Introduction

Intersections of Detroit, Women, and Hip Hop

May 14, 2013, Tangent Gallery. We pull up to the Tangent Gallery on Detroit’s Eastside; decades of automotive manufacturing decline have transformed this once thriving business district into a desolate space. Empty, pothole laden parking lots and a few dilapidated bars keep the gallery company on East Milwaukee Avenue. It’s hot, sunny, and humid enough to draw sweat out of a rock. We are here to celebrate the four-year anniversary of the Foundation, a nonprofit hip hop collective that provides women and their allies a safe and accepting space to perform. This party is a big event that’s been in the making for months and is sure to draw a loyal crowd. We arrive early to help set up. Once inside, the building’s bare-bones, warehouse-like exterior gives way to an atmosphere bustling with activity. A long bar lies to the left of the entrance. The room just past it is where the night’s performances will take place. It is huge and unencumbered, with the exception of a stage and speaker stacks, waiting to be filled with the night’s patrons and performers. We spot Foundation organizer Piper Carter in the next room over, making sure that vendors have everything they need. Sellers of everything from African glass pyramids to hair products and face creams, jewelry, t-shirts, and Afrocentric clothing are present. Months of meetings and labor have gone into organizing this night: reaching out to sponsors, agreeing on performers, and designing publicity.

Always on the go, Piper greets us with hugs and directions: we are responsible for “taking care of the performing artists.” This is code for
“take yourselves to the liquor store and get them what they want.” As the night wears on we are sent to fetch Jameson, Hennessy, mixers and ice—Detroiter’s drinks of choice. There is a lot riding on this night, which is stressing us out. In the absence of sponsors, Foundation members—Piper in particular—invested personal financial capital to secure the event. Of course, we want everyone to recoup their money but more importantly we feel like the Foundation’s reputation for hosting dope events is on the line. It took years to cultivate a space where women in hip hop could do their thing and build an audience. This anniversary party is intended to signal the Foundation’s success and growth. As much as we are stressed, relief calms our bodies as people flow in. From eight to nine they get drinks and mingle while the DJs build up the crowd’s energy.

The lineup is rich and includes internationally renowned Detroit poet jessica Care moore as the host. At around 9:30 Invincible takes the stage with their Outer Spaces project collaborators Las Krudas and Climbing Poetree. Collectively, Outer Spaces self-identify as “a brigade of shape-shifting, gender-bending artists and activists.” Queer-identified, these artists aimed at taking audiences to the outer limits of their experience. The crowd embodies multiple hip hop aesthetics, including call and response, context specific dance forms, and rhyming along with familiar lyrics, while artists use Spanish and English interchangeably. The audience flocks to the floor; anytime a Detroit artist, song, or sound is referenced, the crowd hollers. Likewise, when Outer Spaces makes statements about queering hip hop, the audience responds with hoots, grooves, and snaps.

Other times, the crowd pushes back on the hosts and emcees. When jessica Care moore feels ignored as she performs, she throws pages of her poetry at the audience. Locals communicate nonverbal sentiments like “my bad” by touching their chests and sporting a hip hop style bow. Newcomers use their hands, crudely gesturing dismay about moore’s flying poetry. Attitude is met with both resistance and respect. Similar audience behavior has been documented in ethnographic theorizing about rap battles in LA’s hip hop underground. H. Samy Alim, Jooyoung Lee, and Lauren Masson Carris document how emcees not only rhyme skillfully, but also monitor audiences and survey them strategically. Emcees surveil audiences to smash support for other artists. While we did not witness this practice, we do see the crowd answer and refuse the emcee’s call. This moment that crashes over the crowd like a wave embodies Simon Frith’s argument that music has a life of its own that is always shared by artist and audience and supports his insistence
that affect is central to the production of sound and the feelings that audiences attach to it. We see this in action; we feel the tensions just as we become caught up in the audience-artist synergy that produces embodied, poetic energy.

By this time the space is packed and one can’t avoid the sway. Adults of all ages, from hippies to hipsters, with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds are present. Next, Foundation artists Mahogany Jones, Nique Love Rhodes, Insite the Riot and Deidre “D.S. Sense” Smith perform a set together. The beats are bangin’ and each artist features their favorite tracks off their latest projects. In typical Detroit style, hands are in the air doing the Errol Flynn and feet are two-steppin’. Shortly after midnight hip hop and R&B artist Mae Day takes the stage to close out the night. Again, the crowd does not respond to the vibe of her call, exiting the dance floor. Mae Day draws her own fan base, but it is not the the Foundation’s sustaining audience. The energy dipped after Foundation artists left the stage. As in many hip hop crowds, when people are not feeling it, they head to the bar, or to other gathering spaces.

Throughout the night, all of hip hop’s elements are at play. Mary Mar, aka B-Girl Ma-Ma of Hardcore Detroit, and Martha Quezada of Motor City Rockers tear up the floor with their crews. Foundation member Nicole Carter has easels and corkboard canvases set up all over the space. To the beat of the music she paints Afrocentric women in different hip hop poses on the sides of the dance floor. Stacyé J and DJ XO work the ones and twos while we stand amazed at how the evening has come together—so many women, queer, and gender-nonconforming artists and fans rocking all the elements of hip hop. The fifth element, Knowledge of self and community, is emphasized not only in the music, but in the community-building messages that come through jessica Care moore’s hype, artists’ stories, and Piper’s words throughout the night. This evening marks a peak point in the Foundation’s life, both artistically and organizationally. Hundreds of people, twenty vendors, and one local television station attend the anniversary party. The event will be felt and remembered as one of the best that the community produced.

**THIS BOOK**

This book is about the Foundation, a nonprofit arts and culture organization that sought to change the gendered practices at work in Detroit’s hip hop underground from 2009 to 2016. Before the Foundation’s emergence women struggled to get on stage, to be taken seriously, and to be
appreciated by industry forces, local promoters, and audiences. Our work focuses on the sites where the collective existed as well as the larger context of Detroit that grounds the lives of its performing artists. Planning, organizing, and performing took place all over the city. To fully understand the work of the Foundation and the artists who supported it, one has to grasp the current conditions that Detroit is facing. Given that Detroit is a Black city, our book makes explicit the multiple intersections of identity that shape the cultural productions of the artists we came to know over seven years of engagement. Women Rapping Revolution argues that the hip hop underground is a crucial site where Black women forge new subjectivities and claim self-care as a principle of community organizing. The Foundation’s community-building practices operated from the assumption that self-care is a form of cultural welfare in the lives of its artists. Hip hop and activism are intersecting forces that shape a vital, vibrant sector of Detroit’s hip hop underground.

This ethnography embodies hip hop’s roots as a community-building enterprise. We provide alternative narratives that question the relations of power, patriarchy, consumerism, and violence that have come to dominate the commercial hip hop industry. We argue that the emergence of the Foundation created conditions where women organized and strategized ways to create stages for themselves and other artists: the collective showcased skills, aesthetics, and identities in the making and yet the Foundation was “bigger than hip hop.” Many members were and remain cultural workers. Their cultural production opens new ways to imagine what counts as community organizing and political work. In other words, cultural performance creates avenues where new world views can emerge. Our work with the Foundation articulates the dynamics of grassroots organizing situated within an arts community. In so doing, we reframe both popular and scholarly conceptualizations of women in hip hop. We contribute a much needed focus on Black women’s subjectivity in the life and making of hip hop culture.

Over time, we came to understand that self-care shapes Black female subjectivity in the hip hop underground. For many, it is both a philosophy and a toolkit for survival—a form of cultural welfare. This concept generates acts of self-other love and messages that sustain the possibilities of relational life, rather than sour, ideologically produced excoriations of “the welfare state” that dominate neoliberal public discourse. Self-care reclaims welfare as community-based practices that function as wellsprings of personal, social, and cultural health in the broadest sense. In many ways, our book shows readers in vivid detail what self-
care looks like and how the practices that sustain it ultimately reach to community and larger social forces. Given that so much of the work that women in the hip hop community do is tied to care of youth, elders, and bringing the neighbor back into the hood, we ask, how does self-care become a politics of survival? In contemporary neoliberal Detroit, the politics of survival creates the conditions for resistance. In this context, self-care is far from solipsistic; it is a politics based on “waging love” and getting “On My Detroit Everything.”

Although we focus predominantly on emcees, we also interviewed and illustrate how poets, DJs, organizers, b-girls, and others contribute to the aesthetic and political dimensions of Detroit’s hip hop underground. This diverse community of cultural revolutionaries is messy. The Foundation centered on women, but not all members were/are women identified. Some embrace the language of feminism, while others prefer a gender-justice orientation that creates space for gender-nonconforming participants. Others support women but do not see their work as necessarily for or about women. However, all of the individuals that we have come to know see gender as one among many issues that needs more thought in hip hop communities. The Foundation used art and activism to construct, articulate, and disseminate ideologies about identity, community, difference, nation, and environment. They forged new social formations that assumed cooperative collaborative economics with a new social imaginary for what social relations can mean in public life. In all of its endeavors, members lived along an ethic that renowned local activist Grace Lee Boggs endorsed: “The idea that the world is ‘made’—in a very extended and complex sense, of course—through the actions of ordinary people also meant that it could be unmade and remade.” In other words, everyday people have the power and responsibility to change existing problems, but it takes courage and imagination to foster hope and a willingness to unthink and reimagine old structures that continue to reproduce themselves.

WOMEN IN HIP HOP

Women’s battles for respect and recognition are not unique to Detroit but tied to the larger history of women’s systemic marginalization in hip hop. Born on the streets of the South Bronx in the 1970s, hip hop emerged from block parties organized by Black and Brown youth, many of whom struggled against unemployment, poverty, and gang violence. The elements of these parties collectively defined hip hop culture. DJs
kept the beats going while emcees hyped up the crowd, b-boys/b-girls rocked the dance floor, and graffiti artists created flyers and beautified spaces with their signature artwork. Afrika Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation popularized Knowledge—of self and community—as hip hop’s fifth element. For many of its innovators, this DIY culture was a creative outlet and productive alternative to gang culture and violence. Hip hop historian Jeff Chang describes it as “an expression of a new generation of outcast youth whose worldview felt authentic, original and liberating.”

Despite their involvement from the culture’s inception, women’s contributions are routinely marginalized if not altogether written out of hip hop histories. This is not only true in the mainstream but also in the hip hop underground.

In our work with the Foundation we have witnessed the ramifications of women being sidelined in hip hop for nearly half a century. They range from young women feeling apprehensive about getting on the mic for the first time, to blanket statements like “I just don’t like female emcees,” to outright contempt for the collective daring to host a night dedicated to women in hip hop in the first place. Scholars like Gwendolyn Pough, Marcyliena Morgan, and Jessica Nydia Pabón-Colón document varying ways that women’s contributions to hip hop are devalued.

In the early oughts, Pough called into question Nelson George’s overall assessment of women’s contributions to hip hop. In his book *Hip Hop America*, George makes a provocative claim. Despite his discussion of the artistic output of rappers MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill, and Foxy Brown, he candidly remarks, “if none of these female artists had ever made a record, hip hop’s development would have been no different.” If anything, Nelson’s claim motivated artists, practitioners, and scholars alike to respond and bring into view performance, aesthetics, and politics that address not only racial disparities but also gendered practices that need rethinking. The battle for legitimacy continues across all the elements, and especially in women-centered spaces. Examining such spaces, graffiti scholar Pabón-Colón contends that “the tenor of dismissals ranges from neoliberal postfeminist discourse (the event is passé, girls and women have equal rights) to condescension (girls aren’t good enough to participate in major jams, so these spaces are tolerable) to hostility (events are separatist or ghettoizing) to total lack of interest.” We have also witnessed that women are welcomed as consumers and supporters, but they face opposition as cultural producers in their own right.

Writing in 1987, Nancy Guevara was an early critic of the gender discrimination women in hip hop faced from their male peers as well as
from mainstream media sources that omitted or distorted their contributions to hip hop culture.\textsuperscript{14} To counter the male-centered narratives that had already taken hold, she documented the contributions of women graffiti writers like Lady Pink and Lady Heart, rappers including the US Girls and Roxanne Shanté, as well as B-Girl Baby Love and the Dynamic Dolls. Over the course of our seven years of fieldwork, we have seen women engaging with all of hip hop’s elements in Detroit. They are rappers, DJs, b-girls, graffiti writers, and organizers, and yet, as Guevara and Pabón-Colón writing thirty years apart assert, the creative roles of women in hip hop continue to be challenged and dismissed in both commercial arenas and the hip hop underground.\textsuperscript{15} Foundation artists provide complex ways to think about social issues while pushing the boundaries of hip hop’s aesthetics in terms of lyrics, beats, and presentation of self. Their unique aesthetics, politics, and gender work are grounded in and respond to the contemporary forces reshaping Detroit.

\textbf{DETROIT’S CONTEMPORARY CRISIS}

Our study is located in a Black city; as such, facing race is both necessary and fruitful. The artists and organizers who form the basis of our work shake off old logics that produced insidious forms of racial reasoning. They choke out ideas that came to fruition during the United States’s history of settler colonialism, like eugenics, social darwinism, and redlining policies, and which have taken on new forms in contemporary “postracial” imaginations. Race is but one of the amalgam of social identity categories that shape the struggle of Foundation members. Surviving race is a reality given the historical oppressions that shape the nation—and Detroit in particular. Race theory produced under the guise of science during late colonialism led to egregious white supremacist practices that have morphed into subtleties that dehumanize Blackness to this day. In the face of continuing struggle, Black women continue to speak out against racist practices and about the need for social transformation. In 2013, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors created the Black Lives Matter social media platform that has brought together dozens of organizations. Barbara Ransby\textsuperscript{16} describes what has become the Black Lives Matter Movement [BLMM] as a “Black-led class struggle—inform[ed] by, grounded in, and bolstered by Black feminist politics.”\textsuperscript{17} Even before BLMM and the #MeToo movements gained traction, the women of the Foundation were fighting for women’s legitimacy on many levels including their
roles in hip hop and cultural politics. Their goals, artistic output, and community work respond directly to Detroit’s contemporary context.

The gender, race, and class issues that women in the hip hop underground experience are intrinsically linked to the city’s history. At its population peak in 1950, Detroit had 1.85 million residents and was a mixed-race city. Its population now hovers around 677,000, and it is 83 percent Black. Women making hip hop not only have to deal with the cis-male heteromasculinity that dominates in the hip hop underground, but also navigating daily life in a city that reflects the consequences of institutionalized racism, white flight, postindustrial economic decline, and gentrification. This constellation of conditions find form in urban renewal plans. There is a disconnect between the social actors who create urban renewal plans versus the residents and citizens who have to live their consequences. The Foundation fought against these ideological practices in two ways: one, they were actively involved in organizations that resist and reframe unacceptable conditions; and second, their artistry provided aesthetic narratives that gave voice to their world views. In this sense artists become organic intellectuals and cultural diplomats. It is ironic that as the city mourned the effects of the 1967 rebellion, corporate elites were planning a new, whitewashed vision for Detroit.

On the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1967 rebellion, billionaire Dan Gilbert’s Bedrock real estate company elected to publish a telling ad. The sign filled windows along the ground level of a historic twelve-story building on Woodward Ave. It consisted of the company’s logo and a photograph of mostly white people, along with the phrase “See Detroit Like We Do” in large white lettering. In a city that is overwhelmingly Black, recovering from imposed bankruptcy, and what the United Nations deemed inhumane practices of ongoing water shutoffs, this ad is telling. It provides a striking example of the machinations of gentrification; as such, it is no surprise that immediate and vehement critique followed its release. The display was installed on a Friday and by Monday morning Gilbert had apologized and killed the marketing slogan. Despite his backtracking, the advertisement raises red flags about Gilbert’s intentions. It is another layer of evidence that reveals the workings of institutionalized power; it fueled citizens’ concerns that revitalization efforts are exclusively focused on attracting young, educated, white suburbanites to the city’s downtown and midtown centers.

Detroit is not a blank slate, and yet, the colonial myth that its people need wealthy white men to save them continues to reproduce itself. At the 2019 Oscars ceremony, for example, Green Book director Peter Farrelly
gave a shout out to Shinola as he accepted his award for Best Original Screenplay, exclaiming, “Shinola watches! Unbelievable! They’re saving Detroit!” The luxury goods maker from Texas had no history with the city prior to launching the company in 2011. In the country’s poorest big city, where 35 percent of the population lives in poverty, claims that the white billionaires from Texas behind the Shinola brand and its thousand-dollar wristwatches are saving Detroit are offensive. These revitalization practices, steeped in racially-motivated ideologies, are not lost on Detroiterers. The city’s Black and Latinx populations are paying the price for neoliberal governmentality and corporate recovery. Gentrification practices are wreaking havoc on their lives, displacing them to corners of the city where they lack transportation and community.

Knowledge of this history and the contemporary forces at play in Detroit are necessary to understand the relationships between the people, politics, music, and community building practices we engage in *Women Rapping Revolution*. Our work is grounded in an understanding of the larger structures that govern regulations and relationships between the state, citizens, private enterprise, and policymakers. Currently, there are two sociopolitical imaginaries competing for legitimacy and resources in Detroit: a top-down, for-profit capitalist view and a ground-up, citizen-driven one. The first includes the people who operate the institutional dynamics of urban planning, foundations, utility distribution, housing, and public space at large; the Other Detroit lives the consequences of these social engineering tactics of neoliberal whiteness. Members of the Foundation, its supporters, and the populations that are continuously being pushed away from the city’s center of commerce and luxury experience the ramifications affecting today’s Detroit. We have come to know artists who have been affected and whose children have been harmed by school closings, bad rental property agreements, and water shutoffs. One of the members of the Foundation was arrested when she defended her neighbor, trying to stop the city from turning off her water.

In the early 2000s, ruin porn was the face of Detroit; the city was the center of projects of exploitation and sensationalized media. Filmmakers, photographers, and pundits from near and far regularly journeyed to the city to sensationalize, exploit, and capitalize off of its misfortunes. Their obsession with the aestheticization of poverty came at the expense of the people who lived here. Foundation artists are not only aware of ruin-porn representations, but they are also conscious of language and images that sustain the new face of Detroit’s “come back.” They resist obvious abasement and the coded language of neoliberalism. Words like
“safety,” “security,” “resilience,” and urban renewal” are used to signify that the new Detroit is sanitized for upwardly mobile professionals, most of whom are white.

In the aftermath of bankruptcy, a complex and contradictory set of narratives about revitalization emerged. They reflect two competing visions for what the city’s future should be. Detroit’s redevelopment plans have undermined and ignored the city’s Black population as far back as the 1950s, when the Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods were destroyed to make way for interstate construction. Racist practices including redlining, targeted tax foreclosures and water shutoffs continue to be aggressively instigated to displace poorer, older, mostly Black and Brown populations in an effort to make way for more desirable residents: younger, whiter, and wealthier. The same capitalist forces that performers Invincible and Finale accuse of contributing to Detroit’s systemic demise in the 1990s and early 2000s on their track “Locusts”—which we analyze in chapter 2—returned to buy back property once its value hit rock bottom and was a safe bet for maximum return on investment. These financial transactions are proving to have massive payoffs. At their helm are financiers and developers like Dan Gilbert, John Hantz, and the Ilitch Family. Headquartered in the Fox Theater building in Detroit, Ilitch Holdings Inc.’s businesses include Little Caesars Pizza, the Detroit Red Wings, and the Detroit Tigers. The parent company’s subsidiaries also manage a number of theaters and professional sports facilities. The Hantz Group owns a myriad of financial services firms, from banking to health insurance. Of them all, Gilbert, founder of Quicken Loans and Rock Ventures, is Detroit’s wealthiest entrepreneur and the mover and shaker of the city’s urban development.

Taking advantage of cheap real estate, Dan Gilbert relocated Quicken Loans and thousands of its employees from the suburbs to downtown in 2010. The mortgage company’s relocation jumpstarted the development of “Detroit 2.0”—an initiative to rebrand the city as a Midwestern hub of tech-savvy entrepreneurial startups. It was estimated that Detroit had nearly 150,000 vacant and abandoned land parcels and that approximately twenty square miles of the city’s occupiable land was vacant. As the city was falling into bankruptcy in 2012, the city council approved the sale of 140 aces of public land (some of which was inhabited by residents) to the controversial Hantz Farms. The corporation paid eight cents per square foot ($300.00 per lot) for one of the largest urban land acquisitions in the history of any US city. There was widespread opposition to the deal from those involved with Detroit’s urban agriculture
movement, who felt the city should support smaller farmers who grow food for their livelihoods. Food justice advocates have declared the deal a “case of top-down environmental renewal versus bottom-up environmental justice and self-determination.” Artists we have come to work with have made food justice one of the many commitments that they speak on in their music. The track “Legendary,” on which we focus in chapter 5, juxtaposes urban life with urban farming.

There is substantial evidence backing up the claim that redevelopment strategies in Detroit are driving both gentrification and abandonment. In early 2013, Governor Rick Snyder appointed Kevyn Orr as Emergency Financial Manager to oversee the city’s Chapter 9 bankruptcy filing. Detroit’s claim is the largest municipal bankruptcy filing in US history and Orr was given carte blanche to make decisions through his tenure, which lasted until December 2014. In his role, he attempted but failed to privatize the Detroit Institute of Arts [DIA], the key iconic institution for public art in the city; and succeeded in handing Belle Isle—a recreational landmark in the city—to the state. As with all state parks, vehicles now have to pay to enter. Prior to this shift, it was a free-to-the-public, popular recreational facility and on hot summer days it was populated by Detroiters picnicking and dancing to music emanating from sound system after sound system. The city’s bankruptcy settlement also included pension cuts and reduced health insurance coverage for retired city workers. Bankruptcy became the means to displace African American political power, attack unions, and shift city assets into private hands.

Detroit land that has not been privatized outright is increasingly under surveillance. With the procurement of over one hundred properties in the city, Gilbert’s Bedrock Real Estate Services has developed a state-of-the-art surveillance system that consists of more than five hundred cameras in downtown Detroit. This includes the policing of the Federal Reserve Building which houses the Detroit Free Press. In some cases, surveillance equipment has also been installed without permission on buildings that Gilbert does not own. The net effect of Gilbert’s efforts to surveil his sprawling downtown footprint is that cameras and private security guards now dominate public space in the city’s bustling downtown. Activists Antonio Rafael and Matthew Irwin note how even the QLINE/M-1 Rail streetcar, constructed in 2017, was not built for Detroiters; rather, Gilbert’s investment in it enabled his Rocket Fiber company to install gigabit internet technology underneath the streetcar line in an effort to attract tech workers and “self-styled urban pioneers eager to
Those who challenge design-intensive development and surveillance are cast as naïve people who do not understand business and the protection that public-private sanctioned spying fosters.

Clearly, Detroit’s revitalization is extremely complex. In the eyes of many city officials, urban planners, and private developers, attracting tech entrepreneurs and other members of the creative class is key to rebuilding. Most people understand the benefits of bringing new people and corporations to the city, but the exclusive investment of resources into the 7.2 square miles of the city’s downtown and midtown core disenfranchises the citizens who do not live along this corridor. In our conversations with poet/activist Tawana “Honeycomb” Petty, she disclosed some of her recent everyday experiences at neighborhood restaurants and cafes that she has been going to for years. Before it was rebranded as Midtown in 2000, the neighborhood just north of downtown was known as the Cass Corridor. Historically, the Corridor was an artists’ haven where writers and rockers lived and Creem magazine was born in the 1960s. Since its renaming, the area has been refashioned with trendy micro-breweries, restaurants, luxury baby clothing stores, and boutique bookshops and yoga studios. For long-term residents the area has become unrecognizable. Petty shared with us her experience of feeling out of place at sites that she has frequented for many years:

We used to go there every morning. I ordered my food to go, and I was sitting there waiting for my food. I said, ‘good morning.’ [The waitress] came back and slipped the receipt to me and I said, ‘good morning.’ She looked at me and kept walking. The person brought the food out and she said, ‘is this for her!?’ He said, ‘I think so.’ She goes through the boxes, hands me my change, and then she says to the person next to me, ‘Is everything good?’ I said, ‘I said good morning three times.’ I said ‘What is your problem!!’ She didn’t say anything. ‘I’ve come in here fifty times, what is your problem? Did I do something wrong?’ She didn’t say anything and people were looking at me like the angry black woman. I was mad at myself later for letting her get under my skin like that.

All of the changes are bad like that because all of our history is being wiped out. There are schools I went to that aren’t there anymore. There are places I can’t google anymore, and I’m only thirty-eight. It’s schools, institutions, streets. They changed names of streets and whole communities. My thing is, you know, at least archive it somewhere to where we can find it. It’s hard to deal with it. But if people treat you with dignity and respect, then we can try to figure this out. But when you walk into a space and people treat you like a [different] species, it makes it that much more difficult.

To be a life-long resident and be treated as an invisible imposter is part of the breakdown of neighborhood continuity. The renaming of neigh-
borhoods and influx of new business and residents changes the dynamic of a community, especially in a site with a history of racial tension and violence and government sanctioned redlining practices that protected white interests. Such gentrification practices write over place, identity, and economic exchanges as well as erase memory. The end result is a problematic palimpsest.

Foundation member Nique Love Rhodes’s experiences living and working in and around the city during this time of transition adds another layer to the story:

I was just having a chat with Insite [the Riot] about this last week and we were talking about how like, yeah it’s cool. I can go pick up a kale salad and that’s cool and in the summer I’m going to be riding my bike around and that’s cool and all but at what expense, you know? People, businesses have been kicked out for this shop to be. You know what I’m saying? It’s about being aware of that and a lot of people aren’t aware . . . . The worst part is that people don’t think it’s a problem. Or the conversation that, well, nobody’s doing anything with that space to begin with. Well, let’s analyze why they couldn’t do anything with that space because of how banks treat small business owners of color and with loans and all these other opportunities.26

Rhodes weighs in on the practices through which Black Detroiters are left out of the decision making of redevelopment plans and processes, although they are the very people who live the consequences of urban renewal.

The Foundation, as well as its partnership with the 5e Gallery, cultivated community-centered citizenship. They created spaces and conditions that brought together a multigenerational nexus of practitioners and fans in the midst of these changes. Artists and organizers who were connected to them have continued to foster community through their music, art, and ongoing organizing efforts. In summer 2018 Nique Love Rhodes and Insite the Riot hosted the “DCipher Music Series” in the Lafayette Park neighborhood just east of downtown. The ten-week music series created a platform for a diverse range of local artists to perform. By example, the series uplifted women and Blackness across genres including blues, jazz, rock, hip hop, R&B, soul, neo-soul, future soul, house, and reggae. The audience was multigenerational and diverse.

MUSIC AND POLITICS

In the track “Shapeshifters,” Detroit emcee Invincible insists that “music’s not a mirror to reflect reality/It’s a hammer with which we
shape it.” Their assumption that music makers shape culture, including aesthetic sensibilities and political action, is akin to Simon Frith’s argument that music is not so much an expression of any internal idea or reality, but a mode of production. Musical practices create lyrical structure, sonic cacophony, and audience action. Invincible speaks on what we see as a circuit of sonic pleasure, the articulation of ideology and/or its critique, and affect. Affect is often what binds audience and artist; thus chants, call and response, and dance moves are practices that exist in circulation. Artists produce the outline of action while audiences produce energy, clapbacks, and calls of their own. In other words, music and culture, artists and audiences, are both produced by and producers of particular social and political visions.

The multitude and magnitude of political struggles that African Americans have experienced have inevitably bled into the art that Black Detroiter produce, from the early blues to bebop jazz, Motown’s pop-inflected soul music, the synthesized sounds of techno, and present-day hip hop. We use the term “inevitably” because of the extensive history of African American music and culture’s deep-seated relationship to social and political movements. Shana Redmond insists that “within the African diaspora, music functions as a method of rebellion, revolution, and future visions that disrupt and challenge the manufactured differences used to dismiss, detain, and destroy communities.” Since the time of slavery, to the Civil Rights era, and the present day hip hop movement, Black music “has served as a laboratory for the interplay of racial solidarity and struggle.” Reiland Rabaka goes so far as to say that African American music has consistently functioned as “the mouthpieces for [Blacks’] socio-political aspirations and frustrations, their socio-political organizations and nationally-networked movements.”

Here, we illuminate the varied relationships between music, politics, and community-building efforts that Detroiter have cultivated over time. While not always overt and, in the case of Motown, not necessarily intended, the innovative sounds that have and continue to emanate from the city have often reflected the material realities, struggles, and hope of its people. Through telling the stories of communities, music documents everyday struggles, suggests alternative ways of being, and gives people the power to envision what Jayna Brown describes as material possibility. As we demonstrate throughout Women Rapping Revolution, the hip hop music and culture that the participants in our study make and support are intimately connected to their material and political realities as Black women who live, work, and create in the city. They
are unequivocal in their assertions that Detroit’s unique conditions have influenced their consciousness and artistry. In other words, the state of the city, their worldviews, and the change they are working towards, are all embodied in the form, feel, and messaging of their music.

Writing on bebop jazz innovations in the 1940s and 1950s, Anthony Macías notes that “on the whole, the Motor City musical milieu nurtured a range of African American expressive forms and practices and community-based cultural work.” Detailing the connections between the two, he explains that “the music, style, and philosophy of Bebop musicians critiqued the ideological justifications used to naturalize an economic system that perpetuated racial and social inequities.” Like many Detroit-based hip hop artists today, bebop musicians also purposefully rejected the racist, commercial industry in favor of experimentation that pushed artistic and political boundaries.

A decade later Motown Records redefined the sonic and racial contours of popular music on a national level, positioning African Americans at its center. Berry Gordy purposefully distanced the label from overtly political messages; musically, his intentions were to create songs that would appeal to the masses, namely white audiences. And yet, by the summer of 1967 Martha and the Vandellas’ hit “Dancing in the Street” had been appropriated as a civil rights anthem, not only in the context of the rebellion that ensued in the city that summer but nationwide. Suzanne E. Smith likens the bind Motown was in from this point on to “a tightrope that the company walked between its allegiance to the black struggle and its desire to establish itself in corporate America.” Even though commercial success was the label’s top priority, Smith writes that by 1970 “the ‘commercial’ and the ‘political’ aspects of any black cultural product could no longer be mutually exclusive—even at Motown.” Consequently, Motown created a new imprint, Black Forum, as a place where African American spoken word artists could document and voice Black struggles.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Detroit’s musical innovations were most famously heard in the melodies, beats, and bass lines emitting from synthesizers and drum machines that reflected the city’s post-industrial landscape. The groundbreaking duo Cybotron, consisting of techno producers Juan Atkins and Richard Davis, were electronic music pioneers who merged (white) electro and (Black) funk in ways that marked “a negotiation and subversion of whiteness and black cultural expectations.” In the 1990s, the techno collective and independent label Underground Resistance [UR] continued Detroit’s legacy of producing