“GROWIN’ UP IN THE ‘HOOD SAME AS ME”: BLACK AND BROWN HIP HOP SUBJECTIVITIES AT AN H-TOWN RECORD STORE

by Jimmy Patiño

In his study Hip hop in Houston, historian Maco L. Faniel identifies Soundwaves Record Store as the first business to meet “Houstonian hip hop aficionado demands” in the late 1980s. African-American and Latina/o men and women participated in this emerging culture in Houston, and the origins of Soundwaves’ role in local hip hop reflected this trend as Faniel recalls the crucial role of Carlos Garza, a.k.a. DJ Styles. Migrating from Mexico as a youngster, DJ Styles was a crucial part of creating Soundwaves as a space in which local communities could participate in local and translocal hip hop culture. DJs “flocked” to Soundwaves and one DJ, a student at the historically Black university at nearby Prairie View A&M, Chris Martin a.k.a. DJ Premier soon began working closely with Styles at Soundwaves. Styles and Premier tied Soundwaves with major hip hop labels such as Tommy Boy, Def Jam, Tuff City Records, companies based at hip hop’s birthplace in New York City. Soundwaves soon became a place where local DJs and hip hop fans came to “satiate their taste for hip hop music” and immerse themselves in the culture. In fact, Soundwaves was not only the place to buy your records, but to meet and get autographs from national artists such as Big Daddy Kane and Naughty by Nature, and enjoy short sets of DJing and rap music. DJ Premier was soon hired by rap legend Guru to develop in the cutting edge scene in New York City. Styles and Premier played a key role in making Soundwaves a meeting space that both brought hip hop to Houston from major centers like New York, but also hone local community formations of artists and consumers in local neighborhoods throughout Houston. Indeed, soon after Soundwaves stores opened up several more locations, including one at Crosstimbers off of the Interstate-45 freeway, in the middle of the mostly Mexican-American Northside.

This essay reflects on Soundwaves as part of the local hip hop scene in Houston in the early 2000s. It offers the opportunity to explore how particularly Mexican- and African-American identities in an urban majority Black and Brown working-class context were shaped in relation to hip hop discourse. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the Northside/Northline superneighborhood area where the Crosstimbers
Soundwaves location was in was eighty-three percent “Hispanic,” eight percent African-American, and two percent white. The broader population of the city of Houston was twenty percent African-American, forty-four percent “Hispanic,” and five percent Asian highlighting the Bayou City as a premier majority people of color city. Therefore, the Crosstimbers Soundwaves site provided an opportunity for the analysis of how hip hop manifested itself at the street level among particularly Latina/o and African-American community members.

The essay explores ethnography and interviews with Soundwaves consumers to describe the local manifestation of hip hop culture in the early 2000s and explore consumer thoughts about the meanings drawn from rap music and hip hop culture. It can be argued that hip hop’s impact on society may be best represented in this part of its constituency: those who purchased CDs and listened to them in their cars on the way to work, while cruising with friends on the weekend, or on their front porches with a couple of beers—what historian Gaye Theresa Johnson refers to as “sonic spaces as sites of mutual recognition.”

Adding the physical site of businesses like Soundwaves reflects Johnson’s broader contention that, “marginalized communities have created new collectives based not just upon eviction and exclusion from physical places, but also on new and imaginative uses of technology, creativity, and spaces,” particularly among Black and Brown youth.

Indeed, these creative collectives are of seminal significance at the turn of the century when community members on the Northside were engaged. The 1990s and early 2000s witnessed the rise of mass incarceration, militarization of policing forces, and mass deportations that deeply affected communities of color in the inner-city. Therefore, an understanding of the cultural repertoire accessible to everyday Black and Brown community members in working poor neighborhoods like Houston’s Northside give us insight into their navigation through the structural realities they find themselves in.

In this regard, how does Soundwaves blend the national and localized representations of hip hop culture? In what ways did the store instill dominant cultural practices through hip hop and how does it present the ways hip hop culture also created subjectivities critical to hegemonic practices such as police brutality, inner city poverty and struggles with the illicit drug industry? Why do Latina/o and African-American youth consume rap music and hip hop culture and how does their agency reveal hip hop as a contested site? What, as consumers of hip hop, do they think about the status of the culture, its racial/ethnic dynamics, and its relation to the larger society? Finally, does their consumption of hip hop reflect personal, local, and community experiences and outlooks? This essay seeks to address these questions by first discussing and analyzing ethnography and observation taken from 2003 to 2004 of the images evoked from the merchandise to characterize local hip hop culture and contextualize the larger consumer cultural context individuals engaged in. The essay will then turn to discussions about interviews conducted at Soundwaves Record Store—ten Latinas/os and nine African-Americans—that are used to characterize how Black and Brown hip hop consumers shape their identities as rap music enthusiasts, how these identities are formed in relation to one another’s communities, and what they tell us about the larger social world in the context of postindustrial Houston and similar diverse and urban contexts. While Black and Brown hip hop consumers hold, at times, fragmented outlooks in terms of race and along lines and perceptions about gender, they often articulated a shared experience with living in “the ‘hood,” struggles with police and incarceration, and with criminalized violence, reflecting cross-racial class subjectivities rooted and reflected in their identification with a simultaneously (inter)national and localized hip hop culture. These subjectivities in the early 21st century in Houston were centered in part at places like Soundwaves, a cultural space, site of dissemination and a place of gathering. The example of Soundwaves reveals the important social role of record stores at a...
moment just before the tremendous shift in music consumption through the internet.

**Soundwaves in the Northside**

A block east from the Interstate forty-five freeway, the Crosstimbers Soundwaves sat in a shopping center next to a car radio store and installation, a dentist office, Buffalo wings spot, washateria, and a Taco Bell. Across the street was a huge parking lot that surrounded Northline Mall. I remember getting my haircut during these times in the early 2000s in a shop run by all Mexican immigrant women that serviced area Latina/o youth, especially young men, looking to get a “fade” haircut popular among Houston youth. I got one of my first pair of Air Jordan shoes there—surely a part of hip hop style at the time—and was offered to buy self-recorded rap albums by aspiring Black and Brown artists on more than one occasion while walking around the mall and in its parking lot. At the edges of the parking lot were banks, restaurants, and fast food chains. This part of town was and continues to be a commercial center of the Northside adjacent to residential neighborhoods and apartment complexes.

The employees and clientele at Soundwaves were African American and Latina/o, mostly Mexican-origin, like the surrounding neighborhoods. At times customers are predominantly African-American, at other times majority Mexican/Latina/o and on an average approximately half and half. Most of the customers were youth ranging from their teens to late 20s and were mostly men dressed in a similar manner wearing baggy pants, sports regalia, and baseball caps. These customers, especially young men, often came in as a group but also visited the store on their own. Young women were less visible and usually came in a small group with other females or with male partners. Rap music consumers spend a lot of time at Soundwaves during their visits. They slowly browsed the rap music and other sections scanning the diversity of artists or listened to the abundance of CDs at the listening stations that Soundwaves provided. Most of the CDs Soundwaves allows customers to sample are rap artists, many local but also national artists, displaying the stores’ chief market target, youth of color that listen to rap.

Cultural scholar and critic Tricia Rose describes hip hop as a cultural form that attempts to negotiate marginalization and urban deterioration, the experiences of working-class communities of color as a result of deindustrialization. She says, “Life on the margins of postindustrial urban America is inscribed in hip hop style, lyrics and thematics.” Further, its entrance into existing networks of transnational capitalism made it a global phenomenon itself that manifested within diverse local environments as it moved from the South Bronx, to inner cities across the U.S., and all over the world. Its global movement allows distressed urban communities from all over the nation, even the globe, to ally under a “family of resemblance” due to their similar dislocating conditions. Historian George Lipsitz outlines the demise of the inner city due to the globalized mode of production and the institutional racism practiced in suburbanization, housing, lending, and taxing policies in the second half of the twentieth century. Investment in suburban projects left the inner city depopulated and underfunded. Freeway construction facilitated suburbanites while dividing and displacing city residents. Urban renewal led to loss of homes and dislocation. Depopulation and the loss of a large tax-base led to the vulnerability of city neighborhoods and therefore the placement of prisons and garbage dumps. Global capitalism led to the transfer of high-tech jobs to the suburbs and manufacturing jobs out of the city and to the Global South.

Houston exhibited many of these traits, particularly in the late twentieth century following the oil bust of the mid-1980s. Highways cut through African-American and Mexican-American neighborhoods in
the 1950s and 60s, instigating social dislocation. Working-class communities of color share an uneven development of city services. The majority of Houston solid waste sites, landfills, and garbage incinerators are located in African-American or Latino neighborhoods. Houston’s largest barrio, The East End, is located in the industrial part of town close to the Port of Houston, has an abundant number of railroad crossings, and experiences more air pollutions than affluent communities.⁹

The adverse environment is accentuated by the decrease in jobs that global capitalism shipped to countries where corporations could access cheaper labor, disproportionately effecting residents of color. Unemployment for Black and Latina/o Houstonians was at eight percent in 2000 (Mindiola et al, 2002), more than three percentage points higher than the 2000 city average, just under five percent.¹⁰ Coupled with the influx of drugs into communities of color, high unemployment in inner-city neighborhoods led to deterioration, violence, and social dislocation. This is reflected in the lyrics and language of Houston rap artists. Early Houston rap group, the Geto Boys’ album is titled “Uncut Dope,” a local label is named Dope House Records, and African-American Houston singer Big Moe has a song named “Sippin’ Codeine,” a downer drug that is drank. Chicano rapper, VG Skillz’ hook in his song “Above Water” says “Sometimes the rap game reminds me of the crack game,” and the Geto Boys begin “Trigga Happy Nigga” by sharing the ingredients for “Ghetto dope processed in Fifth Ward Texas” as metaphors for the songs they mix and sell.¹¹ Instead of suggesting that these artists encourage or condone drug use, these lyrics reflect the social conditions of the Houston streets where the illicit drug industry—and equally violent war on drugs policies—have devastated its communities.

In this context by the beginning of the twenty-first century, Houston had become a central site in which new forms of hip hop culture emerged, particularly as part of the rise of “Dirty South” or Southern rap music. As one journalist wrote of Houston’s sound in the early 2000s, “The Houston Sound is, above all, slow, a perpetually decelerating music that is equally good at conveying menace, calm, and grief... Houston’s MCs rap charmingly about their possessions but are comfortable singing about death, racist cops and life in prison.”¹² Soundwaves locations across the city became known as a place for hip hop fans to find local talent. The Soundwaves at Crosstimbers reflected this with dozens of local artists’ CDs available, including DJ Screw, the Geto Boys, and Trinity Garden Cartel. Mexican rappers are also featured including Aggravated, The Most Hated, and South Park Mexican. Yet Soundwaves is also a site of convergence between the local and national rap scene, as rappers topping the charts at the time were surely available as well, including albums from Ludacris, Missy Elliott and 50 Cent. A convergence of Black and Brown is also evident at Soundwaves as both a broader practice of hip hop and reflective of the local context. As Ethnic Studies scholar John Márquez explains, “Houston-area Latinos/as boast about their ties to blackness and their pride in Southern roots.”¹³

Like the market target of Soundwaves, the surrounding neighborhood is a working-class mixture of African Americans and mostly Mexican-origin Latinas/os. The homes are nice but a little rough on the edges, often in need of paint touch ups or a cleaning of mildew. The shopping center and street intersections are busy. Groups of young Brown and Black men walk from Soundwaves to the mall, several men, women and children crowd the dentist office next door as they wait, and an older African-American man, probably in his fifties attempts to sell me a brand new portable CD player. I reply, “No thanks, man, I don’t have no cash right now.” He replies, “God bless you” as he packs the CD player back into his jacket and goes on his way.

Quite often hip hop is analyzed through the thoughts, opinions, or lyrics of its chief benefactors: artists, producers, managers, and radio stations. Further by the early 2000s it was highly noted that white suburban
youth had become rap music’s primary consumers. Therefore, the demographic of the neighborhoods that surround Soundwaves at Crosstimbers allowed an exploration into the important perspectives of Black and Brown rap music consumers and their relations to hip hop culture. Therefore, a primary reason Soundwaves was chosen as a center for the local hip hop scene was its marketing priority towards attracting hip hop enthusiasts. Also, being a Soundwaves customer myself, I knew that this store has particularly sold rap music by local artists and this would allow the research to reflect local ties and context.

Documenting observations of the store attests to the tastes of its constituency of mostly rap music listeners that consume a mix of local talent and rappers of (inter)national appeal. Before entering the establishment, one could see this in the posters that advertised albums on the windows. Displays of New York Haitian rapper/singer Wyclef Jean, the late Tupac’s soundtrack to a recent movie about his life “Resurrection,” Chicago’s Twista, Atlanta-based Outkast, and posters of other successful artists such as Missy Elliot and R. Kelley reflected leading popular music trends throughout the nation at the time. Also displayed is rapper Z-Ro from the local rap label Rap-A-Lot Records. The posters reveal the store’s trend of selling mostly nationally successful rap artists, but also serving a niche at supplying access to popular local rappers.

When entering the store to the right was the “New Release” front display featuring mostly national artist mixed with a smaller amount of local artists. Nationally popular rap artists such as New York’s Jay-Z and Chicago-based Twista had achieved recent success and were displayed in this front rack. Also selling well at the national level was Atlanta rapper Ludacris’ album “Chicken and Beer” also featured on the display. Ludacris’ album, while on the national charts, is also part of the regional “Dirty South” sound that Houston-based rap is often associated with and had begun to hit the mainstream in the early 2000s. On the adjacent display racks are Los Angeles-based Ice Cube’s group The Westside Connection, the soundtrack to the Barbershop 2 movie also starring Ice Cube and (inter)national R&B successes such as Alicia Keyes, R. Kelly, and American Idol winner Ruben Studdard.

The rest of the “New Release” lineup showed locally affiliated talent including Big Pokey and Juvenile, both Houston-based, and Mike Jones’ Swishahouse compilation, which contains a variety of tracks that are chopped and screwed. Chopped and screwed music was a signature DJing technique created by Houston’s DJ Screw in the early 1990s. It featured slowing the tempo down to around seventy quarter-note beats per minute while rhythmically skipping beat and stop timing beats to “chop” the music. In an adjacent rack, locally based groups are also represented, including more of Michael Watt’s Swishahouse compilations and two DJ Screw albums: “June 27” and “A Decade of Hits 1993-2003.” Screw’s albums are still prevalent and as the name of the albums show, have become immortalized and commemorated since his death, which is reflected in the album’s name, 27 June 2003. Other local acts present in the “Best Seller” racks are Color Changin’ Click, Slim Thug, and the recently successful Mexican rapper Chingo Bling, all local artists.

The “New Release” and “Best Seller” racks show the mix of national and local artists sold at Soundwaves. These racks are significant indicators of what artists and albums were being pushed to sell to consumers. The artist or label, a Soundwaves employee reveals, pays a fee to be on these coveted front racks as opposed to being relegated to the regular ones that are categorized by genre. Therefore, the particular relationship Soundwaves created with local artists is evident because many of these local artists could not be found at record store chains in the mall or larger stores such as Best Buy or Wal-Mart. Even while these local artists are usually not featured in larger commercials outfits, they also must have sizable enough marketing deals to have expendable funds to be on the privileged front racks. Not just any hip hop talent off the street can be there, explains the Soundwaves employee, an artist has to be well connected with the rap music industry.
and usually represented by record label executives to negotiate a slot.

This particular set-up is unique to the Soundwaves at Crosstimbers. Another larger Soundwaves store does not hold front racks and “Best Seller” racks that are dominated by rap artists, since it is located in the West side Montrose area where it serves a different, wider constituency that is characterized as more white and of more privileged socio-economic status. Therefore, the Soundwaves on Crosstimbers in the Northside was constructed in a way that was influenced by the aesthetic outlook of the working-class African-American and Latina/o community that surrounded it. Further analysis of its “artifacts” can assist in characterizing the local cultural mirage.

The Contested Site of Hip Hop Consumer Culture

By artifact, the research in this essay refers to the analytical application to merchandise displayed and sold at Soundwaves, namely movies and CDs, and their content, such as lyrics, images, and discourse, as a method to characterize the local culture. The images, symbols and discourses packed within popular cultural production are not static and straight-forward, but sites of contestation between the dominant and marginalized sectors of society. These cultural artifacts and significations can be “decoded” to reveal how hip hop community members make sense of and engage in hegemony—the contested meanings and outlooks layered within music, film and images. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall asserts, “The level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where already coded signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional more active ideological dimensions.”

Soundwaves offers a plethora of images and representations through posters, CD covers, and movie covers that exhibit the mass-mediated and contested nature of society. Knowledge of the content of these CDs and movies reveals further how popular culture resonates with the local community in a multiplicity of ways.

An index of the movies sold at Soundwaves shows that this community consumes to a large degree themes about the African-American experience, including Black comedy (Def Comedy Jam with Martin Lawrence, Woo with Jada Pinkett, and Barbershop with Ice Cube), ‘hood stories about street life in the inner city (Boys in the ‘Hood, Menace II Society), African-American romantic relationships (Love Jones, Poetic Justice), and the Blaxploitation era anti-hero movies (Sweet Sweetbacks Badassss Song, Slaughter with Jim Brown). Mexican-American themed movies and films were also, to a lesser extent, sold. These included Blood in Blood Out a movie about barrio life, Cheech and Chong, Lowrider Magazine Tour Documentaries, Latin Kings of Comedy, and videos of Tejano/Norteño acts such as Selena, Control, and Limite. Other Latinas/os are depicted in video compilations such as Puerto Rican singer Jose Feliciano and the Cuban queen of salsa, Celia Cruz. Early Hip hop themed films that were especially about breakdancing have large Puerto Rican contingencies.

Other movie themes were gangster movies such as Good Fellas and Scarface. Movies depicting street gang life were also prevalent including Colors, 187, and The Warriors. Kung Fu movies including Jet Li films and the older Shaolin, Kung Fu 5: Flyers of Death, and Bruce Lee flicks were on the shelf. Historical icons are also depicted in the video lineup through historical documentaries such as The Rosa Parks Story and Our Friend Martin. Movies that depict the historical black experience included Sounder, The Color Purple, and Amistad. Finally there were movies that explored race related issues such as Higher Learning about racial tensions and white supremacists on a diverse college campus and several “Spike Lee Joints,” films by the leading African-American filmmaker.
This video lineup differed from your mainstream video store. There you would not have found the abundance of films that explore the exploits and experiences of urban communities of color, youth in gangs or in the dope game, films about black heroes who strike back at brutalizing police, and comedy lineups that joke about racism, marijuana smoking, and Black relationships so exclusively. The hip hop community regards many of these movies as classics since they reflect late twentieth century street life and purvey urban hip hop cultural images. Analyzed as cultural artifacts these videos help to characterize hip hop culture. The various types of themes and images they contain reflect cultural critic Nelson Georges’ description of hip hop culture as a postmodern art form. He says, “It’s a postmodern art in that it shamelessly raids older forms of pop culture—kung fu movies, chitlin’ circuit comedy, ‘70s funk, and other equally disparate sources—and reshapes the material to fit the personality of an individual artist and the taste of the times.”

I suggest that the movies, CDs, marketing posters and music played in the store also reflected the hip hop culture that the adjacent Northside residents took home with them to listen, watch, and enjoy. As said, about half of Soundwaves’ customers were Latina/o, mostly Mexican American, and half were African American. The movies, themes, and artists featured in the merchandise was primarily African American. Therefore, in this context Latina/o hip hop consumers purchased products that were primarily starring and concerning the African-American community. An African-American dominance within the cultural productions was evident in this scene, as reflected in the marketing posters on the walls that were nearly all African-American artists: Kayne West, Lil’ Keke, and Tupac. Exceptions are Vico C, an early Spanish-language Puerto Rican rapper, Latin pop artist Paulina, and rock group Vallejo. This is interesting in that half of the customers are Latina/o exhibiting that the main commercial thrust of hip hop and rap music featured primarily African-American artists and the Black experiences in the U.S.

Analyzing the video themes and images represented at Soundwaves, however, Latinas/os can also locate their “place” in hip hop culture. As mentioned, movies such as Blood in Blood Out are about three Chicano men from East Los Angeles who grow up in La Vida Loca, the gang life. Also, the Lowrider Magazine Tour documentaries reveal Chicano culture’s major contribution to hip hop culture and Soundwaves’ reflection of its local Chicano hip hop customer-base. Lowrider culture is a major part of West Coast, particularly Los Angeles, gangsta rap culture because of the large and historic Mexican-American populations there. It has also become a major part of Dirty South hip hop culture, which parallels the content within West Coast gangsta rap.

Also many of the movies at Soundwaves with African-American themes or leading actors have Chicana/o characters and portrayals in them, suggesting the close proximately and shared culture and conditions Black and Brown communities have in the urban context. For instance, the movie Menace II Society is about young African-American men growing up in the streets of South Central Los Angeles hustling, selling drugs, and dodging bullets from adversaries and police billy clubs. One of the lines in the movie describing the primary character, Cain’s, best friend, O-Dog as “America’s nightmare: young, black, and didn’t give a fuck,” describes the inner city violence and struggles themed in the movie. Within the film, Cain and O-Dog get picked up by the police and beat in the back seat. After cracking a couple of their ribs the police drop them off not at home, but in another neighborhood where they are likely to get beaten some more, as Cain narrates, “…where the eses stay.” “Eses” are how many African-Americans sometimes refer to their Chicano neighbors who use the Chicana/o Spanish term “ese” to refer to someone else like “dude” or “homie.” The Chicano men depicted in the film are cholos—rough looking street types with khaki pants, bald or greased hair, and wife-beater shirts working on a car. Cain exclaims his good-fortune
Menace to Society represents a string of films that emerged in the early 1990s, many of them produced and/or written by Black and Chicano filmmakers (John Singleton, Albert and Allen Hughes, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Edward James Olmos), that emphasized an exploration of the violence, injustice and struggles within inner city communities of color, particularly focusing on African-American and Chicano young men. These films from roughly 1991 through 1993 included classics such as Boyz n the Hood (1991), New Jack City (1991), American Me (1992), and Blood in Blood Out (1993) among several others. These “hood” films became ingrained in hip hop culture as classic depictions of the struggle of inner city Black and Brown folks, and “included a general orientation toward coming-of-age stories, the extensive use of hip hop music, and the inclusion of urban landscape as part of their storytelling fabric.” Conversely, rap artist sampled parts of theses films’ dialog extensively in their music. This string of films asserted a range of political critiques as well. Historian Daniel Widener asserts, “Politically these films functioned as a cultural critique in which the totality of the social environment, as opposed to more narrowly defined contest with a putatively white power structure, shape the characters’ lives.” It is no coincidence, therefore, that Soundwaves merchandise featured movies like Menace to Society, Boys n the Hood and Blood in Blood Out. Boys n the Hood follows young African-American men through the violent streets of South Central Los Angeles. Similarly, Blood in Blood Out tells the stories of three Chicano cousins in East Los Angeles on differing trajectories in their gang-ridden communities, exploring issues of law enforcement, drug addiction, and prison organizations. Other movies on the racks included One Eight Seven starring Samuel L. Jackson and Colors which both depict Black and Latina/o characters in the rough inner-city environment. Samuel L. Jackson plays a teacher at an inner-city high school that gets sick of being bullied by his mostly-Chicana/o and African-American gang member students and takes matters into his own hands. Colors is about the exploits of two white cops who battle gangland Los Angeles. Again, most of the gang members are Chicana/o and African-American.

Examining Soundwaves’s merchandise as cultural artifacts characterizes local hip hop culture and exhibited how popular culture is packaged and consumed into this Houston inner-city neighborhood. Hip hop culture at Soundwaves reflected its African-American customer-base in the artists and themes that come together in CDs and films sold there. Latina/o customers identify with many of these inner city themes since they live in the same neighborhoods and experience the exploits of urban America, particularly in Houston’s Northside. Chicana/o-themed popular culture was sold at Soundwaves also, reflecting its Latina/o hip hop generation customers. Further, Latinas/os were often included and depicted in rap lyrics and hip hop culture classic movies as part of the urban environment. These diverse but thematic elements reflected the mirage of hip hop culture, its (inter)national appeal, its social and political critique and, simultaneously, its localized context.

Northside Hip hop Consumer Identities

Using store merchandise and marketing as cultural artifacts paints a picture of the cultural context of mostly African-American but also Latina/o themes in the inner city in which its consumers participate. Through conversation and interview of Soundwaves customers, the effects of a combination of global and local popular culture on the everyday lives of its consumers could be examined. The hip hop subjectivities encountered at Soundwaves were consumer-based meaning the customers chief experience with hip hop
culture is buying rap CDs, listening to rap music on the radio, and watching rap videos. The utility of the hip hop commodities that Latinas/os and others consumed surfaced the themes that in many cases the artifacts engaged—issues issues of urban struggles and class, race, and gender. Far from passive, consuming hip hop was utilized in a variety of way concerning the consumers’ personal lives and their local context.

For instance, Latina/o consumer outlooks deemphasized race and ethnicity as to why they consumed rap music. Since these consumers were purchasing cultural products that featured mostly African-American artists, it is logical that they deemphasize an exclusively racial experience. Some of the respondents were aware that Latinas/os were vastly outnumbered in commercial rap. Mark (pseudonym), a twenty-seven-year-old Mexican-American said in regard to how Latinas/os have influenced hip hop, “Not much man (Latina/o influence), they still trying to get up there and represent for down here in the South, like South Park Mexican when he was here. We’re not big enough yet.” Answering the question, “Do you think being Mexican has anything to do with listening to hip hop?” Pedro (pseudonym) a 21-year-old Chicano says, “S**t no. Like I said I started listening to NWA and that was Afro-American you know.” Other Chicano respondents mentioned successful artists with albums, such as East Los Angeles rapper Frost and locals South Park Mexican, Lucky Luciano and other artist from the Latin Rap Label Dope House Records to exhibit Latina/o participation.

Aware of the lack of successful Latina/o artists, Latina/o consumers explained why they consumed hip hop featuring mostly Black artists by emphasizing the multiethnic consumer-base of rap music. For instance, Jacob (pseudonym) an early twenties Mexican-American male responded when asked if being Mexican had anything to do with listening to rap music, “Nah, I don’t really think so. It’s up to your preference, what you prefer, cause all kinds of different races they listen to pretty much everything.” Similarly, Javier says that ethnic groups get along good in hip hop because “It’s more about the words, it’s not really about color.” Latina/o respondents did not only deemphasize race issues in rap music, but point to its multiethnic constituency as a positive aspect of hip hop culture. Jacob says, “That’s what’s good about, you can mix different cultures.”

Latina/o hip hop consumers emphasized racialized class identities, however, to connect with hip hop and the Black artists they listen to. Pedro mentioned listening to NWA and several Latina/o respondents’ identified listening to the local Geto Boys as early experiences with rap music. These African-American groups were of the “gangsta” rap variety, what some have called reality rap that espouses the dreary and terrorizing conditions of inner city neighborhoods. These respondents expressed a certain resonance with the experiences put forth in rap lyrics. Unlike other music genres, they say, rap music speaks to “what’s going on,” life in the “ghetto” or the “hood,” and “what’s going on in the world.” Rap music listeners saw hip hop culture as an information source through which conditions of the inner city were reported and reflected upon.

The listeners often personally experienced these conditions. As Jacob states, “Out of all the music that’s out there I think it speaks to me more. I like rock ‘n’ roll and stuff but hip hop I can see eye-to-eye with a lot of the s**t that they’re saying.” Some conditions reported by the interviewees that resonate in rap music include doing jail time, difficulties dealing with police and law enforcement, growing up in a single mother family, and losing a homie to gang violence. Pedro mentioned, “I’ve already been to institutions, you know, those laws (police) mess with your mind.” Javier says rappers talk about, “You know, growing up with no father, growing up in the ‘hood, same as me.” In this regard, rap music reflects many of the social conditions that exist in the inner city and working-class Latinas/os buy and listen to it based on their experiences in such conditions. Tony, a twenty-five--year-old African American from the adjacent
neighborhood detailed the personal experiences ‘hood residents attached to and connected with in rap music:

I had a couple of homeboys that I had grown up with since elementary school that got killed, you know, in drive-by shootings. And it’s really real, you know, having really experienced that, you really can relate to it…When somebody comes out with a rap song where they’re talking about their homeboy they done grew up with and they say they were best of friends and stuff like that.

Conversing with several African-American listeners also revealed a different mentality toward hip hop themes. They often referred to rap as an expression of the Black community. For instance, Terrance an African-American student informed me “You are going to have to look into Black history, all the way back to slavery to understand the race issues in rap music.”

Latina/o respondents tended to acknowledge the role of African-American culture in hip hop in their understanding that Latinas/os had not been as predominated among artists, but also asserted that their racialized class experiences in the inner city crossed these racial lines to include Brown hip hop consumers.

A quote from Mexican-American Jacob revealed this outlook. He said, “You don’t have to be black to grow up ghetto. I mean whatever color you are you still grew up ghetto or with no dad or whatever.” This respondent explained his resonance with rap music in his racialized class experience, growing up in the ghetto, poor, in a single-parent home. These listeners expressed an interest in engaging social issues especially in regards to “the ‘hood.” Most Latina/o respondents defined their participation with hip hop culture in this way.

Also important to the construction of a Latina/o consumer hip hop identity was their defense of hip hop in response to charges that it often is degrading to women. Like experiences with urban social conditions, African-American respondents shared these perceptions with Latinas/os.

This different outlook in regards to portrayals of women in rap were, however divided by gender. While men and women generally stated that while some artists portray women in a negative light that hip hop as

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Pura Mexicana y Que,
I say;
I proclaim,
With a devilish grin on my
olive
skinned
face.

I'm not ashamed.
Not ashamed anymore,
although
outside of me,
my culture is being displaced
not here I say,
Pura Mexicana, Y Que?

Pura Chicana Y Que, I say;
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Two lenguajes I
proudly display.

Dos colores, two patrias,
my mother’s homeland
and mine
interlaced.

I'm an ancient flower in a post-modern
vase
I'm a pop-culture body with a Mayan
face
I'm a warrior dressed in leather and
lace
I’m a jaguar, a jaguar
and my lips crave the taste of my peoples old
ways.
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"GROWIN’ UP IN THE ‘HOOD SAME AS ME"
a whole is no more sexist than anything else, women were more likely to discuss the complexity of the issue and consider the negative effects of the portrayals.

For instance, Javier says, “You know, the fellas can relate to some of the stuff that they say.” Other male respondents, Black and Brown alike give similar statements like, “I don’t want to say in general (women are degraded), but maybe. Not just in general though,” and “You have some groups that take it (lyrics portraying women) the wrong way, but on the whole I don’t think it does (degrade women).” Women respondents also defended hip hop. Vanessa an early twenties Chicana says “you shouldn’t really let that get to you,” and Tonya a twenty-eight-year-old African-American woman said, “as humans we tend to look at negative things, you know we talk bad about rappers because they’re derogatory towards women, you know the talk about drugs or whatever. But if you listen to a lot of it they do have positive messages in there you just got to catch it you know.”

These women, however, were more apt to discuss the issue in more depth and consider its complexity. Tonya also voiced her disdain for Houston rap because all they talk about is “their cars” and “their women” criticizing the categorizing women as status-building objects often featured in rap music. Vanessa also said, “I’ve listened to some songs and yeah it is (degrading). And some songs yeah I’ve gotten offended.” Also, only women mentioned the lack of female artists.

In contrast several men placed blame on women for these portrayals. Javier said, “…Sometimes it’s the girls fault too because of the way they act, the things they do. You know, they strip they do all that so. I think that’s why they talk about girls a lot.” Other respondents agree that the portrayals of women as money-hungry deviants willing to use sex for personal gain are accurate and deserved. Mark said, “Them women put themselves in that position,” referring to the entourage of bikini-clad women that often serve as the background for rap concerts and videos, “They shake they ass because they getting paid, that’s their fault.”

Finally, key to consumer hip hop identities is an expression of discontent and critique of popular hip hop culture and rap music.

Respondents know that rappers make vast amounts of money while talking about ghetto life experiences and they, therefore, should be responsible to these communities.

Respondents say that the money they make should be invested in poor communities for projects such as community centers and that rappers should be more present in the ‘hood. Jacob epitomizes this outlook,

There’s a lot of hip hop out, you know, the guys out there singing it and you can tell he’s just trying to make dollars, you know. Then there’s some guys, man, that you really listen to what they’re saying and they’re trying to get a message across. And I think the people that are trying to do hip hop like that who’s playing the role in the community.

Respondents also expressed disappointment in the personal rivalries often held in the limelight between rappers. Most expressed disappointment with the feud and murders of rappers Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. and the, at that time, the threats made by rappers 50 Cent and Ja Rule to each other.

They are suspicious that such rivalries are started for the profit-seeking goal of selling albums and making profit and are detrimental because they can lead to violence and, in the case of Tupac and Biggie, loss of life.

The final critique generally offered by this group was one of more innovation in the music and lyrics. Otis a 38-year-old African-American consumer said, “rappers need to not put themselves in one box, to move out of it or people will get bored with it.”

Tonya said in regards to some of the lyrical themes of Houston artists that, “…it’s basically the same thing: sippin’ syrup, choppin up the street, you know, to me it’s really too materialistic. I mean all rap is
materialistic but that’s basically all they talk about is their cars, the women, the syrup stuff like that.”

Conclusion

The Soundwaves on Crosstimbers closed its doors in 2013, likely a victim of competition from big box stores and the Internet revolution in downloading music. A single Soundwave store remains in the more upwardly mobile Montrose area of Houston where it houses music alongside a recent marketing shift toward selling skate and surf boards. Yet the critical role Soundwaves stores played in the rise of hip hop culture in Houston, bringing outside influences in while honing local manifestations of the culture, was critically significant. As Sergio G. reflected on an internet review of the last remaining Soundwaves in 2010, “Back in the day, many eons ago, when I thought I was a revolutionary, this is one of the places I practically lived in.” Chris S., an African-American reviewer, said, “I remember well the 90s when there were several of these around the city. Now these conglomerates have soaked the market into a few electronic stores.” A young Latina named Michelle “Misha” S. simply recalls, “Honestly, I really miss the old Soundwaves.” Indeed, the store provided an opportunity to reveal how local community members acted as agents within the contested site of cultural production.

In the context of popular commercial culture that was largely associated with the African-American experience and dominated by African-American artists, Latinas/os at Soundwaves on Crosstimbers referred to their racialized class experiences to make sense of their consumption of rap music. Displaying resistance to the black-white binary often practiced in popular culture, these Latina/o hip hop consumers found resonance in their experiences as an urban inner city population to cross racial borders and engage the social context through hip hop discourse. By only loosely connected with hip hop on explicitly ethnic grounds as Latinas/os, hip hop consumers were able to ground a global cultural phenomenon into a local context they share in many ways with their African-American neighbors. Far from passive consumers duped by corporate marketing, Black and Brown women refer to hip hop to voice their discontent with the commodification of women’s bodies, poor urban youth found their experiences verified, and hip hop consumers critiqued corporate power by holding skeptical stances toward money-hungry rappers that are disengaged from “the community.” Community fault lines were also reflected in the outlooks of some hip hop consumers who perceived women in hip hop culture as greedy exploiters of their own sexuality, the larger materialism and get-rich themes within rap music and differing outlooks on how hip hop came to be most associated with African-Americans exclusively. These issues display the contested site of hip hop commodification and popular culture in the globalized metropolis of Houston, Texas in the early twenty-first century.
ENDNOTES

5. I am using “class” here in the dialectical manner suggested by Raymond Williams between a definition based on an objective “social or economic category” and as a “formation” where “class consciousness” considers the “vagaries of self-description and self-assignation to a class scale.” Williams explores this through his particular reflections on historical usage of the term and Karl Marx’s articulation of the term. See Raymond Williams, “Class” in Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, New York: Oxford University Press, Revised editions, [1974] 1983, 61-69, particularly page 68-69.