysis of the city vis-à-vis the cultural productions of hip-hop will show that the spaces of both the postmodern city and hip-hop interpenetrate each other according to what Frederic Jameson calls the logic of late capitalism, organized by a change in consumption.² Hip-hop's

¹ For a quick primer of the scholarly concern with space, rap, and hip-hop, Murray Forman's *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002) is, perhaps, the most important contemporary examination of rap and hip-hop's spatialization. Additionally, Davarian L. Baldwin, Dick Hebdige, Gwendolyn D. Pough, and David Toop, among others, offer important insight into the political, cultural, and economic spaces of rap and hip-hop.

² Much of this work concerning urban spaces and hip-hop is inspired by Frederic Jameson's work, *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991). Specifically, I understand and apply

cultural productions are inscribed within the multiple processes that elaborate the textures of the postmodern city. Rap and hip-hop's cultural producers present their art forms as spatial descriptors that map multiple sites in the urban landscape. Hip-hop's spatial mapping ranges from the extremely local focus of an apartment building, block or neighborhood, to the cultural producer's place within national, political, global, and economic relationships.

Because it emerged from late twentieth century urban America, hip-hop operates within the logic of late capitalism, which shifts consumption away from products to production, ultimately commodifying the processes of production.³ Rap's cultural producers use the art form to generate personal meaning, formed within late capitalism's structures and systems that in turn have constructed and maintained the postmodern city. However, hip-hop's intervention in urban space is not in strict opposition to market relationships because its forms and methods interpenetrate the logic of late capitalism. Therefore, hip-hop is a late twentieth century spatial critique that defines and locates African-Americans in mobile relationships as subject and object, consumer and commodity, in postmodern urban space. Additionally, it is also important to remember that the highly popular, visible, and mediated representations of African-Americans in hip-hop are products of the culture industries; such commodity status is often ignored or underestimated

what Jameson describes as late capitalism, or third stage capitalism, where the consumption process has changed. Products are no longer being consumed, but the processes of production, themselves, are now the products of consumption (276). The postmodern city becomes experienced and/or consumed—both terms are now collapsed into each other—through interventions in space enabled by technology. Hip-hop represents the consumption of race and urbanity in the postmodern city.

³ Jameson, *Postmodernism* 276.

by those trumpeting hip-hop as an oppositional cultural form. While opposition was, and remains, a vital source of hip-hop culture, it cannot be over-stressed that such opposition takes place within, and not outside, late capital markets.⁴

This thesis argues that rap and hip-hop emerged as a set of primarily African American cultural practices intervening in the spaces of the postmodern city organized by late capitalism. Rap and hip-hop's intervention should not be understood as oppositional only. Because rap and hip-hop emerged within the space of late capitalism, its socio-cultural spatial practices must be understood as always already representing the material embodiment of consumption, the commodity. Shifting critical investigations of rap and hip-hop to reflect this new understanding reveals the "peculiar production and reproduction" of racial, economic, and political relationships in space.⁵

Rap and hip-hop emerged at a moment when the social, cultural, and political processes of capitalism were transforming urban space. As I interrogate the critical scholarship devoted to hip-hop and space, investigate the historical emergence of hip-hop's four founding elements, and examine the rap album, each

⁴ For example, Davarian L. Baldwin traces the rise and flourishing of rap's so-called Golden Age, roughly considered to be between 1987-1992, as a reaction to the increasing commercial profitability of rap music in "Black Empires, White Desires: The Spatial Politics of Identity in the Age of Hip-Hop" (Murray Forman, and Mark Anthony Neal, eds. *That's The Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 159-177.

⁵ Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989), 50. Channeling Henri Lefebvre, Soja writes, "what distinguished capitalism's gratuitous spatial veil from the spatialities of other modes of production was its peculiar production and reproduction of geographically uneven development via simultaneous tendencies toward homogenization, fragmentation, and hierarchization."

of my critical sites of inquiry explicitly attempts to locate rap and hip-hop as both product and producer of the spaces of late capitalism. Therefore, this critical investigation attempts to recover rap and hip-hop's misinterpreted articulation of the spaces of late capitalism.

Chapter I

Rap and Space

Edward Soja argues the postmodern city is best represented by the dialectical relationship between social and spatial sites. The socio-spatial dialectic explicates the economic and racial tensions within urban space expressed through unequal experiences of consumption and production.⁶ Extending Soja's analysis, we can see that hip-hop and rap originated in the urban social and spatial dialectic. Soja's perspective locates and reveals hip-hop as commenting on and producing spatial meaning because it developed directly in urban space mottled by overlapping projects of selective institutional attention and neglect, aptly characterized by his terms "flexible specialization," and "selective abandonment." Flexible specialization for Soja facilitates the creation and maintenance of separate suburban and inner-city core areas of industry, while "selective abandonment" entails the "expansive metropolitanization" of the urban and suburban areas through expanding fragmentation of political jurisdictions and further decentralization of civil and commercial services.⁷ According to flexible specialization, the Fordist model of a fully integrated factory surrounded by the neighborhoods of its labor force is no longer necessary. Operating along post-

⁶Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* 78.

⁷ Soja gives an in-depth description of "flexible accumulation" on page 171, with "selective abandonment" following on page 181 of *Postmodern Geographies*.

Fordist dictates, industry now fosters vertically dis-integrated production sites that emerge any place deemed profitable, while obviating the maintenance of the spaces previously developed for factory workers and their families. Flexible specialization enables flexible accumulation where uneven economic development devastates formerly prosperous areas of the city-center, while once poor, peripheral areas become new centers of profits.⁸ These new economic developments both activate and result from selective abandonment. As flexible accumulation and specialization further attenuate the cohesion of the centralized city, state and local resources buttress and develop urban and suburban areas that remain vital areas of production.⁹ David Harvey explains this process as uneven geographical developments precipitated by the increasing neoliberalization of capitalist economies. Harvey argues that since the 1970s nations that have taken a “neoliberal turn” embraced economic policies built on greater flexibility of labor markets, deregulation of financial operations, and privatization of state-owned sectors. Thus the state redefined and diminished its commitment to social programs, as progress and profits became increasingly synonymous in political rhetoric.¹⁰ The results of these processes and policies resulted in planned urban

⁸ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* 172.

⁹ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* 181. Soja describes the combination of these processes as the “State-Managed Urban System” begun during the Depression, but greatly expanded and accelerated after World War II. For a comprehensive and detailed history of the creation and conflict between urban and suburban spaces see Lizabeth Cohen’s *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003) specifically chapters five and six.

¹⁰ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005) 87.

pockets of decay, such as the South Bronx of 1970s New York, whence hip-hop emerged.

The space of the urban ghetto represents the success of late capitalism in America. These resource-deprived areas represent not the failure but instead the triumph of an economic system steeped in class privilege and power.¹¹ The selective economic processes detailed by Soja and Harvey were conceived and enacted by the nation-state's elites to maintain and expand their spaces of privilege and power by increasing concentrations of accumulating wealth.¹² Class power is

¹¹ Arnold R. Hirsch, "With or Without Jim Crow: Black Residential Segregation in the United States," *Urban Policy in Twentieth-Century America*, eds Arnold R. Hirsch and Raymond A. Mohl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 65-99. Hirsch's essay tracks the establishment of African American ghettos through successive historical instances, from the beginnings of the Great Migration to the post-Civil Rights era. Hirsch argues that the urban ghetto is a modern phenomenon tied to the "economic and technological advances permit[ing] urbanization on a scale never before possible," allowing the suburbanization and segregation of workers, which in turn was supported by federal policies aiding "slum clearance, urban renewal" (pp. 71, 84). Additionally Thomas Sugrue provides a portrait of the logic of late capitalism by contrasting the Detroit riots of 1943 and 1967. In 1943, the make-up of the crowd was roughly equal white and black spurred on by an increased black and white competition for jobs and housing, whereas by 1967 "discrimination and deindustrialization" made the crowd overwhelmingly African American. As the spaces of late capitalism continued the process of uneven development, the inner city became the epicenter of limited resources and no employment. This was the generation that developed hip-hop and rap. Thomas Sugrue, *On the Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 260.

¹² For a detailed discussion of economic practices enacted to maintain and expand spaces of privilege and power, see Naomi Klein's *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador, 1999), and Godfrey Hodgson's *More Equal Than Others: America From Nixon to the New Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). Klein provides a journalistic polemic against the processes of late capitalism's restructuring of space following brands from first world deindustrialization to third world exploitation, all in the name of accumulation of wealth. Hodgson argues that the last quarter century of American history has witnessed a "gross and growing inequality" infecting American politics,

rewarded with super-profits emboldening and pressuring other states, cities, or regions to imitate uneven development, guaranteeing that predatory economic policies produce spaces of superabundance and neglect. Citing examples of neoliberal implementation from Mexico to Sweden, David Harvey concludes that “one persistent fact within . . . uneven neoliberalization has been the universal tendency to increase social inequality and to expose the least fortunate elements in any society . . . to the chill winds of austerity and the dull fate of increasing marginalization.”¹³ Late capitalism’s planned production of spaces of superabundance and neglect illustrate the complementary processes of ‘regional restructuring’ and ‘responsive regionalism.’ Soja describes regional restructuring as the response to flexible accumulation, allowing for “several phases of development and decline” as regions are decentralized and internationalized in tune to the rhythms of late capitalism. Responsive regionalism responds to regional restructuring by resisting, encouraging, and demanding the new set of economic relationships created by restructuring.¹⁴ Rap and hip-hop represent a cultural response to the restructuring of late twentieth century urban America. Because hip-hop emerged from the *designed* space of the urban ghetto—designed as a space of

economics, and geography perpetrated by a “small class of owners of wealth and their attendant corporate managers, professionals, publicists, and tame ideologues [which] has steadily accumulated financial, industrial, media, and cultural power” (pp. xvii, xxiii). All take part in the producing and reproducing the space of late capitalism.

¹³ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 87, 118.

¹⁴ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* 172-173. The concept of ‘region’ is broadly conceived and relational to the scale of the economic markets. A region can be as broadly rendered as a continent or hemisphere, or specific as a city or neighborhood, as long as these regions connect to global markets.

neglect, but never imagined as a community—its spatial interventions took root within the structures of late capitalism. Any questions concerning hip-hop and race, space, and place must be examined within late capitalism's market forces.

The housing projects of the Bronx where rap and hip-hop emerged in the late 1970s embodied the spatial logic of uneven development. In his slim volume, *Minoritized Space*, Michel Laguerre argues that “ghettoized” spaces are important for consumer democracies. He writes: “the hegemonic sector has been able to maintain its position precisely because it creates dispersal sites that divide and further balkanize minority status in a hierarchy of sites.”¹⁵ Therefore, the hegemonic elite attempts to maintain power by fragmenting and differentiating the space of subordinate populations along economic and social fault lines. Laguerre's contention directly relates to Soja's spatial dialectic of ‘flexible accumulation,’ and ‘selective abandonment.’ Both authors contend that late capitalism maintains itself by fragmentation and differentiation of space. Power is exercised by privileging one space over another. Significantly, late capitalism produces these spaces of tension through consumer consumption.

At the root of the spatial contestations over representation and consumption is the discourse of authenticity. For African American culture this often takes the form of a debate over class. Davarian L. Baldwin implicitly echoes Laguerre and Soja with his discussion of African-American class tensions between a working class and middle class consumption ethos demonstrated in contemporary rap.

¹⁵ Michel Laguerre, *Minoritized Space: An Inquiry Into the Spatial Order of Things* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of Governmental Studies, 1999) 122.

Baldwin labels this tension “a hip-hop inspired black bourgeois aesthetic,” that rejects “black petit-bourgeois respectability,” while accepting “the consumption habits of the black working class.”¹⁶ Therefore rap and hip-hop become authentic representations of blackness through idealized consumption practices. This rift examined by Baldwin between representation and consumption by middle class African Americans elucidates rap and hip-hop’s interdependence with late capitalism.

The tensions between class and authenticity are based in the spaces of the postmodern city. The postmodern city’s divided spatial organization results from the regional restructuring activated by uneven development. This in turn fractures and differentiates the city’s population and ghettoizes the city’s space. The processes of uneven development, responsive regionalism, regional restructuring, and flexible accumulation actively segregate the space of African American communities. Because late capitalism produces the postmodern city, consumer

¹⁶ Baldwin, “Black Empires, White Desires” 161. Although his article is more implicit about consumption and space, it anticipates the explicit focus on the multiple layers of practices and performances of consumption and class of Chicago’s Black Belt. *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). He argues ‘Chicago’s New Negroes’ acted and enacted new forms of representation and identity in *space* bounded and controlled by cultural and capital economies controlled by whiteness. New identities and forms of representation were formed—important to my conception of hip-hop—but they did so from within and through consumer markets. Mike Davis presents a similar instance of an African American class-based coalition in chapter five, “The Hammer and the Rock,” of *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990), 265-322. Middle-class African American’s actively supported Police Chief Darryl Gates’ perversely racist war on gangs and drugs, in part, because public discourse was able to fragment communities along class lines.

culture is the modality in which people live their lives.¹⁷ This new modality not only transforms human expression into commodity form, but also convinces people that human expression has always been a commodity. The institutions and spokesmen of late capitalism attempt to convince everyone that their social interactions only take place as commodity exchanges.¹⁸ This model serves as a containment strategy; resistance and complaint about inequality convert grievances into commodity form, effectively hiding the experience of structural inequality in the language of commodity and late capitalism.¹⁹ Commodities abstract and obfuscate structural inequalities through a language of substitution that denies aggrieved populations a chance at redress because their experience is conceived of

¹⁷ Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1997), 8-9.

¹⁸ Marx's writes that commodity fetishism determines that a "commodity is . . . the social character of men's labour [that] appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of the labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour." "Capital, Volume One" in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition, Robert C. Tucker, ed., (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 320. Jameson's definition of late capitalism projects commodity fetishism in space transforming social interactions (expressions), themselves, into commodities because social interactions are processes of production. Additionally, Baudrillard argues that the 'hyperreal and imaginary' world of Disneyland functions because it presents 'real' social interactions and expressions in commodity form that effectively masks the fact that the commodity form is contemporary reality. Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of the Simulacra," in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 2nd Edition, ed. David H. Richter (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), 1940.

¹⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism* 273. My thoughts concerning market functions are, again, indebted to Jameson. Additionally on page 273, he writes: "The market[s] function is not to encourage and perpetuate freedom . . . but rather to repress it." His point being, reconciling Hobbes and Adam Smith, that market ideology acts "like a monarch" keeping everyone in line: state power and market ideology function similarly in their specific historical moment.

in terms of choice, of a consumer decision.²⁰ The commodification of rap and hip-hop masks the fact that the logic of late capitalism produces the postmodern urban environment by rendering rap and hip-hop both transparent and natural. Therefore, the processes of late capitalism collapse social expression into commodities and reduces the urban environment into physical objects and forms, informing a “narrow empiricism or positivism” that only observes the object, “eschewing the spatial organization.” This obscuring empiricism presents the commodity as transparent, completely legible, effectively occluding the production of space through a shallow intelligibility.²¹ Rap and hip-hop becomes both the representations and realities of African American urban existence, making any other comment about the space of late capitalism appear inauthentic.

The discourse of authenticity renders the ghetto/street formulation performed by rap and hip-hop as the authentic black experience, which in turn encourages a set of consumer consumption patterns supported by neoliberal economic policies that encourage the maintenance of ghetto-ized areas. At each turn, rap is best understood in terms of the spatial logic of late capitalism. The discourse of authenticity affects other attempts at describing the urban space of rap

²⁰ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 119. Harvey writes “it has been part of the genius of neoliberal theory to provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power, locally as well as transnationally[.]”

²¹ Henri Lefebvre *The Production of Space*, trans Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 27-29. Lefebvre describes the process of concealing the constructed nature of social space in two complementary illusions. The first is the “illusion of transparency” which renders social space completely discernable, and the “realistic illusion” which naturalizes space.

and hip-hops' emergence. Not only is authenticity vital to rap and its commercial viability, but is also inflects much of the scholarly work focusing on rap. Rap and hip-hop's products are themselves inscribed with a focus on the ghetto as a site of authenticity. Robin D G Kelley argues that the development of "ghetto authenticity" can be directly related to sociological scholarship investigating urban, minority poverty that pathologically equated "authentic" black-ness with poverty.²² Echoing Kelley's contention that what passed as 'authentic' ghetto culture was as much a product of market forces as experiential fact, David Samuels argues that early "gritty," urban raps such as "The Message" commanded the market because white music critics eagerly believed these type of songs presented life as it is: performance meets pathology.²³ However, critics do not represent buyers. The commercial and critical success of 'message' raps demonstrates a mainstream identification of African American experience with gritty urban rap songs. Applying this discourse to hip-hop cultural productions necessarily narrows the discussion of hip-hop to one of race and place, the space of the urban ghetto. In

²² Robin D G Kelley, "Looking For the 'Real' Nigga: Social Scientists Construct the Ghetto," in *That's The Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* eds, Murray Forman, and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 119-136. Conversely, William L. Van Deburg's argues that 'soul music' transcended craven market attempts packaging the black experience offering "essential instruction of mental decolonization and self-definition," that included, but was not limited to, the ghetto. William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 216. The tension between Kelley and Van Deburg's arguments demonstrates the powerful forces of late capitalism organizing the space of the postmodern urban environment.

²³ David Samuels, "The Rap on Rap: The 'Black Music' that Isn't Either," in *That's The Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 149.

effect, all things hip-hop become judged by, and as, the representation of the urban ghetto. This conflation of authenticity with commodity shaped hip-hop as both advertisement and site of blackness: the quest for the real ironically maintains the status quo.²⁴

The ideas of Edward Said and Soja further illustrate how this discourse is used against aggrieved communities, as their representations become commodities. Central to the geography of the postmodern city are spaces of third world restructuring within first world development.²⁵ These third world pockets are then viewed as the ‘other,’ where perception and representation of the urban ghetto is used to validate political, economic, and cultural hegemony. The discourse of authenticity becomes a specific anthropological economics of hip-hop within the postmodern city concretizing a set of cultural practices as both commodity and community.²⁶ Because the urban ghetto is a necessary aspect of the postmodern

²⁴ Mark Anthony Neal, “No Time For Fake Niggas: Hip-Hop Culture and the Authenticity Debates,” in *That’s The Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 58. Neal argues that ‘authenticity’ is used in commentary about hip-hop to affect ‘ghetto-centric’ representation of African-Americans. Neal’s argument is added on top of a much larger debate concerning authenticity within African American culture.

²⁵ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* 166, 168. Soja describes this phenomenon as “intra-urban,” where complex economies are able to wring “superprofits” from within national, regional, and city boundaries in a similar manner of uneven regional development/selective abandonment and flexible accumulation as economic exploitation of third world countries.

²⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978). At every turn, from intellectual and scholarly foundations of Orientalism codified by Silvestre De Sacy and Ernest Renan, to imperial ‘knowledge’ colonizing attempts by Napoleon, to the “latest phase” of representing the “Arab” in a post- World War II world, Said demonstrates that the perception and representation of the “Orient” (the other) functions as both an heuristic and epistemological tool validating the West. Orientalism, in essence, converts the other into a commodity. In the

city and late capitalism, entangling conceptions of authenticity with hip-hop deftly strengthens the logic of late capitalism and reaffirms the expected outcome of uneven development.

As a site of production, consumption and containment, Tricia Rose argues “the ghetto as a central black popular narrative has also fulfilled national fantasies about the violence and danger that purportedly consume the poorest and most economically fragile communities of color.”²⁷ Rose’s highlighting of the construction of ‘ghetto authenticity’ represents an important analysis linking rap and hip-hop, space, and late capitalism. However, much of the scholarship settles for the static, analytical binary where representations of the ghetto by African-Americans are sources of strength, which are then always degraded by the white supremacist marketplace. Much of rap and hip-hop’s cultural production demonstrates that the ghetto can be a positive site of formulating resistance against a marginalizing political economy, but it should not be treated as monolithic truth. What is needed is scholarship that tempers the political potential of rap with a keen analysis of late capitalism’s ability to create and structure the spaces where cultural and political forms emerge.

The spatial construction of rap and hip-hop remains an important, if frequently misread, topic of scholarly analysis. If we examine the spatial

hypercommodified moment of the postmodern city, hip-hop becomes another exchangeable currency of the “other.”

²⁷ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 11. Rose’s text provides important, and groundbreaking scholarly insights—most notably concerning the relationship of women and hip-hop—however, she settles for a reductive reading of ghetto authenticity.

competition among the elements of hip-hop, we will learn how rap and hip-hop are postmodern cultural products that emerged in late capitalism. Jeff Chang provides commentary that aptly illustrates the scholarly dilemma concerning polarized hip-hop investigations: “the new [hip-hop] generation—to whom so much had been given, from whom so much was being stolen, for whom so little would be promised—would not settle for the things previous generations had been willing to settle for. . . . Give them an apocalypse, and they would dance.”²⁸ But positioning hip-hop’s elements as a reaction against the collapse of urban inner-city life limits the conversation. Hip-hop must be examined in terms of urban postmodern space to avoid the eclipse of late capitalism’s structural effects on black populations.

²⁸ Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 19.

Chapter II

“We Form Like Voltron”²⁹: B-boys and Graffiti Artists

Rap and hip-hop combined four overlapping youth practices—the break-dancer (b-boy), the graffiti artist, the DJ, and the MC. The best approach to investigate rap and hip-hop’s production and reproduction of urban space is through these elements. While each element deserves individual attention, the interplay and tensions among the four most illuminate hip-hop’s spatial practice.³⁰ The four elements produced and reproduced space at odds with and in support of ‘official’ spatial structures along an axis of authenticity, even as they also jockeyed for position within hip-hop. In this chapter I will focus on the space of the break-dancer (b-boy) and the graffiti artist. Both of these elements appropriate urban space through commodities concealing their own cultural space. Discussing the historical trajectories of these elements demonstrates that rap and hip-hop emerged

²⁹ Wu Tang Clan, *Enter The 36 Chambers*, Loud Records, 2120367, 1994.

³⁰ Both Chang’s *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, and Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn’s *Yes Yes Y’All: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop’s First Decade* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002) provide an excellent cursory history of the four elements in their respective books. For a detailed history and examination of graffiti see Joe Austin’s *Taking The Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), for DJing see Joseph Schloss *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004). Additionally, “The Source” magazine provides photographs and discussion of ‘classic’ tags in a monthly feature devoted to graffiti.

as cultural productions inscribed within urban space.³¹ The chapter title's framing-quote alludes to this history. Method Man described the composition of his rap group, Wu Tang Clan, with a simile that locates hip-hop and rap in terms of a popular 1980s' consumer product: the 'Voltron' cartoon action figures. Method Man's esoteric quote describes hip-hop's development as a combination of cultural expressions conveyed in the language of commodities, an indication of rap and hip-hop's origins in the urban spaces produced by the logic of late capitalism.

Christopher Small provides a useful conceptual term, 'musicking,' which he elaborates as all the activities defining and informing the consumption and production of music. Small's concept enables us to investigate precisely the multiple, spatial sites of hip-hop's elements in their relationships to urban spaces and places.³² He writes: "if we widen our attention to take in the entire set of relationships that constitutes a performance, we shall see that music's primary meanings are not individual at all but social."³³ Furthermore, Small makes an

³¹ My thinking concerning the elements and space organized by late capitalism is influenced by Soja's *Postmodern Geographies*. He writes: "once it becomes accepted that the organization of space is a social product—that it arises from purposeful social practice—then there is no longer a question of its being a separate structure with rules of construction and transformation that are independent from the wider social framework. From a materialist perspective, what becomes important is the relationship between created, organized space and other structures within a given mode of production" (80). Therefore, the elements are reacting to, and arise from the late capital mode of production, which in turn helps organize and re-organize the space of the urban ghetto. Because late capitalism has broadened the sites of production beyond the factory to include space and consumption, hip-hop's cultural expression must be investigated in terms of originating space, and late capitalism.

³² Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (London: University Press of New England, 1998) 11-12.

³³ Small, *Musicking* 8.

explicit connection between cultural expressions and space: “The way people relate to one another as they music is linked not only with the sound relationships that are created by the performers, not only with participants’ relation to one another, but also with the participants’ relationships to the world.”³⁴ As Small investigated the meaning assigned to classical music in Western civilization by understanding the space of the symphonic concert hall, so too can the elements’ spatial orientation within hip-hop, and hip-hop’s place within the larger culture be revealed and understood as both comment on, and comment about, spaces and places.³⁵

Small believes that classical music is too often analyzed and interpreted without any consideration of *how* the piece is performed.³⁶ Applying Small’s criticism of excessive formalism in classical music study to rap re-focuses scholarly attention to music *in* space. The performative aspects of rap and hip-hop similarly have received little attention. Small describes the mindset in terms of classical performance: “[scholars, commentators act as if the] performance does not exist in order to present musical works, but rather musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform.”³⁷ Music is divorced from any meaning associated with performing the music. Most scholars focus instead on the spaces of rap and hip-hop but ignore the music, or they reduce music to a mere cipher of

³⁴ Small, *Musicking* 47-48.

³⁵ It is important to note that while I deal with each part separately and together, that all actions are forms of hip-hop and rap, which are forms of musicking.

³⁶ Small, *Musicking* 5-7. Small writes: “only those who can read a score have access to the inner meanings of music; the performer or musician is rarely discussed, or if he is, with scorn.”

³⁷ *Ibid.* 8.

sociocultural, political concerns.³⁸ Additionally, the four elements are discussed without real connection to rap music, and rap music is seen as an obvious and expected outcome based on linear interpretations of African American history. To fully appreciate the issues at stake in rap and hip-hop, the performance of the music also needs examining. Yes, very important historical actions contributed and elicited the musical form identifiable today as rap music. However, musicking provides a critical space to consider hip-hop's elements as cultural products-cum-commodities of postindustrial space organized by late capitalism.³⁹ Understanding hip-hop's elements vis-à-vis commodified space illuminates both how rap music is created to make and re-make the producers' experience in space, but also how

³⁸ A quick scan of the major scholarly books on the subject illustrate this point. Tricia Rose, Murray Forman, Russell Potter, Michael Eric Dyson, and Todd Boyd all focus on rap in terms of protest and continuity with African American history. They all provide salient and invaluable insight into the context of rap, but it sacrifices the form in favor of political ends. On a more determined end, Jeff Chang and some of Forman's work offer an excellent historical gloss. One excellent example of a music and performance based approach to rap music is David Toop's *Rap Attack 2: African Rap to Global Hip Hop* (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1996). His work attempts to document the performers and performance of rap, first, and then he is able to attempt a larger understanding of the vital contextual issues embedded in the music. Additionally, Joseph Schloss's work is the first to attempt to document the practice and meanings of sampling in his excellent work, *Making Beats*.

³⁹ Something as ephemeral and easily ignored as an advertising flyer for a weekend rap show provides an important link to the combination of elements in commodity form. By the end of the 1970s hip-hop becomes a recognizable cultural product beginning to provide income for some practitioners. Respected graffiti writers—or individuals copying the graffiti style—would highlight the sound system and DJ, the MC, and highlight and emphasize the potential for dancing: one mass-produced sheet of paper combining all the elements and spatial practices in an effort to advertise and promote music. For a more detailed elaboration of the art and production of advertising flyers, see Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y'all*, pp. 151-167.

space can be structured to emphasize and celebrate specific representations of space through consumer markets.

Break Dancing:

The practice of b-boying is associated with urban space; the b-boy practices outside, on the street, in public areas. The history of b-boys resonates with the appropriation of urban space.⁴⁰ The b-boy is now firmly enmeshed in popular culture, but the residual appropriation of space through an oppositional cultural practice remains in need of examination.⁴¹ Whether in the dance circle, the cardboard stage, or on popular cinema, break-dancers redefined their relationship to urban and social space, while working within late capitalism's produced spaces.

Break dancing is both a production and reproduction of urban space. This space was constructed, ordered, made meaningful, and controlled by African-American and Latino youth, seen typically as marginal members of late capitalism; yet that fact obfuscates the b-boys' reproduction of late capitalism's space as an important element in late capitalism's production of urban space. Although the b-

⁴⁰ Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y'All*, 9. Ahearn and Fricke write: "you could take the b-boys back to the outlaw gangs of the late '60s, '70s. They were the original b-boys, and it [breaking] was part of their war dances."

⁴¹ By the middle 1980s, break dancing became a widespread popular cultural practice. Although break dancing became ubiquitous, it still connoted a marginalized youth practice. One such example involves an interesting investigation of rural, Native American youth forming break dancing crews in high school as a resistance to "preppy" (white) culture, see Donna Deyhle, "Break Dancing and Breaking Out: Anglos, Utes, and Navajos in a Border Reservation High School," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 2. (June, 1986). Salient to this work is Deyhle's discussion of popular cultural commodities, such as the movie "Flashdance," serving as a text for both indoctrination and instruction for acts of resistance.

boy appropriated and produced urban space, such production quickly turned into reproduction. Although the b-boy produces a self-defined space, the b-boy's cultural production soon became understood as a natural cultural performance by oppressed populations. This 'natural' cultural production validated the relegation of the 'other' in segregated space according to the logic of late capitalism.⁴² Thus the b-boy's cultural expression was both an outsider art form created by marginalized African American and Latino youths and also a logical outcome from postmodern urban space structured by late capitalism.

Break dancing reconfigured and made meaningful many of the spaces of the postindustrial city and popular culture from within the space and logic of late capitalism. Instead of investigating the b-boy's cultural origins, it is more productive to consider how the musicking of the b-boy's performance relates to, and produces, the space of performance. For instance, b-boys' fashions were entirely made up of cheap, mass-produced consumer goods chosen for style as well as function and price. Not only did the clothes provide a comfortable fit to perform the variety of break dancing moves, but they were also easily and cheaply replaced after the clothes were worn out through the b-boys' up-and-down moves in the urban environment, constructed of concrete, asphalt, etc. Such cheap, disposable clothes, representing the signature uniform of the b-boy, served as both a representation of late capitalism, and an emergent space of hip-hop growing out of commodities. The use of mass-produced commodities provides the needed lens to

⁴² My use of Edward Said and Henri Lefebvre from chapter one remains applicable; particularly Lefebvre's complementary illusions of space, and Said's project of Orientalism.

see how break dancing, and hip-hop, represents postmodern urban space. The break dancers become associated in space with their dancing, and with the commodities-cum-uniforms, converting the appropriated space of the performance, the b-boy, and the clothes into a system of objects for use in late capital's postmodern spaces.⁴³ Illustrating the easy commodification of the b-boy, Native American youths in an Oklahoma high school adopted the b-boy dress and style through clothing: "black nylon zippered pants, red T-shirt, white-topped basketball shoes."⁴⁴ Demonstrating a double commodification, the clothes are cheap commodities designed for ease of movement and easy replacement, and the Native American youths confessed to learning about break-dancing from popular culture.⁴⁵ The b-boy's roots may be in the urban outlaw gangs, but they can only be understood as emergent cultural expressions within late capitalism. Following this, the b-boys' authenticity and resistance to power were refigured within a commercial system.⁴⁶ The b-boys' emergence within the space of late capitalism is

⁴³ Jean Baudrillard's "The System of Objects" in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, 2nd Edition, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 13-31. Although Baudrillard's formulation helped me conceptualize how the b-boy's use of commodities acts in space, it is necessary to incorporate his 'system' with Small's musicking. Don Slater comments that even when Baudrillard argues that "the social has dissolved," he can only prove this through a socio-historical evaluation, (*Consumer Culture & Modernity*, 205). Leavening Baudrillard with Small avoids removing human action from hip-hop, which, after all, is the most important element of this study.

⁴⁴ Deyhle, "Break Dancing and Breaking Out" 111.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 121. Instruction through consumer consumption of Michael Jackson Pepsi commercials, and movies such as *Breakin'*, and *Beat Street*.

⁴⁶ This argument of authenticity is a constant discourse that threads its way throughout rap and African American cultural studies. The secondary literature on authenticity itself is thick: Mark Anthony Neal, David Samuels, Alan Light, Robin D. G. Kelley, R.A.T. Judy, Paul Gilroy, and Michael Eric Dyson, all discuss this.

too easily formulated as a pure response to urban decay. Careful attention to the b-boys' explicit use of mass-produced clothes acts as both an identifiable uniform of alternative cultural practices as well as an easily commodifiable image. The b-boy's intervention in space is directly situated within the logic of late capitalism, entailing mass production.⁴⁷

The b-boy's intervention in space must also be understood as the history of bodies in space. According to Sally Banes, foundations of break dancing derive from the African-American dance repertory, including the lindy and the Charleston, as well as dances from the larger Atlantic Diasporic communities in the Caribbean and South America.⁴⁸ Following Joseph Roach's formulation of the interconnection of history, memory, and performance, break-dancing represents both continuity with the Atlantic Diaspora cultural expressions that precede late

Additionally, many scholars such as Murray Forman, Tricia Rose, Russell Potter, and M. Elizabeth Blair consider hip-hop and rap as an example of fallen authenticity and focus on the moment when hip-hop 'lost it': the moment of commercialization, commodification. Finally, there exists a third group of scholars who problematize the discourse of authenticity and hip-hop. This group includes the work of Keith Negus, S. Craig Watkins, Ted Swedenburg, and Eric K. Watts.⁴⁷ I also believe that these seemingly vague links between the mass-produced commodity and performance affect the scholarship concerning break dancing and hip-hop. Unlike the DJ, the MC, and rap music, discussion the b-boy generates little contentiousness. Because the b-boy is imagined as a somehow pure response to urban decay, representing a proto-typical African American cultural expression, it is easy to conclude that the initial development of break dancing refused the corruption of the marketplace. I agree with the consensus history of the b-boy's move from gang-dances to dance crews developing alongside the other elements, in accordance with African American cultural history. However, the b-boys' emergence must be reexamined in terms of its close connection with commodities.⁴⁸ Sally Banes, "Breaking," in Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal's *That's The Joint!*, 118. Banes also makes the connection between break dancing and Brazilian Capoeira, corresponding with Jeff Chang's reading of break dancing as an aggressive dance form (114-118).

capitalism, and also a novel cultural form emerging from late capitalism.⁴⁹ Demonstrating this fact, break-dancing was also a product of the 1970s; dancers used a variety of sources and sites for creative inspiration including “Playboy” magazine, Kung-Fu movies, cartoons, comics, television, and French pantomime.⁵⁰ The popular culture and material inspiration for b-boying was a permanent feature: “many of the breakdancers were avid fans of martial artists like Bruce Lee.” B-boys also paid tremendous attention to their sartorial choice, demonstrating that the dress code can also be understood as making a culture statement. The b-boys uniform consisted of “fat-toed, colorful shoes with one- to two- inch soles . . . jeans, or thirties peg pants, always pressed . . . with pajama top T-shirts.”⁵¹ B-boys constructed a performance culture in space through popular culture, yet they critically performed and referenced popular culture on the margins. Their style of dress was a decisive break from platform shoes, and the dancing was a break from disco; the Kung-Fu movies that influenced them were on the margins as well, on the margins of a mainstream culture that drew already on a black culture. B-boys not only responded to urban decay, but they also created and became a popular cultural commodity. The b-boys’ creation of cultural expression through popular

⁴⁹ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). He writes: “the anxious survivors who . . . feel obliged more or less to reinvent themselves, taking into account the roles played by their predecessors” (Roach, 1).

⁵⁰ Banes, “Breaking” 18.

⁵¹ Michael Holman, “Breaking: The History,” *That’s The Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman, and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 31, 39.

culture commodities reveals the integration of hip-hop within the commercial regime.

Graffiti:

We should consider graffiti writing in conjunction with the b-boy and musicking for salient reasons. Both graffiti writing and b-boying achieved their meaning through performance and presentation in public spaces. The canvases of graffiti writing were any and all surfaces of the city, with writers “slipping through the long arms and high fences of authority, violating notions of property and propriety,” finding their freedom on any and all public façade.⁵² Thus writers used graffiti as a way to transform spaces that control, isolate, and differentiate populations into spaces of potential collectivity. Graffiti writers’ original focus was usually territorial and parochial, with the block or neighborhood preeminent. One early practitioner noted graffiti’s foremost emphasis was neighborhood: “when you grow up in a neighborhood that’s all gangs, you got to join . . . They used to call me 174 spider. That was my name . . . I wrote 174 Spider [not Spider 174, as most graffiti writers would have]. I felt my block was me, and that came first.”⁵³ But what seems to be at first a local concern was indeed universal; graffiti artists made claims outside the neighborhood to the city, and by extension, to the nation-state. In a telling anecdote, Joe Austin relates the possibly apocryphal story of the bicentennial “Freedom” train. On July 3, 1976, the writers Caine, Mad 103, and

⁵² Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* 74.

⁵³ BOM5 interviewed in Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y’All* 5.

Flame One painted an eleven-car mural at the No. 7 Flushing-to-Manhattan storage yard, in Queens, to celebrate the bicentennial.⁵⁴ Upon discovery, the cars were immediately removed from service and the paintings effaced. Austin argues that despite, or perhaps due to, the official censure, these three, like most graffiti writers, attempted to “[make] a place for themselves in the city’s public network, claiming a right to the city as a valuable and necessary part of its cultural life.”⁵⁵ Although the public never saw the “Freedom” train, tagging subway trains was an important aspect of graffiti in all cities that had subways. Through graffiti on subway trains, the artists re-mapped the city with cheap aerosol paint and art markers through a process of visible repetition. The train tag can be seen as a way of circulating self throughout the city, effectively claiming the route of the train, and by extension New York, as one’s neighborhood, and expanding the boundaries of the neighborhood to include the city, to include oneself within the city. Beyond territorial gains, graffiti’s initial work of re-mapping the city was an act of locating the self in urban geography.⁵⁶ Graffiti re-mapped the city by re-writing on urban surfaces. Graffiti artists were not attempting to erase or destroy the urban environment; their work was an attempt at inclusion within that environment, structured by the logic of late capitalism.

Investigating the materiality of graffiti demonstrates how graffiti artists re-mapped the urban space to include themselves in the city’s space. Importantly, the

⁵⁴ Austin, *Taking the Train* 1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 47. Quoting the writer credited with popularizing tagging, Taki 183, Austin notes that Taki 183 was most interested in “the way the name looked” in urban space.

materiality of graffiti applies to both its physical implements, and also the urban surfaces over which the artists re-wrote. Essential to investigating graffiti are two key music technological components discussed by Mark Katz: portability and repeatability.⁵⁷ The spray paint cans, stencil books, and markers that the artists used reiterates Katz's formulation; the public spaces and places, such as the city's buildings and mass-transit vehicles, are also evocative of portability and repeatability.⁵⁸ Each instance, whether tool or surface, demonstrates that mass-produced technology was explicitly implicated in graffiti's production of space. Without the spray-paint can—a cheap, disposable commodity—re-writing on the edifices explicitly designed for mass society would have lacked the potential of portability and reproducibility to become a critical element of hip-hop, delimiting its ability to circulate within postmodern space. Lacking spray-paint cans would have severely limited, even disallowed, spatial production and reproduction through commodity exchange. Investigating graffiti's material tools in terms of

⁵⁷ Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004). Katz discusses seven terms used to understand musical technologies and recordings: tangibility, portability, (in)visibility, repeatability, temporality, receptivity, and manipulability. Of course not all these components will warrant the same amount of attention in each element.

⁵⁸ This is evocation should be understood in terms of produced space. Buildings and other public structures can appear similar or dissimilar—consider the homogenous groupings of public housing, and the uniquely designed skyscraper—however the space their presence produces is always the same. Even unique and hallowed structures such as monuments produce identical space. This is the exact intent of mass-produced structures. What is portable and repeatable about urban structures are skyscrapers, public housing, monuments, etc. attempting always produce abstract or absolute space, and also act as a reproducible method of producing space anywhere. See Lefebvre's *Production of Space*, chapter four, for an in-depth theoretical discussion.

technology and musicking illuminates how this element's intervention in space reproduced the spatial logic of late capitalism as graffiti contributed to hip-hop's emerging spatial vision of order.⁵⁹

For Katz, 'portability' signifies reproductions "no longer bound to the circumstances of their creation, [which] may encourage new experiences and generate new traditions wherever they happen to be."⁶⁰ Literally and theoretically, portability was integral to graffiti's representation of a mobile community. Practical concerns prompted writers to choose spray-paint cans, markers, and stencil books; such easily carried materials were important to avoid potential incrimination or capture.⁶¹ Portability was critical to the location of graffiti, as well. The canvases of a graffiti artist were buildings, billboards, and subway trains—any conceivable public space. In fact, the more difficult the painted space, the more respect and envy generated among writers.⁶² The materials needed to be

⁵⁹ The visual, as well as the aural, constitute important spatial space. Rap music is spatial because of such visual inflections of the b-boys and graffiti, as well as the aural nature of the sound systems, and the DJs and MCs that take advantage of sound technology. Because these practices originated in response to urban space, rap naturally contains and retains a pervading sense of space.

⁶⁰ Katz, *Capturing Sound* 15.

⁶¹ Jeff Chang and Joe Austin detail the potential punishment for graffiti. Austin details New York City's 'war on graffiti' specifically. Additionally, Craig Castleman's article, "The Politics of Graffiti," in *That's The Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004) documents the use of a "graffiti epidemic" by New York City government to confine the problems of the postindustrial city to the 'pathologies' of minority youth while expanding surveillance efforts of the same population through joint private/public funded projects. The use of an 'ethnic threat' by power to further encroach on public, urban space is also excellently documented in Mike Davis' chapter "Fortress L.A.," in his book, "The City of Quartz," 221-264.

⁶² Austin, *Taking The Train* 53. According to Austin, tags judged 'inaccessible,' and 'unexpected' were key. Both words signify several different types of space.

light and easily carried as the artist climbed over and through obstacles in search of the best places to tag. Additionally, stencil books allowed a graffiti writer to create a template that could be easily carried to different sites—this also applies to repeatability. The stencils and templates corresponded to an important aspect of Katz’s notions of portability—the ability to teach and inspire through a portable medium.⁶³ Tutelage through portability underscores how stencils and templates were shared with like-minded masters and novices at the many writers’ tables that acted as seminars for the graffiti writers. Before, during or after school interested and established writers would meet at the schoolyard and talk shop, while watching the trains roll past.⁶⁴ The ability to transfer and move the art made it possible to evoke the city as a whole and to re-map it.

Space described as ‘inaccessible’ could be defined as physically tough to reach, and also socially inaccessible based on race/class/gender. The tag became ‘unexpected’ because the artist ‘appeared’ in these ‘inaccessible’ spaces.

⁶³ Katz, *Capturing Sound* 15. Katz notes Alton Adams hearing Sousa in the Virgin Islands and Darius Milhaud transporting black jazz back to Europe. Obviously, Katz notion provides an important conceptually link between graffiti writing, and rap’s musical practice of sampling. Katz’s notion evokes Gilroy’s conceptualizing of the Black Atlantic and the mobility of cultural traditions and politics embodied by the image of the slave ship providing an alternate reading of the spaces and places of modernity in Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1993), 16. Although the Black Atlantic provides hip-hop with its ontological basis, I want to be explicit about the fact that this work only applies to African American hip-hop. Gilroy examines the danger of conflating the African Diaspora with the African American experience in “It’s a Family Affair,” in Forman and Neal. This essay provides two important insights into this work. The first is to avoid characterizing US-based hip-hop as a heuristic tool for hip-hop globally. The second reinforces my notion of hip-hop and late capitalism. Gilroy is also wary of the African American viewpoint because he believes it privileges the patriarchal family, which recapitulates US constructions of race, and the market.

⁶⁴ Austin, *Taking the Train* 54; Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* 119; Rose, *Black Noise* 43. This not to say that this form was open to anyone based on the

Although hip-hop initially developed locally, it was always already spatially mobile because of its use and reliance on mass-produced and mass-mediated signs, symbols, and material for meaning and content. This can be understood as a combination of Katz's notion of portability and repeatability. Repeatability signifies the potential for a repeated version to displace an original.⁶⁵ Initially, graffiti artists reproduced their name, followed by a number.⁶⁶ This number either designated some opaque biographical fact, such as the street number or floor they lived on, or it distinguished them from an identically named writer. Adopting a writing name such as BOM5 or KOOL125 authenticated their tags through alluding to an earlier writer while at the same time attempting to displace them.⁶⁷ The displacement was not always concerned with aggression or insults. Much of the time the name and number represented an addition, the new wrinkle in the community of graffiti artists. In many ways, it was an act of love and homage to another writer.⁶⁸

portability of graffiti implements. Like most social forms, graffiti developed and maintained hierarchies and codes of conduct. That being said, the portability of the materials—including the relatively inexpensive nature of the materials—allowed novices an easier route to get into graffiti and gain a standing in this world.

⁶⁵ Katz, *Capturing Sound* 25. Katz discusses the phenomenon of the jazz recording and how a mistake in the studio could codify the song for the performer or band in concert. In effect, the recorded version becomes more real than the live version and concertgoers would demand the “mistake.” I will continue discussing repeatability when I tackle rap music as the ultimate form of hip-hop.

⁶⁶ Taking a quick scan of names, whether in Ahearn and Fricke, Austin, or Chang, documents that sometimes the number would precede the name, but mostly it followed.

⁶⁷ This practice of repeating and reproducing names is also very important for the MC, which I will discuss in chapter three.

⁶⁸ See Austin, *Taking The Train*, chapter two. In particular, he gives an excellent account of imitation and repeatability of ‘throw-ups’ of names on pages 42-47.

This overlay and reproduction of names suggests that authenticity was located in appropriation and that more recent, rather than initial, stylistics represented the real version; thus hip-hop reversed and reconceptualized the meaning of authenticity through reiteration of marketplace logic selling ‘real’ experience as commodities that can only be accessed through consumption. The “newer” version was not necessarily more authentic, rather its authenticity originated in a widely understood, and shared criteria, the projection of newness. Graffiti was the insignia of shared experience as mediated and experienced through a system of commodity exchange. Joe Austin explicitly links graffiti’s produced space and the commercial realm. He connects graffiti’s production of identity directly to how people understand themselves in relation to mass media: “It is by way of the commercial public sphere—the mass media business—that most New Yorkers grasp the city as a whole. . . . In a competitive information marketplace, the ‘important’ events and ‘real’ meanings of our shared public lives are sold as commodities to consumers.”⁶⁹ Spatially, the tags denote multiple spaces and communities expressed through commodities, compressed into a single site. The practice of signature tags using a number is also the result of a practical solution to urban space “organized by mass institutions such as public schools, where one’s first name alone cannot provide a reliable means of distinction from others.”⁷⁰ Graffiti thus represented the expressions of individuals, neighborhoods, kinship, a history of dispossession, and music in the spaces created to keep these forms of

⁶⁹ Austin, *Taking The Train* 11.

⁷⁰ Austin, *Taking the Train* 42.

expression silent. In fact, Austin sees an additional significance to the number in a signature tag: “the street number located . . . identity within a specific neighborhood, which simultaneously placed him in a particular street gang.”⁷¹ Although Austin implies competing readings of graffiti through the separate lenses of ‘mass institutions,’ and specific neighborhoods and gangs, his excellent insights should be understood as a dialectical relationship: the gangs and impersonal organizations’ activities working against the mass institutions attempts at constructing a community mutually reinforced one another. Gangs could provide a sense of community and identity combating the anonymity and fragmented existence of life lived on the margins of urban society. Simultaneously, mass institutions often worked to contain and neutralize the perceived threat of marginal populations. Each part of this urban dialectic is focused on characterizing and molding the same community, composed of aggrieved inner-city populations. Identity is characterized and derived from a sense of space, the street. The tension that Austin sketches but resists elaborating revolves around the streets.⁷² Like all of hip-hop’s elements, graffiti’s expression and location are found within the spaces

⁷¹ Ibid., 42.

⁷² Davis, *City of Quartz*, 231. The surveillance focused on the streets by the state can be understood to “kill the street,” and “kill the crowd.” Use and consumption of public spaces and resources—the street—becomes just as fragmented as the logic of consumer capitalism, and the structuring of urban space buttressed by the forces of selective abandonment and uneven development. Both extra-legal and formal communities characterize and identify the spaces graffiti artists emerge from with the same vocabulary of space, the streets. The streets and community are defined as bad and dangerous, and oftentimes graffiti and hip-hop’s attempt to re-imagine space is not to redefine space, but merely substitute the ‘bad’ with ‘good.’

of the postindustrial city structured by mass-production and mass-consumption enabled by late capitalism.

Portability enabled hip-hop to constitute a community of practitioners. Thus, the portability of graffiti implicated every public space in the city as the potential private domain of hip-hop. The place and space of hip-hop was in effect the city street; eventually hip-hop could be located in any urban area, and, finally, anywhere. Additionally, musicking demands a consideration of the places and spaces where performances take place—emerge—to understand the performances’ spatial presentation and how the society at large understands it. Social codes of power and morality, along with what constitutes rap music and hip-hop are demonstrated in very personal, public acts. Hip-hop’s performances can appear anywhere because mass-mediated, mass-produced tools are the components that produce these cultural forms. So graffiti’s history reveals that the practitioners of rap and hip-hop imposed their art in the structures and spaces of power. Graffiti allowed new understandings and relationships with the spaces where rap and hip-hop originated. Graffiti’s cultural productions reclaimed and re-imagined the space segmented by late capitalism’s logic of ‘selective abandonment.’ Refusing this spatial isolation, writers sought mobility by presenting names and tags as mobile commodities. Through re-imagined use of mass-produced commodities, the “urban landscape became an unbounded billboard” where the “mass-mediated prestige economy” was reproduced in hip-hop guise.⁷³

⁷³ Austin, *Taking the Train* 47. Austin also provides an example of the graffiti billboard becoming a television commercial. The names of graffiti writers PNut,

Graffiti and break-dancing offer a material message that reclaimed and highlighted the physical structures and space where hip-hop emerged.⁷⁴ The public spaces and places used by graffiti artists and b-boys re-mapped postmodern urban space. These aggrieved individuals demanded inclusion in the city, remapping it through commodities. Because graffiti artists and b-boys intervened in postmodern urban space through consumer culture and goods, hip-hop's interventions must be understood as taking place within, and not fully against, late capitalism.

Diablo, and Jester are visible in the opening shots of "Welcome Back Kotter" featuring a subway train. For a time afterward, these writers considered Kotter "their show" (Austin, 49-50).

⁷⁴ Small, *Musicking* 20. Small understands the symphony house to be a material message to any audience that the building is invested with "the power to impose those assumptions on what goes on within it." Not only is the symphony house regulating space inside its doors, but also the structure radiates a cultural authority in city space surrounding the building. Graffiti—and all the elements of hip-hop—is conceptually congruent because it can act as a cultural code marking the spaces and structures where graffiti is found with an expectation of a specific cultural performance.

Chapter III

Agency and the Marketplace: The Space of the DJ and MC

Emerging from the mass-produced, mass-mediated marketplace of the postindustrial city, rap music and its aural elements, the DJ and MC, were similarly produced within space. Using mass-produced tools that heightened the aspects of repeatability and portability, the DJ and MC re-mapped and reiterated the spaces of the postindustrial city, as well as the spaces of the cultural industry. Additionally, the space of the DJ allowed the “desired relationships” of the elements to come together, through the performance’s “vision of order.”⁷⁵ In both comment and critique the DJ brought into existence the desired relationship of the musical performance in conjunction with the other elements. The DJ responded to the other three elements’ production of space by “[teaching] and inculcat[ing] the concept of those ideal relationships, or values, and allow[ing] those taking part to try them on . . . to experience them.”⁷⁶ As a key element in hip-hop, the DJ brought the other components together. Without the DJ, rap music would not exist, and the graffiti artists and b-boys would have remained quaint, historical cultural eruptions; without the DJ, break dancing and b-boys would not have risen above the level of

⁷⁵ Small, *Musicking* 168, 183.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 183.

local curiosity.⁷⁷ The individual elements could only achieve a parochial critical purchase without the connector thread that the DJ provided. Furthermore, the DJ's emergence made explicit use of commodities. In turn the MC emerged in the performative space affected by the DJ. Within this explicit space of commodification, the MC served as the elemental capstone facilitating rap's consolidation of hip-hop as a music industry product. Finally, the performance and production of space by the DJ and the MC presents a directly discernable relationship with the space of the postmodern city elaborated by the logic of late capitalism.

The DJ:

The DJ embodied multiple contesting and overlapping sites where rap originated. The DJ emerged from urban segregation and gang culture, as well as radio's segregationist practices. The narrative of DJs' origins told by practitioners asserts that luck and a savvy business sense enabled them to bring some type of entertainment to their isolated and entertainment deprived neighborhoods. Early DJs thus began their careers bringing music to block parties, gymnasium parties, parties in the park, and neighborhood clubs. These neighborhood parties partly resulted from police surveillance that targeted movement of minority youth through continual harassment and surveillance on the MTA—which the city partly rationalized as defense against graffiti—and increased police focus on gang activity

⁷⁷ Ahearn and Frick, *Yes Yes Y'All* 23.

in Downtown Manhattan.⁷⁸ According to DJ Kool Herc, his initial DJ parties were a way to avoid potential arrest, but still have fun.⁷⁹ The police surveillance effectively maintained a boundary between Downtown Manhattan and the peripheral sections of the city. Consequently, rap music emerged where the DJ brought his sound system to provide the soundtrack for parties and community gatherings.

The rise of the DJ has its roots in the radio programming ignoring black audiences, as well. In early 1970s New York, DJs like Grandmaster Flowers in Brooklyn garnered a following because they were the only individuals playing the records their majority African-American audience wanted to hear.⁸⁰ Similarly DJ Kool Herc's sets provided the same type of music for younger, primarily African American audiences as the neighborhood nightclubs where older DJs performed

⁷⁸ Davis, *City of Quartz* 253. Davis's excavation of Los Angeles provides another portable formulation. Although Los Angeles' the urban environment is more diffuse, and patterns and types of transportation are different than New York, the LAPD worldview that saw "good citizens, off the streets, enclaved in their high-security private consumption spheres; bad citizens, on the streets (and therefore not engaged in legitimate business)" is applicable to New York. The spatial logistics, as well as the logistics of consumer consumption, differ between the two cities, but the idea of being out of space/place—therefore out of space/place within the structure of late capitalism and consumption—provides the ideological foundation for police scrutiny of minorities out-of-place. Chapter four, *Fortress LA*, of *City of Quartz* provides a detailed description of police scrutiny and urban space.

⁷⁹ Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y'All* 25. DJ Kool Herc revealed to Ahearn and Fricke that he was tired of being hassled, and the threat of molestation by the police when he would try to go to downtown clubs, that he decided to start his own parties—he "took a chance and put Kool Herc on an index card"—for fun, and a little profit.

⁸⁰ Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y'All* 23.

and where youth did not go.⁸¹ The standard practice of radio segregation was pivotal to the development of the distinct form of instrumentation used by the rap DJ, the turntable.⁸² As the DJ became the main source of music and inspiration for the party, musicians were forced to look outside their neighborhood clubs for work. Ahearn and Frick provide a useful description of the early 1970s club scene home to the emergent DJ, illustrating the foundational structure the DJ provides hip-hop. In the early 1970s, club jocks—disc jockeys that regularly played in clubs rather than on the radio, like Grandmaster Flowers in Brooklyn—were making waves and taking gigs away from live musicians.⁸³ With limited resources, and few job opportunities for musicians in the clubs in the neighborhoods surrounding South Bronx, there were few incentives to develop live instrumentation. Writing for *Billboard* Robert Ford, Jr. commented on the rise of hip-hop: “Rapping DJs reminiscent of early r&b radio jocks . . . are making an impressive comeback here—not in radio but in black disco where a jivey rap commands as much

⁸¹ This points to a generational difference in use and production of space. Not only does hip-hop develop within the private/public space produced by late capitalism, but also the tension between the minor/adult productions of space. Although this is an important feature of hip-hop and rap, my focus is with the urban space of hip-hop and rap vis-à-vis late capitalism, generally. For an investigation of hip-hop and youth, Murray Forman’s *The ‘Hood Comes First* is an excellent resource.

⁸² As digital samplers became increasingly sophisticated, the turntable was displaced as the equipment de rigueur, however the DJ or producer aesthetic remains faithful to the early concept, perhaps representing the creation and maintenance of a postmodern culture through nostalgic quotation. Frederic Jameson’s analysis of Frank Gehry’s Santa Monica house and film develops and interrogates postmodern conceptions of nostalgia and quotation: see chapters four and nine in *Postmodernism*.

⁸³ Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y’All* 25.

attention as the hottest disk.”⁸⁴ Ford’s observation linked radio segregation with the DJ as a commodity for consumption. The club DJ became a local celebrity who could represent someone people might aspire to become. In this atmosphere of fewer and fewer entertainment options, as well as limited economic opportunities, the house parties and rented community centers in the projects where the DJs held their parties became the sites where all the hip-hop elements came together. It is the parties thrown by burgeoning DJs where “the story of hip-hop begins.”⁸⁵ By expanding, altering, and highlighting hip-hop’s production within the urban spaces of late capitalism, the DJ explicitly demonstrates the complementary relationship between the spaces of hip-hop and rap, and late capitalism. Additionally, Ford notes an early form of the MC, which will be discussed below. Elaborating the popularity of club DJ noted by Ford, DJ Kool Herc offers an interesting interpretation of his ascendancy: “I was just a guy who played straight-up music that the radio don’t play, but that they should be playin.”⁸⁶ The undercurrent of Herc’s statement speaks to the historical exploitation of African American’s in the music industry, and their marginalization in cultural ownership, with creative labors of African Americans being used and sold for the financial benefit of the record companies and opportunistic individuals that took advantage of copyright theft. Situated in this historical context, Herc thus criticized space and place well

⁸⁴ Robert Ford, Jr. “Jive Talking N.Y. DJs Rapping Away in Black Discos,” in Forman and Neal’s *That’s The Joint!*, 43.

⁸⁵ Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y’All* 23.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

beyond the local. The hip-hop DJ produced a national critical space through commodities.

The naming practices of DJs also recast spatial relationships in a similar way to graffiti, reformulating the question of authenticity in line with late capitalism. Like graffiti, the naming of the DJ served as a form of repeatability and portability, or a brand name. Many DJs had the 'DJ' designation firmly attached to the front of their persona or stage name. Each DJ staked his claim as the ideal DJ through differentiating names. Also, the imitation and repeatability was not hidden; if anything, this aspect of hip-hop and rap was broadcast so that the audience knew who represented, and presented, the correct—newer—version of rap and hip-hop. In terms of portability, the figure of the DJ is more of a direct link with the music of hip-hop for obvious reasons. However, it is important to understand the connections with graffiti as demonstrated through Katz's understanding of technology and Small's theory of musicking to appreciate how the elements of hip-hop exist in separate and overlapping spaces, but also that they are in dialogue with each other and the larger spaces and communities encompassing hip-hop. Because they represent different aspects of rap, but illustrate similar uses of space, the practices of hip-hop are tied to space, and the space of representing and presenting the urban spaces organized by the logic of late capitalism.

The music the hip-hop DJ played at the early neighborhood parties produced alternative space at two, if not more, sites of late capitalism. First, the hip-hop DJ produced a space that resonated with the audience, a space for aggrieved communities. DJ Disco Wiz recalled that the music Herc played

signaled something different, and “the funk that he threw on the turntables, and the soul . . . was something that I related to. . . . When I hear the beats and the bass thumpin’, it was something that really blew me away.”⁸⁷ Secondly, the DJ produced an alternate space of commodity exchange by re-fashioning the use of commercial products into another form of commercial exchange. For example, Afrika Bambaataa enlarged the sonic space created by the DJ through, among other qualities, his expansive consumer habits. Known for his eclectic musical tastes and wide-ranging record collection, Bambaataa showed that any record—any mass-produced commodity—provided the raw material for hip-hop and rap’s sound. Additionally, Bambaataa would peel the labels off his records so that other DJs could not find out what breaks he was using.⁸⁸ Not only did Bambaataa respond to potential threats to his business, but he also created his own brand, a form of new music through combination and bricolage completely developed and elaborated through commodities. For Bambaataa, his records became equivalent to him; his DJ ‘brand’ became both a physical space predicated by his physical presence, and a brand-name style of music, further conflating hip-hop, the body, and commodities through the discourse of authenticity. Demonstrating a perfect storm of consumer capitalism, entrepreneurial-minded youthful observers and participants in the DJ and club culture began hosting parties in neighborhood parks, recreation centers and schools, charging admission to cover expenses and turn a slight profit. Additionally, uneven development of urban space made trips outside the

⁸⁷ DJ Disco Wiz, quoted in Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y’All* 26.

⁸⁸ Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y’All* 49.

neighborhood in search of entertainment costly and often dangerous. These factors had a galvanizing impact on individuals craving entertainment.

The urban development projects in New York City in the several decades prior to the 1970s dramatically restructured the geography of the city's most aggrieved citizens. Investigating this history demonstrates how embedded hip-hop is in late capitalism's production of urban space. This history provided the socio-spatial foundation for the early DJs' intervention in space. The spatial critique was predicated by the confluence of state and private capital in an attempt to create consumer markets, ultimately entailing the planned disintegration of the urban communities whence the DJs emerged. The urban development and renewal that affected the South Bronx found a willing and important champion in Robert Moses. Moses was the chief engineer and architect behind New York's urban renewal and expansion from 1924 until 1968.⁸⁹ Most important to hip-hop's history, Moses envisioned and oversaw the construction of the Cross-Bronx expressway that displaced and dispersed most of the population to the housing projects of the South Bronx where rap and hip-hop emerged.⁹⁰ As early as 1929, Moses and the New York Regional Plan Association developed a reconstruction plan in hopes of creating Manhattan as center of wealth circled by highways and expressways leading directly to the suburbs.⁹¹ Begun in 1959 and cutting entirely through Upper Manhattan, the Cross-Bronx expressway linked suburban white-flight populations

⁸⁹ Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Knopf, 1974) 171, 1144.

⁹⁰ Rose, *Black Noise* 30-31.

⁹¹ Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop* 11.

with their city-center jobs. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s an estimated 60,000 Bronx homes were razed. Moses used his Title 1 slum clearance program to designate these predominantly blue-collar housing units ‘slums,’ which forced the relocation of 170,000 people.⁹² Stable, if low-income, neighborhoods lost their residents. Local businesses that served these neighborhoods folded, with no reinvestment in the local economies that kept the neighborhoods functioning. Additionally, these local businesses seldom reestablished themselves near the new housing projects because the opportunity to do so rarely, if ever, existed.⁹³ Even if local businesses escaped the bulldozers, they faced a dwindling customer base and bankruptcy. Further, their enforced isolation left them increasingly vulnerable to crime.⁹⁴ Importantly, these economically and socially eviscerated areas were part of the logic of late capitalism that unevenly developed some areas at the expense of others. Marshall Berman argues that Moses’ highway laid waste to neighborhoods in an attempted return to the “techno-pastoral,” allowing only white consumer-citizens access to the new garden (suburbs) through the privileged commodity of

⁹² Rose, *Black Noise* 31. Underscoring the human disruption, Rose writes that “these ‘slums’ were in fact densely populated stable neighborhoods, comprised mostly of working- and lower-middle class Jews, but they also contained solid Italian, German, Irish and black neighborhoods.” Once these families were relocated to resource-deprived public housing, those families and individuals that could, moved; because of de facto housing segregation, African American families could hardly ever move, keeping the Bronx overcrowded and primarily African American.

⁹³ Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* 10-11.

⁹⁴ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988) 293. Robert A. Caro narrates a one-mile tale of destruction documenting Moses’ impact on the East Tremont neighborhood in chapters 37 and 38, in *The Power Broker*.

the automobile.⁹⁵ The logic of late capitalism undergirded the expressway's construction. The funds for this project came from multi-billion dollar Federal Highway Program grants that worked in conjunction with the suburban housing initiatives of the Federal Housing Administration that funded uneven development.⁹⁶ Significantly, Federal monies intervened in space because the selective allocation of funds necessarily entailed the demise of bypassed social spaces; these older neighborhoods became "sufficiently [resource] strained to preclude patch-work adaptation," and were then forced to "demand significant structural change instead," ensuring the demise of these isolated communities.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Additionally, Moses understood that the automobile was overwhelmingly a white consumer good, and that the inner-city poor depended on public transportation. In order to not only "protect" the suburban spaces his expressways were connecting with, he built overpasses too low for buses to pass underneath. See Lizabeth Cohen, *Consumers' Republic*, 488, citing Caro. Growing up in a middle-class, black home on Long Island, Chuck D, of Public Enemy, captured the contestation over consumption and access to space and commodities in the song, "You're Gonna Get Yours," as an "ode to his 98 Olds[mobile]," complete with lyrics concerning racial profiling (Public Enemy, *Yo! Bum Rush The Show*, Def Jam, 527357, 1987). Jeff Chang correctly locates this song within the historical context of Moses' "expressway-fueled segregation and Levittown's racial covenants," Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop* 232.

⁹⁶ Berman, *All That Is Solid* 299, 307. Berman quotes a favorite maxim of Moses pithily describing official attitudes to the expressway's construction: "When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax" (209).

⁹⁷ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* 159. Of course 'significant structural change' is not an option because that threatens market capitalism. Any demand for equity in resources is not only understood as an attack on capitalism, but the logic of this system also frames any dissent as treasonous. Concluding the quoted passage, Soja writes: "One can describe this brake-and-shift as a time-space restructuring of social practices from the mundane to the *mondiale*." Significantly, Soja argues that the spaces of the postmodern city are no longer responding to local internal dynamics, but that the global nature of late capitalism determines the structures of the city, and that internal dynamics are the result of global concerns. Interestingly, this argues for the logic of rap music. As capitalism changed, shifting the

Robert Moses' massive public works' project effectively restricted African Americans' (and Latinos') participation in consumer consumption. As I discussed, "consumer consumption is the modality of experience" in postmodern urban space, so the spatial disconnect created by the structural and spatial restriction of African Americans to fully partake in the postmodern consumer modality of American society creates a social, cultural, and economic disjuncture. Therefore the DJs' produced space must be understood as emerging within this created vacuum. The hip-hop DJ recast unused space as a place to party in the face of dire economic conditions. Jeff Chang quotes Robert Jensen's description of the South Bronx in the 1970s as a "condition of poverty and social collapse, more than a geographical place."⁹⁸ According to Kool DJ AJ the almost instantaneous popularity of DJs and their parties derived from the lack any type of entertainment business development in the black community. According to him: "See, [in] the South Bronx we really had nothing to do. There wasn't no movie theaters."⁹⁹ Kool DJ AJ's comments

expectations and experience of urban life, so does the musical culture. In fact, rap scholars who argue that rap is an extension of earlier African American musical forms are correct, but these musical forms must be read and understood through the spatial logics of the historical modalities of capitalism. Not only is the music the record of a people, but a record of the economic structures enmeshing peoples' lives. Furthermore, but also how they react and provide a point of examination of these structures.

⁹⁸Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop* 17. Chang importantly frames his work in terms of generation, instead of limiting his work to narrow geographic concerns. He discusses the rise of rap in terms of societal condition played out in geography, not as a result of geography. As such, Chang is able to understand hip-hop and rap as an artform that flourishes due to frameworks that construct space based on exclusion and neglect, not because the space alone contains any type of special qualities. Chang deflates the mythic in favor of a narrative of creativity in the face of dire realities.

⁹⁹ Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y'All* 35.

provide experiential illustration of Edward Soja's comments on the predicament of inner cities in the late 1970s. The spatial decline of inner city areas was attributed to an economy that was increasingly segmented and fragmented, causing profound dislocation of the city's spatial organization. The dislocation occurred as a profound polarization between occupation and residence became increasingly entrenched between "high pay/high skill and low pay/low skill workers," entailing residential segregation, flight of businesses, lack of social services, etc. based on various classifications directly related to hierarchical position within a postindustrial/postfordist economy.¹⁰⁰

Consequently the DJ represented an intervention within, not against consumer capitalism: the resolution of the disconnection between consumer practice and economic promise came in the alternative commodity markets enacted by early hip-hop parties organized by emergent DJs. Even though access to commodities was limited, the logic of late capitalism still induces aggrieved individuals and communities to think in terms of consumer consumption. Elizabeth Chin's study on the lives of African-American youth in New Haven, Connecticut, addresses the connections of consumption habits, spatial segmentation and community. Chin's informants' lives were marked by cultural, economic, and structural disconnection. Although they were bombarded by advertising and television shows glorifying consumption, economically the children could not fully participate. Consumption became a geographical inflection of their neighborhoods,

¹⁰⁰ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* 186. Soja's list of discriminatory categories: occupation, race, ethnicity, immigrant status, income, lifestyle.

encompassing and transmitting information about race and class; they understood their world of spending possibilities signified by their overpriced, local convenience store, “Bob’s,” versus stores and shops accessible by automobiles or time-consuming public transportation.¹⁰¹ Murray Forman also provides a particularly apt appraisal of inner city geography divided by spatial economies. Symbolically, Forman reads city-center buildings as shells and empty monuments to capitalism, filled during the day with people involved with making money, and at night with workers cleaning the buildings. For Forman, this stark contrast maps the spatial structure of postindustrial cities that function by separating and exploiting residents of aggrieved communities, while suburban commuters work during the day, and then leave the city for their spaces outside the city. This economic strategy limits gainful employment within aggrieved communities

¹⁰¹ Elizabeth Chin, *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). In an anecdote echoing Lizabeth Cohen’s analysis of the reconfiguring of the public space of the suburban shopping mall to exclude people and articulate a definitive vision of the proper shopper (*Consumer Republic*, 257-262), Chin mentions a rumor that New Haven’s downtown mall would rebuild the entrances to the New Haven’s downtown mall that would only be accessible by car, ensuring that public transportation customers (overwhelmingly African American) would be kept out (*Purchasing Power*, 232). In her appropriately titled chapter, “Hemmed In and Shut Out,” Chin discusses the surveillance her informers receive by the “White Lady” marks the shopping mall as a privileged space for white consumers. Whereas “Bob’s” lack of options, higher-priced convenience store located in the Newhallville neighborhood home to these kids, is “part of their daily and hence unremarkable landscape” further demonstrates the ways that space is organized by consumer culture (*Purchasing Power*, 91, 97).

limiting the tax-base as well as withering the re-circulation of capital as the majority of the money earned in the city's core ends up in suburban circulation.¹⁰²

The spatially regimented lives punctuated by flexible accumulation and selective abandonment provides important context for understanding hip-hop's creation vis-à-vis earlier African American cultural expressions. Arguing for generational differences, as well understanding the spatial restructuring of cities of late capitalism, Chang writes, "if blues culture developed under the conditions of oppressive, forced labor, hip-hop culture would arise from the conditions of no work."¹⁰³ Additionally, African Americans in late twentieth century New York were excluded from quotidian, mainstream activities and fostering a culture based in negative space; the DJ emerged in this logic of exclusion necessitated by late capitalism. The DJ's intervention in space was explicitly connected to mass production through his use of consumer commodities (turn tables, stereo equipment, records). The DJ's intervention is entirely postmodern because the DJ's cultural production is enacted through the consumption of commodities, with

¹⁰² Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First* 44. This point directly echoes my elaboration of Mike Davis in a previous footnote. Important for Forman, and Davis, is how urban space is not so much divided, as the same space is regimented according to the dictates of business.

¹⁰³ Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop* 13. Defining "no work," Chang provides the "bad numbers" of economic decline in the South Bronx: "By the mid-seventies, average per capita income dropped to \$2,430, just half of the New York City average and 40 percent of the nationwide average. The official youth unemployment rate hit 60 percent." However dire these statistics are, Chang also cites a 1973 documentary, "New York Illustrated: The Savage Skulls with Piri Thomas," where a youth advocate estimated some neighborhoods had 80 percent youth unemployment.

the cultural consumption itself turning back into a commodity.¹⁰⁴ Because the DJ's production is unequivocally mediatized, its recuperation as a pure, authentic cultural expression is necessary to maintain the fiction of the 'otherness' of aggrieved populations so that the larger processes of commodification and the consumer market go unnoticed. By 'naturalizing'—relying on the discourse of authenticity—the groundbreaking postmodern work of hip-hop DJs, the deeper connections of commodification, late capitalism, and the space of the postmodern city go unnoticed, and unquestioned. As such, the DJ's space balances precariously between hip-hop's more subtly commodified elements, and its total commodified form, recorded rap.

The MC:

Jeff Chang observes an interesting connection between the DJ and MC. Chang writes that Grandmaster Flash and his "professionalization" of turntable aesthetics revealed the need for MCs to exhort the crowd. In Chang's estimation, the development of the DJ's skill precipitated the need for a "raw" MC.¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, the need for a 'raw' MC acknowledges the "authentic" aesthetic embedded in hip-hop and rap. As rap and hip-hop emerged as a commodity, authenticity derived from the 'street' increasingly became an important element in selling rap and in connecting it to the mythology of hip-hop's four elements. Formally, the DJ and MC are explicitly linked, but a closer inspection of the MC's

¹⁰⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism* x.

¹⁰⁵ Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop* 112.

space elucidates the spatial connections among the four elements, and the spatial construction of late capitalism. Examining the space of the MC will demonstrate how hip-hop and its elements rework and comment on the space of hip-hop space, and the postindustrial city.

Although hip-hop historians and cultural producers continue to debate the chronology of its elements' origins, consensus argues that the rap MC emerged last, the final galvanizing factor of the form. The development of the MC was precipitated by the further development of the DJ in terms of sound, technique, and performance. The DJ widened the notion of what hip-hop was, and created the need for the MC. Grandmaster Flash described himself as “totally whack [i.e. incompetent] on the mic,” therefore he “had to find someone able to put a vocal entertainment on top of this rearrangement of music.”¹⁰⁶ It is important to note how Flash understood the MC piece of the hip-hop equation. For Flash, hip-hop is a performance, entertainment. The combination of the MC and DJ is what makes rap music whole. Rap became hip-hop, and rap is mainly activated and established through the rise of the MC.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y'All* 71.

¹⁰⁷ The MC and rap is also an extension of African-American cultural practices such as the dozens and toasting. On top of this is the history of the trickster figure as both a character of instruction and amusement within black communities. Lawrence Levine provides a good overview in his *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). Specifically, see chapter 5, entitled “Black Laughter,” which is congruent with Ice-T’s discussion of the role of laughter in hip-hop. Quoted in Chang’s text, Ice-T relates: “if you don’t understand that hip-hop is funny, then you won’t get it” (Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* 283).

The MC is the element that communicates most directly, most personally, to the audience during a performance. In terms of “widening the circle,” the MC placed the focus of hip-hop almost completely on the rap performance. The change in spatial orientation within hip-hop was duly noted by one b-boy. Bom5 started out as a b-boy in the late 1970s, already past the peak of the b-boy. He notes: “When I started dancing more, you could see everyone would stop [dancing and watching the dancers] and pay attention to the MCs. You start losing your circles. People walking away from you when the MCs rocked.”¹⁰⁸ The new performance and spatial orientation precipitated by the rise of the MC speaks to an increasingly self-conscious, almost professional, prescription of the codes and rules that became the defining markers of rap and hip-hop. The spatial shift announces a separation from the other hip-hop elements and a splitting of audience and performer, the local community, and the wider orbits of fame. Small asserts, “the fundamental nature and meaning of music lie not in objects, not in musical works at all, but in action, in what people do.”¹⁰⁹ Therefore, the MC can be understood as the final, social touch that embodies both a spatial critique and recapitulation of late capitalism. Through the consumer market, the social touch that the MC provides recasts the original concept of the local community and neighborhood displayed by the earlier

¹⁰⁸ Bom5 quoted in Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y’All* 117. The circle refers to the dance circle, and also connotes multiple registers of community. Importantly, ‘widening the circle’ also plays off of a phrase in Christopher Small’s *Musicking*. The quote is found on page eight: “if we widen the circle of our attention to take in the entire set of relationships that constitutes a performance, we shall see that music’s primary meanings are not individual at all but social.” Both Bom5 and Small understand ‘the circle’ as signifying a community and space of performance.

¹⁰⁹ Small, *Musicking* 8.

hip-hop elements. The MC enabled the closing of the circuit of inner-city spatial relationships. The previous three hip-hop elements emerged as spatial practices from urban cities, assumed to be oppositional to larger market forces, which obscures the spatial logics of these elements' emergence. The MC shifted the relationships of the elements to each other, and, most importantly, their relationship to late capitalism, demonstrating the interconnected and interpenetrative relationship of hip-hop and late capitalism. So, what at first is understood as a profoundly local culture—the initial three elements—can now be understood as a chain of cultural practices inflected by the restructuring processes of late capitalism brought into focus by the emergence of the MC.¹¹⁰

The rise of the MC demonstrated hip-hop and rap's potential of being a spatial critique through a literal mouthpiece, while simultaneously silencing critical potential through commodification within the larger purview of the music industry. Many scholars argue that hip-hop and rap were able to develop independently, largely without the influence of the record industry. Implicit in these arguments is the view that hip-hop provides a flourishing of post-civil rights rebellion and a sui generis form of resistance culture. Additionally, the political project of these scholars is an attempt to set the boundaries of hip-hop discourse as a revolutionary

¹¹⁰ Soja quotes Hadjimichalis' definition of regionalism to understand how populations react to late capitalism. The reactions and actions understood as regionalism result from "different political and ideological forms, ranging from an acquiescent request for additional resources to an explosive attempt at secession." Quoted on Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* 164.

art form.¹¹¹ However, this is a serious misreading of hip-hop and rap. Arguing that the move to record, facilitated by the MC, denigrated hip-hop's cultural form ignores the histories of the other elements, while trying to place rap and hip-hop outside consumer culture. This position does a double disservice to the culture. Trying to attach a rigid authenticity to rap and hip-hop threatens to narrow the boundaries of what can be considered hip-hop. Secondly, this viewpoint limits much of the insight the study of hip-hop and rap can provide in understanding how economic relationships potentially structure and inflect the sites where rap is produced. Therefore, investigating the MC's relationship with the other elements and the recorded commodity is important because the MC literally elaborates urban space, and hip-hop as a product of the spaces of late capitalism.

Based on Katz's idea of tangibility, and technology's ability to provide freedoms and strictures, the MC and microphone explicitly aligned hip-hop with the marketplace. The MC and the microphone must be viewed as both a unique and a homogenizing force.¹¹² Applying Small to this discussion follows a similar course

¹¹¹ This is not to say that consensus exists concerning the revolutionary nature of rap. Many scholars offer a subtle read of hip-hop's political vantage points—if such a vantage point exists—problematizing a reading of rap and hip-hop as a cultural force against injustice, that was corrupted, and appropriated by hegemonic culture industries. However, while acknowledging the nuances implicit in hip-hop's emergence, there has largely still been a de-emphasis on the ways that consumer markets help construct a Hip-Hop Nation, as opposed to solely, de-construct the Hip-Hop Nation.

¹¹² Katz, *Capturing Sounds* 13. Katz notes that technology is never a unidirectional force or influence, providing the example of the introduction of the cassette into Indian and Java. For Indians, the cassette broke the monopoly of the Gramophone Company of India (CGI), by providing a tangible means to record various types of music, whereas the gamelan music of Java became increasingly homogenized due to the circulation of gamelan cassettes to isolated villages.

as my earlier consideration of the graffiti artist. In much the same way that tagging could re-appropriate buildings and space and mark them as a site of hip-hop, the use of the microphone provides the same ability. For the performing MC involved in a formal act of rapping and music making, the microphone designated the space of performance. This space could be at a club, a park, a block party, wherever. The importance of the microphone is that it not only conferred 'MC' status, but also transformed the space of performance into a hip-hop, or rap zone. At the same time that the microphone transformed space, it also locked the MC into that specific zone. The MC with microphone usually performed in a neighborhood park, or other local space that was more inclusive than exclusive. Such a performance space suggests transience, mobility, the potentially destabilization of space. However, the microphone anchors the MC to the performative space maintaining the traditional space of performance/audience through a commodity intervention. Resisting and reaffirming late capitalism's space, the MC becomes a local phenomenon and thus, rap becomes codified as a local commodity, something easily recognizable, and ready for sale.

Several examples will help clarify this point. First, MC Sha-Rock noted the local flush of celebrity as people recognized her local Bronx performances. According to Sha-Rock, "[h]earing someone say, 'I know you're Sha-Rock. You're good on the mic,' that was a good feeling, but you take it with a grain of salt because we were all just experiencing this, just being a local celebrity, within

our community.”¹¹³ The community supports the locals. Like tagging, rapping was local at first. Here, then, is evidence of both an admission of the natural and unnatural nature of a local reading of the MC and hip-hop. True, Sha-Rock was a local MC, who developed a local following, but her performance was tied to a re-contextualization of a specific space. An MC and a microphone demonstrate the potential for anyone to become a local celebrity; this could have happened anywhere. According to one informant, Rahiem, hip-hop and rap was not as parochial as is usually suggested. According to him, “the first few months was really exciting . . . We had battles out there in Queens and Brooklyn. We were going outside of our domain and getting a chance to see what it was like and how people received us in other places.”¹¹⁴ The music and performers came out of specific neighborhoods and created names around blocks and streets, but just as quickly the participants traveled and circulated, influenced and were in turn influenced by people and things beyond their neighborhoods. Rahiem’s metropolitan interests along with similar attitudes of other MCs demonstrate that hip-hop and rap was less parochial than usually assumed, and that the rise of the MC would facilitate the move of hip-hop to a mainstream commodity.

The MC facilitated the move of hip-hop into the recording studio, and association of rap with hip-hop. The MC’s prominence caused spatial ripples within the localized scene, but generated larger waves for hip-hop felt throughout popular music. Rap’s first product, the widespread rap single, thus needs our

¹¹³ Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y’All* 109.

¹¹⁴ Raheim quoted in Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y’All* 109.

attention. In 1979, Sugar Hill Records released Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight." The history—apocryphal or not—of the single offers a wealth of information concerning the spatial aspects of rap and hip-hop. As the story goes, music industry veteran Sylvia Robinson saw an opportunity to cash in on a "fad"—rap songs—and signed three unknown MCs who recorded "Rappers Delight," for her newly minted imprint, Sugar Hill Records.¹¹⁵ Sylvia Robinson had a long career in music, including producing Ike and Tina Turner's 1961 hit "It's Gonna Work Out Fine," and the Moments' "Love on a Two-Way Street."¹¹⁶ Sugar Hill records was formed through a distribution deal with Morris Levy's Roulette Records in 1979 after Sylvia noticed her children's MC and DJ tapes, and heard Big Hank rap at the New Jersey pizza parlor he worked at.¹¹⁷ Although Sugar Hill Records was located in nearby New Jersey, its name referenced Harlem, linking "Rapper's Delight," and an evocative site of African American cultural history in an attempt to certify the song's hip-hop authenticity.¹¹⁸ Although historical

¹¹⁵ Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First* 109; Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop* 129; Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y'All* 189.

¹¹⁶ Steven Stanchell, *Rap Whoz Who: The World of Rap Music* (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1996) 274.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* 274-275.

¹¹⁸ Cary D. Wintz, "Harlem," in *Harlem Speaks: A Living History of the Harlem Renaissance* ed. Cary D. Wintz (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Inc., 2007) 27-50, 40-41. Located west of Striver's Row on the bluffs west of Eighth Avenue, Sugar Hill overlooked the old Polo Grounds, containing luxurious apartments and brownstones home to prominent members of the African American cultural vanguard. Residents of Sugar Hill included George Schuyler, Aaron Douglas, A'Lelia Walker, Duke Ellington, Paul Robeson, while W.E.B. Du Bois, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Weldon Johnson frequented the homes and parties there.

As a matter of hip-hop historical explanation, early contestations of place in rap circled around the question of Brooklyn or Bronx origins, never Harlem. See

verification is lacking, the combination of space, culture, race, and business entwined in Sylvia Robinson's transposed referencing of her record label and African American cultural history too perfectly demonstrated the burgeoning mainstream awareness and business potential of rap music. Fad or not, recorded rap was marketed and sold due to the MC's emergence.

Although initially dismissed as a joke by hip-hop insiders, the rap singles that immediately followed Sugar Hill Gang's success were similar to "Rapper's Delight." Bobby Robinson's Enjoy Records—actually located in Harlem—released Grandmaster Flash and the Funky 4 + 1's 1979 "Christmas Rappin,'" and Kurtis Blow scored rap's first gold single in 1980 with "The Breaks."¹¹⁹ Although these three early singles are lyrically and musically similar, the place and space of the song's creators determined the 'authenticity' of the rap song.¹²⁰ Following up on "Rapper's Delight" Sylvia Robinson's capitalized on rap's association with the inner city with Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message." Ostensibly presenting a portrait of inner city life, "The Message" vividly conceptualizes the space of the ghetto as desolate and poverty stricken. According

KRS-One's "Bridge is Over," and MC Shan "The Bridge" for examples of songs debating the true crucible of hip-hop, Brooklyn or Queens. "Bridge is Over" is on Boogie Down Productions, *Criminal Minded*, M.I.L. Mulitmedia, 4787, 1987. "The Bridge" is included on MC Shan's, *Down By Law*, Cold Chillin', 25676, 1987.

¹¹⁹ Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y'All* 177. Illustrating the importance of space and place in terms of authenticity, Joey Robinson remarks on the Sugar Hill Gang situation in Ahearn and Fricke: "I see different interviews where some of the rappers have a lot of animosity for the Gang because they say they wasn't from the streets, they wasn't from this, and they wasn't from that" (*Yes Yes Y'All*, 189).

¹²⁰ Kurtis Blow and Grandmaster Flash grew up in Harlem and the Bronx, respectively. In terms of hip-hop authenticity, they grew up in emerging culture.

to group member Kid Creole, Sylvia Robinson pushed the song on the group because she “had a concept of us doing that song, and she felt that we would be perfect for it because we came from the inner city.”¹²¹ Reflecting on “The Message,” Melle Mel commented that, “what started as a party movement became a protest movement, and the rhymes followed suit.”¹²² Melle Mel’s admission does not dilute the critical and artistic power of “The Message,” rather it aptly locates hip-hop within the logic of late capitalism. The rise of the MC enabled the explicit recognition of hip-hop as a marketable commodity. More to the point, the MC’s had to leave the city for the studio to enable the music, and potential musical critique, to be recorded and sold.

Corresponding to the marketability of hip-hop enabled by the MC, the MC as a spatial site of investigation is also the site where the codification and formalization of a “local” logic takes place. The MC cements the strict notion of locality in hip-hop, and also opens up the art form for consumption and equates hip-hop and rap as a complete unit in popular consciousness.¹²³ Chang provides this same analysis that also echoes Katz’s formulation of portability. Returning to

¹²¹ Ahearn and Fricke, *Yes Yes Y’All* 210. Kid Creole’s entire quote is worth reproducing because it demonstrates rap and hip-hop’s place within late capitalism, as always already available for commodification: “When it came to ‘The Message,’ we were like, ‘What in the hell is this? What are we doin’ with this?’ It’s slow, it’s plodding . . . the hook . . . what is it? We was used to all of the break records, but Sylvia had a concept of us doing that song, and she felt that we would be perfect for it because we came from the inner city. We was afraid of the song because we didn’t think that it would work. We were surprised like hell; it worked like a charm. Matter of fact, it worked so good that the next 50 million songs that we did after that all tried to be like that, because that formula worked [laughing].”

¹²² Forman, *The ‘Hood Comes First* 83.

¹²³ Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* 132.

“Rapper’s Delight,” Chang believes the song was “tailor made to travel” because it was written with the “ears of fans and the enthusiasm of dilettantes,” incorporating the “hookish” appeal of rap and hip-hop that “would strike listeners around the world as both universal and new, not local and insular.” Chang assumes that the beat of the song ultimately sells; however, the MC’s cadence delivered in both rhythm and counterpoint to the beat highlights the song, providing hip-hop a perfect marketable commodity. The MC affects the complementary illusions of spatial transparency and naturalness for hip-hop. The MC, as singer, provides a transparent analogue with other forms of popular music, and the lyrics’ content becomes a legible expression of African American urban life. The beat and rhythm of rap songs are considered natural based on long-standing stereotypes of an innate African American expressive musicality.¹²⁴ The universal concern of space and place articulated by the MC facilitated the mainstream marketability of hip-hop through rap.

The MC’s localism foreclosed casual recognition of hip-hop as a broad spatial critique. Explicitly celebrating neighborhood roots hid the larger context of late capitalism’s spatial organization and instead facilitated hip-hop as a representation of mass production and mass consumption. The MC transcends locality. Derived from the generic ‘master of ceremonies,’ the abbreviation MC garnered new meaning as “microphone controller”—suggesting an alternative reading and name for the purpose and function of the MC. Instead of merely presiding over an event, the MC became the aggressive ruler who claimed an active

¹²⁴ Lefebvre, *Production of Space* 52-53.

role in defining the environment around him. In much the same way as portable spray paint allowed an “all-city” attitude, so the microphone offered the same possibility. The MC and his microphone have the potential, in Katz’ words, to “encourage new experiences and generate new traditions where they happen to be.”¹²⁵ The ability to take a microphone to almost any location transforms that locale into a venue for artistic production and remakes the place as a concert venue or extension of the MC’s home neighborhood, creating a feedback loop for the MC’s potential to create a new interpretation and relationship to space and place.

¹²⁵ Katz, *Capturing Sound* 15.

Chapter IV

The Rap Album

The recording and marketing of the rap album becomes the ultimate intervention in space—intervening not only in the space of hip-hop’s elements, but also within the marketplace. Most importantly, investigating the rap album’s spatial intervention complicates critical conceptions of the purpose and emergence of hip-hop’s elements in postmodern urban space, as well as how the rap album reflects and comments on these spaces. The rap album becomes the ultimate articulation of African American social space. Lefebvre elaborates social space as “social practice presuppos[ing] the use of a body.” The commodification of hip-hop in the form of the rap album converts the elements into a fully articulated consumer-good that strips hip-hop’s elements of a direct relation to their postmodern spatial emergence. The rap album intervenes in the elements’ space by becoming a physical presence that occludes the fact that the album is a production of the elements’ space. Through the rap album’s commodified production of space, it localizes hip-hop as an African American expression of inner city life.¹²⁶ This spatial intervention flattens interpretation of the elements, and narrows the meaning of hip-hop and rap according to a market friendly discourse of authenticity where

¹²⁶ Lefebvre, *Production of Space* 123. Lefebvre defines “production of space” as a process whereby nature is transformed into a product, with additional effect of localizing space.

representations of race are inextricably linked and determined by place.¹²⁷ The rap album amplifies this discourse through its circulation as a consumer commodity turning the inner city experience elaborated by hip-hop into the universal African American experience. However, the rap album does not represent the failure of hip-hop's intervention in space, rather it articulates the deep connectedness of hip-hop's elements with late capitalism.¹²⁸

As I discussed in the previous section, rap first emerged on record in the single format. "Rapper's Delight" is an important historical signpost tracking rap and hip-hop's move into mainstream commodification. Initially, rap singles tested the music industry's thesis that rap was a fad, merely "talking disco."¹²⁹ Forman discusses initial reluctance of recording a rap LP noting that "there was little thought . . . of packaging rap in LP album format . . . [and] many industry insiders believed the music was too "new" to the ears of mainstream America." Additionally, "the resulting lack of certainty around the rap market and the

¹²⁷ Although Tricia Rose is very careful in considering the negative aspects of rap music—sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and materialism—as a result of the culturally attenuating influence of the corrupt music industry, she concedes that "the return of the ghetto as a central black popular narrative has also fulfilled national fantasies about the violence and danger that purportedly consume the poorest and most economically fragile communities of color" (*Black Noise*, 11).

¹²⁸ Further elaborating his formulation of 'illusion of transparency,' Lefebvre writes that "things lie, and when, having become commodities, they lie in order to conceal their origin, namely social labour, they tend to set themselves up as absolutes. Products and the circuits they establish (in space) are fetishized and so become more 'real' than reality itself--that is, than productive activity itself, which they thus take over" (*Production of Space*, 81). Each rap element acts as a spatio-visual commodity produced by late capitalism's restructuring of the city. In effect, the elements obscure the relationship between their emergence and late capitalism; the elements signify urban blight, turning structural neglect into racial pathology. The rap album finally removes even the visual, human commodity,

¹²⁹ Robert Ford, Jr. "Jive Talking N.Y. DJs Rapping Away in Black Discos," 43.

desirability of either twelve-inch single or LP configurations was yet another contributing factor to major labels' and radio broadcasters' hesitation to embrace rap."¹³⁰ The single was considered fleeting, its success anomalous and contingent, allowing the music industry to simultaneously exploit and devalue rap music—continuing the historic discriminatory practices of the music industry.¹³¹ Fighting this devaluation of rap music as commodity and cultural expression, the successful rap album attempted to elevate rap as a more serious and sustainable genre.¹³² By 1984, Def Jam released Run-DMC's second full length LP, *King of Rock*, demonstrating “that with the proper handling rap could be successfully recorded and packaged in the LP format.”¹³³ One year previously, Run-DMC released what is arguably the first rap album, *Run-DMC*, ending the “old-school” era, establishing the album format as the serious and legitimate expression of rap.¹³⁴ Run-DMC integrated the elements of stand-alone singles into one package that combined social commentary, diverse musical elements, and uncompromising cultural

¹³⁰ Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First* 114, 131.

¹³¹ Ibid. 133. Forman cites Donald Harper's discussion of *Billboards* “Rock Tracks” as implicitly discriminatory. According to Harper, “the implication is that a ‘rock track’ . . . is part of a larger artistic work comprised in an album and that . . . the album ought not be dissected inot its constituent songs if one is to appreciate the artistic integrity of the whole. . . . ‘Black songs, which evidently do not cohere as a conceptually integrated albums, and thus are easily charted as discreet ‘singles.’”

¹³² Rick Rubin, Russell Simmons, and Run-D.M.C. underwrote Run-D.M.C.'s first album, *Run-D.M.C.* (Profile, 1983), with the profits from their twelve-inch single “It's Like That/Sucka MC.” They saw the rap album as “the major leagues,” legitimating rap music in the music industry (*The 'Hood Comes First*, 134).

¹³³ Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First* 134.

¹³⁴ Judy McCoy, *Rap Music in the 1980s: A Reference Guide* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1992) 208. *Rap Music*'s second chapter provides a critical discography of the 1980s and early 1990s.

identification, a combination that “pushed the music into the mainstream and secured its future as an American musical genre with an identifiable tradition.”¹³⁵ By virtue of its industry success, the rap album contradicts its marketed image, and critical perception, as a challenge prevailing music industry perceptions, while simultaneously illustrating that rap and hip-hop was conceived and emerged within the commodified spaces of late capitalism. The rap single is an important part of hip-hop’s spatial history, but it only presents one instance of hip-hop’s spatial emergence: one can either purchase a party song, “Rapper’s Delight,” or a gritty rap, “The Message.” Instead, the rap album offers an explicitly broad-based commodified evocation of hip-hop’s emergence in the space of late capitalism. The rap album consolidates all aspects of hip-hop in one commodity allowing a deeper consideration of the connection between the spaces of rap and late capitalism the rap single provides.

After Run-DMC’s album success, the 1980s witnessed a massive proliferation of recorded rap albums as the music industry, and artists, realized the potential for profits. There were literally hundreds of rap albums recorded and released between 1988 and 1990, and choosing one as best representing the interconnection of the spaces of the rap album and late capitalism presents a challenge.¹³⁶ All of these albums demonstrated some aspect of late capitalism’s

¹³⁵ Michael Eric Dyson, “The Culture of Hip-Hop,” in *That’s the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 62.

¹³⁶ Judy McCoy provides a comprehensive discography of rap albums released between 1984—Run-DMC’s first album—and 1990. Of these, fifty-five albums of note were released between 1988-1990. My definition of ‘albums of note’ means

an album that is critically or historically important based on an album's contribution to the evolution of rap music, or its popularity, or had an impact on the rise or popularity of a particular subgenre. For example, I include 2 Live Crew's albums *Nasty As They Wannabe* (Skywalker Records, 1989), and *Banned In the U.S.A.* (Luke Records, 1990) because of the national debates involving censorship, first amendment rights, and rap music, not because the albums necessarily exhibit a critical musical development in hip-hop. Following is the list of albums. 1988: Big Daddy Kane, *Long Live the Kane*, Cold Chillin', 1988; Boogie Down Productions, *Criminal Minded*, Jive, 1988; DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, *He's The DJ, I'm The Rapper*, Jive, 1988; Eazy-E, *Eazy-Duz-It*, Ruthless, 1988; EPMD, *Strictly Business*, Priority, 1988; Eric B. & Rakim. *Follow The Leader*, Uni, 1988;; Ice-T, *Power*, Sire, 1988; J.J. Fad, *Supersonic—The Album*, Ruthless, 1988; Jungle Brothers, *Straight Out The Jungle*, Warlock, 1988; Kid N' Play, *2 Hype*, Select, 1988; Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, Def Jam, 1988; Rob Base and DJ E-Z Rock, *It Takes Two*, Profile, 1988; Run-DMC, *Tougher Than Leather*, Profile, 1988; Salt-N-Pepa, *A Salt With A Deadly Pepa*, Next Plateau, 1988; Slick Rick, *The Great Adventures of Slick Rick*, Def Jam, 1988. Albums from 1989: Big Daddy Kane, *It's a Big Daddy Thing*, Cold Chillin', 1989; Young M.C. *Stone Cold Rhyming*, Delicious Vinyl, 1989; Tone-Loc, *Loc-ed After Dark*, Delicious Vinyl, 1989; Roxanne Shante, *Bad Sister*, Cold Chillin', 1989; Queen Latifah, *All Hail The Queen*, Tommy Boy, 1989; Neneh Cherry, *Raw Like Sushi*, Virgin, 1989; Mellow Man Ace, *Escape From Havanna*, Capitol, 1989; Maestro Fresh-Wes, *Symphony In Effect*, LMR, 1989; MC Lyte, *Eyes on This*, First Priority, 1989; LL Cool J, *Walking With a Panther*, Def Jam, 1989; Kool Moe Dee, *Knowledge is King*, Jive, 1989; Jungle Brothers, *Done By the Forces of Nature*, Warner Bros., 1989; Ice-T, *The Iceberg/Freedom of Speech... Just Watch What You Say*, Sire, 1989; Heavy D. and The Boyz, *Big Tyme*, Uptown, 1989; EPMD, *Unfinished Business*, 1989; De La Soul, *3 Feet High and Rising*, Tommy Boy, 1989; The D.O.C., *No One Can Do It Better*, Ruthless, 1989; Boogie Down Productions, *Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip-Hop*, Jive, 1989; Biz Markie, *The Biz Never Sleeps*, Cold Chillin', 1989; The Beastie Boys, *Paul's Boutique*, Capitol, 1989; 3rd Base, *The Cactus Album*, Def Jam/Columbia, 1989; The 2 Live Crew, *Nasty As They Wanna Be*, Skywalker Records, 1989. Albums from 1990: Big Daddy Kane, *Taste of Chocolate*, Cold Chillin', 1990; The 2 Live Crew, *Banned In the U.S.A.*, Luke Records, 1990; Boogie Down Productions, *Edutainment*, Jive, 1990; Digital Underground, *Sex Packets*, Tommy Boy, 1990; Eric B. & Rakim, *Let the Rhythm Hit 'Em*, MCA, 1990; Ice Cube, *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*, Priority, 1990; Kid Frost, *Hispanic Causing Panic*, Virgin, 1990; Kid N' Play, *Kid 'N Play's Funhouse*, Select, 1990; LL Cool J, *Mama Said Knock You Out*, Def Jam, 1990; MC Hammer, *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em*, Capitol, 1990; Monie Love, *Down To Earth*, Warner Bros., 1990; Public Enemy, *Fear of a Black Planet*, Def Jam, 1990; Salt-n-Pepa, *Blacks' Magic*, Next Plateau, 1990; Snap, *World Power*, Arista, 1990; A Tribe Called Quest, *People's Instinctive Travels And The Path's of*

spatial organization, however N.W.A.'s 1989 album, *Straight Outta Compton*, typified hip-hop's emergence in the spatial logic of late capitalism, popularizing a subgenre branded 'gangsta rap,' and encapsulating the *entire* range of hip-hop's postmodern spatial organization. Additionally, N.W.A.'s emergence represented a moment when hip-hop's origins within the spatial logic of late capitalism are easily perceived, as well as easily occluded. Unlike other rap groups and rappers in the hard-core cohort—Public Enemy, Eric B. & Rakim, and Boogie Down Productions most prominently—N.W.A. explicitly frame their local specificity, Compton. Arguing against East coast albums, N.W.A. provides a constant evocation of place because they do not take their local milieu for granted. Similar to the local-myopia that affected the first hip-hop generation, the backdrop of New York, and its boroughs, were taken for granted as hip-hop's space represented on record. Even Public Enemy, who offered trenchant attacks on late capitalism's interpellation of African Americans and minorities, assumed an abstract localism based on New York.¹³⁷ Of course these artists present an excellent spatial reading of *some* of the postmodern spaces of late capitalism. Their evocation of space is necessarily limited due to New York's compressed and concentrated urbanism. The dislocation and exclusion of aggrieved populations is manifested differently in New York and Los Angeles: a 19th century-style 'walking cure' is still possible in New

Rhythm, Jive, 1990; Vanilla Ice, *To The Extreme*, SBK, 1990; X-Clan, *To The East, Blackwards*, 4th & B'Way, 1990.

¹³⁷ Chuck D, Public Enemy's leader, would later move away from this viewpoint, calling rap music, "black people's CNN" (*Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 246).

York.¹³⁸ Although expressways and freeways have been cut across New York's landscape, public transportation is still extant. Los Angeles is vitally dependent on the ribbons of freeways that further divides and differentiates urban space creating explicit postmodern geographies.¹³⁹ All rap albums in this archive responded to the same processes of late capitalism that structured and restructured all urban spaces, even if the local configurations were different. However, *Straight Outta Compton's* importance derived from its location in the postmodern space of Los Angeles, because the spatial structures of late capitalism are broadly manifested throughout the greater Los Angeles area. If the geography of the postmodern urban city is the home of hip-hop, then Los Angeles provides the perfect setting. Edward Soja formulates the postmodern space of Los Angeles as encompassed by a sixty-mile circle around the urban center.¹⁴⁰ Additionally, the nodal modality of Los Angeles clearly demonstrates the regional recycling implicit in the processes of uneven development and selective abandonment so integral to the spatial logic of

¹³⁸ Commenting on the centrifugal forces breaking up Los Angeles, Edward Dimendberg uses the walking cure to highlight the forces restructuring the city, reflected in the themes and motifs of *Film Noir*. Chapters two through four provide an examination of centripetal and centrifugal forces, and walking cures, in *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹³⁹ See chapter six in Eric Avila's *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003) for an excellent investigation of Los Angeles' freeway system.

¹⁴⁰ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* 224. Soja defends his circumscription saying, "[the circle] covers the thinly sprawling 'built-up' area of five counties, a population of more than 12 million individuals, at least 132 incorporated cities and, it is claimed, the creates concentration of technocratic expertise and militaristic imagination in the USA."

late capitalism, and the emergence of hip-hop.¹⁴¹ As “Rapper’s Delight” necessarily had to be recorded and released by a studio outside the scene, so did the best rap album that demonstrated hip-hop’s origins in the space of late capitalism and elaboration of life lived in the postmodern city must emerge outside New York. The processes of commodification and consumption continued to cycle reinterpreting hip-hop’s position within late capitalism that necessarily affected a spatial change. Just as hip-hop emerged from the postmodern urban spaces being restructured by the processes of late capitalism located in New York, *Straight Outta Compton* represents an updated spatial emergence in Los Angeles predicated on hip-hop’s location in postmodern urban geographies.

Once rap reached the recording studio, the cultural practices created by late capitalism were reconnected with the market, becoming another commodity. Exemplary of late capital’s structuring of urban, rap, and black into a commodity is

¹⁴¹ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* 159. Postmodern formulations of Los Angeles has an extensive genealogy. Not only does Soja demonstrate postmodern geographies through Los Angeles (chapters eight and nine in *Postmodern Geographies*), but also many other scholars view Los Angeles as embodying their conceptualizations of postmodernity, space, and late capitalism. For a more theoretical investigation of Los Angeles, see Frederic Jameson’s *Postmodernism*, chapters two and four, Jean Baudrillard’s “The Precession of Simulacra,” specifically the section “Hyperreal and Imaginary,” Eric Avila, Mike Davis, Edward Dimendberg, and Josh Sides investigate the historical development of Los Angeles. Furthermore Davis catalogues, what he calls “the exiles” and “the mercenaries,” a rarefied collection of cultural intellectuals that find their way to LA through a variety of reasons. Included in these two groups are Adorno and Horkheimer, Aldous Huxley, Brecht, Thomas Mann, and more recently Baudrillard, Derrida, and Jencks (*City of Quartz*, 46-88).

N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton*.¹⁴² Approaching rap and hip-hop through the recorded commodity, *Straight Outta Compton*, allows us to investigate how consumer markets structure and mediate relationships of race, space, and cultural productions. *Straight Outta Compton* is inextricably tied to the history of black Los Angeles and the restructuring of late capital that marked Compton as a site of urban, African-American decline. Paying special attention to urban space, the spatial relationships demonstrated by hip-hop and its elements, and the recorded rap album provides compelling evidence that hip-hop and rap emerge out of, and rely on, associated constructions of authenticity from the urban geography of late capitalism. Therefore, the recorded rap album recapitulates hip-hop and rap's emergence from late capitalism.

The confusion over what critical stance to take in relationship to the album circles around hip-hop's discourse of authenticity. Therefore, it is important to understand *Straight Outta Compton* as a vision of order marketed by late capitalism as a vision of disorder.¹⁴³ Because rap is interpreted as the authentic expression of African American ghetto life, the calculated nature of rap albums are written out of the marketing scheme, to highlight the 'raw' and potentially dangerous expressions on record.¹⁴⁴ The artistry of N.W.A. is reduced to a document of a world teetering

¹⁴² N.W.A., *Straight Outta Compton*, Priority Records 571024, 1989. Although the album was initially released on vinyl in 1988, I am using the 1989 album that includes several more songs.

¹⁴³ Small, *Musicking* 193.

¹⁴⁴ David Samuels, "The Rap on Rap: The 'Black Music' that Isn't Either," *That's The Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004) 147-153, 152. Samuels documented several "real and imagined" scraps with the law leveraged into record label marketing

on the brink of apocalypse. However, *Straight Outta Compton* also spoke out about the effects of late capitalism on urban spaces. Tracing and re-tracing a passive and active voice in space, the rap album can be thought of as the translation and transmission of space from a “representational space” to a “representation of space.” According to Henri Lefebvre, “representational space” is “space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and held the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users,’” whereas “representation of space” conceptualized space.¹⁴⁵ The rap album intervenes in the space of its elements, acting as a verbalization, a ‘conception’ (representation) of the ‘lived’ experience (representational) of the elements’ practitioners. By subsuming hip-hop’s elements within a representation of space, the album becomes representational space, blurring and underscoring the connection between commodity and reality.

N.W.A.’s album exactly demonstrates this fine line between representation of space and representational space by positioning the artists as observers. In effect, N.W.A. translates behavior into legible code. According to member Ice Cube, the album is constructed around the loose concept of the group members acting “like reporters.”¹⁴⁶ David Toop correctly understood “the problem with N.W.A.’s projection of themselves as objective reporters was that their music . . .

campaigns. These included Def Jam’s incorporation of Slick Rick’s arrest for attempted homicide into its marketing campaign, special mention of DJ Quik’s police records maintaining his “street credibility,” and a focus on “controversial attitudes” of rap groups, such as Brand Nubian’s supposed anti-Semitism.

¹⁴⁵ Levebre, *Production of Space* 38-39.

¹⁴⁶ David Toop *Rap Attack 2*, 180.

was exhilarating stuff.”¹⁴⁷ The problem was that N.W.A.’s ‘reality’ is produced and designed to titillate, converting representations of inner city life into pathological experience. The album’s producer, Dr. Dre, said that the impetus behind the album was shock appeal: “I wanted to make people go: ‘Oh shit, I can’t believe he’s saying that shit.’ I wanted to go all the way left.”¹⁴⁸ Dre’s quote reveals the tension in the rap albums slippage between representation and representational space. On one level Dr. Dre is simply discussing the explicit lyrics of N.W.A.’s album, but the desire to shock also stemmed from verbalizing, and verbally assaulting, lived social inequalities. Regardless, Dr. Dre’s comments implied a performance aimed at exploiting societal fears of urban spaces inhabited by the aggrieved. N.W.A. manipulated its image for entertainment, as Robin D.G. Kelly said: “In reality, NWA have more in common with a Charles Bronson movie than a PBS documentary on the plight of the inner-cities.”¹⁴⁹ Any attempt to track the significance, or reality, of NWA’s album must be understood in terms of the mass marketing of the ‘other’ located in restructured spaces organized by the inherent processes of late capitalism.

For decades Los Angeles’ police department had a legacy of oppressing the city’s minority population, especially in meting out excessive force against

¹⁴⁷ Toop, *Rap Attack* 2 181.

¹⁴⁸ Dr. Dre quoted in Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* 318.

¹⁴⁹ Robin D.G. Kelley, “Looking for the ‘Real’ Nigga: Social Scientists Construct the Ghetto,” in Forman and Neal’s *That’s The Joint!*, 130. Befitting his reference to Bronson’s Death-Wish series, both vigilante movies and the rise of the ‘gangsta rapper’ emerge from late capitalism’s decimation of inner cities.

citizens.¹⁵⁰ South Central, Los Angeles comprised the neighborhoods Watts and Compton. This area was bordered and defined by a series of fences and security patrols, circumscribed by the Santa Monica, Harbor, and Century Freeways, all of which are areas that were obsessively contained and patrolled by the LAPD under direction from Chief Darryl Gates.¹⁵¹ Mike Davis spotlights the history of spatial inequality in Los Angeles twenty years before N.W.A. with a quote from the 1969 National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence: “we live in ‘fortress cities’ brutally divided between ‘fortified cells’ of affluent society and ‘places of terror’ where the police battle the criminalized poor.”¹⁵² In effect, South Central spatially excluded sites of business and mobility: commerce did not get in, and residents were not supposed to leave. Accordingly, postmodern geography’s uneven development and selective abandonment describe the crucible from which *Straight Outta Compton* emerged. However, N.W.A.’s representation of space is presented entirely as a mass-produced commodity. The question then becomes:

¹⁵⁰ Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* 456-463; Davis, *City of Quartz*. Both authors provide excellent accounts of the many brutal injustices. Chang documents a salient history of abuse from 1943’s Zoot Suit riots to the Rodney King riots, and the subsequent successful agitations for ‘three-strikes’ legislation represented by Proposition 21. Mike Davis offers a century long look at Los Angeles development, that although not always explicitly focusing on the LAPD, always connects the structural dots. Specifically, in order of relevance, see chapter five, “The Hammer and the Rock,” chapter four, “Fortress L.A.,” and chapter two “Who Rules Los Angeles?”

¹⁵¹ Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* 314-315. See Eric Avila’s *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight* chapter six, for an excellent investigation of the growth and impact of Los Angeles’s freeway culture on the region. Avila demonstrates how the freeway system dismantled public transportation, effectively disallowing citywide transit by Los Angeles’ minority populations.

¹⁵² Davis, *City of Quartz* 224.

how does the rap album as a cultural form prefigure a commodity like N.W.A.'s album?

The album's title track, "Straight Outta Compton," begins with the declaration, "You are now about to witness the strength of street knowledge."¹⁵³ 'Street knowledge' is the promise, and threat, that N.W.A. will represent their space, Compton, as a site of power and agency. Undergirding this street-knowledge is the geographical and economic history of Compton. Compton represented the fulfillment of the American Dream for middle-class African-Americans during the 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately, competition and decline in the steel and automotive industries in the 1980s spelled significant economic decline. The result of this decline is that the chief economic export of Compton became an image of lawless gangs readily manipulated and marketed by the culture industries.¹⁵⁴ Correspondingly, Ice Cube begins the song with this lyrical salvo: "You know I got a sawed off/Bodies get hauled off." Ice Cube's lyrics demonstrate the threat of 'street knowledge' that is equally despaired and desired in commodity form. Knowledge becomes a code word for understanding the rules of representation of Compton. Simultaneously, the lyrics also register the tensions within the cultural production as commodity demonstrating the effects of late capitalism on the creation of both Compton, and hip-hop and rap.¹⁵⁵ MC Ren

¹⁵³ *Straight Outta Compton*, 1989.

¹⁵⁴ Josh Sides, "Straight Into Compton: American Dreams, Urban Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb" *American Quarterly*, 56, 3 (September 2004): 584.

¹⁵⁵ Richard M. Elman's *Ill At Ease In Compton* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967) presents a compelling narrative of the decline of the once thriving black

boasts that N.W.A. is so dangerous that “security is maximum/and that’s the law,” in Compton.¹⁵⁶ Imbedded in this lyric is the double meaning of the use of ‘maximum security.’ MC Ren implies that Compton is a dangerous place, tantamount to a maximum-security prison. N.W.A. represents Compton from both an external and internal location. Accordingly, “Straight Outta Compton” threatens that the representation of space could erupt into physical action, as well as connecting the outside listener to the inside participant.

The album’s sonic palette also straddles the line between representation and representational space. On “Straight Outta Compton,” producer Dr. Dre sampled the Winstons’ “Amen Brother,” characterized as “a frenetic horn-driven instrumental funk take on the joyous hymn, “Amen,” . . . now played with Sunday-morning abandon.”¹⁵⁷ However, Dre turned the “amen” into a sound that was menacing. According to Chang, it “sounded like the drums of death.”¹⁵⁸ Regardless of contextual intent, the sound that Dr. Dre created with the sample was an aggressive, threatening soundscape that acts as the aural signature of Compton’s selectively abandoned space. Although the track’s and the album’s sound signified the specific urban experience of Compton through the sampling, scratching,

middle class community at the end of the 1960s. Also, the book provides historical context for the era that the members of N.W.A were born and raised, providing a parallel to New York’s urban crisis.

¹⁵⁶ *Straight Outta Compton*, 1989.

¹⁵⁷ Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* 318.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 318.

booming bass, and simulated gun shot sounds, the music could only signify Compton because of the lyrics, and the album's title.¹⁵⁹

Fundamentally, both the album's 'local specificity,' and its tension between the representation of space and representational space, materially embodies hegemony. Although both the lyrics and the album's soundscape comment and critique the experiences of living in the postmodern inner city, the album reaffirms the existing hegemonic order. The album's representation of space operates according to a double illusion, concealing the production of the postmodern inner city's space by the logic of late capitalism. The "illusion of transparency" is achieved by the album's lyrics and music that appear to be recounting and mimicking urban strife; the "realistic illusion" is achieved by the assumed authenticity of African American voices. Concealment is managed on record by both illusions mutually reinforcing the other.¹⁶⁰ The 'truth' represented on the rap album is validated by the presence of the African American rapper; the album's lyrics can only describe the peril of inner city life. Turning on the discourse of authenticity, *Straight Outta Compton*, and "Straight Outta Compton," manages to promote a pathological vision of behavior that seemingly threatens spatial order while reinforcing it.

¹⁵⁹ In 1989, Dr. Dre's produced soundscapes denote Compton. After Dr. Dre's production style with N.W.A. and his solo album, 1992's "The Chronic," his sound became a brand and his musical services were elicited from all popular music genres. There is nothing authentically 'gangsta' about Dr. Dre's music, except that he sometimes creates gangsta rap.

¹⁶⁰ Lefebvre, *Production of Space* 27-30.

The album's second track, "Fuck Tha Police," plays like a courtroom fantasy, indulging in equal parts social commentary and mob justice. MC Ren begins the song's narrative with, "right about now, N.W.A. is in full effect. Judge Dre is presiding in the case of N.W.A. versus the police department. The prosecuting attorneys are MC Ren, Ice Cube, and Eazy-E." N.W.A. present themselves as prosecuting attorneys, holding the crooked justice system on trial, using the courtroom metaphor against the hegemonic forces of law and order, and reversing the power dynamic between the powerless and the state. Ice Cube begins his testimony in language demonstrating that the site of formal justice has been inverted to match 'street knowledge': "Fuck tha police comin' straight from the underground/ A young nigga got it bad cause I'm brown."¹⁶¹ Although the language and sentiment may be shocking at first listen, Ice Cube is voicing the persecution of young, "brown" individuals by the Los Angeles police department. Consequently, "Fuck Tha Police" is an attempted replacement of the old order. Rewriting the meaning of Compton as representing powerlessness, crushing poverty and institutional neglect, this selectively abandoned space becomes the legitimizing agent for N.W.A.'s authority. As Ice Cube declares, "just cause I'm [Ice Cube] from the CPT [Compton]/ Punk Police are afraid of me," Compton is recast as a site of power, not enervation. However, replacing the traditional spaces of law and order within Compton, N.W.A.'s provocative and controversial track can also be read as ultimately reinforcing existing spatial relationships. Although N.W.A. re-imagine the social order to place the police on trail, this is an act that

¹⁶¹ *Straight Outta Compton*, 1989.

merely replaces one executor of power with another. Applying Lefebvre illustrates that placing the police on trail is a useless task merely replacing instead of reversing “the dominant tendency.”¹⁶² As I understand it, the dominant tendency is that which maintains late capitalism’s spatial relationships. Therefore, N.W.A.’s call for the replacement of the police is a sterile status quo reproducing the purposes of spatial organization.¹⁶³ The system meting out justice in postmodern urban space is maintained, and N.W.A. acts the violent “other” that must be contained and policed within the inner city.

Demonstrating continuity with the initial subversive impulses of hip-hop, fun and humor are also tools of *Straight Outta Compton*’s spatial intervention. *Straight Outta Compton* offers resistance in the form of fun as well as violence. What may seem surprising based on N.W.A.’s aggressive pose, is that much of the album is fun, and funny. As Ice-T said in Chang’s book, “if you don’t understand that hip-hop is funny, then you won’t get it.”¹⁶⁴ Rap and hip-hop developed as, and remain, entertainment. NWA concludes *Straight Outta Compton* with the shockingly quaint track, “Something 2 Dance 2.” As the title suggests, this song is intended for dancing (and the dance clubs) and created expressively to move the audience’s feet. Over a track of break beats and thumping bass, Arabian Prince, Dr. Dre, MC Ren, and Eazy-E exchange simple, nonsense rhymes focusing on the music and the song’s dance-ability. “Something 2 Dance 2”’s humor derives from

¹⁶² Lefebvre, *Production of Space* 26.

¹⁶³ Lefebvre provides a neat turn-of-phrase describing this: “production without creation—mere reproduction” (*Production of Space*, 116).

¹⁶⁴ Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* 283.

its association and replication of early hip-hop and rap forms, the party rap. Gone are the previous tropes of violence, misogyny, and nihilism. Instead, an explicit *pop* tune ends the album. The album intervenes in the elements' space by offering a track wrapped in the patina of hip-hop tradition. Mixing ultra-explicit content with a traditional style party rap allows the album to create "nostalgia for the present." Not only does the rap album attempt to permanently locate hip-hop in a local understanding of space, but also its representation of space functions as historicity, defining the album's present (and presence) as its own history.¹⁶⁵ It is this affecting of historicity that manages the spatial tensions between local representation and late capital commodification within the space of the rap album.

Finally, the album's spatial intervention is revealed as a carefully considered commodity. The album track, "Something Like That," explicitly articulates *Straight Outta Compton's* presence as mass commodity, acknowledging and discussing life in show business. Interestingly, the song works against and within the aggressive, gangster trope of the album's more notorious tracks. By investigating this third type of song, rap as a self-conscious performance, N.W.A. argues that the album's space allows aggrieved populations an economically empowered opportunity to creatively represent themselves. "Something Like That" plays like a lecture on how to create the perfect rap song, representing not only an

¹⁶⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism* 284. Additionally, Jameson writes that "it can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective" (*Postmodernism*, 284). As a new form of rap commodity, N.W.A.'s album authenticates itself through party rap historicity.

African American business model, but also a representation of a hip-hop community. Dr. Dre enumerates the four important elements needed “to create something funky, that’s original.” According to Dr. Dre, the music will take care of itself if the lyrics focus on any, or all of these four themes: (1) “talk about the place to be”; (2) “who you are”; (3) “what you got”; (4) “or a sucka MC.”¹⁶⁶ With this list, Dr. Dre explains rap entails little more than plugging the right code in the correct sequence or following an architectural blueprint in which hip-hop space stands out against late capitalism’s uneven structuring of urban space. MC Ren discusses critics and people he perceives as jealous of N.W.A.: “punks make us a target and knew that we hit it/ But that was part of show business.”¹⁶⁷ Representing the album’s space as an authentic African American commodity, allowing its content to act as an objective space, free from hegemonic control. However, like the double illusion masking late capital’s hand in constructing the album’s space, and the continuity of space maintained by its replacement, the “built-up” space of the rap album does not actually stand apart from the space of late capitalism, but does so “in appearance only.”¹⁶⁸

Straight Outta Compton presents an aggressive, violent intervention in hip-hop space through tracks like “Fuck Tha Police,” and “Straight Outta Compton.” Additionally, the album attempts to locate itself in hip-hop history through nostalgic party raps, attempting to locate the space of the rap album outside late capitalism’s control; as such it offers a classic variety—something marketed to a

¹⁶⁶ *Straight Outta Compton*, 1989.

¹⁶⁷ *Straight Outta Compton*, 1989.

¹⁶⁸ Lefebvre, *Production of Space* 338.

wide audience. The spatial intervention of the rap album attempts a commodified critique of the inequality of the lived experiences of aggrieved inner city populations. As such the market logic of ‘streetwise’ authenticity leads to “increasingly excessive and outrageous depictions of the street,” turning the self-styled “prophets of rage,” into “profits of rage.”¹⁶⁹ *Straight Outta Compton* represents the rap album as a commodity that defines hip-hop’s space. The space of the hip-hop album enters the space of the inner city by attempting to render visions of the inner city, and its emergent cultural expressions, as reinforcing and recapitulating an ‘authentic’ conception of African American cultural expression based on homogenizing tendencies of abstract space.¹⁷⁰ The rap album does not undercut or nullify the elements’ representational space, rather it attempts to contain, obscure, and highlight hip-hop’s inextricable relationship with late capitalism’s spatial productions.

¹⁶⁹ Ted Swedenburg, “Homies in the ‘Hood: Rap’s Commodification of Insurbordination” in Forman and Neal’s *That’s The Joint!*, 586. Swedenburg makes several interesting insights into rap and hip-hop’s relationship with the mass consumer marketplace. Specifically he argues that rap rejects oppositions of artificial and authentic, allowing for a tactical, successful marketing of a hostile attitude where rappers “retain control of the message and keep it undiluted.” However, Swedenburg’s insights are built on two unstable pillars that are readily identifiable if investigative focus is switched to space. First, Swedenburg argues for rap’s autonomy within the marketplace. A spatial analysis demonstrates that the appearance of autonomy bolsters and produces the space of late capitalism. Secondly, (and this dates the piece) what happens if the market disappears or changes? Swedenburg argues that rap maintains its authenticity, even in commodified form, because it brings to light the music industry’s appropriation of black culture. Without the centralized control of the music industry, or under a very different business model such as *iTunes*, does rap remain authentic?

¹⁷⁰ Lefebvre, *Production of Space* 287. He writes that the goal of abstract space is homogeneity, not that abstract space is homogeneous. As such, abstracting space attempts to flatten and remove social complexity from produced space.

Coda

A cursory web search of posthumous rap albums by Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. produces a list of no less than 7 albums of re-mixes, unreleased recordings, and imagined duets, echoing Jameson's discussion of the function of nostalgia in the cultural logic of late capitalism's postmodern commodities.¹⁷¹ The continued release of these albums not only reflects an attempt at easy profits by a weakening music industry, but also the continued concretization of rap and hip-hop as an authentic, and commonplace, cultural expression of African Americans. Although the diminished profits recorded by the music industry could suggest a change in marketing strategy for rap music, the recent arrest and industry rehabilitation of high-profile mixtape producer DJ Drama illustrated that rap and hip-hop would continue to be marketed and conceived as a semi-legal activity performed by inner city African Americans.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Chapter nine, "Nostalgia For the Present," in *Postmodernism* offers Jameson's in-depth consideration of nostalgia's function in postmodern late capitalism.

A quick search on either Amazon.com or Allmusic.com lists both Tupac and Biggie's posthumous releases.

¹⁷² Kelefa Sanneh and Brenda Goodman, "With Arrest of DJ Drama, the Law Takes Aim at Mixtapes," *The New York Times*, January 18, 2007, Arts Section, nytimes.com, accessed on March 3, 2008. DJ Drama was arrested for racketeering charges in January 2007 because of his unlicensed mixtape series, Gangsta Grills. However he was able to release a new Gangsta Grillz album in December 2007 through an arrangement with Atlantic, and the album landed at No. 26 on the billboard charts (Jeff Leeds, "Cautiously, Big Labels Confront the Mixtape," *The New York Times*, December 15, 2007, Arts Section, nytimes.com, accessed on

My analysis of the rap album's intervention in space, and hip-hop's cultural emergence from the urban decay of New York City created by late capitalism demonstrate that rap and hip-hop did not emerge as only a rebel cultural production fighting against the local decay of postmodern, urban life. Instead, rap and hip-hop's cultural expressions are inscribed in the spaces of late capitalism. Created and confined by the spatial logics of race, space, and place that serve as the structuring elements of hip-hop, rap is not intended to escape consumer markets, it wants to saturate them. Conjuring space and the potential to represent and critique the lived-in places home to hip-hop's emergence are registered every time a rhyme is rapped, a beat dropped, a dancer pops and locks, or some kid briefly immortalizes himself through aerosol paint. However, examining productions of space in relation to cultural expression provides the appropriate critical vantage point to understand not only hip-hop and rap's eruption, but also the instances where late capitalism inflects and articulates the spaces where people live. Resisting a homogenized formulation of the culture, history, economics, and meaning of rap and hip-hop, the investigation into rap and hip-hop's emergence from the spatial structures of late capitalism demonstrates that not only has the decay of inner cities been a necessary and planned aspect of late capitalism, but also that representations and discourses concerning hip-hop is deeply implicated in

March 3, 2008). The arrest and subsequent 'official' album release echoes a long history of promoting the 'illegality' of the hip-hop artist to boost sales and tours. For example, the promotional literature accompanying an album release by DJ Quick highlighted his 'authenticity' through a recitation of his police jacket. Similarly, after Slick Rick was arrested for attempted murder, it was used to promote his subsequent tour (Negus, *That's The Joint!* 530) .

the cultural, commodified operation of these functions. Exposing the spatial emergence and interventions of hip-hop and rap reveals another site to interrogate the corrosive confluence of government and late capitalism as they work together elaborating the nation-state.