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"Yo, Dre, I've Got Something To Say": Listening to Compton's Hip-Hop Landscape

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**"YO, DRE, I'VE GOT SOMETHING TO SAY": LISTENING TO COMPTON'S
HIP-HOP LANDSCAPE**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of Geography

of the University of Mary Washington

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Ian T Spangler

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By

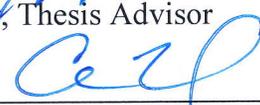Ian Spangler

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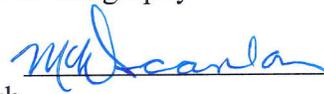
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Table of Contents

Introduction

Whether through radio waves, headphones, or the vast "tunnels" of the Internet, music is consumed with astonishing ferocity in today's world. It proliferates our aural environment, sometimes invited (that which relaxes you after a long day), and sometimes not (that Bruno Mars song in the grocery store, which you've heard one-too-many-times). There are a multitude of ways in which music affects our everyday lives. Jacques Attali has noted the economic and political heft of musical production and commodification (Attali 1985); Oliver Sacks offers anecdotal insights to the psychological effects of music, like its power to pierce through a "state of melancholia or anhedonia" (Sacks 2008, 324); and, when asked about their mobile device, one anonymous iPod even user went as far to say, "I can't overestimate the importance of having all my music available all the time. It gives me an unprecedented level of emotional control over my life" (Bull 2009, 56). Music, then, effects change, makes us feel, and even lends us identity, serving both as "a means of power" but also "a form of entertainment" (Attali 1985, 6). We listeners carry music with us like a memory or an echo, singing the words, tapping our toes, and sometimes just trying to get it all out of our heads. Music is a sonic Frankenstein—a uniquely human creation that commands power over its very creators.

Despite its nature as an intangible, detached entity, the geographer understands music as a product anchored in space. When listening to music spatially, each note and lyric contains the echoes of place. That may be the pilgrimage landscapes of heritage in Elvis' Graceland, the "postmodern metropolis" of California represented in Red Hot Chili Peppers albums, or a walk down Abbey Road's cultural geographies with The Beatles (Pesses 2009, Kruse 2005). Conversely, a geographer may also detect aspatiality in the landscape, maybe struggling to distinguish one place from another; an East Coast from a West. Of his trip down America's

eastern seaboard, for example, Murray Forman recalls the "sense of placelessness" that accompanied his movement. "The radiophonic journey," he explains, "did not correspond to the physical journey through space, over distance; rather, it was constituted as a recurring array of formats, with the distance being measured in spaces on the dial along the broadcast spectrum" (Forman 2002, xv).

Forman's emphasis on place encourages interpretations of music that create meaningful links between the landscape, as an integral aspect of a place's identity, and the music produced within one. Unfortunately, in cultural landscape studies, sound and music have been less utilized than traditional visual methods, despite Attali's observation that music is a "mirror" which "reflects the manufacture of society" (Attali 1985, 4). As an epistemological system, music is an important way of knowing perceiving the world. It speaks to dominant and alternative discourses of power rooted in musical production and authorship, and has boundless potential to tell us about ourselves (Leyshon et al 1998, 15). In the field of geography, hip-hop is a particularly important genre to study, considering how its "lyrical constructions commonly display a pronounced emphasis on place and locality" (Forman 2002, xvii; see also Johansson and Bell 2009, 245; Leyshon et al 1998, 18).

Since the rise to fame in 1989 of the rap group Niggaz Wit Attitudes (more commonly known as N.W.A.), Compton has been on the musical map as a hip-hop hotspot. Indeed, Elizabeth Grant notes, "[in Compton] N.W.A. shaped a racial-spatial paradigm a generation of West Coast rap artists would emulate," turning the city into a "touchstone for gangsta identity" (Grant 2008, 162). This identity was informed by a number of factors, most notably the gang violence, poverty, and racial tension that defined Compton in the 1980s. N.W.A. famously rapped about such issues, bringing them to light but glamorizing drugs, murder, and misogyny in

the process. Their music was harshly criticized and yet ferociously consumed, in many cases by white audiences (Samuels 1991). Now, over 25 years since N.W.A.'s official debut, Kendrick Lamar—a self-proclaimed student and devotee of the controversial group (see Ritz 2015)—has reinforced Compton's reputation as a cultural hearth of popular hip-hop with his two critically acclaimed albums, *good kid, m.A.A.D. city* and *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Kendrick's music is markedly different from that of N.W.A.'s in both theme and sound, and thus, the two musicians engage with a number of competing but equally valuable discourses that reflect the biography of Compton.

This paper examines Lamar's second album *good kid, m.A.A.D. city* (2013) and N.W.A.'s debut album *Straight 'Outta Compton* (1988). The music of N.W.A. has been discussed through the lens of cultural geography (see Carney 2003; Forman 2002; Johansson and Bell 2010); however, as a relatively new artist, there has been little spatial examination of Kendrick Lamar, despite both his critical popularity and his frequent invocation of local and regional geography. By treating these musicians as performative authors, and their compositions as musical texts, we can see how their instances and utterances of sonic materialized discourses have, over time, shaped and been shaped by the complex city within which they were raised (Schein 1997). Such an approach will involve combining lyrical text, musical choices, and the artist's performance in order to interpret Compton. This is unique, as studies in musical geography have rarely privileged performativity in the context of recorded music. Even fewer have couched their analyses in the framework of a soundscape, as articulated by R. Murray Schafer (1994), and fewer still have considered the recent rise to fame of Kendrick Lamar, who will likely enter what Forman calls the academic "hip-hop canon" and thus merits critical consideration (Forman 2004, 5). Therefore, the paper accomplishes a number of objectives: 1) to establish a geographic

framework of soundscape analysis in conjunction with landscape, 2) to examine how discourses come to exist both in the soundscape and the landscape, and finally 3) to, through music, analyze Compton as a landscape of competing discourses and identities.

Lost in Transposition: From Sight to Sound

Cultural geographers interpret landscapes as expressions of the people who create and inhabit them in certain places. The art of landscape interpretation is steeped in metaphor and visual analogues tend to dominate much of cultural geography's landscape studies (Bull and Black 2003). In his article on the semantic roots of the word, J.B. Jackson focuses on "landscape" as an optical construction, referencing its origins in landscape paintings of the 19th century. He further emphasizes its visual form when he invokes an "old-fashioned" definition of landscape: that it is a "'portion of land which the eye can comprehend at a glance'" (Jackson 1984, 299). Cosgrove elaborates, "Landscape is in fact a 'way of seeing', a way of composing and harmonizing the external world into a 'scene', a visual unity" (Cosgrove 1989, 121). Even more abstract notions of reading landscape as text "[reinscribe] the visual as the central action of interpretation" (Barnes & Duncan 1992).

This is not to say that geographers have never appealed to non-visual senses as they interpret cultural landscapes. For example, Yi-Fu Tuan has noted, "our experience of space is greatly extended by the auditory sense which provides information of the world beyond the visual field" (Tuan 1974, 9). Still, despite such marked recognitions of space as a comprehensive object, cultural landscape interpretation is a discipline largely dominated by vision. Attali argues that it is not just important, but "*necessary* to imagine radically new theoretical forms, in order to speak to new realities. Music… is one such form" (Attali 1985, 4; emphasis added). In other

words, by not critically listening, we shortchange our understanding and experience of the world. As we move away from a visual reading of landscape and toward an aural listening of landscape, it is important to remember that many of the aforementioned landscape concepts are translatable from sight to sound. the course of this paper, I will draw connections between landscape and soundscape to demonstrate their similarities, and more importantly, the ways in which they can be understood more fruitfully in conjunction with one another.

Landscape, discourse, and power are inextricably connected, and even a working knowledge of one requires a comprehension of all three. Kendall and Wickham invoke Foucault when they call discourse "a corpus of 'statements' whose organization is regular and systematic" (2002, 42). Such discourses are embodied, in a number of ways, in the cultural landscape. Existing literature defines "landscape" as a space that represents different, often competing discourses, or "socially constituted… sets of 'common sense' assumptions" (Duncan 1990, 12; from Schein 1997). Schein expands on this idea of discourse, saying, "Each seemingly individual decision behind any particular U.S. landscape is embedded within a discourse," and that when these decisions result in tangible landscape elements, "the cultural landscape becomes *discourse materialized*" (Schein 1997, 663; emphasis in original). Finally, Schein argues, "The cultural landscape serves to naturalize or concretize – to make normal – social relations as embodied in the various discourses and their combinations" (Schein 1997, 676). According to Schein, participants in a landscape act based on dominant discourses, and those actions add structure to the social world. This notion can be applied in conjunction with Mitchell's theorizations on landscape and power. He argues that landscapes are often the product of social struggle or contestation, and that "the purpose of landscape representation was precisely to [hide exploitation] by naturalizing it" (Mitchell 2000, 118). That is, no part of the landscape is

innocent or innocuous, specifically because the aspects we overlook tend to be the same ones that contain the most interpretive value. These naturalized discourses, and their tangible manifestations, are some of the most relevant clues in understanding our "unwitting autobiography" (Lewis 1979, 12).

We can *listen* for our unwitting autobiography and *hear* discourses in the same way that, traditionally, we have *read* it and *identified* them. That is, music and sound can be one form of the "tangible landscape elements" that Schein notes above. In order to reinterpret landscapes through sound, however, it is necessary to rework the vocabulary with which we read landscapes. That process begins with augmenting the realm of interpretation to include soundscape with landscape. R. Murray Schafer defines "soundscape" as the totality of sounds in an acoustic environment (Schafer 1994, 3). He would have us see the world as a "macromusical composition," or rather, a place where disparate noises—the hustle and bustle of a city block, the clanging of construction, even the whistle of birds—converge to form organized sound. Humans are constantly producing and consuming aural phenomena. In an enthusiastic declaration, Schafer welcomes this reinterpretation: "Behold the new orchestra: the sonic universe! And the musicians: anyone and anything that sounds!" (5) He supports the notion that all sound is valuable, and all sound is musical, as it contributes to the great macromusical composition that is our collective soundscape. In keeping with this new language, we would not just *read* the soundscape, but also *hear* it.

In agreement with Attali's theories of noise, music and power, and by applying Schein to the aural, we see that listening to soundscape can reveal dominant and alternative discourses. Schafer claims, "the general acoustic environment of a society can be read as an indicator of social conditions which produce it and may tell us much about the trending evolution of that

society" (1994, 5). In other words, sound interacts with the landscape in ways that appear so normal they become unnoticed. There are sounds that we have "learned to ignore" (Schafer 1994, 3)—or, at least, sounds to which we have grown socially accustomed and aurally numb. Of course, many sounds vie for our attention in the grand synthesis of noise, and it is difficult to comprehend them in their entirety.

Here, it is important to distinguish between the soundscape that Schafer illustrates, and the sonic discourses that inevitably come to fruition within a soundscape. The soundscape is the sonic backdrop, an aural canvas upon which noises are inscribed, or what Schein would call the "medium" through which discourses are communicated, contested, and argued (1997, 676). A soundscape contains many sounds and has many authors, and a sonic discourse is a particular pattern or network of sounds *within* that soundscape—a systematic, organized, and identifiable strain of connected sounds. Sonic discourses, like any other discourses, are inextricably attached to power. As Schafer explains, the "keynote sounds of a landscape are those created by its geography and climate: water, wind, forests, plains, birds, insects and animals," and these sounds "may even affect the behavior or life style of a society" (Schafer 1994, 10). The sonic discourses in a soundscape are not limited to naturally occurring or organic sounds. Music, for example, is a constant fabric in the soundscape; even when one is not listening to it, music informs one's perception of a place, and even affects one's individual decisions on how to act or behave in that place. For the sake of clarity, we can find a visual analogue in Schein's explanation of "the discourse of insurance mapping" in Ashland Park, Kentucky (Schein 1997, 671). Schein notes:

> "As a surveillance technique of the insurance company, the fire insurance map determined more than what Ashland Park residents paid for fire insurance. The map monitored the ways residents built, what they built, where they built, and when. This is not to suggest that the heavy hand of the insurance industry was the sole determinant of the Ashland Park landscape, but just as many urban houses today employ deadbolt door

locks and have smoke detectors and fire extinguishers in part for insurance purposes, the requirements of

the insurance underwriters have always been a strong disciplinary component of individual building

owners' decisions" (1997, 670).

The existence of and accessibility to Sanborn fire insurance maps during the mid-20th century

directly affected "individual building owners' decisions" in Ashland Park. As Del Casino and

Hanna (2005) argue, "maps stretch beyond their physical boundaries; they are not limited by the

paper on which they are printed or the wall upon which they might be scrawled. Each crease,

fold, and tear produces a new rendering, a new possibility, a new (re)presentation, a new moment

of production *and* consumption, authoring *and* reading, objectification *and* subjectification,

representation *and* practice." Mappings, thus, are theorized as continual "processes" which are

constantly in formation, somewhere between the binaries in which we often read maps.

According to Schein, the practice and process of insurance mapping is an expression of a

discourse materialized. Likewise, pieces of music can be heard as expressions of a *sonic*

discourse materialized in the soundscape, expended aurally, as the Sanborn maps are visually.

Songs exist beyond the confines of their temporal length, affecting our sense of place before the

push of a play button and well after the final note is struck. As it is produced, consumed and

commodified, music is part and parcel with the processual and ever-becoming nature of maps.

This relationship is one that clarifies music's role as sonic discourse materialized.

Sonic discourses appear in many forms, and if we listen, we can understand sounds and sound

patterns as parts of sonic discourses. Based on what is present and what is absent in a particular

soundscape, they reflect both what a society values as sound and what it considers valueless.

Take, for example, John Cage's contentious experimental piece, *4'33"*. Cage entered the stage

with a famous pianist and proceeded to direct the musician to sit in silence for four minutes and

thirty-three seconds. The only noise was his opening and closing of the grand piano's lid.

Needless to say, when first performed, it left audiences dumbstruck. Where was the music? Where was the performance? Where was the *sound*? Of course, in the absence of performed sound, the audience unexpectedly became the performers. The everyday-forgotten noises were the only thing one could hear; or, as Virginia Woolf would say, the "sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered" (Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*).

Upon entering the venue of Cage's performance—what we may term the "concert hall soundscape"— concertgoers have multiple preconceived expectations, and thus, the concert hall presents a number of coexisting discourses. Some are musical: for example, the genre of a concert hall performance generally fits within the umbrella of classical music (baroque, renaissance, romantic, etc.), where genre itself is a sonic discourse that follows the musical syntaxes of style, technique, execution, and composition. Other discourses exist outside the musical front and are rooted in social norms, like Carnegie Hall's suggestion that "[audience participation] may not be necessarily appreciated by the person sitting next to you" (Carnegie Hall Corporation). Sitting in the nosebleeds versus the box seats also incurs a certain social pedigree; that is, stage propinquity both reflects the wealth of a concertgoer, and affects that concertgoer's experience at the show. The politics of concert clapping are a hotly debated enterprise, too. Knowing when to clap requires a working knowledge of how classical concert pieces are structured, how to identify the concertmaster and the music director, and whether to clap in short bursts or when to sustain. The Austin Symphony even has a suggestion for coughing: "chances are you'll feel less need to cough if you're prepared" (Austin Symphony). Such expectations and social etiquettes configure how sound occurs in a concert hall, and function as rigid sonic discourses to concertgoers new and old. Finally, "when in doubt,"

reminds the Austin Symphony, "it's always safe to wait and follow what the rest of the audience does." This process of peer-based follow-the-leader at concerts tends to reproduce and reinscribe the practices of a concert hall, whether of genre, clapping, coughing, attire, or other.

The only reason that John Cage's piece was so contentious was because of its radical upheaval of social norms, of those expected discourses in a concert hall. His piece answers the question: what might an audience *do* when we violate discursive sonic norms? Or, maybe more relevant, what even are those discursive sonic norms to begin with? Ultimately, when we consider the ways in which sonic discourses function, both in the concert hall and beyond, we must remember that such discourses find their genesis in power. Understandings of how to behave and the expectations of what sounds will occur are predicated upon the hegemonic and normalized discourses in a space. Cage's purpose, which echoes the likes of Attali, Schafer, Lewis and Schein, was well made in his experimental piece: namely, that all sounds are valuable, even the ones that we may need to sit in silence to notice.

Musical Geographies: The Textual, Sonic, and Performative

A comprehensive approach to understanding the complex interrelationships between music, soundscape, and landscape requires us to not simply "listen" to landscapes, but rather uses sonic interpretations to supplement visual and nonrepresentational methodologies. Above, I have outlined the relationship between landscape, soundscape, discourse, and power, reconfiguring our mode of interpretation from strictly visual to include the aural. It is important to consider that, in a theoretical framework that equally privileges the sonic alongside the visual, landscape and soundscape are both components of understanding place. Here, I will review the discipline of musical geography, and present a theoretical framework for interpreting Compton's landscape

and soundscape via music's three components. First, on the textual, which includes the lyrics of the songs; second, on the sonic, which includes the piece's sonic choices, from instrumentation to sound effects; and third, on the performative, which includes the tonal inflection, attitude, and vocal deliveries on the track. Each of these three aspects must be explored in order to understand how a piece of music reflects and reproduces the landscapes, soundscapes, and experiences of places.

Music as Language, Text & Geography

A number of landscape geographers have examined the spatiality of musical texts in general, from alternative rock to mainstream pop. However, most of the studies that explore the intersections between music and landscape rely heavily on music's lyrical aspects. In his cultural geography of The Beatles, for example, Robert Kruse argues that the 60's pop sensation are read as an empty signifier, or "a vessel ready to be filled with any particular discourse for which there is thirst" (Kruse 2005). Reading the Beatles as an empty musical text allows them to become a conduit for a number of competing discourses through their vast, geographic discography (*Abbey Road*, "Penny Lane," etc.). These places have been inscribed in the cultural landscape, Kruse says, and his goal is to "show how spatially differentiated readings of the Beatles as text contribute to their ongoing instability as a cultural signifier and to geographically differentiated discursive practices" (Kruse 2005, 9). In mid-1960's Britain and US, the straight-banged crooners challenged "dominant social orders" such as Christianity, white supremacy, and American exceptionalism (Kruse 2005, 88).

One particularly useful interrogation of musical landscape is Michael Pesses' analysis of the Los Angeles, of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, or what he calls "a city that defies modern

notions of urbanism" (Pesses 149). He argues:

> "… the Red Hot Chili Peppers express not a national unease, nor a straightforward critique of utopia, but rather *a struggle to accept the multiple realities of postmodern existence*, which I would argue is a logical progression of L.A. noir… the band embraces both worlds to show how they are not mutually exclusive… but rather… *coexisting and competing realities*. In turn, the band's lyrical and sonic choices are influenced by the postmodern nature of the city where they live" (emphasis added).

The Chili Peppers are a vehicle through which one can understand this complicated "city of angels." Pesses describes a dual Los Angeles, and in so doing, paints the city as its own being— it feels as much like a character as it does a place. The band acts as a cultural thermometer, allowing us to identify and measure the city's "competing realities," which speaks to a number of discourses employed by geographers of the cultural landscape. From Mitchell's theory of struggle in landscape formation to the competing realities and instability of meaning described by Duncan and Duncan, we see how the Chili Peppers become an interesting case of, in Attali's terms, music "as a way of perceiving the world" (Attali 1985, 4).

Hip-hop is a fascinating example of musical text. Unlike most Western music, it derives much of its narrative-based textual style from bardic African traditions, grounded in oral storytelling (Keyes 2008). This "poetic language" grew especially as a result of American chattel slavery, which despite being the darkest chapter of America's complicated history yielded "black vernacular expressions that documented one's existence, hopes, and desires" (Keyes 8). Indeed, Perry (2004) notes that Black vernacular speech "constitutes the central form of linguistic communication in hip-hop" (24). In the early days of hip-hop, the "improvisational aesthetic," or "freestyle," where artists spontaneously rhyme lines as opposed to reciting known lyrics, dominated the genre (Perry 2004, 33). From a purely textual perspective, hip-hop provides a refreshing counterpoint to Western musical traditions. However, reducing hip-hop to solitary

examination of text loses important evocations of place that only a comprehensive analysis including sounds and performative choices could produce.

Music as Sonic Discourse & Geography

Music, in its commercialized form, can be understood as a language. It has rules and regulations, translations and keys, syntax and vocabulary. Tuan notes of visual perception, "If we were not linguistic animals, visual images could not carry even a small fraction of the meaning that they often have for us" (Tuan 1979). Tuan argues that language enhances our visual experience, exemplified through his Saussurian explanation of words as "mere vocables or marks on a page," and elaborated further in Duncan and Duncan's (1988) discussion of poststructuralist literary theory, where they describe text as having "a web-like complexity, characterized by a ceaseless play of infinitely unstable meanings." Just as verbal language and our ability to represent complex ideas with simple words enriches our visual experience, the language of music enriches our aural experience. Momentarily setting aside the performative dimension, music can be understood as a form of text. Like individual words and phrases, the notes themselves contain no inherent meaning on the staff. Rather, meaning is ascribed at moments of production and consumption when people in particular places give notes life and character, enabling a song to calm, energize, or to take the performer and/or listener to another place.

The text of a song provides listeners with narratives and symbols that carry us through from beginning to end. However, it is more difficult—at the very least, more subjective—to identify the sonic qualities of songs that contribute to or construct a discourse. For example, it is easy to hear geography in Kendrick Lamar's verse, "Compton, Compton / Ain't no city quite like mine." The short phrase invokes a clearly articulated sense of perceived uniqueness of the

rapper's home city. When such an obvious geographic signpost is removed, Pesses explains that it sometimes feels like "[the geographer's] discursive analytical powers are rendered useless" without narrative structure and semantic clarity. For this reason, Pesses suggests that "instrument type, vocal style, and the very notes and rhythm chosen produce the totality of the song" (Pesses 148). To analyze music without considering its aural aesthetics is to alienate it from the musical, cultural, and social soundscape within which it was created.

The sonic elements of songs are multivariate and not just limited to the musical instrumentation beneath lyrics. Sometimes, we can draw a straight and simple line from the soundscape to a sonic discourse in the music. This could manifest as the sound effect of gunshots or a police siren on a track, as heard in the introduction and second verse of N.W.A.'s "Gangsta Gangsta." Much like the way in which the soundscape of a concert hall contains discourses of "wealth" or "class," defined by things like clapping and attire, the soundscape of N.W.A.'s Compton contains social discourses of "violence" or "gangster," which have their own distinctive set of sonic factors. Understanding the identities, expectations, and intentions in reproducing social discourses of violence or gangbanging helps us interpret the meaning in sonic choices in the musical pieces. In the absence of a straight connection between soundscape and sonic discourse, we can take a broader approach to conceptualizing musical forms in the soundscape.

Adam Krims (2000) has also detailed the ways in which hip-hop privileges the sonic, arguing, "[Hip-hop] must be understood as a sonic force more than anything else" (Krims 39). The sonic decisions that artists make generally fall within fixed musical genres, which are also affiliated with unique places. Specifically, Krims outlines three main genres of hip-hop: Jazz/Bohemian, Reality/Gangsta, and Don. The Jazz/Bohemian genre is defined exclusively by

its musicality, as it incorporates "the use of jazz" into its songs, and contains "relatively complete samples of pop/soul" (65). Reality Rap, or so-called "gangsta rap," privileges the concept of realism, and thus the ghetto, and exists in a "situation of social totality" (70). Finally, Don Rap, a blend of jazz/bohemian and reality (i.e., a Mafia Don), frames gangsta imagery "more and more as fantasized and spectacular" (83). The styles in which these genres and artists work are a "common poetic procedure of an artistic community or tradition," as they are not necessarily deterministic but certainly an "internally developing force" (90).

Generally, these communities and traditions are also geographic in nature. George Carney (2003), Steven Graves (2009) and Murray Forman (2002) have extensively written about the spatial proliferation of rap music in America. In Carney's exploration of rap, he notes its prominence as a "regional music phenomenon" (Carney 2003, 93). "Compton," Carney observes, "a southern suburb of Los Angeles, became the *core* of the southern region of West Coast rap" (Carney 2003, 103; emphasis in original). It was from this core that the style of "gangsta rap" disseminated. Graves discusses rap as a postmodern folk music: postmodern based on its utilization of pastiche sampling, emphasis on hyperbole, and suggestions of authenticity, and folk due to its "cultural and social isolation" at a local level (Johansson and Bell 2009, 252). Forman, in his work on race, space, and hip-hop culture, argues, "… it is through the complex dynamics of discourse and practice that race is spatialized and space is racialized" (Forman 2002, 10).

Music, Performativity, and the Limits of Representation

Even still, music is more than simply text or sound, and placing upon it such limitations only serves to misrepresent its full affective capacity. Music involves additional components,

such as context, intentionality, and most importantly, performance. The hip-hop musical

Hamilton, which chronicles the life of its titular United States founding father, exemplifies this.

Consider the tune "You'll Be Back," a ballad of sorts, sung by the character of King George.

Taken alone, the text of the song is frightening, even threatening. King George laments, "When

push comes to shove, I will / kill your friends and family to remind you of my love." The music

further complicates the text; it is a folky British pop tune, boasting a chorus of "da-da-da's" and

a few cheery falsettos. It is only when we consider the performance of the lyrics that the song

realizes its full potential. On the Broadway Cast Recording, Jonathan Groff transforms the text's

fright into mania, and threat into hilarity. Performed, the song is darkly funny—a pop-ballad

sung to the rebelling colonists, but felt as if sung by a scorned lover. One can practically see the

twitch in Groff's wide eyes as he threatens murder in a quiet staccato, or taste the saccharine-

sweet of his heady trill when he proclaims, "You'll be back, soon you'll see / you'll remember

you belong to me." The performer's vocal delivery, inflection, and intention when singing the

number turn the song into a darkly comedic caricature of tyranny, and could not be achieved

through a simple reading of text or music alone.

Here, it is important to mention nonrepresentational theories (NRTs), or what some have

termed "more-than-representational" theories (Lorimer 2005).[1] NRTs tend to engage with the

intangible aspects of geography and landscape, such as affect, emotion, performativity, and their

relationship to the human body (Thrift 2008). In a form of response to the theoretical crisis of

representation, they attempt "to configure geographical thought… as a series of infinite 'ands'

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[1] Lorimer's description of NRT's as "more-than-representational" is very applicable to this paper because, rather than decrying representation with a "non-" prefix, I still employ representational theories and methods. So, my usage of NRT's harkens to Anderson and Harrison's: "disparate and potentially loosely connected bodies of thought which do not prioritise the role of representation in their accounts of the social and the subject" (2010, 2). I will continue to use the acronym NRT's with the working knowledge that it is inclusive of the "more-than-representational" definition.

which add to the world rather than extract stable representations from it" (Anderson and Harrison 2010, 6; Cadman 2009, 1). Finn (2015) describes the necessity of new aural methodologies to capture the performative aspects of soundscapes, and Thrift (2008) argues for a reconceptualization of cultural geography that examines the ways in which performance influences space. In order to grapple with something as ethereal and eager to float away as music, we must anchor our methods firmly with NRTs—specifically, in this paper, with those relating to performance and performativity.

The existing NRT literature often focuses on the human body and its relationship to performance through things like "dance and multimedia technologies to political rallies," theater, and even "forms of street art" (Cadman 2009, 3). However, there is less engagement in the theory with music as a type of performance, despite music's nature as a performative art and its capabilities to attune in the mundane. Dirksmeier & Helbrecht note the paradox inherent in performance: that it "takes place in the present and takes place just once" (Dirksmeier & Helbrecht 2008). This is a clear limitation when considering performance exclusively through recorded music, as the researcher cannot identify or personally quantify the performance itself. Finnegan notes that recorded music, although "different from live performances," still can be considered "one among several engagements in [a group's] cycle of performances" (Finnegan 1989, 156). The recording was not "made in a vacuum," and "you have to do something special in order to make up for the absence of audience interaction" (1989, 156). Thus, the performer, even in a recording studio, is not a machine—they do not reproduce a text as a mirror image, nor are they somehow removed from the process of performance by recording in the studio. According to Dirksmeier & Helbrecht, the public is "an equal partner and *sine qua non* of the performance." Although the performer is one who translates a "textual script into

'experienceable' reality," the audience takes part in the performance's ultimate formation (2008). Therefore, the concept of an audience, whether extant or simply anticipated, must be present to merit a legitimate performance.

In recorded hip-hop music, the idea of an audience—i.e., the people to whom an artist is addressing his or her message—is especially resonant, because hip-hop tradition focuses so heavily on a "call-response trope," wherein the artists engage in "discursive intertextuality," an exchange of ideas "between artists and audience" (Perry 2004, 33). An example of this can be seen in Kendrick Lamar's "Poetic Justice," where the track opens with the line, "If you a bad bitch, put your hands up high, hands up high, hands up high." Such a line is invocative of what Krims calls Party Rap, the earliest forms of hip-hop that focused on "listener (and dancer) participation" by offering stable, repetitive, easy-to-follow lyrics that encouraged dancing along (Krims 2008, 57).

Hip-hop artists often partake in "signifyin,'" or "an indirect statement about a situation or another person." According to Keyes (2008, 11-13), "Black vernacular speech utterances depend heavily on tonal contouring to convey meaning." The act of signifyin' often depends more on the "style of delivery rather than in content"; or, in other words, the sonic quality of the voice, the tonal aspects, and the performative choices matter as much in rap as the text that is being spoken. These performative choices reflect a sense of the artist's identity—how they would like to be perceived by audiences both intended and unintended. N.W.A., for example, came to prominence in the late 1980's, at a time when hip-hop culture had been fast growing for over a decade, and was still quickly evolving. "Founding fathers" such as Kool DJ Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and DJ Kool Herc (Nelson 2004, 45) explain that hip-hop's formative aesthetic was welcoming—they used to have dance parties in parks, testing new tracks and entertaining the

locals. The gangster rap genre that N.W.A. generally espouses is a far cry from the party rap that these founding fathers were performing, and as far a cry, albeit in a different direction, from Kendrick Lamar. It is particularly important to consider the performative styles of delivery when comparing Kendrick to N.W.A., because they will be crucial in identifying the variation on discourses from each artist, which, in turn, help to understand representations of Compton.

NRT's are fitting while we grapple with the moments of performance that are central to the theoretical framework. That is, the immediate, visceral, emotional reaction of the audience, a reaction that precedes conscious thought (Cadman 2009, 4). This recalls the central paradox of studying performance: we must ask, how does one separate the moment of "now" out of a performance? How do we capture or attempt to represent a moment of performance that can never occur again? Thrift (2008) is helpful in considering this when he quotes Schiefflin (1998):

> Unlike text, performances are ephemeral. They create their effects and then are gone—leaving their reverberations (fresh insights, reconstituted selves, new structures, altered realities) behind them. Performances are a living social activity, by necessity assertive, strategic and not fully predictable. While they refer to the past and plunge towards the future, they exist only in the present."

It is clear, then, that performance cannot be replicated, and by nature, cannot be recorded. The act of recording excludes the physical presence that defines performance as an instance and experience. However, the "reverberations" of such a performance can linger in the soundscape, which is exactly what audio recordings do: they afford us the fade, the echo, the reverberation of a moment in time, never quite the whole thing, but certainly an image of it. Although this does not fully go beyond representation, it gets closer to the comprehensive and more-than-representational approaches necessary to investigate the interactions of music, landscape, and identity.

Namely, these insights are the "recognition of the arbitrary nature of symbolic orders"

and "the plural and contested… nature of symbolic orders" (Anderson and Harrison 2010, 5).

Crouch entertains this paradox, and suggests, "the so-called 'non-representational theory'… is

not antagonistic to representations, but regards them as fluid and engaged" (Crouch 2010, 7). He

goes on to say that "understanding the performance of artwork both in the making and in its

mutual articulation in life beyond its making may offer a means both to deepen an articulation of

landscape in relation to life, and space in relation to living." It is true, then, that "perception is

based on practice; on looking, *listening*, and touching" (Simonsen 2010, 223; italics mine). In

other words, perception is a totality, a comprehensive experience beyond a single mode of

interpretation. This "more-than-representational" framework allows us to conceive of music as

more than just text or sound, and use aspects of performance to find moments in the music that

are made uniquely special—and spatial—by their performative qualities.

It has been noted again and again that the aural often takes a backseat to the visual in

landscape interpretation (Bull and Back 2003; Kearney 2010)—an important thing to recall,

since this analysis of Compton is predicated on the notion that we must both look and listen

when we interpret landscape. In doing so, we are trying to identify the discourses that are

inscribed into the landscape and into the soundscape, because as Dittmer (2010, 275) explains,

"it is through the recognition and the interaction of the various discourses in which we are

embedded that meaning is created, power is conveyed, and the world is rendered recognizable"

(275). Discourse, Dittmer explains, is a collective term: it is "the fusion of material texts with

other forms of communication, such as body language, interactions, symbolic acts, technologies,

and the like," all of which taken together constitute a discourse (275). Music is one such form of

communication that could be added to Dittmer's list. Through its lyrics, its sounds, and its

performance, music resists and reinforces dominant social discourses both within and without of

the places where it is made. It is necessary to listen for the geographies of popular hip-hop artists like N.W.A. and Kendrick Lamar in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of Compton's landscape and soundscape. By parsing through socially dominant discourses via the ways in which lyrics, sound, and performative choices converge, we can operationalize this theoretical framework of soundscape and landscape in the context of Compton.

"Ain't No City Quite Like Mine": Compton's Story

The city of Compton, California sits tucked between Long Beach and downtown Los Angeles. It is one of the oldest cities in California, founded in 1867, and its central location between LA and Long Beach has given it the nickname "Hub City" (Mathews 2015). Denis Cosgrove (1989) might call Compton an emergent hip-hop landscape, its symbols of "gangsta" identity (see Perry 2004, 94-95) having been written into the landscape and offering "a challenge to the existing dominant culture" (Cosgrove 1989, 132). Compton is a relatively small suburb, boasting about ten square miles of space and a population just shy of 99,000 (2014 US Census). Compton's history, having experienced a number of transitional periods in terms of demographics, affects how we can interpret both the visual and the aural. While it was "predominately black for many years," as of 2013 the city's population was estimated at 65% Latino (Quinones et al 2013). Interestingly, its racial makeup began in quite the opposite fashion. In the early 20th century, Compton was almost entirely white; however, it experienced severe white flight after the Supreme Court's 1948 case *Shelley vs. Kraemer* and 1953 case *Barrows vs. Jackson*, both of which "prohibited… racial covenants in housing, thus undermining white Compton's primary instrument for halting the influx of African-American newcomers" (Straus 2009, 511-512). Indeed, from 1955-1960, Compton saw its black population rise from 17% to 40%.

In this way, Compton became a typical case of upper-class whites leaving the city and taking the wealth with them. Many whites that stayed remained unwelcoming, and practices to exclude blacks from housing, employment, and education as much as possible continued for years to come (Straus 2009, 512). Despite the structural obstacles facing African Americans in Compton, the poverty into which many graduated would often be classified as self-inflicted, as noted in Oscar Lewis' 1966 "culture of poverty" argument where he claimed "poverty generated a set of cultural attitudes, beliefs, values, and practices" which would "tend to perpetuate itself over time" (Small et al 2010, 7). The rise of gang violence did not alleviate Compton's instability. In the 1980's, "Los Angeles youth searching for a new identity began to mobilize as street groups" that would become infamous gangs: namely, the Bloods and the Crips (Howell and Moore 2010, 11). These gangs often operated on a hyperlocal level, working at the neighborhood scale in and around Compton. For example, the 42nd Street Piru Bloods, a prominent gang faction, originated near Compton's Piru Street (12). Compounded with the tensions of police brutality and violent resistance in the greater LA area, from the Watts riots to Rodney King's beating, the city operated within a longstanding paradigm of unease.

These realities are reflected both in Compton's natural soundscape as well as in the musical discourses that its residents articulate. One only needs to look as far as an account of high schooler Kitam Hamm's typical morning in order to hear a Compton moment. In a *Sports Illustrated* report on the young athlete, as he wakes up, a "car alarm pulses in the alley and police sirens scream past, noises so familiar they go unnoticed" (Benedict 2011). The familiarity of these noises speaks to their normalized presence in the soundscape. Kendrick Lamar echoes the sentiment of naturalization to violence and crime in an interview with *Rolling Stone* where he recalls witnessing his first murder at age five. "After that," Lamar says, "you just get numb to it"

(Eells 2015). Schafer has argued that noises "are the sounds we have learned to ignore," but by refusing to ignore these sounds—or rather, by recognizing and engaging with them directly—we can uncover that which is latent in the landscape (Schafer 1994, 3).

Both historically and presently, Compton struggles with issues of violence and strife. However, while Compton has historically seen its fair share of trouble, it is important to note that by many accounts, contemporary Compton has begun to change. The face of "the new Compton" is 33-year old mayor Aja Brown, whose vision for the city is one of hope. "When I think about Compton," she said, "I think about redemption." According to Brown, crime is down 71% in the last 20 years, and as of August 2015, there had only been seven homicides in that calendar year. Compared to a shocking tally of 89 homicides in 1989—the year after N.W.A.'s album *Straight Outta Compton* was released—the number is redemptive to say the least. Compton resident Gene Brown, in an interview with NPR, notes, "We did have an era that was really bad. We did have an era. But I think that's kind of passed over now. You know, it's not like that anymore. But then you have movies like *Straight Outta Compton* and stuff that perpetuates that whole thing all over again in the eyes of the world" (Takahashi 2015; see also Kennedy 2009). Indeed, journalist Joe Mathews observes how "perceptions of Compton have been formed by decades of media reports on crime and gangs, ethnic conflicts and public corruption… [Today, surveys] show Compton is a good place to start a business… But, outside the city, the old impressions of Compton have held" (Mathews 2015).

These perceptions of Compton harken back to Pesses' examination of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, where he described Los Angeles as a city with two identities that are coexisting, competing, and still mutually constitutive (Johansson and Bell 2009, 149). The suburb of Compton is much the same. Through persistent media representations like music, news, and film,

it has been unable to separate itself from its image as a place exclusively identified by violence, crime, and gangster rap. Despite contentions that the new Compton is improving by many accounts, and clear, focused efforts to revitalize its image (see visionforcompton.org), the city cannot seem to shake underlying impressions. This is not meant to underplay racial, economic, or social issues that may still plague Compton, but rather efface the notion that Compton is a flat landscape without nuance. In listening to Kendrick Lamar and N.W.A.'s music for clues to Compton, it is important to remember the competing discourses, such as racialized violence, redemption, and its place in the hip-hop landscape, that shape Compton's identities.

Data & Methodology

In keeping with the theoretical framework of a comprehensive analysis of landscape and soundscape, I conduct a content analysis of the two albums, followed by a discourse analysis of selected songs. The data used in this analysis is the music itself. I have limited the scope of the study to five songs from N.W.A.'s first album, *Straight Outta Compton* (1988), and five songs from Kendrick Lamar's second album, *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* (2013). The albums, released about 25 years apart from one another, both foreground their narratives in the city of Compton. By examining these particular works, we can control for geography while comparing across time. Each piece of data—that is, each song—contains three characteristics from which we can identify discourses materialized in Compton's landscape and soundscape: the textual, the sonic, and the performative. These aspects weave together as lyrics, music, and performative delivery to construct the texture of the song in its entirety, and it is upon this three-part theoretical framework that I ground my analysis. Without considering each aspect of the data, we would not be able to sufficiently identify the discourses within which N.W.A. and Kendrick Lamar operate.

The textual data, which are in this case the lyrics and titles of the songs, were copied into word processing documents from the crowdsourced lyric and annotation website, "rap.genius.com."[2] I then verified the lyrics by listening to the albums while reading through the copied text, making sure that both 1) the words were correct and 2) the line breaks were sensible. The sonic data are, expectedly, the songs themselves. The final selection was based on which songs more frequently invoked geography compared to other songs on the artists' albums (see table 1). All tracks were derived from N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton* or Kendrick Lamar's *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*. Finally, the performative data refers to the tonal inflections and vocal choices with which the artists deliver their lines.

Table 1: Selected Songs from N.W.A.'s Straight Outta Compton and Kendrick Lamar's good kid, m.A.A.d city	
N.W.A.	**Kendrick Lamar**
Straight Outta Compton	Sherane, A.K.A. Master Splinter's Daughter
Fuck tha Police	Backseat Freestyle
Gangsta Gangsta	The Art of Peer Pressure
8 Ball	m.A.A.d city
Compton's N the House	Compton

The three musical aspects that I have identified—textual, sonic, and performative—do not contain exclusive or necessarily unique content; that is, a reference to "Gangsta Identity" might appear both sonically *and* textually, or depictions of "Violence/Crime" might appear textually *and* performatively. This recognition required me to develop an inclusive codebook, one that could be applied broadly to the three musical aspects. My approach yielded two types of codes: preexisting codes, which sprung out of the literature on hip-hop music and Compton's

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[2] The website self-proclaims, "Rap Genius is dedicated to crowd-sourced (and artist/producer sourced) annotation of rap lyrics/beats." Fans are free to upload song lyrics and annotations to those lyrics, which are verified by their musical peers and, in some cases, by the artists themselves.

place within the genre, and manifest codes, which appeared from my own listening to the music (Cope 2010). Each of these codes was derived from the original research question: namely, how does the music of Kendrick Lamar and N.W.A. work to reinforce or resist the social discourses that structure perceptions of Compton, California?

The codes allowed me to conduct a content analysis of each song based on a typology designed specifically for this study, which required multiple critical listenings and readings of the two albums. There are three sections to the codebook (see table 2), which mirror the components of music: textual, sonic, and performative. Textual codes like "Money/Wealth/Fame" or "Violence/Guns" were preexisting based on gangster rap's general content and Compton's history. Other textual codes, such as "Religion/Prayer" or "Family," manifested during readings of the lyrics. The sonic codes were generated largely on notions of genre in hip-hop, as detailed by Adam Krims (2000). He characterizes Gangsta Rap as connoted generally by its "hardness," specifically with an "unfocused but dominating bass… radically dissonant pitch combinations; and samples that foreground their own deformation and/or degrees of reproduction" (Krims 2000, 72). The Jazz Rap genre is defined as an "'art music' genre," predicated on MCs' playful sampling of jazz and its "extensive orchestration" (Krims 2000, 66-67; Williams 2010). Don Rap is a hybrid genre that "combines, on the semantic and imagistic levels, the dominating imagery and toasting of the older gangsta genre with the wealth, individuality, and 'smoothness' of the older mack genre" (2000, 83). Beyond genre, the sonic also includes contextual codes like "Skit," which designates a section of the song where a prescribed, nonmusical scenario unfolds, or "Soundscape," which refers to sound effects (gunshots, police sirens) that are embedded in a musical line. The performative codes were designed while considering the emotional delivery of a line, such as "Anger" and "Calm," as

well as vocal affect (whether growled, pitched up/down, or utilizing vocal cracks).

      Each of the ten songs was coded, line-by-line—as opposed to word-by-word—based on the line breaks in the copied text. I chose to code by line under the assumption that songs are temporal creatures whose structure and format has a beginning and an end, with each line being the smallest, most sensible unit of semantic meaning through which a cohesive idea is conveyed. Sometimes, a single line contained more than one applicable code in per category, which

Table 2: Three-Part Codebook			
Textual		**Sonic**	**Performative**
Religion/ Prayer	Sex	Jazz	Collective/ Chant
Crime	Regional/ Local	Jazz Rap	Affected
Police	Hyper-local	Gangsta	Anger
Money/ Wealth/ Fame	Self	Sound-scape	Calm
Homies/ Gang	The Other	Don	Rapped-Straight
Violence/ Guns	No Code	Skit	Rapped-Swung
Women		Rock	Sung
Streets/ Hood		Sample	Spoken
Family		A cappella	Mimesis
Party			Feature

complicated the coding process textually, sonically, and performatively. For example, the line "My mind is living on cloud 9 and this 9 is never on vacation" from Kendrick Lamar's

"Backseat Freestyle" could be textually coded as either "Self" or "Violence/Guns." In such situations, I decided on the final code with my own interpretation of what was the dominant message in the given line. The sonic codes were also not straightforward. If it was not possible to sonically code a line with both "Jazz Rap" and "Skit," despite the fact that music may be playing on top of one of the skit scenes, I would code as "Skit" and detail the musical style in the discourse analysis section. "Mimesis" is a performative code that refers to an artist the song. Considering that a line could be easily both angry and mimetic, these codes too are impersonating someone else in imperfect. Again, whatever ambiguities these codes have will be discussed in greater detail during the discourse analysis. Finally, the codes were calculated in a Microsoft Excel sheet that summarized the textual, sonic, and performative codes of each song by percentage.

Content analysis is inherently reductive because it is just that: a count of content. Although examining percentages of what is and is not discussed in a song helps quantify the data, it does not allow for an understanding of the discursive nature of lyrics, much less their comingling with the musicians' sonic and performative choices. I use the content analysis as an access point for the discourse analysis, which is what ultimately interrogates how the relationships between text, sound, and performance in each selected pieces of music reproduce and/or challenge discourses materialized in Compton's landscape and soundscape.

Compton? Which Compton? Results & Discussion

An appropriate place to begin examining Kendrick Lamar and N.W.A. is at the results of the descriptive content analysis, which foregrounds us in the content of the music and positions us to look for the ways in which the music reinforces or resists the dominant social discourses at play

in Compton. Preexisting codes like "Crime," "Money/Wealth/Fame," "Homies/Gang," and "Violence/Guns" all occurred relatively frequently, which was expected, as these are the touchstones topics of gangsta rap genre associated with Compton. The codes "Self" and "The 'Other'" also merit explanation; lines were classified as "Self" if they were self-aggrandizing and bombastic, or self-interrogative and reflective. "The 'Other'" was a code that developed in opposition to "Self," and lines were coded as "Other" if they referred to people or groups in opposition to the narrator's perceived in-group (for example, N.W.A.'s "others" are usually their rival gangs). Although the content results are useful in conceiving of what the songs broadly say and how they broadly sound, these results are purely representational. Discourse analysis will allow us to speak to aspects of music that are beyond representation.

The content results, at a first glance, suggest that Kendrick and N.W.A.'s lyrical content is rather similar (see table 3.1), while their sonic and performative content diverges (see tables 3.2 and 3.3). Kendrick and N.W.A. invoked regional or local geography at rates of 8% and 5%, respectively, and made hyperlocal mentions (street names, restaurants, apartment complexes) at smaller rates of 4% and 1%. These numbers may seem low at first; however, we should remember that many of the songs are also titled geographically, such as N.W.A.'s "Straight Outta Compton" and "Compton's in the House," or Kendrick's "Compton" and "m.A.A.d city." Explicit geographic titles were not coded, but rather serve as an expositive backdrop for the song in its entirety, where the listener understands that the following narrative unfolds in this particular place, whether or not its name is mentioned.

This is where it is important to recall music, its sounds, and its performance as reverberations that linger in a soundscape. Although the two artists only invoke geography at total rates of 12% and 6%, the mere fact of this music being inherently "Compton" inextricably

tethers the music to place, whether or not it is being actively consumed. Especially to non-residents who only have representations of the city (i.e., the music of N.W.A. and of Kendrick Lamar) to assist in understanding it, the perception of Compton depends on its representation. Indeed, Ice Cube, a founding member of N.W.A., has said himself, "Unless you come from Compton, it's not a world you're privy to. Our music let *[sic]* you visit Compton from a distance" (Ritz 2015). The music, produced in Compton, titled for Compton, lingers as a reverberation in its soundscape and ripples outward to other places, affecting how people within and without of the city perceive it.

"Regional/Local" geography could be very direct, such as Kendrick's line in "Compton" where he says, "Hop in the G ride / From the West to the East side / Know that's just how Compton roll." However, Regional/Local geography could also be more vague, such as the motific hook in Kendrick's "m.A.A.d city," which is a threatening set of four lines, deeply sung:

"Man down, where you from, nigga?
Fuck who you know, where you from, my nigga?
Where your grandma stay, huh, my nigga?
This m.A.A.d city I run, my nigga."

These four lines are coded performatively with the Feature code, which means someone other than Kendrick is speaking them. Kendrick could certainly have chosen to sing the lines of this hook himself, but consciously decided to feature another artist, a decision that echoes the textual content of the hook: someone *else* is issuing the threat. The introduction of another voice is destabilizing and unfamiliar, especially when intoned so deeply that it sounds affected, robotic. We are reminded that this scenario is not exclusively between the listener and Kendrick, but rather that there are social politics being symbolically enacted behind the recording microphone. Textually, the hook could have been just as easily coded "Other" as it was "Regional/Local" and

"Family." Having said that, the latter two are certainly the dominant lyrical themes. They speak to the notion that in this city, whom you know is much less important than where you're from, and your life may even depend on it. Maybe most interesting is the speaker invoking his grandmother's residence as a form of extortion—the notion that a domestic family space, which is traditionally considered safe, suddenly becomes a point of vulnerability in this place. This subversion of familial space is consistent with the destabilization and unfamiliarity invoked by the song's performative choices.

"m.A.A.d city" is not the only song where family is invoked and its function is subverted. The opening track, "Sherane, A.K.A. Master Splinter's Daughter," closes with a lengthy skit simulating a phone call from Kendrick's mother and father. The sonic coding of these lines as "Skit" is important because it contextualizes the lines as a nonfictional narrative; that is, when we hear the voicemail, we are meant to interpret it as a representation of Kendrick's reality, transporting the listener from their environment to his soundscape of Compton. Kendrick's mother, tinged with emotions of concern and anger but mostly the latter, is demanding that Kendrick return the family car he has borrowed. His father frequently interjects from a distance, telling Kendrick to bring back the "dominoes" that he has also taken, supposedly for gambling. The mere fact that Kendrick has chosen to, in his mother's words, "keep fuckin' around in them streets," shows his valuation of the streets over the home, of gangsta identity over his family identity. In other words, the skit depicts an embracement of the gangsta lifestyle, but to a degree that feels more critical than condoning. Collectively, such pointed subversions of safe or familiar spaces seems to be a characteristic of Kendrick's Compton, and are reinforced by his destabilizing performative and textual choices. Indeed, this representation casts Compton as a

familial locality, but one in which that sense of closeness is the subject of threat and coercion as opposed to safety or reprieve.

The Compton of N.W.A. is much different from the Compton of Kendrick Lamar, where Kendrick self-positions against his parents and frames domestic spaces as undesirable or unsafe. In essence, Kendrick is constructing a Compton of micro-contestation, of internal struggle within the self and between gangs. Furthermore, Kendrick positions the listener to be a witness to the victims of violence, crime, and poverty. On the other hand, N.W.A. positions the listener to see the braggadocio of violence and crime, flatly glamorizing the gangsta lifestyle.

Table 3.1: Text Coding Results				
	N.W.A. Totals		**Kendrick Totals**	
Text Codes	*%*	*Count*	*%*	*Count*
Religion/Prayer	0%	1	5%	23
Homies/Gang	11%	63	8%	36
Family	0%	2	10%	44
Party	1%	8	9%	43
Crime	6%	35	9%	39
Police	13%	76	0%	0
Money/Wealth/Fame	3%	17	4%	19
Violence/Guns	19%	109	11%	49
Women	4%	23	7%	30
Streets/Hood	1%	7	3%	13
Regional/Local	5%	27	8%	37
Sex	1%	3	5%	24
Hyperlocal	1%	4	4%	16
Self	13%	76	8%	37
The "Other"	11%	60	1%	5
No Code	9%	52	9%	41
Instrumental	0%	0	0%	1
Total Lines	**100%**	**563**	**100%**	**457**

In many of their songs, N.W.A. navigates personas of braggadocio, self-aggrandizement, and absurdity in order to better represent the realities of their city, challenging what they identify as forces of oppression. 67% of N.W.A.'s text was devoted to five codes, suggesting a narrow range of textual content. Since they are generally discussing the same topics, N.W.A.'s sonic and performative choices carry even more weight. Lines like "Straight outta Compton, another crazy ass nigga / More punks I smoke, yo, my rep gets bigger" place them squarely into the discourse of gangsta identity, where credibility is measured in perceived hardness. However, lines similar to tThey include the sound effects of gunshots in their music, such as in line 18 of "Straight Outta Compton" when Ice Cube raps, "AK-47 is the tool," or in line 83 of "Fuck Tha Police," when MC Ren raps, "Put in my clip, yo, and this is the sound."

We can look to sonic codes for a greater density of meaning in N.W.A., who used skits 11% of the time (see table 3.2). Their skit scenarios often feel intentionally fictional, as opposed to Kendrick's, which frequently bookend the songs and feel as though we are meant to experience them as undergirding a continuous narrative that connects from song to song. For example, the song "Fuck The Police" opens up with a courtroom scene in which the police are on trial and being judged by the members of N.W.A. It begins and ends clearly within the confines of the song. There are few imaginable scenarios in which N.W.A. would be afforded the chance to preside over and prosecute the police. However, this fictional scenario, as absurd as it is, presents an interesting challenge to discourses of law enforcement from the streets to the courtroom. While the soundscape of a courtroom is generally one of respect and deference, N.W.A. does not subscribe to this vision. Their courtroom contains heavy chatter and laughter, not to mention the constant musical underpinnings of a kick drum and record scratching. In the moment, N.W.A. become the arbitrators of justice, and it is a justice determined by nobody's

standards but their own. "Judge Dre's" final decision is to indict the police on trial for crimes of "being a redneck / White bread chickenshit motherfucker"—in other words, for the crime of existence. This blatant subversion of conventional legal proceedings, as well as who has the power to indict whom, is a form of reclaiming agency for N.W.A., and likely for many of their listeners as well.

Whether represented in skit form or translated through song lyrics, the police are often the subject of N.W.A.'s anger and their violent retribution. Indeed, N.W.A. discusses the police at a rate of about 13% in their music, often times as the victims of violence perpetrated by N.W.A. Kendrick never once mentions the police in his five selected songs, instead choosing to focus on Religion/Prayer or Family (together 15% of his lyrical content). We can look at Kendrick and N.W.A.'s dualistic focus on Family/Religion/Prayer vs. Police as inverted content, positioning them as foils to one another in the competing identities of Compton's soundscape and landscape. In other words, where N.W.A. talks about police and police brutality, Kendrick Lamar is talking about religion and family. Such a distinct pattern reflects how the two artists self-position in the city, and from that, how the city can be perceived.

Table 3.2: Sonic Coding Results				
	N.W.A. Totals		Kendrick Totals	
Sonic Codes	*%*	*Count*	*%*	*Count*
Jazz	1%	3	16%	71
Jazz Rap	0%	0	35%	159
Don	0%	0	4%	17
Gangsta	80%	465	21%	98
Soundscape	2%	14	3%	15
Skit	11%	64	16%	72
Sample	2%	9	3%	14
A cappella	4%	23	2%	11
Total Lines	**100%**	**578**	**100%**	**457**

Another look at Kendrick Lamar's opening track from *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, "Sherane A.K.A. Master Splinter's Daughter," demonstrates his emphasis on micro-scale introspection as opposed to N.W.A.'s focus on macro-scale external oppositions. The opening lines, a softly spoken group prayer, transition into Kendrick telling the story of him and Sherane, the female

Table 3.3: Performative Coding Results				
	N.W.A. Totals		**Kendrick Totals**	
Performative Codes	*%*	*Count*	*%*	*Count*
Collective/Chant	3%	20	2%	11
Anger	72%	416	30%	136
Calm	0%	0	22%	102
Affect	0%	0	7%	33
Rapped Straight	11%	66	4%	18
Rapped Swung	0%	1	2%	10
Mimesis	0%	2	3%	12
Sung	2%	13	8%	37
Spoken	6%	33	9%	40
Feature	5%	27	13%	57
Totals	**100%**	**578**	**100%**	**456**

subject of the song: "I met her at this house party on El Segundo and Central." The two go on to exchange a few words about where they're from, with Kendrick asking, "Where you stay?" and her responding, "'Down the street from Dominguez High.' / Okay, I know that's borderline Compton or Paramount / 'Well is it Compton?' / No, she replied." Kendrick's song immediately situates the listener inside the city, and rather than engaging with larger tropes of police violence and resistance, "Sherane" sets a tone of the individual rather than the collective, of internal as opposed to external. The fact that this song starts the album with a moment of prayer followed by

a jazz track suggests that Kendrick is not conforming to the precedent set forth by N.W.A. in their musical representations of the city. In "Sherane," Kendrick offers a nuanced sonic perspective of Compton that tracks a single story at the hyperlocal level, emphasizing themes of religion and family, while N.W.A. presents the city as a static symbol for their violent resistance to police oppression.

It is easy to distinguish between the two artists when looking at the separate content of their music, but more interesting is what happens when we examine where it overlaps. For example, throughout the 10 selected songs, Kendrick Lamar and N.W.A. talk about violence at fairly similar rates (11% and 19%, respectively); however, the *ways* in which they discuss violence are completely contrasting. As a result, they engage with, reinforce, and resist very different discourses. Take N.W.A.'s "Gangsta Gangsta" in comparison with Kendrick Lamar's "m.A.A.d city." "Gangsta Gangsta" is, like many of N.W.A.'s songs, a straightforward and unambiguous glamorization of violence as a means of reclaiming agency. It details the dangers of the streets of Compton, and often times, N.W.A. places themselves as the center of this danger. Ice Cube raps, "Takin' a life or two, that's what the hell I do / You don't like how I'm livin', well fuck you." The song discusses Violence/Guns 16% of the time, and the violence is usually committed by N.W.A. Kendrick's "m.A.A.d city," clearly referring to Compton as the city in question, discusses Violence/Guns even more often than "Gangsta Gangsta," clocking in at 24%. However, 25% of the lines on Kendrick's song are vocally affected; on all of his four verses, he raps with frequent vocal cracks, ascending into a vulnerable falsetto that suggests far less confidence and certainty than N.W.A. on "Gangsta Gangsta," who rap 87% of the lines with clear and unambiguous anger. Kendrick also rhythmically swings his delivery in this song, which

demonstrates his roots in the jazz genre, as opposed to N.W.A., who perform almost all of their lines straight.

Another point of comparison for these two songs is that they each contain a break in their narrative arcs. At line 96 in "Gangsta Gangsta," Dr. Dre commands, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, cut this shit." The beat on the track changes, and N.W.A. introduces a harmonic minor riff that sounds like it came straight from the flute of a snake charmer. The musical scale that defines this section of the song is more common in Indian, Middle Eastern, and Arabic music. In line 77 of "m.A.A.d city," Kendrick features M.C. Eiht, another Compton rapper, on the track. The track cuts to M.C. Eiht's verse in much the same way "Gangsta Gangsta" transitions between sections—after a brief spoken-word interlude—and introduces a minor guitar riff that stylistically echoes the riff in "Gangsta Gangsta." Whether or not it was Kendrick's intention, the two songs feel like mirror images in structure, harmonic choices, and content, to the extent that they are in direct conversation with one another. Both artists here are employing non-Western musical discourses; in doing so, they challenge the socially dominant sonic discourses of Western music, while subscribing to Compton as a site of rebellion and resistance.

Kendrick and N.W.A. also discuss the Self at similar rates—respectively, 8% and 13%. However, Kendrick's invocation of self is usually interrogative or subversive as opposed to blatantly aggrandizing. Furthermore, he spends almost no time discussing the Other (i.e., other gangs or posses that pose a threat to his/his crew's image). For example, his song "Backseat Freestyle" is a work of intentional criticism of the gangsta image and identity. In it, Kendrick raps:

> *"All my life I want money and power,*
> *Respect my mind or die from lead shower,*
> *I pray my dick get big as the Eiffel tower,*

So I can fuck the world for 72 hours."

This hook is complex in content. Each line contains a different code: in order, Money/Wealth/Fame, Violence/Guns, Self, and Sex. Kendrick himself has said of this series of lyrics, "That is just me capturing the moment and being 16 and saying the most outlandish shit when you are around your homeboys or you are around whoever" (rap.genius.com 2013). Like N.W.A. in much of their music, Kendrick is assuming an intentionally reductive identity to make a point; however, instead of espousing this identity as a mode of resistance, he questions its efficacy by demonstrating the absurdity of these material desires.

Although Kendrick Lamar and N.W.A. appear to vary on many fronts in their lyrics, music, and performance, it would be reductive to paint them as strictly and diametrically opposed. In fact, the discourse that they collectively reinforce on almost every vector is a discourse of aggressive masculinity. The patriarchal values reinforced in Compton go beyond the mere notion that the music's text merits a coding box for "Women"—in fact, they manifest most prominently in the masculine codes like "Violence/Guns," "Crime," or "Gangsta." There are almost no feminine codes in the three-part codebook. The soundscape is also masculine: indeed, police sirens and gunshots hardly incur images of young women running through the streets with pistols strapped to their belts. Collectively, the codes structure Compton as a place of exclusivity, a male-gendered landscape and soundscape.

N.W.A. frequently entertains descriptions of explicit, phallocentric sexual acts that defame and degrade women, a reminder that their bombastic self-aggrandizement hinges on hypermasculine values and structures Compton as a space that excludes women. Kendrick's music has some such descriptions, as on a line from "The Art of Peer Pressure" where he says, "Hungry for anything unhealthy and if nutrition can help me / I'll tell you to suck my dick and

then continue eating." Although not explicitly sexual or overtly dominant, Kendrick has an equally problematic representation of women in his songs: as part and parcel of the vices and temptations in the urban landscape's complex fabric. The main female character in his songs, Sherane, is often portrayed as a temptress with the capacity to corrupt; in some cases, even more so than Kendrick's "homies."

Taken in totality, the two artists engage with various discourses that structure perceptions of the city, none of which are reality. Then again, Joni Tevis asks the compelling question: "Does the show become reality, if repeated enough times? Without N.W.A., it is no stretch to say that we would never have Kendrick Lamar. Much of Kendrick's music exists more in response to N.W.A.'s than in opposition, in such ways that their two albums feel more like a conversation across years than as opposing perspectives. In addition, the two albums speak to a number of discourses, some different and some shared, which collectively structure perceptions of the city. Through his subversive sonic, lyrical, and performative choices Kendrick often frames Compton as a space of redemption, incorporating themes of religion, prayer, and family into the musical narrative. His focus on self-interrogation places the listener in Compton on a micro- level, where N.W.A. offers a look at the city as a whole. N.W.A.'s focus on the themes of violence and police, as well as the consistent angry tone with which they deliver the lines and their dominant utilization of the gangsta rap genre, frames Compton as a space of active resistance within which N.W.A. is leading the movement.

"The Strength of Street Knowledge": Conclusions

This examination of Compton, at its core, incorporates aural methods of interpretation into visual ones when understanding a place. Compton, and our perceptions of it, is structured by socially

dominant discourses. It fits the mold for a typical place wracked by police brutality, gang violence, and a history of racism. Furthermore, since Compton was the context in which N.W.A. and Kendrick Lamar found their respective successes, it is tempting to assume that something unique sets this city apart from the rest. By painting Compton in broad brushstrokes, one could conclude that its uniqueness stems from gang violence, poverty, racism, and police brutality that is *more significant* than in other places. Hypothetically, this might suggest that musicians like Lamar and N.W.A. utilized the medium of music as artistic defiance. In reality, however, it is difficult to distinguish Compton from other similar places—at least to the extent that it would become the national hearth of a prolific gangster rap movement. Journalist Joe Mathews notes, "Southern California has no shortage of cities with similar problems" (Mathews 2015).

Indeed, Compton was a site of black resistance to housing discrimination, but it was certainly not the only one, and not even spectacularly so. Howell and Moore remind us that gang violence occurred in a number of other US regions, not limited to but including New York, Chicago, and even places like Florida and South Carolina (Howell and Moore 2010, 11-13). The adjustment to police sirens and gunfire, although notable as a marker of crime, does not set Compton apart from many urban areas that experience the same or higher crime rates. And finally, poverty and housing discrimination were (and in many places remain to be) nationally felt oppressions, as opposed to something that would identify Compton as unique. This begs the question: why, then, did Compton become a mythic hip-hop site?

Compton's name, identity, and recognition are predicated on the glorification, commodification, and distribution of its own harsh realities during the late '80s and early '90s, originally mass marketed by N.W.A—or, what Interview Magazine calls, the "urban mythology… of the rags-to-riches gangsta rap narrative" (Badu 2013). Thus, when people see

Compton in movies, when they hear Compton in music, they are not seeing nor hearing a real Compton—they are experiencing a manufactured representation, a simulacrum of the city that is not the city itself. According to Mathews, the "real Compton does not fit the ghetto cliché" (Mathews 2015). In his music, Kendrick Lamar is responding as much to the nationally distributed simulacrum of Compton that N.W.A. left in their wake as he is to the city itself. Indeed, there is no "Compton" that exists for Kendrick Lamar without N.W.A. In Lamar's own words, "Putting a positive light on where I come from is important to me. When you think of Compton, there is this idea that it's numb with negativity" (Badu 2013).

His sentiment here is strikingly similar to that of Aja Brown, the Compton mayor who is in the midst of a citywide attempt to revitalize Compton's image. Through both his words and his music, Kendrick Lamar advocates for the "new" Compton, attempting to acquit the city of national negativity associated with its gangsta rap reputation. Conversely, N.W.A. engineered the image of old Compton: a city wrought with strife and struggle, but unified under the social criticism in N.W.A.'s message. Compton was ultimately made popular because it was commodified and sold by N.W.A., not on the merits of itself as a place, but rather on the mere *notion* of place in general—on some vast intrinsic sense of spatial authenticity that this music was a uniquely Compton experience. Ultimately, there is no way to get at the "reality" of Compton, because it is so inextricably and messily tangled in with its various representations put forth by the likes of Kendrick Lamar and N.W.A.

There is much to be learned from a careful listening of Compton. Exploring the soundscape of the city, from its street noises to its musical texts and performative choices, substantiates the notion that Compton is a site of competing identities. It struggles with its felt reality and its perceived reputation as a gang-city of the 1980's. These images interact with one

another to this day in such a way that the identities of Compton are mutually constitutive—they contribute to the music produced and at the same time are affected by the representations in the music. Janna Zurita, a Compton city councilwoman, said, "We should be benefitting from putting rap and gangsta rap on the map" (Jennings 2015). When N.W.A. raps that they are "straight 'outta Compton," the truth is that Compton is just as much straight 'outta them. When Kendrick preaches that there "ain't no city quite like mine," it's just as much that there ain't no rapper quite like Kendrick. For the city, all of its images and identities—whether of violent resistance or spiritual redemption—are important, and it would not be possible to comprehensively interpret the discourses that structure perceptions of the city without considering both soundscape and landscape together. Compton did not follow any preordained mythology. Instead, it was the origin of the myth.

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